

Discussion Questions

1. What police procedures are used during arrests, and how do these procedures lead people to feel confused, fearful, and dehumanized?
2. If you were a guard, what type of guard would you have become? How sure are you?
3. What prevented "good guards" from objecting or countermanding the orders from tough or bad guards?
4. If you were a prisoner, would you have been able to endure the experience? What would you have done differently than those subjects did? If you were imprisoned in a "real" prison for five years or more, could you take it?
5. Why did our prisoners try to work within the arbitrary prison system to effect a change in it (e.g., setting up a Grievance Committee), rather than trying to dismantle or change the system through outside help?
6. What factors would lead prisoners to attribute guard brutality to the guards' disposition or character, rather than to the situation?
7. What is "reality" in a prison setting? This study is one in which an illusion of imprisonment was created, but when do illusions become real? Contrast consensual reality and physical or biological reality, and explain the implications of the following poem (by PGZ):
Within the illusion of life,
Death is the only reality,
but
is Reality the only death?
Within the reality of imprisonment,
Illusion is the only freedom,
but
is Freedom the only illusion?

8. What is identity? Is there a core to your self-identity independent of how others define you? How difficult would it be to remake any given person into someone with a new identity?
9. Do you think that kids from an urban working class environment would have broken down emotionally in the same way as did our middle-class prisoners? Why? What about women?
10. After the study, how do you think the prisoners and guards felt when they saw each other in the same civilian clothes again and saw their prison reconverted to a basement laboratory hallway?
11. Moving beyond physical prisons built of steel and concrete, what psychological prisons do we create for ourselves and others? If prisons are seen as forms of control which limit individual freedom, how do they differ from the prisons we create through racism, sexism, ageism, poverty, and other social institutions? Extend your discussion to focus on:
 - o The illusion of prison created in marriages where one spouse becomes "guard" and the other becomes "prisoner"
 - o The illusion of prison created in neurosis where one aspect of the person becomes the prisoner who is told he/she is inadequate and hopeless, while another aspect serves as a personal guard
 - o The silent prison of shyness, in which the shy person is simultaneously his or her own guard and prisoner
12. Was it ethical to do this study? Was it right to trade the suffering experienced by participants for the knowledge gained by the research? (The experimenters did not take this issue lightly, although the Slide Show may sound somewhat matter-of-fact about the events and experiences that occurred).

13. How do the ethical dilemmas in this research compare with the ethical issues raised by Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments? Would it be better if these studies had never been done?
14. If you were the experimenter in charge, would you have done this study? Would you have terminated it earlier? Would you have conducted a follow-up study?
15. How can we change our real institutions, such as Attica Prison, when they are designed to resist critical evaluation and operate in relative secrecy from taxpayers and legislators?
16. Knowing what this research says about the power of prison situations to have a corrosive effect on human nature, what recommendations would you make about changing the correctional system in your country?