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**Background:**

Report by the six-person 'Independent Ethics Panel' as Chaired by MP Lembit Opik on the BBC Prison Experiment, conducted by Professor Alex Haslam (Exeter University) and Professor Steve Reicher (St Andrews University) to oversee the day-to-day running of the experiment and safeguard participant interests and wellbeing. BBC (October 2001 to May 2002).

BBC Television



'The Experiment'

## Report of the Independent Ethics Panel

April 2002

This report can be viewed also at:

[www.uel.ac.uk/psychology/news/panel-report.pdf](http://www.uel.ac.uk/psychology/news/panel-report.pdf)

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## Report

This report has been written and published by the Independent Ethics Panel for submission to the BBC production team and for public information.

## The Independent Ethics Panel

**Dr Mark McDermott** is a Chartered Clinical & Health Psychologist, member of the British Psychological Society, and from 1989 to date has been a full-time lecturer and researcher in psychology in the University of East London's School of Psychology. He was a lead advising psychologist on the ITV psychology television series 'The Human Zoo' and advised on the initial planning stages of the BBC programme 'Five Steps to Tyranny'.

**Lembit Öpik MP (Chair of the Panel)** has been Member of Parliament for Montgomeryshire since 1997. He was formerly Human Resources Manager at Procter & Gamble, specialising in organisation development and training work, internationally. He has particular experience in developing models to explore human behaviour in response to roles and high stress stimuli.

**Dr Stephen Smith MBE** is co-founder of Beth Shalom, the Holocaust Memorial and of the Aegis Genocide Prevention Initiative. He is a world-renowned expert on memorialisation and witness testimony. He was awarded the MBE in 2000. A member of the International Task Force on Holocaust Education (Sweden) he works closely with Holocaust projects in Lithuania, Sweden and the USA. He is Consultant to South Africa's Cape Town Holocaust Memorial Museum.

**Steve Taylor** is a writer on criminal justice and penal affairs, specialising in prisoners' rights, the politics of criminal justice, and prisoner sexuality. He is a Member of Council of the Howard League for Penal Reform; a member of the National AIDS and Prisons Forum; a member of the British Society of Criminology, and an Honorary Member of the Association of Prisoners. He is currently writing a book on sexuality in prison.

**Andrea Wills** is Chief Adviser Editorial Policy BBC, advising programme makers on taste and decency issues as well as issues relating to children and programmes, fairness to contributors and respect for privacy. She also liaises with the Broadcasting

Standards Commission, Independent Television Commission and other regulatory bodies on joint broadcast research projects.

## **Background to 'The Experiment'**

In 1973 Professor Philip Zimbardo, along with colleagues Haney and Banks, reported the findings of what has become known as The Stanford Prison experiment. In this field study, Zimbardo created a simulated prison environment in the basement of Stanford University's psychology building. He co-opted students to play the role of guards and prison inmates. Those students who were to be inmates were stripped, sprayed with disinfectant and issued a smock type uniform with an identity number on the front and back. The students who were to be the prison guards were required to wear khaki uniforms and reflector sunglasses. They also carried batons. Their anonymity was heightened by the fact that they were not referred to by name and had to be addressed by the inmates as 'Mr. Correctional Officer'. Guards required that inmates obey all the rules. If this did not happen then loss of privileges would follow, as well as the punishment of being given menial work to do.

Zimbardo and colleagues found that the students adopted their roles quickly and soon the guards were devising new ways of making their captives feel worthless. All of the participants had been selected for their psychological stability and resilience. A day and a half into the experiment, one of the inmates who had led a failed rebellion, began to cry uncontrollably and to experience rage and depression. Thereafter, on successive days three further prisoners showed stress-related symptoms, and a fifth prisoner developed a psychosomatic rash all over his body after an appeal to leave the prison was rejected. However, so substantive were the effects of the prison environment and the associated social roles of being a guard and prisoner on behaviour, thought and emotion, that the entire experiment was halted after only six days. It had been intended that it would run for two weeks.

The Stanford Prison experiment demonstrated the power of socially negotiated situations on behaviour, that such situations have the capacity to overwhelm the personalities and intentions of ordinary people, and that such people when placed in extraordinary circumstances are capable of behaving in ways which are also extraordinary and which they never thought possible of themselves before. The experiment points up that the exercise of free will is a socially constrained phenomenon.

Since that time, because of ethical concerns surrounding placing participants in simulated environments, there have been few attempts to replicate Zimbardo's work. An exception to this was the Australian research of S.H. Lovibond, M. Adams & W.G. Adams, reported in 1979. However, given such work took place over twenty years ago, there has remained a question as to whether or not Zimbardo's findings could be replicated or indeed were of any relevance to today's society.

Much interest in the experiment has remained, since it, along with other work investigating the conditions under which people conform and blindly obey malign authority, is recognised as having implications for understanding how seemingly ordinary people can inflict abuse and atrocity on one another. As C.P. Snow (1961) put it: *"...far more, and far more hideous, crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion"*. Indeed, the frequent ethno-political conflicts of the twentieth century and the associated human rights abuses that have accompanied these wars and disputes testify to the continuing need to understand the origins of such destructive behaviour.

A major question arising from the Stanford Prison Experiment was whether or not the descent into coercive behaviour on the part of the guards and the acquiescence of the prisoners was the only outcome that could have ensued in this simulated environment? What conditions might have enabled successful rebellion and resistance to the malign authority of the guards? Given the prosocial value of disobedience in such a circumstance, it was

thought that it would be worthwhile to run another prison experiment to investigate these issues and to see if Zimbardo's findings still have relevance today.

With the benefit of hindsight, additional ethical safeguards could be put in place to make a new prison experiment possible: an *independent ethics panel* would be appointed to monitor the entirety of the experiment and would be contractually empowered to withdraw participants or to stop the entire experiment if the behaviour of participants warranted such intervention; additionally, clinical psychologists would be on site up to 16 hours a day to monitor the well-being of both prisoners and guards and would also be contractually empowered to withdraw any participant if in their professional judgement it was necessary to do so from a mental health standpoint. Other safeguards would also be incorporated, such as banning the use of all physical force and the expulsion from the site of anyone who was physically aggressive or violent. Further, unlike in the Stanford study, in this new study the guards would not wear deindividuating sunglasses, carry batons or be addressed anonymously. So a quite new prison context was to be constructed.

### The Lab vs. the TV Studio

An important dimension to this new experiment is that, unlike its Stanford predecessor, it was not going to occur within the confines of a university laboratory. Rather it would be run within the setting of a TV studio and purpose built set. Participants would know that they are being filmed for TV broadcast purposes. Zimbardo's inmates were also filmed but it was not apparent to them that the footage would be used for anything other than archival and data-analytic use.

So, the collaboration between academic social psychology and public broadcast television produces a new scenario in which novel ethical difficulties need to be negotiated. Filming an experiment for TV broadcast is distinct as an entity from both purely lab-based studies of situations which purport to be analogues of everyday life

and from what occurs within the prevalent genre of 'reality TV' wherein no structured experimental manipulations take place. Such a collaboration brings together two groups of professionals with potentially competing agendas: on the one hand the academic psychologist is interested in conducting a methodologically defensible study in order to extend existing knowledge, whilst on the other, a TV production team is likely to be primarily interested in producing television that will hold its viewers' attention, as well as edifying them about matters of general import. Maintaining an audience's attention can be achieved in a number of ways: dramatic footage often makes for compelling television; and, concentrating on individuals is a way of making meaningful at a human level some of the narratives a programme is trying to communicate. But both of these devices can be antithetical to the objectives and concerns of the social scientist when conducting research with human participants. The potential 'drive-to-drama' of TV may not be in the best interests of participants and may not produce knowledge about behaviour of any significant value. Further, TV's need to personalise narratives may be quite at odds with the social psychological objective of understanding the social and intersubjective origins of behaviour. Thus, a creative tension between social science and TV exists in which their competing agendas must find a resolution that is acceptable to both sides. Whilst these tensions produce compromises for both, the main reward of such a collaboration is that contemporary psychological understandings of human behaviour can be made accessible and can impact on a very wide audience, so changing and hopefully improving 'lay' notions about the complex and multiple influences on and origins of human behaviour.

### The Exeter University Ethics Committee

Given the incorporation of human participants in this study and the ethical issues that surrounded Zimbardo's prison experiment 30 years ago, a detailed proposal was prepared by the investigators, Dr. Stephen Reicher of the University of St. Andrews and Professor Alex Haslam, the University of Exeter. This proposal was prepared



in conjunction with the BBC producers, Gaby Koppel and Nick Mirsky. The proposal was submitted to the members of the University of Exeter Ethics Committee, who subjected it to intense scrutiny over a six month period before finally agreeing to it in final form, following amendments. The resultant study plan contained carefully articulated hypotheses that would be investigated during the days of the experiment. It contained much detail regarding ethical safeguards, such as the setting up of an Independent Ethics Panel, the members of which would monitor the events of the experiments on a day to day basis. Such safeguards would mitigate against the excesses of behaviour witnessed in the Stanford study.

## **Background to the Independent Ethics Panel**

The Independent Ethics Panel membership was selected by the BBC. Their goal was to include a cross section of people, each of whom could import their particular insights and experience to provide balance to the Panel. Four members of the Independent Ethics Panel were paid a nominal fee to participate in the Panel. One member was not paid as she is a BBC employee.

### Remit

The Panel's remit was to ensure the welfare of the participants. This was to be achieved by ensuring ethically acceptable standards were maintained throughout the Experiment. The Panel was given the authority to define this, and establish monitoring systems to follow the conduct of the experiment.

The Panel expressly agreed its remit was NOT to pass editorial judgement on the programme, or the experiment itself. If the event was boring, or too long to be entertaining, or not enlightening, this was not a matter for the panel to advise upon.

Before the Experiment commenced, the Independent Ethics Panel reviewed all protocols relating to the activities of participants, and

proposed some changes (to, for example, the rules for punishment), which were accepted. Again, the Panel was careful to limit its remit to the ethical aspects of the protocols.

In the event, the Independent Ethics Panel discussed some editorial matters informally at post-production meetings (see below).

### Visits to the set

The first visit was invaluable, to see the conditions and the format of the cells, and how filming would take place.

### Meetings

In total, the Panel met twice (22/11/2001 in London, and 04/12/2001 at the Elstree film set) before filming began. The Panel held a private session, then involved producers to discuss terms and procedures after the private session. Both meetings lasted about 2 hours. One member was unable to attend the first meeting, however submitted to the Panel a written report in response to the intended experimental protocol.

### Enforcement

The Independent Ethics Panel negotiated the terms of its authority with the producers of the programme. The Panel successfully negotiated the contractually agreed authority to close down the experiment or withdraw particular participants, if three out of the five panel members felt it necessary to do so. It was clear the sanctions were necessary to provide the authority for the Panel to influence proceedings.

Within this, the members would be authorised to make suggestions, and offer views regarding the events in the experiment as it developed. It was agreed the Panel members could visit the set at any time, without prior notice.

In the event, there was no need to use any formal enforcement procedure, and closing of the experiment was not considered at any stage.

The Panel also established a role in reviewing the programme before airing, to ensure compliance with the ethical standards as agreed. The Panel negotiated a viewing of the four 59-minute programmes at a point in the post-production process when changes could still be made, if required. The Panel also agreed with the Production that, in the event of irreconcilable disputes regarding ethical matters, Stephen Whittle, Controller of BBC Editorial Policy, would act as arbiter.

## Filming

Filming for 'The Experiment' took place in a purpose built set at Elstree Film Studios from Friday 7 to Saturday 15 December 2001 inclusive. During the filming period there was both 24-hour paramedic and security guard cover.

### Unannounced Visiting Rota

At the second meeting of the Ethics Panel a confidential rota was drawn up to ensure that at least one panel member made an unannounced visit to the set for a few hours every day. It also ensured that there would be an Ethics Panel presence both as the volunteers (prisoners and guards) entered and left The Experiment. Lembit Öpik agreed to be on call throughout the filming period in the event of an incident requiring Ethics Panel involvement. Security passes were provided to panel members to allow ready access to the set at all times.

### Panel Communications - Email/Mobile Telephones

To ensure joined up monitoring all panel members had mobile phones (one was supplied by production for the duration of the filming). In addition, all members had e-mail addresses and reported to the other members of the Panel via this means on a daily basis.

### Interaction with Production Team

Prior to filming the Ethics Panel were given information about production team shift patterns, contact numbers and accommodation details.

The production team set up a rolling e-mail system to inform panel members of incidents on set, it was intended that these would be sent out at 9.00am and 9.00pm although these times were not strictly adhered to. It was also agreed that The Experimenters would give prior notice of any planned intervention not agreed in advance by the Ethics Panel.

In the production manager's office there was a VHS recording of the previous 48 hours recording available for scrutiny by the panel members. The time of day was shown on all VHS tapes along with the date.

There was a printout computer log (two loggers were working simultaneously 24-hours a day) also available for reference.

There was also an opportunity to discuss filming with the series producer, executive producer, the two experimenters, and the two clinical psychologists.

### Clinical Psychologists

Two chartered clinical psychologists, Scott Galloway and Andrew Eagle, were on set from 7.30am to 11.00pm every day, and they were also on call 24 hours a day, as they also slept at the film studios. Their temporary home was an outside broadcast truck to the right of the stage where they had a bank of monitors for

viewing all of the activity on the prison set. When a panel member visited the set, they could visit the experimenters and sit with the duty clinical psychologist observing The Experiment as it happened.

The clinical psychologists kept daily psychological monitoring forms on anyone whose behaviour was causing concern. These forms recorded: changes in mood, behaviour, incidents of verbal or physical aggression, evidence of co-operative versus disruptive behaviour and of participation versus withdrawal. The visiting panel member routinely asked if they were making use of these forms with respect to any individual and what recordings had been made.

There was a protocol for access to the clinical psychologists for both "prisoners" and "guards" - see Appendix 1

Key Issues raised by or referred to the Ethics Panel:

- Saturday 8 December a panel member raised four issues as a result of hearing conversations on set: namely that the participants should be given further reassurance about halal meat, fire safety, keeping noise to a minimum at night, and the temperature on set. Subsequently air conditioning and fire extinguishers were introduced to the set. In addition one of the guards had to be reassured that another guard, was not a 'plant'.
- Experimenter Steve Reicher asked for input on Sunday 9 December when a prisoner used his time in the video booth to ask the production team to take money from the jacket he'd been wearing on arrival and pay it into the bank for him. Steve Taylor and Stephen Smith discussed the issue and concluded that there was no problem with this.
- 10/11 December during this night shift the paramedic was called to attend to a prisoner who had difficulty sleeping - the paramedic gave some non-prescription tablets, but said he would pursue a further prescription of something stronger e.g. Temazepam for tonight. Ethics panel members discussed this

with both Alex Haslam and Scott Galloway and the agreement was that no prescription drugs would be used unless there was a real medical emergency and a GP prescribed such medication. In the event, no Temazepam tablets were provided.

- Monday 10 December - 3 people were sentenced by the participant 'guards' to 1.5 hours solitary confinement in response to an altercation at lunchtime witnessed by a panel member.
- Tuesday 11 December - a new prisoner entered at 9.00am but was withdrawn again 24 hours later because it was felt his trade union background meant he might lead to the premature ending of The Experiment.
- Wednesday 12 December a guard had to be told by Alex Haslam and Steve Reicher that his grandmother, who lived overseas, had died. He was given the option of withdrawing and had a confidential session with a clinical psychologist. He elected to remain.
- Thursday 13 December following the dissolving of the two-tier prison society by agreement of all participants, two guards decided to leave The Experiment.
- Thursday 13 December. The experiment had run its course, that is to say the experimental manipulations that had been planned and had been agreed with the University of Exeter Ethics Committee had been completed. The participants, however, wanted the prison situation to continue and to see if a 'commune' could be established, despite past group partitioning. The experimenters sought the opinion of members of the Independent Ethics Panel. We reported that we did not object.

### End of Experiment

Steve Taylor was on set from 0600 to 1300 on the last day and observed:

- 40 minute debrief by the experimenters, series and executive producer and the clinical psychologists.
- Tour of set
- Publicity photographs
- Lunch
- Debriefs

## The Post-Film Stage

### Meetings of the Panel

The Panel met on three occasions in the post-film stage:

6<sup>th</sup> March 2002 to discuss production of a report by the Independent Ethics Panel into our considerations, and comments on 'The Experiment'.

19<sup>th</sup> March 2002 to view the four edited programmes with a BBC producer and 'the experimenters', Steve Reicher and Alex Haslam.

27<sup>th</sup> March 2002 to discuss further the Panel's report, and to comment upon the edited programmes.

30<sup>th</sup> April 2002 Each Panel member viewed the 2<sup>nd</sup>  
& 9<sup>th</sup> May 2002 version of programmes 1 & 3 on these occasions.

### Input to Edited Programmes

The Panel met at Broadcasting House to view and scrutinise the four edited programmes. This viewing took place some twelve weeks prior to the date of the first programme being broadcast. We were shown four 59-minute programmes. Also at the viewing

were BBC producer Gaby Koppel , and the two 'experimenters', Dr. Steve Reicher and Professor Alex Haslam.

Brief discussions were held in between each programme, and a further discussion, in more depth, took place after the viewing of the fourth programme. Several concerns were expressed by the Independent Ethics Panel directly to Gaby Koppel. The Panel also agreed to internally circulate views and concerns on what had been seen.

Steve Taylor, Mark McDermott and Andrea Wills circulated comments amongst the Panel, the producers and experimenters. The series producer advised the Panel of concerns expressed by one participant following an earlier viewing.

The Panel agreed that some portrayals were inappropriate and required editorial attention. Several other issues of concern were raised about these '1<sup>st</sup>-draft' programmes:

- The portrayal of Professor Zimbardo at the beginning of programme 1;
- The lack of clarity and background to The Experiment, and the fact that both prisoners and guards were voluntary participants;
- The lack of clarity over the role of the Independent Ethics Panel and independent Clinical Psychologists;
- The descriptive terms used to introduce the individual participants;
- The un-flattering depiction of some prisoners;
- The narrative, which in some places was unnecessarily ambiguous;
- The inclusion of a guard informing a prisoner - in some detail - about the health of another prisoner;
- Quotes relating to 'an emergence of fascism', and a separate reference to Hitler;
- Insufficient foregrounding of the scientific significance of the content of the footage as described in the narration, thereby bringing into question the value of placing human



participants in an experimental situation for what appears (given this '1<sup>st</sup>-draft' narration) as comparatively little knowledge gain.

A further viewing of the programmes, subsequent to additional editing and prior to broadcast, was requested by the Independent Ethics Panel members.

### Post Broadcast

The remit of the Independent Ethics Panel did not extend beyond the broadcast stage. However, the Panel was concerned that some participants may require support or other forms of aftercare post-broadcast. The Panel was satisfied with the BBC's undertaking that appropriate post-broadcast support would be available to all participants should this be required.

## **Participant Welfare**

Participants in 'The Experiment' were all volunteers, selected from many hundreds of applicants who responded to advertisements in Sunday newspapers. However, the fact that they had volunteered to enter 'The Experiment' did not negate the requirement for conditions within the set, and their treatment therein, to meet specific standards which might be considered under the 'human rights' umbrella.

The purpose of the Independent Ethics Panel was to ensure that all participants, the experimenters, and the programme makers acted responsibly and appropriately. The professional make-up of the Panel was such that participant welfare was given due priority.

Meetings of the Panel prior to filming concentrated on the conditions in which the participants would be expected to live. Particular attention was given to:

- The formulation and enforcement of the prison rules;
- The punishments and penalties available to guards;
- The means by which participants could signal a desire to leave;
- The means by which participants could summon advice and support after the filming had ended;
- The means by which important personal news could be communicated to the participants; and
- The means by which the Independent Ethics Panel could intervene should it be held necessary to do so.

The BBC production team circulated a '*Guard Handbook*' at the first meeting of the Panel. This document outlined the parameters within which the guards were expected to perform their duties, and how they might 'punish' infringements of the rules. Concern was expressed at that first meeting about some of the listed forms of punishment, particularly those that required physical exertion. The Panel also considered rules and guidelines for the use of the solitary cell.

The Independent Ethics Panel agreed with the production team on the punishments available to guards, and upon use of the solitary cell. With reference to the latter, it was agreed that the longest a participant could be placed in the cell was two hours, although intervention would not come until a participant had been there for three hours.

At a second meeting of the Panel, at Elstree Studios a few days prior to the filming beginning, a revised *Guard Handbook* was circulated and approved by the Panel.

The set almost complete on that occasion, the Panel were given a tour, and were locked into a cell. The Panel's inspection was rigorous, and included jumping on furniture to test the strength and suitability. The Panel expressed concern on that occasion at the heat within the set, and was informed that air conditioning equipment was being provided.

Independent Ethics Panel members were present on the day the participants arrived (Mark McDermott), and as they left (Steve Taylor). Unannounced daily visits were also conducted, and regular contact between the group was made.

Concerns were raised (26 April 2002) about the provision of psychological aftercare for the participants. This concern was raised in the form of views expressed via email by one participant to Philip Zimbardo, who then passed them on to a Panel member. With the participant's permission, the Chair of the Panel was asked to raise these concerns with the BBC producers and experimenters.

## **Appendix 1: 'Prison Rules'**

The rules of the prison were set by the guards. The Guard's Handbook required that rules be written to cover the following categories:

1. Dress and appearance
2. Tidiness and hygiene
3. Language
4. Aggression
5. Respect for authority
6. Time keeping
7. Radio-mic maintenance
8. Obedience
9. Out of bounds areas
10. Work
11. Guards
12. Other areas at guards' discretion

In addition, the Guard's Handbook advised of the following prisoners' rights, to be upheld at all times:

1. No physical chastisement
2. No sleep deprivation
3. No enforced nudity or strip searches
4. No racial abuse, homophobic abuse, or abuse based on religious or ethnic identity
5. No cruel or unusual punishments
6. Provision of a mattress and bedclothes
7. Provision of a nutritionally adequate diet
8. Session with a clinical psychologist on request
9. Daily hot shower
10. Shower and toilet in private; no broadcasting of nudity
11. Clean clothes and bedding
12. Sanitary and hygienic living conditions
13. The right to withdraw from the study at any time

## **Appendix 2: Punishments**

The Ethics Panel was asked to approve a list of sanctions available to guards to punish breaches of the prison rules. The agreed list of punishments was:

1. Toilet cleaning
2. Temporary removal of one or all personal possessions
3. Detention - standing in the 'punishment zone'
4. Reduction of cigarette ration
5. Writing lines
6. Bread and water (for one mealtime)
7. Solitary detention (for a maximum of two hours, and not into sleeping times)
8. Others to be devised by guards (but subject to approval by the Ethics Panel, and not to include any physical punishments).

The Guard's Handbook allowed punishments to be given to (a) individuals; (b) cells; or (c) entire groups.

### **Appendix 3: Protocol for Intervention by Ethics Panel**

The following protocol was agreed between the BBC and the Ethics Panel:

**Step One**      Panel member highlights the problem and asks the producer to suggest remedial action.

- Step Two**            Series Producer / Executive Producer report on remedial action.
- Step Three**        If at that stage the Panel Member is unsatisfied he must consult implications with (a) one of the clinical psychologists; and (b) at least two other members of the Panel (by telephone).
- Step Four**         With the agreement of at least two other Panel Members, he can ask for the following changes to be made:  
(a) one or more of the participants to be given a warning;  
(b) one or more of the participants to be asked to see the clinical psychologist;  
(c) one or more of the participants to be removed from the study.
- Step Five**         Full termination of the study, called with the agreement of at least three of the five Ethics Panel Members. Of the three calling for termination, at least two must be on site.

## Independent Ethics Panel - Contact Information

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