The Stanford Prison Experiment

August 15-21, 1971
One view is that the study lacked validity as it was not a ‘real life’ prison as the guards and prisoners only played a role rather than actual behaviour. For example later the participants who were ‘guards’ said they only were mean as it was part of the ‘game’, they did not use their morals as it was fake. Some psychologists say that as it was not real life the role did not suit the participants personal beliefs from what right or wrong, therefore it is hard to analyse whether the participants were intentionally acting this way as they knew it was fake or whether they genuinely believed their role.

However others have an alternative view say the investigation did obtain valid results. This is because the findings of the three types of guards. First, there were tough but fair guards who followed prison rules was about 50%. Second, there were "good guys" who did little favours for the prisoners and never punished them was 20%. And finally, 30% of the guards were hostile, arbitrary, and inventive in their forms of prisoner humiliation. These types of guards show parallel patterns to real life events, such as reserve police battalion in the second world war where ordinary men who were not fit for war were forced to kill over 38,000 Jews, showed that the majority only killed when assigned to do so, others were enthusiastic and less then 20% were ‘refusers’ where they found it hard to cope, the statistics of both events show parallel results.

The problems with this research as is there were many ethical issues involved. This is because the study caused psychological harm on the prisoners and 5 had to stop the investigation due to anxiety. But Zimbardo for many years after made debriefing sessions and recorded that there was no long term psychological damage.

Zimbardo’s experiment was not useful as, although he tried to educate the US congress of the harm of prisons (especially on younger people) and make the prisons more humane. However it did not make changes within the prisons system.