CONFORMITY TO SOCIAL ROLES: ZIMBARDO’S RESEARCH

The Stanford Prison Experiment

Zimbardo 1971

ETHICS – Zimbardo’s dual roles. Zimbardo responded to somebody asking to leave as a superintendent being asked by a prisoner rather than as a psychologist being asked by a student.

Aims

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

Procedure

- Zimbardo set up a mock prison at Stanford University.
- Advertised for students willing to volunteer and selected those who were deemed ‘emotionally stable’ after extensive psychological testing. (Zimbardo had control – ruling out individual personal differences)
- Students were randomly assigned roles of guards or prisoners (increases internal validity), and prisoners were arrested at home and then taken to the prison in order to heighten the realism. They were blindfolded, strip-searched, deloused and then issued a uniform and number. Names of the prisoners were never used.
- Prisoners’ daily routines were heavily regulated.
- There were 16 rules that prisoners had to follow and which were enforced by guards who worked in shifts.
- Guards had their own uniform, including a wooden club, handcuffs, keys and mirror shades. They were told that they had complete power over the prisoners.