



## THE FINAL RECKONING OF THE STANFORD PRISON SAGA

### PART 6: THE LAST JUDGMENT

--- Hugo Meijers ---

The researchers crafted a compelling allegory. Three storylines — guards spiraling out of control, prisoners suffering, and psychologists losing themselves in their role — gradually became entangled. The storylines propelled the plot to a climax confrontation between two lovers resulting in the premature termination of the experiment and the return of relieved boys to freedom.

Cleverly created story elements delivered the generalized warning of the power of the situation. However, the narrative is full of plot holes. After meticulous fact-checking, applying a narratological method to detect the flaws in a composed piece of art, the facts appear starkly at odds with what Zimbardo and his colleagues have been telling.

Indeed, the Herculean task of piecing a Kafkaesque puzzle together brought shocking revelations to light. Here are the highlights.

#### Brutality was pure fiction

Concerning the guards, Zimbardo painted the picture that they escalated their brutality to a point beyond control. So has David Eshleman, aka tyrannical John Wayne. Because no one told him to knock it off, he claimed he escalated his abuse. However, these assertions are unsound.



In reality, there was no brutality whatsoever. The directive no physical violence saw to that. The prisoners attested to a total lack of any threat of violence, which made the prison unreal. When asked if they would act as brutal as the guards, they reacted that the guards were just obnoxious.

Various reports by staff members indicate there was nothing exceptional going on. They thought John Wayne was by far the most abusive. Yet, the guards attested to a mundane setting where nothing disconcerting occurred. Even bully John Wayne thought he did nothing out of the ordinary. He was simply hamming his hazing experience in the short hour he had between the bathroom run and lights out. For most of his shift, Eshleman chitchatted zeitgeist stuff with sidekick Chuck Burton while the prisoners slept.

The prisoners, including informer Gorchoff, thought John Wayne was acting like an asshole. They refused to execute his orders every time he tried to cross the line of decency, particularly on the last night. But most of the time, the guards simply backed off when a prisoner wanted to push back.

Furthermore, Eshleman has consistently upheld that he ran a little secret experiment to give the researchers something to look at and prevent the study from turning into a summer camp. Zimbardo recently revealed he led the covert operation, illustrating Eshleman acted by proxy and followed orders.

John Mark, famous for being instructed to act tough, was of a different mind. Despite the staff trying to tighten the thumbscrews, he did not get into the act. He was not the only one defying the pressures the psychologists exerted on the guards to harass the prisoners.

### All prisoner accounts are off

The first prisoner out was Douglas Korpi. He was shocked to find himself falsely imprisoned. Zimbardo gave him two grounds for release — medical or psychiatric. Korpi tried both by faking nausea and acting hysterical. His staged emotional outburst lasted mere seconds for him to return to normality.

But his malingerer was only half the story. He started his tantrum on cue in a back room. In the conversation that followed, he referred to faking, putting on a show, pretending and acting in psychological concert. So Korpi faked his breakdown in cahoots with David Jaffe. The original audio recordings prove the researchers were complicit.

In truth, most versions of the Stanford Prison story mention Korpi faked. References to his pretense are primarily tentative, relying on the power of suggestion to discourage commentaries from exploring the issue. Zimbardo even remarked he ordered Korpi's arrest because he faked. However, this is untenable since the guards never picked him up.

Despite repeated claims by the psychologists, Korpi did not incite an exodus. Prisoner releases got organized. On Tuesday, Zimbardo contemplated letting two prisoners go. He was already scheming the releases that followed on Wednesday, with Levin the first to go. The next day, Prescott proposed paroling a couple of prisoners. Roney was allowed to leave the next day, followed by Yacco.

The standing order that prisoners could only get out on medical and psychiatric grounds triggered Levin to pretend he was sick and depressed. But his release was already ordained, even before the commotion in the back room Wednesday morning. He was released at 9 p.m. and not in the morning.



Three prisoners were allowed to leave on grounds in stark contrast to what the researchers reported. Gee broke out in a rash from unsanitary conditions. He had no psychosomatic reaction when the Parole Board turned him down for parole. He did not want to leave the experiment nor forfeit his pay for parole.

Yacco was paroled on Wednesday but released on Thursday to spread prisoners leaving the simulation more evenly. The staff delayed his departure. He was not about to break down as they suggested.

The only prisoner genuinely upset about being held against his will was Rowney. He wanted out and had set his hopes set on good behavior. When the staff would not let him go after the second Parole Board, he broke down in tears — a far cry from a psychological breakdown. Rowney never cracked under oppressive guard brutality. He was a victim of the power abuse of psychologists running a mock prison.

The prisoner releases show profound signs of psychologists suffering from Munchausen syndrome by proxy — a factitious disorder whereby a caregiver makes a dependent person appear mentally or physically ill to gain attention. As caregivers, the psychologists arbitrarily labeled perfectly normal behavior as psychopathological to captivate their audience.

These psychologists pretended to run a mock prison that was not running amok. By Wednesday, the action had fizzled out. Things were relaxed. So Zimbardo brought Ramsey in on Wednesday night to fill a job opening. Ramsey flew defiantly solo with his hunger strike to cause a stir on Thursday. In the NBC Chronolog video, his scripted testimony that he completely lost himself in prisoner #416 in a mere few hours comes across otherworldly.

The four original prisoners that stayed the course coped with humor, disassociation, and defiance. They never lost sight of being part of an experiment that would soon be over. The short stay inside the basement ensured they were never fully immersed in the setting. To them, the simulation was unlike a real prison.

## A prison not run by psychologists

The third plotline is about psychologists internalizing their prison role. Protagonist Zimbardo lost himself gradually when he changed into the insensitive superintendent, suggesting he succumbed to the oppressive situational and systemic setting.

Nevertheless, the inner struggle is a facade. Zimbardo's transition is make-believe. The jailbreak rumor that Korpi was going to bust his buddies out and the fiancée's confrontation followed by his epiphany are both flawed. The plotline is an attempt to pull the wool over everyone's eyes.

The inference of guards wielding power over powerless prisoners that led good guards to turn evil is by design utter nonsense. The portrayed power dynamics are ridiculous given that psychologists ran the Stanford prison. Students guards could never have acted on their own accord unless the prison was not run properly, disqualifying the simulation as a functional prison.

Given the simulation set-up, Zimbardo's suggestion that guards should have reprimanded fellow guards is preposterous. In their role as prison management, the psychologists were responsible for



enforcing the rules and maintaining order. Implying peers should confront peers is entirely against the correction officer code: never criticize a colleague in front of inmates.

To add, guards were not privy to the night shift pranking. Seven of the ten guards never saw what bully Eshleman pulled out of his back of pranking tricks. Sidekick Burton knew what John Wayne was doing and decided to play along. George Loftus did nothing much.

The student guards resided at the lowest rung of the correctional ladder. Research assistant Jaffe, as head of the guards, even saw himself low on the totem pole. He was non-stop giving instructions and masterminded tedious chores. Jaffe came up with things to force the tension, like waking prisoners up with shrieking whistles. The guards, like brave foot soldiers, followed warden Jaffe's orders. They were no more than extra's on a scripted stage.

The fuzz about Jaffe encouraging John Mark to act tough was peanuts compared to his constant coordinating the daily schedule and actively trying to create the desired tension. Conversely, as superiors in charge of the warden, Zimbardo and his confederates neglected to run an orderly prison. Their non-interference resulted in derelict of duty, which gave implicit approval to act out.

Decades later, Zimbardo deemed the participation of the researchers a design flaw, but this is a ruse. Without their direct involvement, the crucial emotion in the narrative would dissipate. The staged falling-out to end the experiment prematurely would never have materialized. Without this climax, the press would likely never have jumped on the story. Besides, psychologists losing their sense of self is the core theme in the Pirandellian frame used to reach a wider audience.

### **Fabricating startling events**

Key events propelled the plot of a forced premature end to a planned two-week experiment. Except most scenes appear to be highly dubious, heavily distorted, or significantly misrepresented. Some are undeniably imagineered.

The great distortion began with rigorous testing to exclude personality differences. The tests had no role in the selection, as suggested in the abstracts of the journal papers. The psychologists handpicked the 24 most eligible students and made them do some personality tests on Saturday morning. The results were tabulated afterward to avoid selection bias.

Therefore, the so-called rigorous testing never excluded anything. Even the random allocation after a flip of the coin is dodgy. Nearly all the students openly voiced doubt about the random assignment to play a guard or prisoner.

Korpi's staged breakdown in cahoots with the staff makes the rumored Tuesday jailbreak extremely dubious. Korpi stayed in a back room till after lights-out. The prisoners did not witness his tantrum. On Tuesday, the prisoners heard Korpi had gone to maximum security for disciplinary reasons.

Notably, that everyone staying in the basement till 9 p.m. makes no sense. The rumored breakout was to occur before or during visiting hours between 7 and 8 p.m. When they evacuated the basement to flee to the fifth floor, the prisoners thought they were getting some recreation time.



Irrefutable proof showed that Zimbardo made up his legendary scene between the superintendent and the wife-to-be to bring him back to reality. The night-shift guards began evaluating around 10 p.m., and the bathroom run took place hours earlier.

Zimbardo's decision around Thursday midnight to terminate the study is untrue. The decision to stop was taken earlier that day and was always part of the plan. Zimbardo and Richard Yacco both attested to this. The premature end forced by guards spiraling out of control is a scheme to fit the plot.

Likewise, psychologists losing themselves in their prison role is a ploy. Zimbardo's dissociative fugue — losing awareness of one's identity — is fake. The only thing spiraling out of control is the imagination of the researchers.

### Making things up as time passes

Over time, Zimbardo told irreconcilable, contradicting accounts of important events giving a clear signal he made things up. The inconsistencies start with three different times someone overheard the rumored jailbreak. Depending on the version, Korpi returning to bust his buddies out of the basement was picked up on Monday evening, Tuesday morning, or Tuesday after visiting hours. There are also three possible times of Korpi showing up: either before, during, or after visiting hours on Tuesday.

During the day, two incompatible versions exist on the sequence of gaining approval to move to the old County jail and introducing an informer. One version clearly states Zimbardo first tried to get permission, and when he got turned down, the staff opted to put a spy in to gather more intel on the breakout. The other version tells the exact reverse.

Then the mind-boggling discrepancies of the Parole Board hearing. The slideshow narrative, official website, and journal papers state there was one hearing with five prisoners. Other accounts like in *The Lucifer Effect* remark there were two hearings with four prisoners each.

Consequently, the loaded question Zimbardo asked prisoners if they were willing to give up pay for parole has two recitations. In one, Zimbardo asked the five prisoners eligible for parole if they would forfeit payment. Three of the five said yes. In the version with two hearings, he asked eight prisoners. Five agreed so they could get out.

In the official papers, the prisoners pleaded their case to the board on Wednesday. However, on Zimbardo's prison website and according to the slideshow narrative, the hearing was Thursday. Some versions claim the hearing was in the morning, whereas others remark it was in the afternoon. The telling's recounting two hearings state the panel convened Wednesday and Thursday afternoon.

Following the atrocities in the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib, high on all the tribulations and media attention, Zimbardo came up with a scene he hailed as behavior off the scale. On the last night, Eshleman ordered the prisoners — in one version five and another seven — to perform simulated sodomy with a 10-minute video showing the whole ordeal.

Except the recording shows there is no camel humping. The four prisoners in the prison yard did innocent leapfrogs. They did so rather pathetically while having fun. Moreover, the prisoners refused to execute Eshleman's order to do things doggy style.



Lastly, I found three conflicting ways the alleged lawyer or public defender Tim Bruinsma was approached Thursday evening to interview the prisoners on Friday. All three are off since Bruinsma was not a lawyer at all. He was a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year law student.

### Severe tampering with data

Zimbardo added numerous distortions for dramatic effect to *The Lucifer Effect*, published in 2007. For instance, Rowney left at 5.30 p.m. while upset that Yacco could go during visiting hours between 7 and 8 p.m. Another example is three conflicting accounts of the fabricated falling-out with the bathroom run at 10 p.m. and 11 p.m., while when Ramsey got out of the Hole at 11 p.m., he went straight to bed.

One of the most shocking perversions is portraying the push-ups prisoners had to do as unexpected Nazi camp-like punishment. Jaffe suggested push-ups during the guard orientation for the morning exercises. The guards also agreed it was a possible punishment for insubordination. Doing push-ups was not unexpected.

Moreover, the researchers suffered chronically from confirmation bias to substantiate their predefined conclusion. The recordings were seriously biased to capture only the dramatic and unusual cinematics. Selective sampling of anecdotal data resulted in quotable quotes, while everything else got swept under the rug.

Anything damaging the plot did not make the director's cut. For instance, Zimbardo discarded Korpi's testimony to Jaffe and Haney, demonstrating they knew he faked. He masked Tim Bruinsma's report that the prisoners on Friday attested to suffering little more than campus behavior. Nothing was done with Gee's debrief, revealing that the situation was relaxed and the guards were just a pain in the ass. And what about Rowney's interview with Banks exposing Yacco got parole.

Nevertheless, all this is trivial in light of core data being doctored. The staff remastered the night shift video and audio recordings of days 4 and 5. The compilation masks that the action had fizzled out by Wednesday. Unsurprisingly, Zimbardo in *The Lucifer Effect* attributed Thursday's events to Wednesday in chapter 6 - Wednesday is spiraling out of control. Without those events, the title of the chapter would fall through.

Additionally, crucial information in the audio transcripts is not transcribed, like Korpi mentioning he is faking. Essential references and names are left out. Discernable parts of the audio recordings are incorrectly marked unintelligible or inaudible. The transcribers also strayed from the verbatim by adding deceptive remarks like things looking homoerotic. Zimbardo misused these additions to fantasize simulated sodomy.

## THE FINAL VERDICT

In the wake of my revelations, the outcome of the final reckoning is incontrovertible. The Stanford Prison story is a false, nefarious narrative — a re-enactment of Pirandello's *Theater of the Absurd* by cleverly mixing fiction and facts. One of the seminal studies in psychology is an unsurpassed fabrication that rogue researchers wrote and subsequently defended for 50 years.



Executive producer Zimbardo running astray, aided and abetted by his culprits, scripted the Stanford Prison story. He produced vital scenes, planned prisoner releases, intervened in guard shifts, reviewed raw footage, rearranged events, invented incidents, doctored recordings, covered up conflicting data, and fantasized a false premature end.

The take-home message is that the Stanford Prison Experiment is blown to smithereens.

### A cut-and-dry concoction

Palpably, Blum only touched the tip of the iceberg of a massively flawed experiment with *The Lifespan of a Lie*. Le Texier merely scratched the surface by debunking the scientific validity. All laudable attempts to expose the folly were feeble. Students staging and faking were nothing compared to the disgraceful fabrication and falsification of plotlines and main events.

Many have dubbed the Stanford Prison Experiment a staged play directed by Philip Zimbardo. In fact, the prison of life play is no more than a memorable revue starring casted actors and extras dancing to Zimbardo's tune. Philip Zimbardo, supported by staff and students upholding the theatrics, made us believe in a mock prison run by psychologists not running a prison. Except he fumbled to tell a consistent story.

After decades of getting away with bluffing, he probably believed no one would bother to cross-check the discrepancies and spot the differences. The final thread I pulled with the phony finale unraveled the already fraying fabric of a fabricated fable.

The moral of the fraudulent tale is that a lie will always come back to haunt you. Anyone can create a fictitious reality, yet, the facts will eventually catch up. "[You can fool all](#) the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time."

Spotting the countless flaws and crafted fiction is not rocket science. Simply follow the trumped-up plot to a fictional dramatic climax. It did take painstaking scrutiny and deep delving into the archived treasure trove. Thankfully, they forgot to pluck the staggering plot holes.

Of course, there were always crucial limitations to prove the narrative is false. For a long time, the names of the participants and exact shift composition were unclear. Still, from 2011 onward, everyone has access to the archived data to piece the Pirandellian puzzle together. The most instructive information came from interviews with the participants given between 2004 and 2018.

### Psychology buffs are complicit

In hindsight, the scripted ploy is childishly easy to fathom. Start with a spectacular opening involving the police arresting students. Gradually built the tension of brutality spiraling out of control that causes poor boys to suffer severe emotional breakdowns. Introduce the climax of a lover's quarrel to bring the lost soul of Zimbardo back to reality. Back to his senses, the hero terminates the science study prematurely to end the suffering.

In truth, the prison chronicle is just classic 3-act storytelling.

Moreover, in complete control of the narrative, the psychologists could fabricate whole events propelling the plot that their prison ran amok, while in reality, it ran aground. It was never brutality



but the overzealous imagination of deceiving researchers that spiraled out of control, especially Zimbardo's.

The faking and staging of some students defined a grey area: the shadowland of not knowing with certainty whether the psychologists were actively involved. Ambivalence left open whether the pretenders fooled them. Finally, this ambiguity is resolved. The facts speak for themselves. The researchers, including Christina Maslach, are complicit. They are guilty of conspiring to create and uphold a cockamamie concoction. Zimbardo could never have pulled this off alone for a half-century without his culprits playing along.

## We have all been played!

Zimbardo painted a situational landscape claiming realism, but the painting was contemporary abstract art. Together with his accomplices, he tricked us into believing a never-ending logic-defying merry-go-round and thrust us down a surrealistic reality of his own making.

As the creator of a Kafkan story world, he could spin absurdity with force in perpetual circular reasoning to preach the power of the situation on our psyche. Like the staff forced the tension while the guards acted on their own. The prison was run by psychologists, not running anything. Researchers lost control of themselves while remaining in total control. At the bottom of the power ladder, powerless guards had absolute power.

Personality excluded roleplaying while roleplaying took over personality. Playacting became real because reality is a playact. Eshleman acted on his initiative while controlled by John Wayne. He created the environment that created him. Evil guards were good, and good guards not interfering were bad. Guards should have stopped what they never witnessed. And the folly goes on and on. Welcome to the bizarre Kafkaesque world of Philip Zimbardo.

Zimbardo crafted a short story resembling Kafka's *The Trial*, where a man is arrested but never charged. The Parole Board bellowing, "What are you charged with and how do you plead?" with the loaded question, "Are you willing to forfeit your money?" was the icing on the absurdity cake. Only Kafka had not counted on Ramsey (#416). Ramsey was never charged and found a way to fight the system by going on a hunger strike. He showed there is always a way to fight injustice if you are willing to pay the ultimate price.

Without question, psychology buffs led us up the garden path. In fairness, everyone is guilty. The awe-struck public fell hook, line, and sinker for the blockbuster punchline of how good turns evil — the theme of successful epic sagas through the ages. Peers made a so-called study famous. They are still keeping it alive as a psychology landmark to further their career. Criticasters and commentaries unjustly took the story seriously and inadvertently allowed the fabrication to grow on the controversy. And let's not forget the sensation-seeking press hyping shocking details like Nazi camp practices and ragged brutality to create bold fake headlines.

## Is this science fraud?

The defining lens through which we should view the prison study is not to demonstrate the power of the situation but the unsurpassed display of academic power abuse. Predominantly, tenured professors misused the authority bestowed by the scientific system to further their name and fame.



Indeed, to typify the conduct of the researchers as misconduct, the consensus is that reporting research results based on [fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism is science fraud](#). The present misconduct policy acts as a guide to assess the severity of the research transgressions.

Plagiarism is a bit far-fetched. Referencing the cruel irony of Dostoyevsky surviving the horrors of a Siberian prison labor camp, framing the experiment as a Pirandellian prison, stressing the lack of Milgramesque obedience, and linking events to Kafka's surrealism is relatively harmless. Invoking these tropes serve as sensationalism for a more compelling story. Although I can imagine these great, influential writers would not be particularly thrilled to have their names used to stand a sham.

Fabrication pertains to making up data. There were plenty of manufactured events to spice the story, like brutality spiraling out of control and the reason for the prisoner's release. They invented simulated sodomy in a sex game of camel humping. Yet nothing surpassed the falling-out fabrication on the last night to pretend the study had to end prematurely.

Additionally, let's not forget the different, irreconcilable versions of critical events, like the incompatible order of putting an informer in, the various moments of hearing a jailbreak rumor, and how a lawyer got on board. Discrepancies point to using a poetic license to add fiction.

Was data falsified? Core data not supporting the conclusion was deliberately omitted from the narrative. For instance, Zimbardo willfully kept silent that his false imprisonment caused fake breakdowns. False reports masked the planned releases. On top, countless dramatized additions point at not accurately representing the research record.

Overall the demonstration seems to tic most of the boxes. Did the researchers have the proper motive to resort to fraud? Common motivators to commit misconduct are [career pressures, ease of fabrication, and more earnings](#). Zimbardo wanted to gain a foothold with a wider audience to further his household reputation. His celebrity status likely made it worth his while. The ease of fudging anecdotal evidence made crafting a compelling narrative child's play.

## Facing the music

One crucial question remains. Research misconduct does not include honest errors or differences of opinion. The misrepresentation must be intentional and a [significant departure from accepted practices](#) of the relevant research community. Is this the case?

There is no doubt the inaccurate reporting of procedures and data was deliberate. Yet is fabricating a narrative a departure from the practice within the psychology community? Not according to Brain Resnick. [He mentioned a rather disturbing list](#) of flawed simulation studies resembling the mock prison.

Critically, every psychology simulation is suspect. Perverted practices lure scholars into creating alternative realities. The Stanford Saga signifies a general problem in the field. It is common practice to tweak data and present hyperbole findings based on dodgy statistics and tuned hypotheses. This practice has led to the current replication crisis.

Nonetheless, my findings provide ironclad proof of science fraud. The fraud resulting in hundreds or more papers and books surpasses everything in social science. It transcends Diederik Stapel by far,



whose misconduct was condemned as an audacious, deplorable, appalling, and incredible deception. How will the Stanford Prison fiasco be duped?

Indeed, why did they do it? Stapel's confession to [The New York Times](#) gives some remarkable insights. Stapel explained he became addicted to the thrill of publishing sexy studies and presenting successful findings. The rewards turned him into a junkie seeking a bigger and better high by carrying out acts of increasingly daring fraud. His status as dean served as a shield, as did his brazen confidence.

Stapel could no longer resist the circus of media attention and allure of academic adoration. To stay ahead, he concocted more post-truths until students caught on and exposed him. "When you live your life and suddenly something extreme happens," [Stapel said](#), "your whole life becomes a bag of possible explanations for why you are here now."

Zimbardo is not just a bad apple in an otherwise good barrel. Stapel explained that the corruptible science barrel made him believe in his irreproachability. It was science that corrupted his mind and caused his scruples to rot. And not just his. Scientific dishonesty is hardly unique. The infamous gallery of scholastic cheats features many scientific celebrities that ultimately get dethroned.

A similar fate awaits the Stanford Prison experimenters. Their fraud outweighs any misconduct in the number of articles, the reach of the audience, transgression of ethics, and longevity of deceiving. Diederik Stapel's ten-year spell of data manipulation covering some 60 papers is nothing compared to a half-century pathological lying by a group of psychology professors.

Ironically, in the process of keeping the baloney bubble afloat, these rogue researchers lived their lie, proving good people can do bad things. Toxic psychologists poisoned generations of students. Now they can join the growing ranks of science rascals, apologize and ask for forgiveness. Will they show remorse? Commit an act of atonement? Time will tell.

In the next episode, *Making sense of the shambles*, I explore the chaos to try and make some sense. How could Zimbardo get away with the deception? What does this say about social science? Is the conclusion ground-breaking or was the fiasco for naught? Is there an alternative explanation? And what stunning flaws in reasoning caused fatal attribution errors?

Previous articles of The Final Reckoning of the Stanford Prison Saga:

Part 1: [The Aftermath of The Lifespan of a Lie](#)

Part 2: [David Eshleman's deepfake](#)

Part 3: [John Mark's insubordination](#)

Part 4: [Douglas Korpi on trial](#)

Part 5: [An orchestrated apotheose](#)