Zimbardo (1973) set up mock prison in basement of Stanford University. They advertised for students willing to volunteer and selected ones deemed ‘emotionally stable’ after psychological testing. 24 chosen from 75. Randomly assigned roles prison guard and prisoner. The ‘prisoners’ were arrested from homes by local police and taken to the ‘Prison’ to heighten realism. Blindfolded, strip-searched, deloused, given a uniform and number. Roles strictly divided. Prisoners’ daily routines were regulated. 16 rules had to be followed, these were enforced by the ‘guards’ who worked in shifts, 3 a time. Prisoners’ names never used, only their numbers.

The guards had their own uniforms, complete with wooden club, handcuffs, keys and mirror shades so they couldn’t look into the prisoners’ eyes directly. Told they had complete power over prisoners, deciding when they can go to the toilet, etc. Guards completed roles with enthusiasm. Their behaviour became a threat to prisoners’ psychological and physical health, study ended after 6 days instead of the 14 it was meant to last. Prisoners harassed by guards constantly, even in middle of the night. One prisoner released on the first day because he showed symptoms of psychological disturbance. Two released on day four. One went on hunger strike. Guards tried to force feed him, punished him by putting him in a dark closet. He was shunned by other prisoners. One guard became more aggressive, some appeared to enjoy the power they had. A third of guards embraced role and prisoners became passive.

**Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment**

**Strength:** Zimbardo and his colleagues had control over variables. Selection of participants. Randomly assigned roles. Researchers tried to rule out individual personality differences through this. Control increases internal validity.

**Ethical issues:** many participants were psychologically harmed. And one of them asked to be ‘released’ from the experiment but Zimbardo, who was superintendent, didn’t let him. He didn’t have the right to withdraw. Also, none of the participants knew exactly what they were signing up for.

**Weakness:** Lack of realism. Students may have been play-acting their roles, Banuazizi and Mohavedi (1975). Performances based on stereotypes (film Cool Hand Luke would explain riot on day 2). ‘Prisoner 416’ said the prison felt like a real one but run by psychologists instead of the government.

**Weakness:** Fromm (1973) accused him of exaggerating the power of the situation to influence behaviour, minimising the role of personality factors (dispositional influences). Only a minority of the guards (a third) behaved in a brutal manner. Another third were keen on applying rules fairly. Others supported and helped prisoners, giving them cigarettes, etc. Guards were able to exercise right and wrong choices, despite the situational pressures to conform to a role.

**Weakness:** Lack of research support. Steve Reicher and Alex Haslam’s (2006) partial replication of Zimbardo’s experiment was broadcast on the BBC. Their findings are very different to Zimbardo’s. It was the prisoner’s who took control on the mock prison and subjected guards to harassment and disobedience. Social identity theory (Tajfel 1981). However, this may just be because they wanted to look good on the TV.

Do prison guards behave brutally because they have sadistic personalities, or is it because the situation creates such behaviour?