

Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment

This is an exercise using active learning and writing where students are forced to grapple with a difficult problem in small groups, put their ideas into words and then debate with other groups of students. The lesson allows the opportunity for reconciliation between the groups and ends with a take-home assignment that asks students to apply some of the concepts learned in class to their own lives.

Screen the film *Quiet Rage*, a documentary about Philip Zimbardo's 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment. Beyond the subject of the experiment, human behavior, the film might be used as an introduction to psychology experiments and/or ethics in social science.

Exercise

We are trying to summarize the findings of the Stanford Prison Experiment as they relate to human behavior.

1. Ask all of the students to write an answer to the following question: Are the guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment responsible for their actions?
2. Break the class into groups of 6-7 and have the student's work collectively to boil down their answer to the previous question into one or two sentences. Half the groups must support the idea that the guards are responsible for their actions and begin their sentence with "Yes,". The other groups must argue that the guards are not responsible for their actions and begin their sentence with "No,".
3. Have the groups write their sentences on the board, or overhead, then facilitate a discussion between the groups where each group must defend their sentences. After 5-10 minutes ask whether they still believe what they wrote or whether the question could be better answered without any restrictions. If so they should rewrite their sentences.
4. Have a class discussion on the effect of institutions and roles on human behavior.
5. Have the groups rewrite their sentences again to incorporate information from the group discussion. If possible, create one or two sentences that summarize the views of the class.
6. Compare the sentences summarizing the role of the guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment with what the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, said about the abuses at Abu Ghraib: Rumsfeld attributed such abuses to "a few bad apples" -- lower-level members of the military acting on their own. Ask student's who they think is responsible for such actions and have them articulate their beliefs.
7. Take home assignment.

Write a page describing a situation where you have adopted a role or been affected by an institution and acted in a way that you would not normally act. Relate your experience to our discussion of human behavior and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's words: "Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains."