

THE ETHICS OF THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research was to determine whether the Stanford Prison Experiment is considered to be ethical or unethical. The collection of data was carried out through the mode of a questionnaire containing eight multiple choice questions that were answered by 18 respondents. The results of the research concluded that statistically, majority of people believed that various features of the Stanford Prison Experiment were unethical. This should be a helpful guide for other researchers to avoid similar blunders.

Keywords: Ethics, Prison, "The Lucifer Effect", Philip Zimbardo, unethical

The Ethics of the Stanford Prison Experiment

The Stanford Prison Experiment was a social psychology experiment conducted by Dr. Philip Zimbardo. It involved college students taking up the roles of either prisoners or guards in a simulated prison environment. It attempted to investigate the psychological effects of perceived power, focusing on the struggle between prisoners and prison officers. It intended to study how people readily conform to the social roles they are expected to play, especially if the roles are as strongly stereotyped as those of the prison guards.

Review of Literature

There has been a lot of research conducted in this area of interest. Philip Zimbardo who was the researcher behind the Stanford Prison Experiment wrote a paper entitled; "Ethics of intervention: Stanford Prison Experiment" which analyses the sense in which the study can be considered to be unethical. Philip Zimbardo's book, "The Lucifer Effect" elaborates on this further and includes numerous details. Another paper by Philip Zimbardo called "Thoughts on Psychologists, Ethics, and the Use of Torture in Interrogations" also talks about the questionable ethics associated with the conduct of the Stanford Prison Experiment. An article by Harry Perlstadt in the Current Research Journal of Social Sciences entitles, "How to get out of the

Stanford Prison Experiment” answers many questions that are raised about social science research ethics and talks about how the experiment demonstrates a need for research ethics. The book, ‘Obedience to Authority’ was edited and a second version was published by Thomas Blass, this version includes an introduction by Philip Zimbardo that gives an insight about his views on his involvement with the experiment and why that was a factor that made the study unethical.

Method

To measure the effect of role-playing and social expectations on behaviour, Dr. Zimbardo transformed the basement of the Psychology building at Stanford University into a mock prison. Beginning with a mere advertisement in the newspaper, this experiment rounded up 24 participants who were judged to be physically and mentally healthy. Over the course of the experiment, some of the guards displayed cruel and authoritarian behaviour, while a number of the prisoners became depressed and disoriented. After an outsider revealed to Dr. Zimbardo the reality of the participants’ mental condition, he decided to conclude the experiment only six days after it began. Whether the Stanford Prison Experiment was conducted ethically is a question that has been constantly asked since the experiment was conducted in 1971.

Rationale of the Study

After doing my summer project on the Stanford Prison Experiment, I decided to read the book “The Lucifer Effect” by Philip Zimbardo. The Eleventh chapter in the book talks about the ethics surrounding the study. The reason it interested me was because Dr.Zimbardo weighs both the positive and the negative outcomes of the experiment. He admits to the numerous unethical acts carried out by him and his team during the course of the experiment. Though,he also lists various positive impacts the study had on him, the participants and how it helped in the betterment of society as the experiment became a warning against abuse of power.

Participants

The mode of data collection that was used was a questionnaire. The sample was comprising of 18 people in the age range of 15-17years of both genders, 7 male and 11 females.

Procedure

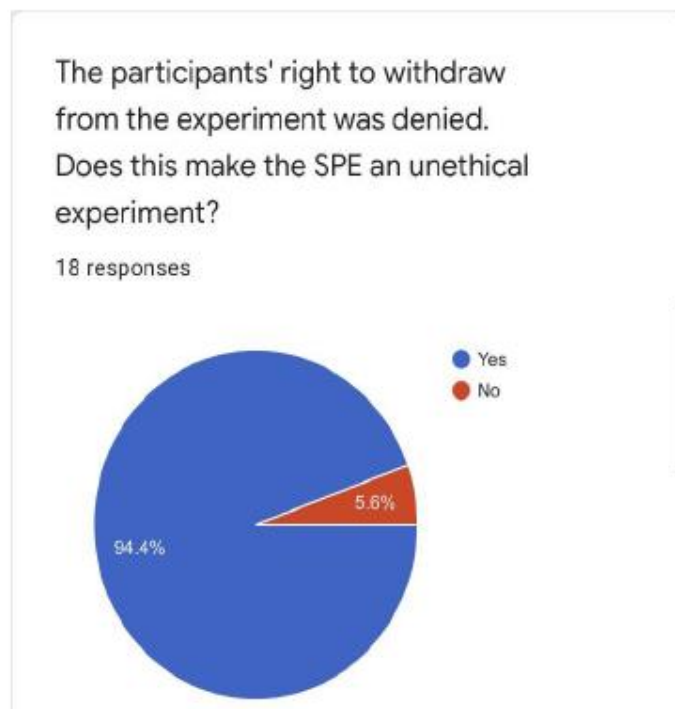
To collect data, a Google form was developed in which 8 questions were input and sent to the particular experimental group which had been chosen.

Materials

A questionnaire was formulated called “The Ethics behind the Stanford Prison Experiment” and used the software, google forms to help it reach the respondents. The questionnaire comprised of 8 multiple choice questions. An example of one of the questions is, “The particular nature of the events that would take place through the course of the experiment was not disclosed to the participants beforehand. Does this make the SPE an unethical experiment?”

Results

The respondents answered all the questions of the questionnaire that I formulated and the results concluded that the majority of the respondents thought that the Stanford Prison Experiment was unethical.



Survey Question Number 1

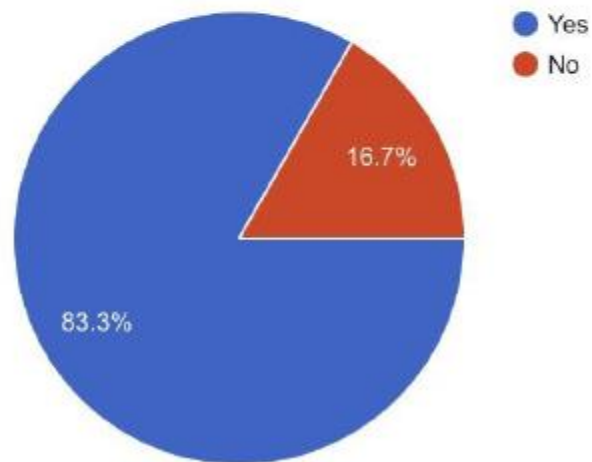
Results:

Yes- 94.4%

No- 5.6%

Dr.Zimbardo agreed that human beings suffered considerable anguish as a result of the study. Does this make the SPE an unethical experiment?

18 responses



Survey Question Number 2

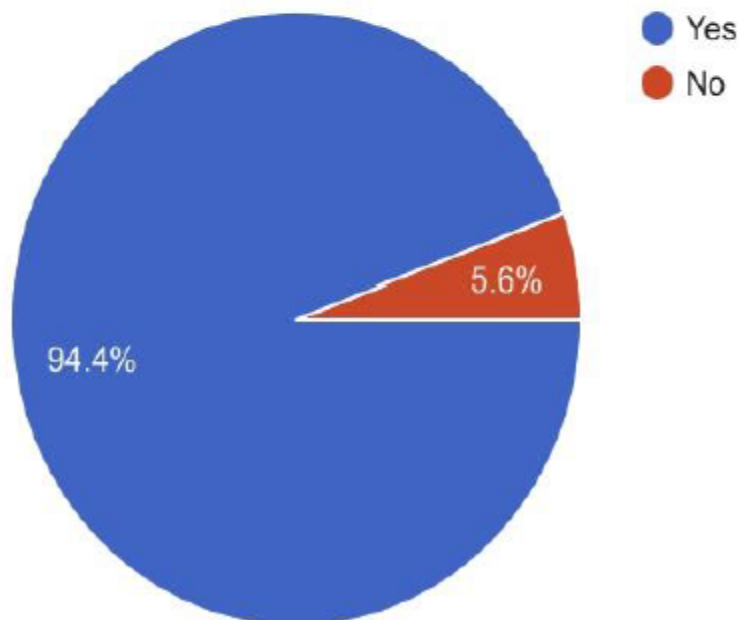
Results:

Yes- 83.3%

No- 16.7%

The parents of the participants were manipulated into believing that that their sons were not facing any issues or harassment. Does this make the SPE an unethical experiment?

18 responses



Survey Question Number 3

Results:

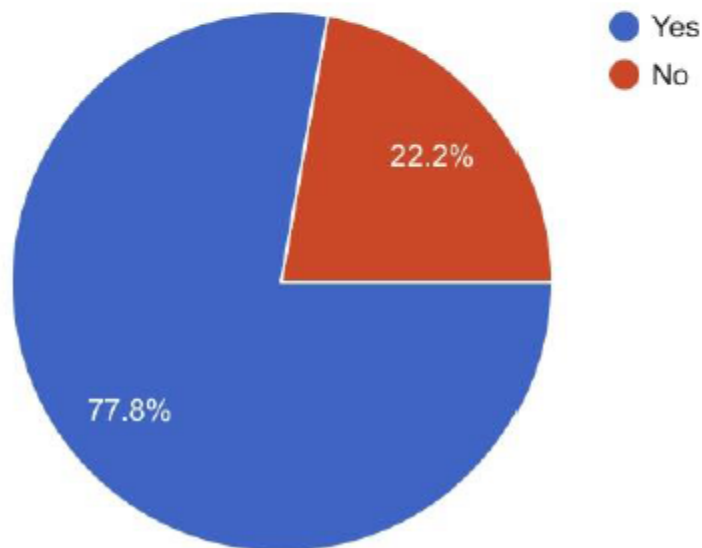
Yes- 94.4%

No- 5.6%

The particular nature of the events that would take place through the course of the experiment was not disclosed to the participants beforehand. Does this make the SPE an unethical experiment?



18 responses



Survey Question Number 4

Results:

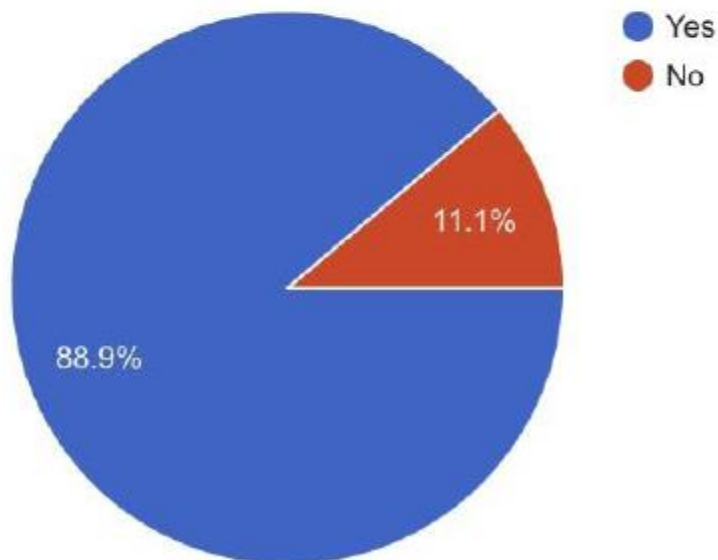
Yes- 77.8%

No- 22.2%

There was a failure to terminate the study despite the mental and emotional well being of 5 of the participants deteriorating so much that they had to be released. Does this make the SPE an unethical experiment?



18 responses



Survey Question Number 5

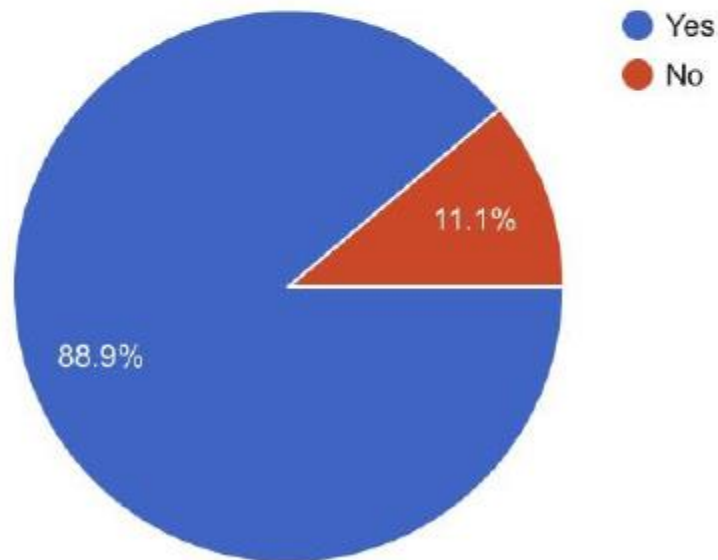
Results:

Yes- 88.9%

No- 11.1%

In the SPE, the participants were subjected to extreme emotional trauma. Does this make the SPE an unethical experiment?

18 responses



Survey Question Number 6

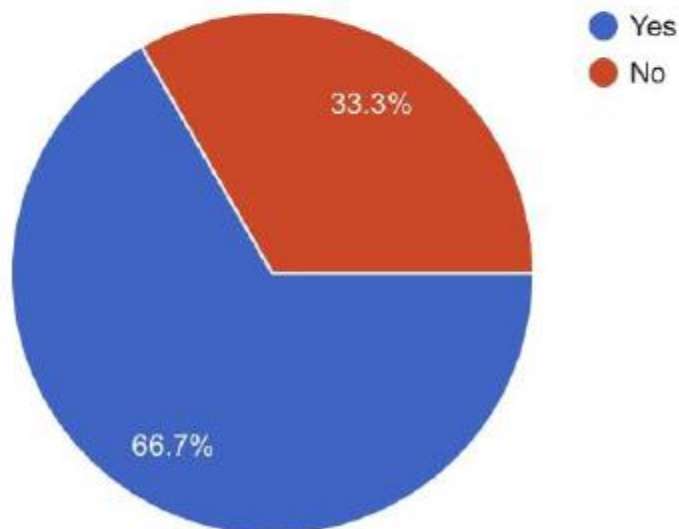
Results:

Yes- 89.9%

No- 11.1%

The SPE was able to serve as a study that advocates social change as I helped bring about many reforms in prisons that were much needed to improve the psychological health of prisoners and prison guards. Does this make the SPE an ethical experiment?

18 responses



Survey Question Number 7

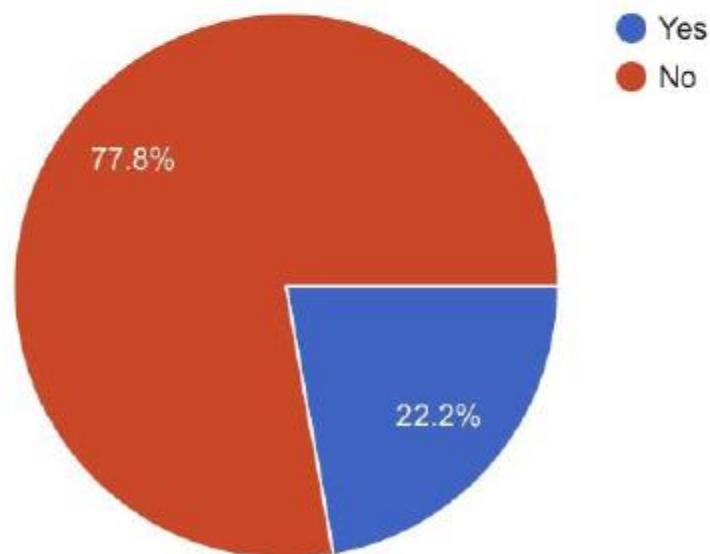
Results:

Yes- 66.7%

No- 33.3%

Most of the participants now describe the SPE as a valuable personal learning experience. Does this make the SPE an ethical experiment?

18 responses



Survey Question Number 8

Results:

Yes- 77.8%

No- 22.2%

Interpretation and Discussion

The results of the data I collected supports my hypothesis that the Stanford Prison Experiment

was an unethical one. An absolute ethical standard postulates that because human life is sacred it must not in any way be demeaned, even if it is unintentionally. My research's results proves that on the basis of absolute ethics, the Stanford Prison Experiment should be considered unethical. Philip Zimbardo himself stated that the experiment caused human beings to suffer considerable anguish. The study resulted in extreme stress and emotional turmoil for the participants. There were numerous features of the study that qualify as unethical like, failure to terminate the study despite the harmful psychological effects on the participants, the right to informed consent and the right to withdraw being violated and the parents of the participants being manipulated into believing their children were not facing any problems. The experiment created an environment where the "prisoners" were treated inhumanely and experienced psychological abuse. The "prison guards" suffered from the realisation of the cruel actions they took and became distressed on becoming aware of the fact that their abuse was real, direct and continual to the other participants.

Limitations

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, I didn't have too many choices for a data collection method. Using the method of a questionnaire, as a researcher, I cannot guarantee that the respondents answered the questionnaire themselves and in an unbiased manner. Also, I was not able to clarify any doubt that the respondents had while answering the questionnaire.

Implications

This research that proves that the Stanford Prison Experiment was an unethical experiment can benefit other researchers by providing them with the knowledge to avoid similar downfalls. It gives an opportunity to the researchers to learn and engage greater sensitivity to ethical safeguards.

Conclusion

The results of this research should be used as a guiding hand for judging the complexity of ethical judgments involved in research. This experiment was the root cause for many APA Standard Code guidelines being altered to make sure that all psychological experiments avoid causing human beings any suffering or torment.

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