



THE FINAL RECKONING OF THE STANFORD PRISON SAGA

PART 9: FINISHING OFF THE RESPONSE

--- Hugo Meijers ---

The journey is not yet over. There are two remaining issues in Zimbardo's response that are indirectly related to the simulation. Early publications appeared outside peer-reviewed journals to avoid rejection, and a British research team failed to replicate the simulation. To finish the job I started, I forced myself to dig my teeth into the last two cherry-picked items Zimbardo felt compelled to rebuke. The plot thickens in how the power of a mesmerizing tale ensnared the press and the general public.

THE FOLLY OF PEER REVIEW

In 1973, the Stanford psychologists published two journal papers and an enchanting epistle for The New York Times. [Blum contended](#) the order of release. In his exposé, he raised the point that Zimbardo and his co-authors deviated from scientific protocol by first publishing in The New York Times Magazine, sidestepping the usual peer review to avoid rejection.

[Reporters jumped](#) on the disclosure that the psychologists eschewed conventional academic reporting. Naturally, [Zimbardo denied](#) that he sidestepped standard protocol by publishing outside peer-reviewed journals. He claimed the first article was published in Naval Research Review, followed by the International Journal of Criminology and Penology. The last publication was in the magazine to reach a wider audience with a Pirandellian Prison frame.



What was the actual release order? [Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison](#) got published in the February volume of the International Journal of Criminology & Penology. The second journal paper, [A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison](#), was incorporated in the Naval Research Review of September 1973. Even so, the Office of Naval Research approved the article on November 10, 1972. *The mind is a formidable jailer: A Pirandellian Prison* featured in the [New York Times Magazine](#) of April 8, 1973.

As a consequence, taking the Navy's approval into account, Zimbardo has a point. Except, he caused the issue Blum raised himself. Somewhat confusing is that he wrote in his book that the first publication was in The New York Times Magazine to reach a wider audience? Why did he do that?

More importantly, why did the researchers publish in these two not-so-scientific journals? For sure, they had to write a paper for the Navy. The Group Effectiveness Branch of the Office of Naval Research sponsored the prison simulation. The Navy was concerned about the antisocial behavior of naval personnel guarding prisoners and granted Zimbardo a \$ 5,000 fund to run the experiment. In return, as Zimbardo remarked in his response, the Office of Naval Research insisted that the results were documented in its journal. The quid pro quo makes perfect sense.

The editor of the International Journal of Criminology & Penology asked Zimbardo for an entry. Zimbardo felt obliged to comply. The two journal papers are nearly identical. Almost but not quite! Compare them and see the deliberate deviations to play to different audiences. One is on violence.

Therefore, willfully circumventing peer review was never in play. Whatever the exact order, all three publications were written in parallel and came out in 1973. The sequence is splitting hairs. Why did Blum stress the point? In fact, why did he place so much faith in peer review preventing the papers from being published?

Peer review is irrelevant

The trust in peer review is highly overrated. Science's safeguard is deeply flawed. [Failures in peer review](#) and mistakes in statistics have rendered a shocking number of published scientific studies useless. In reality, human tendencies drive evaluation when personal ideas are presented as scientific truth.

Indicative is [The Lancet MMR](#) (measles, mumps, and rubella) autism fraud spearheaded by Andrew Wakefield — a false link between the vaccination causing regressive autistic spectrum disorder. The article released under peer-review shows how a phony idea can get through the collegial audit to infect many minds with a disastrous notion. The publication caused a staggering wave of anti-vaxxers refusing inoculations.

Plainly, reviewing is not a foolproof filter to prevent the release of unsound ideas. Thus would appraisal by a few colleagues have stopped the prison publication in its tracks? By no means! Zimbardo mentioned why [in his response](#). After the official publication, he subsequently co-published several articles on the Stanford Prison Experiment in peer-reviewed journals, including the American Psychologist, which is rigorously peer-reviewed.

Furthermore, decades of trying to torpedo the simulation only turned an inflatable dingy into an indestructible battlecruiser. Despite countless contentious commentaries and controversial criticisms



on the official publications, the experiment weathered every storm. An impressive feat considering my revelations.

The immortality of the Stanford Prison myth bears testimony to the unfounded trust in an inherent incestuous and subjective assessment process. Besides, Zimbardo's response to the publication sequence and the point of peer review is smoke and mirrors — a classic technique in magical illusions that makes an entity appear to hover in space — to obscure what really happened.

Far more relevant is why did the authors take over 1,5 years to get papers published in journals? Conscientious peer review did not hamper the progress to get them out. It seems apparent that these articles were never the main focus.

We should be looking at the early involvement of the press in shocking a wider audience. [The point Le Texier](#) brought to the table. And which Zimbardo conveniently ignored in his response — a transparent trick to dodge the bullet.

Fueling the coveted publicity

The purpose of the experiment, which warden Jaffe explained to guard Mark on Monday morning, was to go public to stress the need for prison reform. The Stanford prison staff were on an activist mission to rehumanize the penitentiary system. At least some were, some of the time.

[Zimbardo wanted to demonstrate](#) that prisons are bad for prisoners. However, [he later denied this was the reason](#). "During that course, I began to see that prisons are a waste of time, and money, and lives," Zimbardo said. "So yes, I am a social activist, and prison reform was always important in my mind. It was not the reason to do the study."

Whatever his rationale for doing the simulation, the researchers went straight to the press, even before the start of the study, to induce a media spectacle. Zimbardo undeniably turned the Stanford Jail into pop psychology seeking a high media profile way outside peer review.

From day one, Zimbardo hit the publicity ground running. The media campaign started on Sunday morning. San Francisco TV station KRON taped some of the arrests. [Filming the pickups](#) made the arrests even more eventful to the shocked suspects, as well as their parents and neighbors. KRON returned drooling Friday morning to capture the emotional release of the suffering prisoners on camera.

Monday afternoon, the coveted exposure gained traction. Zimbardo compiled a news release to lure journalists out of the woodwork and wet their scoop appetite. [The news release](#) contained the purpose of the simulation, "making us aware of the prison reforms needed at a psychological level so that men who commit crimes are not made into dehumanized objects by their prison experience, and in turn prey upon society when they are released, worse criminals than when they went in."

In this light, there is no doubt what the objective was. The researchers courted the press to gain attention for the toxic effect prisons have on inmates' minds. Moreover, barely a day in the simulation, Zimbardo announced the expected outcome. His news release shows that the conclusions were [pre-written according to non-academic aims](#).



Zimbardo must have counted on the phenomenon that once the story got out, it lives a life of its own. For the evocative prose of his communique got the eager press onboard to lap the tantalizing sensation up. A second news release before the official end on Friday rocked the prison publicity boat even more.

Media nationwide went beserk

Courting the press worked like a charm. On Thursday and Friday of the simulation, [some newspapers](#) featured the mock prison with captivating headlines based on the Monday news release. One of my favorites is the Palo Alto Times, “Prison experiment too realistic: convicts break down and want out.”

Other press outlets caught on in the days and weeks that followed. They lit the story on fire. On Saturday, [special editions](#) from a slew of local and national newspapers ran articles on the forced premature ending of a too-real experiment. The Washington Daily News headed, “Test made animals of students.”

Newspapers gladly printed feature articles. Clippings popped up from Washington to San Francisco with shocking news. The dramaturgy erupted in The Daily Mail of August 24 with “It was horrifying. They were falling apart before my eyes.”

Zimbardo went all out and [jumped at every opportunity](#) to attract attention for the Stanford Prison Experiment. He made up fraught one-liners to generate publicity. In fact, [he did anything to get extensive news coverage](#) in magazines, newspapers, and television to disseminate the prison story.

The uptake by the media across the nation quickly turned him into a public figure as the expert on evil. On the precipice of expert stardom, he was basking in the limelight. But not only the press helped him become a household name.

Real-life events rocketed Zimbardo’s fame when George Jackson attempted a jailbreak from San Quentin State Prison on August 21 and was killed. KRON TV station arranged a televised debate between Zimbardo and San Quentin’s associate warden. On September 9, the Attica riots broke out when more than 1,200 of the 2,200 inmates took control of the prison to fight for their human rights. Four days later, state police troopers quelled the uprising at the expense of over a hundred people getting killed or severely wounded.

Those two incidents were a gift from heaven. The timing could not have been more perfect. The foiled San Quentin’s escape, combined with the shocking Attica rebellion, became fodder for news coverage and exacerbated the need for answers on how good people turn evil. Prisons were in crisis, so journalists jumped on Zimbardo’s explanation of the power of the situation.

Still, Zimbardo and his confederates left nothing to chance. On October 15, Life magazine released an article with the sinister title, “I almost considered the prisoners as cattle.” Ten days later, Zimbardo gave expert testimony to the House of Representatives Judiciary subcommittee on prison reform. The hearing added further credence to the crafted story.

Around the same time, they launched the publicity campaign *Stick to the Basics*. The Daily News, Evening Sun, The Herald, and other newspapers printed the infomercial. It started with, “In the aftermath of the bloody events at San Quentin and Attica, an experiment conducted at Stanford



University last August is said to offer some kind of new insight into the brutalizing effects of prison, on both prisoners and their guards.” Talking about blowing your own trumpet.

The October promotion was the run-up to the NBC TV show Chronolog hosted by Larry Goldstein. [The scripted promo video](#) promoting Eshleman and Ramsey was produced and aired on the TV show on November 26, 1971. Zimbardo’s composed demeanor and charming candor disarmed the viewers while he narrated a horrendous ordeal. He left households awe-struck, gawking at their televisions in sheer disbelief.

Wrapping the issue up

Before the year’s end, the simulation story was featured in newspapers from coast to coast and viewed in various TV documentaries. But after the initial upsurge in the fall of ‘71, the media attention gradually ebbed away.

Nevertheless, media coverage continued throughout 1972. With the pending release of the three primary papers, the authors launched a revitalization operation to bring the story back to life. December 7, 1972, The Washington Post ran the bold headline, “Mock Prison becomes all too real.” The Providence Sunday Journal opened three days later to induce prevailing beliefs that guards are inherently sadistic and prisoners emotionally prone to crime.

Unquestionably, Zimbardo wallowed in the spotlight and bombarded the press with results that had not been tabulated or analyzed. The exposure in the 1,5 years before the official publications makes his rebuttal about the proper sequence a farce.

What principal researcher debates the release sequence after publicity campaigning on national media for years, knowing full well he cajoled the press with a false premature end and hyperbole one-liners? Zimbardo did nothing but circumvent the scientific field, violating every thinkable protocol with a fudged preconstructed narrative.

Furthermore, to my knowledge, there is no other so-called study where researchers sent alarmingly suspect news releases at the start explaining the outcome. Few experiments have a clairvoyant result without tabulating and analyzing the data. All this was crystal from day one when Zimbardo went nationwide. And this is supposed to be acceptable academic conduct?

Sadly, the field did not question Philip Zimbardo’s integrity and true motives. Psychology should have stopped the promotional campaign in its tracks. The media could also have prevented a sham from turning seminal if they had not failed as a watchdog. But they blindly believed the baseless statements and never bothered to check the veracity of a compelling evil tale. And why should they? Trumped-up punchlines by psychologists travel faster and further than the truth.

BBC TELEVISED PSEUDO-SOMETHING

The last issue in Zimbardo’s response is the failure of a British research team to replicate the experiment’s findings. Blum raised the replication fiasco as another blow to the scientific credibility of the Stanford Prison Experiment.



In May 2002, researchers Haslam and Reicher attempted to reproduce the findings of the Stanford prison simulation. Their experiment was filmed over eight days and broadcast in a 4-part BBC documentary. Hence the name '[The BBC Prison Study](#).'

Now I knew from Bregman, with whom my daunting venture to unravel the Stanford prison narrative began, that he sat bored through the series. He frequently nodded off because little to nothing went on, similar to the sheer monotony in the basement of Stanford's psychology department. So what happened?

The outcome was somewhat controversial because the exact opposite occurred. Prisoners dominated and terrorized the guards who failed to identify with their role. Some guards broke down and quit the experiment. The contradictory finding led the replicators to speculate about researcher interference by Zimbardo and his team.

The paradoxical result didn't sit well with Zimbardo, who called the BBC prison a reality show loosely based on the Stanford Prison design. [He reacted very negatively](#) to the BBC study, critically questioning the scientific legitimacy of research generated by a television program.

Specifically, he highlighted biases, fallacies, and distortions in the partial replication to the point of trying to prevent the publication of the results. In his view, the made-for-TV study was fraudulent and scientifically irresponsible.

Zimbardo obstructed the publication of the BBC prison results for years while the British researchers tried to get them published. At long last, in 2006, the British Journal of Social Psychology published the [BBC Prison paper of Haslam and Reicher](#), together with a [commentary by Zimbardo](#). Zimbardo presented arguments why a reality show should not be treated as a valid scientific replication and stated that the results should not be published in a scientific journal.

The fight behind the scenes

[Reicher divulged to Blum](#) that, at the time, he and Haslam thought they were in a scientific debate with Zimbardo. But in actual fact, they were in a commercial rivalry. Zimbardo was very keen on getting a Hollywood film out and was likely afraid the controversy would throw a spanner. Although the production of the movie was announced in 2002, it took over a decade to develop. The film was [finally released in 2015](#).

Zimbardo has consistently appeared to denounce the BBC study. Nonetheless, he facetiously promoted the BBC prison to add more weight to his fabrication. [In his 2007 book](#), he referred to the replication as a "Seeming Replication Failure in a TV Pseudo experiment." He euphemistically used the prisoners taking over the guards as further evidence of situational power.

[In his 2018 response](#), Zimbardo argued along the same lines. The BBC show met in no way the scientific criteria for replication. He rejected the use of this 'replication' as a scientifically valid challenge to his results because the BBC study missed the intense build-up of emotional confrontations between guards and prisoners. He further claimed that Haslam and Reicher frequently intervened — with announcements, assessments, contests, and daily confessionals — diluting the reality of simulated prison life.



Ironically, Zimbardo's criticisms seem [far more applicable to his experiment](#). Jaffe frequently gave direct orders and made announcements over the intercom system. The Stanford participants knew they were recorded and had daily interviews with committees, counselors, staff, or boards. All in all, pretty much the same as what happened in the replication.

So here we have scientists contesting each other's study findings on running interference. Essentially, the pot is calling the kettle black. And both are right, disqualifying either study. How about that for logic in remission.

Still, the BBC prison researchers did not copy the most critical feature. Psychologists ran Stanford Prison in a way they saw fit, ordering the guards around, forcing tension, and discarding their role of running interference even when they were not intervening. Zimbardo admitted in his response to playing an essential role in soliciting the alleged bad behavior. Mind you, a role he has always denied playing.

It is a shame that the speculation of interference in the Stanford Prison never surmounted to more than conjecture. The replicators could not fathom the extent of the fallacious nature of the Stanford simulation, where overzealous imagination and academic power abuse led an academic field astray.

Offering a plausible alternative

Why did Zimbardo hammer on the validity of the replication in his response? Perhaps he seized the opportunity to settle a score. Archnemesis Haslam and Reicher had been intellectual thorns in his situational side. For decades they offered an alternative explanation for what took place in the basement. They emphasized that people identifying with a group and its leader were the cause of the observed behavior, referred to as social or leadership identification.

[In their view](#), the real lesson behind the Stanford Prison Experiment is not that people will blindly conform to a given role but that they can be persuaded into doing bad things by a strong-willed leader who makes them feel part of a righteous cause. Transgressors of the norm need to believe their actions are necessary for the group to act out.

On many occasions, Haslam and Reicher have raised social leadership to explain reported guard behavior, [starting in 2003](#). In 2011 they challenged the single-sided focus on power [oppression rather than resistance](#). In 2018, these scholars continued to [rethink the role of identity leadership](#) in the Stanford Prison simulation.

They voiced gratitude to Thibault Le Texier after alerting them to warden Jaffe asking guard John Mark to toughen up. The instructive meeting was the smoking gun they had been seeking for 15 years after their replication produced contradictory results. Elated by the finding, [the replicators concluded](#) that not role conformity but identity leadership provides a better account of the cruelty observed in the SPE.

At first glance, they seem to have a point. Jaffe's hands-on management of the daily schedule would play nicely into the hands of scholars that promote the idea of leadership identification. The guard orientation also points in this direction. Zimbardo and Jaffe repeatedly used the operative 'we' to get the guards to identify with psychologists running a mock prison. For instance, "We have total power



in the situation. They have none.”, and “their lives are totally controlled by us, by the system, by you, me, Jaffe.”

Notwithstanding, guard Mark did not follow the instruction. He did the exact opposite and continued to act kindly. So the smoking gun misfired. Overall, the Stanford study was an unsuccessful demonstration of leadership identification. Guards did not cross the line of normality to dehumanize the prisoners. There was no brutality to explain either way. When the infamous John Wayne tried to cross the line of decency, the prisoners refused.

Therefore, if anything, the result suggests the reverse. Good people do not follow bad leaders who demand transgressive behavior. They stand up to power abusers! Just as millions around the globe are constantly doing.

Giving weight to a sham

Haslam and Reicher tried for decades to link the basement façade with their idea of social leadership, relentlessly pursuing confirmation of their hypothesis while referring to a famous study. They still believe that the Stanford Prison Experiment is one of the [most famous studies](#) in the history of psychology. [Right up to this very day.](#)

Insisting the Stanford stage is genuine science fallaciously lends weight to their own research and theory. And with every science paper on the Stanford Prison Experiment, they pay further homage to a fantasized fiasco. Therefore, instead of running the BBC study into the ground, Zimbardo should be grateful. He likely is since the adversaries buried the hatchet.

Zimbardo’s derogatory reactions to the BBC experiment and the long theoretical strive ended on August 27, 2018. [A consensus statement](#) with common intellectual ground — signed by Philip Zimbardo, Craig Haney, Alexander Haslam, and Stephen Reicher — was released to promote constructive scientific dialogue. In essence, this is a peace offering to further scientific and public understanding.

Years of intellectual bickering cloaks that the BBC replication legitimizes a crafted tale. Thus Blum got it wrong. Although a chorus of critics made the Stanford story bigger by illustrating it continues to stand scientific scrutiny, Haslam and Reicher contributed more than anyone to the scientific credence of a fairy tale.

Not that any of this seems to matter. Psychology is at the center of an ongoing crisis primarily caused by [questionable practices and plain fraud](#). The [majority of psychology research](#) results cannot be reproduced or have a limited statistical effect. I guess bringing failure to replicate to bear is not such a big deal in social science.

Time to reflect

Is it not high time to rethink how psychologists create fictional realities to further their name and fame? All the more in light of Zimbardo’s sudden change of heart on the scientific status of his study while he trashed a far more credible replication attempt as pseudoscience.

After being caught out so often, Zimbardo now attests he should never have called his study an experiment. It was a demonstration. He should have named it an exploration since the simulation



[explored the boundaries](#) of human nature. We are also courteously invited to see the basement spectacle [as an experience](#). Another mundane new label is referring to [an encounter](#). Seemingly, any word starting with an 'e' will do to avoid the word experiment.

Zimbardo's reframing even seduced the American Psychological Association to follow suit. The association has officially labeled the study "[Demonstrating the Power of Social Situations](#) via a Simulated Prison Experiment."

And why? Palpable reframing enfeebles the attacks on his person. Changing the label is a typical defense tactic to salvage a sinking reputation, just as misdirection, renaming, paraphrasing, and denial. Spinning the status serves to take the sting out of the returning critique. Some critics have even named the mock prison an academic reality show. But the reality is that it is deceit, as plainly [worded by Brian Resnick](#).

Incomprehensibly, Zimbardo told Resnick that the only thing that makes his study an experiment is the random assignment to prisoners and guards; that's the independent variable. There is no control or comparison group. So it doesn't fit the standards of what it means to be an experiment. "It's a [very powerful demonstration](#) of a psychological phenomenon, and it has had relevance."

Alas, random selection is not a variable but a process, just like fire is not an element. And not subscribing to a working hypothesis makes the simulation nonscience and impossible to falsify. A unique unreproducible event is precisely what these psychologists aspired to. Further, they most definitely had a working hypothesis. Twenty-four handpicked students were hired to demonstrate, "when we put good boys in a bad situation, some will turn bad." Because none did, a fake fable was contrived.

Beware of the folly

Given that Zimbardo now marks his study as a demonstration makes the whole fuzz about replication a ploy. The upheaval only serves to draw renewed attention. The point to take away is that an orchestrated prison event warrants no reproduction. Fables are retold and re-enacted. They can be reviewed, critiqued, adored, and even idolized, but any meaningful inference on human nature is pure folly.

Moreover, suppose the BBC prison study had inadvertently corroborated the made-up findings. Then what? We would be stuck with a false-positive replication. Unfalsifiable fabricated simulations should *never* be replicated, published, or for that matter referenced. They are the epitome of nonscience.

Where does this leave Haslam and Reicher? The [BBC Prison study website advertises](#) that their findings have been published in leading scientific journals and textbooks. The results have entered the core student syllabus altering our basic understanding of how groups and power work. Since they tried to replicate a false narrative, this will no longer fly.

And what about Zimbardo? His demeaning attitude towards the BBC prison study, where the researchers at least tried to comply with scientific rigor, is a disturbing feature of his psyche. What do you call someone who besmirches a replication study as pseudoscience while going to any length to sell his cleverly crafted tale as scientifically valid?



Crucially, Zimbardo was always in a position to take a different route and come clean. That no one of the psychologists ever did while continuing their double-dealing is on them. Yet, the field of psychology gave the Stanford psychologists a blank canvas to paint abstract art and turned the constructed composition into an impervious landmark. Now it looks on in silence or goes on paying tribute, showing its true colors. Go figure!

Seeing through the devilish defenses was child's play. One last episode of the reckoning remains, highlighting the narratological principles I applied.

Previous articles of The Final Reckoning:

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](#)

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