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There were many people who witnessed what took place during the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE)—not just the participants and research team, but various visitors, including academic colleagues, invited experts with experience of working in prisons, family members, and staff who helped with the prison logistics (e.g., delivering food for the prisoners). All of these people observed the operation of the study, so I find it surprising that recent critics are claiming that such a long-running, widely observed, and well-documented study was

built on fakery and lies. The critics are very far away from the truth.

For the record, I was one of the visitors. I was not a part of the research team that designed and carried out the study, and I did not know much about it beforehand. I had just completed my doctorate at Stanford, and I was in the midst of packing up everything for my move to the University of California, Berkeley, where I would begin my new job as an assistant professor of psychology. I did know everyone on the research team, and I was also in a dating relationship with Phil. So, when he asked me to help out near the end of the study, particularly with doing interviews, I agreed to visit the prison and see what was going on.

As I have stated and written elsewhere, I was really upset by the dehumanizing way the guards were treating the prisoners as they took them to the bathroom before going to bed in their cells. Indeed, I felt sick to my stomach and could not watch the line of hooded prisoners being led down the hall. As it turned out, I was the only one who felt that way. None of the other researchers or visitors had the same reaction, and some even teased me a bit, questioning my ability as a psychologist if I could not look at these unusual scenes of human behavior. Phil was especially annoyed by my unwillingness to be interested in what I was seeing, and it was that moment that came as a great shock to me. How could Phil and I have such totally different viewpoints of the world around us, and such different responses and judgments of it? I had thought that I knew this man well, and now he was like a stranger to me—it felt as though we were on opposite sides of a deep chasm, and that chasm was too serious an issue for me to simply ignore it or run away from it. I had to figure out what was going wrong, so I confronted Phil, and we had a major argument that went on for several hours. Eventually, Phil came to agree with what I was saying, and he decided to end the study in the morning.

That morning I did do interviews, but now they were “exit” interviews. I was also a participant-observer of all the group meetings and debriefings that took place throughout the day. The ex-prisoners were really happy and celebrating that the study was over; the ex-guards were quiet and seemed unsure of what would happen next. When everyone came together as a single group, there were lots of interesting moments and questions for each other. For example, some of the former prisoners were convinced that the people selected to be guards were the biggest and tallest ones. However, when we had everyone stand up, it became evident that there was no significant difference in average height between prisoners and guards. The difference was in the mindset, not in objective measures.

There was a lot of deep debate about whether people’s behavior was a true reflection of their “real self” or just the enactment of a role. For example, if a guard tripped a prisoner while leading him down the hall to the bathroom, was he just behaving like a guard, or was he going beyond the role because he was actually a mean person? Clearly, different people had varying perceptions on all of this, and the conversations about these issues—and how people came to terms with each other about them—were amazing to hear. In no way was any of this experience “false.” It was deeply meaningful to everyone who went through it, and I think the critics do a serious disservice to all of the participants by denying what occurred and what was learned because of it.

Finally, I want to note that there are many other people who have witnessed similar experiences in their own lives; that similarity is why people continue to resonate so much to the SPE. It has been 47 years since the study took place, and during that time I’ve been told hundreds of stories which began, “something like that happened to me.” These stories have come from students in my classes, neighbors, co-workers, friends, and even strangers. Some stories have taken place in jails or hospitals, others in schools or the military, and still others in family settings. And the details range from prisoner-like experiences of being bullied or abused to guard-like experiences of going too far and treating someone else badly.

There are important lessons to be learned from the SPE, and in my view, the study makes an important and enduring contribution to our understanding of human behavior.

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