In the early morning hours of August 15th, 1971, nine students in Santa Clara County, California were arrested on charges of burglary and armed robbery, and subsequently hauled back to the Palo Alto Police Department for intake and questioning. This surprising series of arrests marked the beginning of one of the most prominent and infamous psychological studies of the 20th century, known today as “The Stanford Prison Experiment”.

The experiment was conceptualized by Dr. Philip G. Zimbardo; a psychologist, researcher, and professor at Stanford University who aimed to explore power dynamics within prison-like environments. This area of exploration was centered around the idea of situationism, or the belief that human behavior is influenced not by personality or predisposition, but rather surrounding circumstances and stimuli. The Stanford Prison Experiment was one of the more notable experiments conducted in response to the corresponding “situationist movement” that emerged within the 1960s and was heavily debated into the 1980s before being largely abandoned altogether. Bearing this in mind, Zimbardo intended to answer the following question: were the abusive dynamics between incarcerated individuals and prison staff the result of their respective natures, or was the environment itself to blame for the dangerous contrast?

With the grounds of the experiment established, it was time to begin sourcing subjects. Zimbardo and his team opted to conduct the experiment within a simulated prison environment as opposed to a literal one. Removing this degree of realism granted the researchers more control over their circumstances by ensuring that the subjects were as far removed from lives in violent crime and mental distress as possible. As such, an advertisement was placed in the local newspaper calling for participation in the study- specifically that of male college students. Selected participants would be compensated $15 daily for the entirety of the experiment, which was originally intended to run for a period of two weeks. Once the ad was published, construction began on the prison itself.

Zimbardo’s team employed a number of outside sources to establish the legitimacy of the prison’s configuration: ex-convicts, former correctional officers, and others with intimate knowledge of the prison system were consulted for their personal insights and experiences. These results were applied in the form of a drastic modification to the basement of Stanford University’s Psychology Department Building, which was the intended setting of the prison. Laboratory doors were removed and replaced with steel bars resembling those of a jail cell. A supply closet opposite the laboratories was emptied of its contents and converted into “solitary confinement”- a cramped space that was just large enough for prisoners to stand in, kept in complete darkness to isolate whichever prisoners were unlucky enough to find themselves inside. The only “open” area of this prison was the connecting hallway, referred to as just “The Yard”. The entire area was monitored by means of security cameras and audio feeds, through which researchers could observe interactions between prisoners, guards, and the intersections of the two groups in detail.

With the physical prison already in production, Zimbardo and his team were faced with their next task: selecting their subjects. According to the experiment’s official website, over seventy-five people had responded to the advertisement placed in the newspaper, giving the researchers a rather sizable pool to pull from. In order to narrow this number down, however, applicants were weeded out based on various different factors, including a history of mental illness, crime, and incarceration- anything that would place them too close to the nature of the experiment. With these parameters set, twenty-four applicants remained. To maintain the experimental nature of the roles, they were randomly divided into two groups: prisoners and guards, with nine members of each group being the experiment’s initial participants, and the remaining three from each group being designated as on-call alternates. Now that the prison was constructed, and the population was decided upon, the experiment could finally begin.

It got its official start on the aforementioned morning of August 15th, 1971, when Palo Alto police officers were dispatched to arrest the selected prisoners. To contribute to the immediate loss of agency that the prisoners were intended to experience, the arrests were made to be as realistic as possible, and so the police officers confronted the now-prisoners publicly. They were searched, spread-eagled against the police cars as they were informed of their charges, all as neighbors, family, and onlookers watched in shock. From there, the prisoners were taken back to the

Palo Alto Police Department, where they were then processed and led, blindfolded, to holding cells to await their transfers to the “Stanford County Jail”, the name given to the laboratory and setting of the experiment.

Upon their arrival at the laboratory, prisoners were searched a second time, stripped, and deloused. Apart from mimicking legitimate prison intake practices, this process served a secondary purpose: demonstrating to the prisoners that they were already at the mercy of the guards. Forcing them to display themselves naked denied them decency, and the delousing was an added step intended to designate them as “unclean” and “lesser-than”. So, as long as they were within the prison, they no longer possessed the same level of agency. Their street clothes were taken and confiscated in favor of very intentional uniforms. The prisoners were given nylon caps with which they were meant to cover their hair. Similarly, their uniforms weren’t your standard orange overshirt and trousers combination, either, but rather short, dress-like smocks beneath which prisoners weren’t permitted to wear undergarments. This was meant to distance prisoners from their outside identities by means of conformity and uncomfortable dress, as well as emasculation and humiliation.

While not typical in actual prison environments, a heavy chain was padlocked around one ankle. In detailing this decision, Zimbardo wrote the following: “Even when prisoners were asleep,” he reasoned, “they could not escape the atmosphere of oppression”. By providing a physical and ever-constant reminder of their captivity, one that extended beyond the bars of the prison cells themselves, the effects of a significant time spent incarcerated were replicated with incredible speed.

Finally, prisoners were stripped of their names and assigned identification numbers which they were meant to use instead. If they failed to do so, then guards were all too eager to punish any resistance to the experiment’s impositions.

Just as the prisoners were wholly unprepared for their roles within the experiment, so too were the participants assigned as guards. They were given no actual training, nor guidelines to follow; having been instructed only to act and respond to prisoner disruptions as they saw fit. Also like the prisoners, guards were meant to wear uniforms, though theirs were far more humanizing than their counterparts. They were outfitted in simple khaki, and given whistles and batons with which to exercise their commands. They also wore sunglasses- a decision which was meant to further obscure their identities and emotions.

The guards began to emphasize their authority rather early into the experiment through a series of “counts”. Prisoners were disrupted at random hours–sleeping or waking–and made to present themselves in front of the guards, stating their prisoner numbers, for inspection. If their behaviors or cells were deemed unsatisfactory by the guards, they were ridiculed and made to do push-ups. Initially, Zimbardo questioned the effectiveness of the punishment, though he later commented with acknowledgement that push-ups and other displays of physicality were common punishments within Nazi concentration camps and other serious and similar environments.

Understandably, these counts were received rather poorly by the prisoners and so, on only the second day of the experiment, a rebellion was incited. The prisoners barricaded themselves inside their cells, using their mattresses to prevent the guards from entering. They called out to the guards, taunting and challenging them for the duration of the night shift and even into the morning shift. The shift change was not facilitated as usual, however: instead of switching off as they were meant to do, the night-shift guards and the day-shift guards banded together in an effort to dismantle the prisoner rebellion. Pulling one of the ordinance-mandated fire extinguishers from the wall, the guards sprayed the prisoners with its contents and forced them away from the cell doors. They then entered aggressively: stripping the prisoners, removing their beds from the cells, and forcing the apparent “leader” of the rebellion into solitary confinement.

The guards were content with this response for the time being, but it wasn't a sustainable one based on their staffing pattern, and so they shifted their means of authority from physical impositions to psychological ones. The solidarity between the prisoners needed to be disrupted in order to prevent additional uprisings, and so a "privilege cell" was created. Prisoners assigned to the privilege cell were permitted to eat, clothe themselves, and keep their beds. Guards randomized the assignments of prisoners to this cell as a means of confusion and planting seeds of distrust among the prisoners. Functions which, at the beginning of the experiment were seemingly guaranteed, such as restroom usage, were now a privilege that guards could choose to deny or not honor. Both the guards and prisoners were settling rather intensely into their roles, much to Zimbardo's surprise.

Less than two full days in, the effects of the adverse environment were beginning to wear on the prisoners. One of them, Prisoner #8612, was exhibiting signs of distress which were initially received by the guards and researchers as a ruse. He was questioned and returned to his cell, wherein he subsequently informed the other prisoners that they were not allowed to quit the experiment. After descending once more into hysterics, he was eventually removed from the experiment altogether, and sent home. Following Prisoner #8612's release, a rumor spread that he was rounding up outsiders to return to the site of the prison and break the other prisoners out. Understandably, Zimbardo's team panicked, and began strategizing security measures to prevent the experiment from coming to a halt. The experiment was indeed interrupted, but not by an elaborate escape plot. In anticipation of the break-in, Zimbardo and his team decided to temporarily dismantle the prison with the intention of feigning the experiment's conclusion, only to find that the escape never actually materialized. It was only afterwards that Zimbardo realized his mistakes: in becoming so paranoid about the experiment unraveling, he'd entirely neglected to collect data for the day. He had become unintentionally involved within his own experiment, sacrificing his research goals for the sake of keeping it intact. And so, in a similar fashion to his subjects, he too began to settle rather quickly into his role.

Following the falsified break-in, the prison guards doubled down on their harassment of and cruel treatment towards the prisoners. Zimbardo described the emerging personalities of the guards as belonging to three categories: those who attempted to follow prison rules, those who attempted to treat the prisoners favorably, and those who quickly became hostile and exercised their power whenever given the opportunity to do so. Similarly, the prisoners' behavior reflected distinctly different coping methods: some rebelled, some broke down entirely, some became complacent and obeyed the guards' ridicules so as to avoid further punishment.

As I mentioned earlier in the video, the public had a sizable influence on the construction of the experiment, but the first real instance of public reaction to the prison conditions occurred while the experiment was still running. Parents and family members of the participants were invited to visit the prisoners–an idea meant to heighten the realism of their prison environment. The prison, which had fallen into disarray, was cleaned, and the prisoners were implored to feign contentment. Some of their relatives were incredibly put-off regardless, but Zimbardo's team eventually dispelled their concerns. The prisoners were then placed before a faux 'parole board', where they were made to appeal for their freedom. They had been made to feel powerless, having fallen entirely into their identities as prisoners, and returned to their cells afterwards without even questioning the success of their pleas. Interestingly enough, when addressing the members of the parole board, they referred to themselves using their identification numbers rather than their actual names.

Bearing this in mind, Zimbardo cites two primary reasons for the study ending: the first being a horrific escalation in the guards' behavior when they thought the researchers weren't actively watching them. The second was input from the outside, courtesy of Stanford Ph.D. graduate Christina Maslach. Christina was appalled by the prison's environment, and implored Zimbardo to end the experiment for the well-being of the subjects.The experiment came to an official end on August 20, 1971. As information began to circulate regarding the nature and results of the experiment, psychologists and common people alike expressed shock and horror at just how quickly the study had derailed. Even prior to the dwindling exploration of situationism, the experiment was viewed as unethical and

somewhat inconclusive- a professional verdict which has contributed massively to the negative perception of the experiment within today's media.

It's been just over fifty-two years since the experiment's conclusion, and still we look to it as a show of how experimental psychology has evolved within the last century. Regardless of whether its impact is negative or positive in nature, however, it is undeniable that Zimbardo's research has made quite the impression within both the professional and observational scopes of psychology.

Thank you for watching this video, I apologize if it was incredibly long-winded. Take care, and happy holidays.