Appendix 6: Effect of imprisonment (Social)

Key research: Haney, Banks and Zimbardo (1973) A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison

Aims

- To look at the processes which motivate aggressive and submissive behaviour within a ‘total institution’ (e.g. a prison)
- The study forms part of a research project funded by the Office of Naval Research examining the psychological processes involved in aggression. It is now widely known as the ‘Stanford Prison Experiment’.

Participants

- 24 male college students selected from a pool of 75 respondents
- Self-selecting sampling method – advert placed in a newspaper asking for ‘Male college students for psychological study of prison life’ in return for $15 per day
- Completed a range of self-report measures about family background, physical and mental health, prior experience, attitudes and propensity towards psychopathology
- 22 students participated (two were on ‘stand-by’).

Method/Design

- Participants randomly allocated to role of ‘guard’ or ‘prisoner’
- Mock prison created in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford University with a cot as the only furniture for the prisoners’ cells and several rooms used as ‘guards’ quarters’
- ‘Prisoners’ remained in the mock prison for 24 hours per day
- ‘Guard’ subjects worked three-man eight-hour shifts
- The assigned task was to ‘maintain the reasonable degree of order within the prison necessary for its effective functioning’
- Subjects in each group were administered uniforms.

Results

- Planned to last for two weeks but stopped after six days due to negative behaviour
- Deindividuation: loss of sense of self-identity due to ‘roles’
- Pathological prisoner syndrome – initial rebellion followed by passivity and obedience. A range of negative emotions e.g. crying, depression, rage and acute anxiety
- Pathology of power – the guards used their power and authority to control the prisoners e.g. use of sanctions, punishments etc. They redefined the basic prisoners’ rights as rewards to be earned. The guards were distressed that the experiment was stopped early.

Conclusions

- A situational explanation of behaviour – the prisoners’ and guards’ behaviour changed due to the roles that they had been assigned.

Evaluation issues

- Ethics
- Ecological validity
- Situational vs Dispositional debate
- Sampling bias.