Findings

Within a very short time, guards & prisoners settled into their new roles, with guards adopting theirs quickly and easily. Within hours of beginning the experiment some guards began to harass prisoners. They behaved in a brutal and sadistic manner, apparently enjoying it. Other guards joined in, and other prisoners were also tormented.

Prisoners were taunted with insults and petty orders, were given pointless tasks to accomplish and were generally dehumanised. Push-ups were a common form of physical punishment.

Prisoners soon adopted prisoner-like behaviour too. They talked about prison issues most of the time. They ‘told tales’ on each other to the guards and started taking rules seriously, as though they were there for the prisoners’ benefit and infringement would spell disaster for all of them. Some even began siding with the guards against prisoners who didn’t obey the rules.

Over the next few days the relationships between guards and prisoners changed, with a change in 1 leading to a change in another. The guards were firmly in control and prisoners were totally dependent on them.

As prisoners became more dependent, the guards became more devious. They held the prisoners in contempt and let the prisoners know it. As the guards’ contempt for them grew, prisoners became more submissive. As they became more submissive, the guards were more aggressive and assertive. They demanded greater obedience from the prisoners. The prisoners were dependent on the guards for everything so they tried to find ways to please the guards, such as telling tales on fellow prisoners.

During the second day the prisoners removed their stocking caps, ripped off their numbers, and barricaded themselves in the cells by putting beds against the door. The guards retaliated by using a fire extinguisher which shot a stream of skin-chilling carbon dioxide, and they forced the prisoners away from the doors. Next, the guards broke into each cell, stripped the prisoners naked and took the beds out. The ringleaders of the rebellion were placed into solitary confinement. After this the guards began to harass and intimidate the prisoners.

Prisoner #8612 had to be released after 36 hours due to uncontrollable bursts of screaming, crying and anger. His thinking became disorganised and he appeared to be entering the early stages of deep depression. Within the next few days 3 others had to leave after showing signs of emotional disorder that could have lasting consequences (these were people who had been pronounced stable and normal a while before).

Zimbardo (1973) intended that the experiment should run for a fortights, but on the sixth day it was terminated. Christina Maslach, a recent Stanford Ph.D. who was brought in to conduct interviews with guards and prisoners, strongly objected the experiment when she saw the prisoners being abused by the guards. Filled with