

The SPE Remains Debunked: A Reply to Zimbardo and Haney (2020)

Abstract

Le Texier (2019) conducted the first in-depth analysis of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) archives, resulting in seven substantiated findings: (1) several key elements, such as the prison rules and daily schedule, were not created by the guards but were taken from a student experiment conducted 3 months earlier; (2) the guards were not informed that they were participants, leading them to think they were part of the experimental team and thus impacting their behavior toward the prisoners; (3) the prisoners could not leave of their own will and were subjected to harsh conditions designed by the experimenters; (4) the guards not only knew what results Zimbardo wanted to achieve but were told how to achieve them; (5) the participants were almost never completely immersed in the unrealistic prison situation, as Zimbardo has claimed; (6) the collection and reporting of the data were incomplete and biased; and (7) the conclusions of the SPE had been written in advance according to nonacademic aims. Zimbardo and Haney's (2020) comment and Zimbardo's (2018) online response to recent SPE criticisms did not address three of these findings and failed to present any evidence contradicting the other four. Thus, the SPE remains a debunked, invalid study whose results should be disregarded.

Based on my thorough analysis of the Stanford prison experiment (SPE) archives, I detailed seven well-substantiated findings that together debunked the SPE (Le Texier, 2019). Zimbardo and Haney's (2020) comment and Zimbardo's online response to recent criticisms of the SPE (Zimbardo, 2018) did not rebut any of these findings.

Three were not addressed at all:

(1) *Several key elements of the SPE, such as the prison rules and daily schedule, were not created by the guards but were taken from a student experiment conducted 3 months earlier.*

(2) *The guards were not informed that they were participants, leading them to think they were part of the experimental team and thus impacting their behavior toward the prisoners.*

(3) *The prisoners could not leave of their own will and were subjected to harsh conditions designed by the experimenters.*

The four findings that were addressed were:

(1) *The SPE guards knew what results Zimbardo wanted to achieve and were told how to achieve them.* Zimbardo responded: "We did not give any formal or detailed instructions about *how* to be an effective guard." (Zimbardo, 2018, p. 4). This is contradicted by numerous instances of clear instructions given before and during the experiment by the research team, especially by the prison warden (cf. Le Texier, 2019, pp. 827-829).

(2) *The participants were almost never completely immersed in the unrealistic prison situation.* Zimbardo and Haney's response addressed this point for two participants: the most abusive guard and a prisoner who has repeatedly claimed to have faked an emotional breakdown in order to leave the study early. This response only repeated known arguments and failed to present any element contradicting the evidences I found in the archives.

(3) *The collection and the reporting of the data were incomplete and biased.* Zimbardo and Haney responded that "[t]he SPE may be among the most carefully documented and heavily scrutinized studies in the history of our discipline". This declaration is not supported by my findings, among which is a report written by Haney soon after the SPE ended, underlining "a number of serious distortions in the data, most of which derive from the vicissitudes of initial recording" (quoted in Le Texier, 2019, p. 834).

(4) *The conclusions of the SPE had been written in advance according to Zimbardo's nonacademic aims.* Zimbardo and Haney's response was that "to our discredit, we quickly lost experimental control, failing to anticipate or manage the power of the environment that we

created.” In reality, the SPE was a replication of a student prison experiment that ended poorly and it was based on Zimbardo’s previous studies on anonymity and aggression, both of which telling him what to expect. Zimbardo and Haney also respond that the SPE was a “demonstration”; yet, in a demonstration, the conclusions are written in advance.

Lastly, Zimbardo and Haney proclaim at length about the ecological validity of the SPE, its uniqueness, and its ongoing fame. This, however, is not the issue; the issue is whether the SPE is a valid scientific study. My findings show that it is not, and Zimbardo and Haney have failed to provide any evidence to contradict them. Thus, the SPE remains a debunked, invalid study whose results should be disregarded.

References

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