

REPLY

Debate Around Leadership in the Stanford Prison Experiment: Reply to
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Access to the Stanford University archive has revealed new material that makes it possible to debate the precise nature and causes of events in the Stanford Prison Experiment. What the authors see as important is that these materials show the experimenters engaged in processes of identity leadership, which encouraged guard cruelty by presenting it as necessary for the achievement of noble collective goals. However, the authors encourage students, teachers, and researchers to engage with this new material themselves to explore alternative perspectives on what actually occurred in the study.

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Two decades ago, when we were planning our BBC Prison Study (Reicher & Haslam, 2006), we argued for the resumption of normal scientific debate around the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE; Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). In particular, we sought to invigorate discussion around the critical question of what can lead ordinary humans to act in extraordinarily inhumane ways. We noted at the time that this was all but impossible because (a) the SPE had gained iconic textbook status in the discipline, (b) we lacked many critical details about the study, and (c) we could not directly replicate the study for ethical reasons. As a consequence, we had to take the authors' word on the original findings and interpretations. And that is not science. As the motto of the Royal Society of London cautions, *nullius in verba*—take nobody's word for it.

In addition to the inherent value of resuming normal science, we had a specific concern with the received account

of the SPE. This concerns what Moscovici (1976) identified as a general *conformity bias* in social psychology. The focus in the SPE, as elsewhere, was on the ways in which people conform to expectations (in this case, role expectations), to the exclusion of acts of nonconformity. Yet even from the limited material then available, there was considerable evidence of resistance to role expectations among both guards and prisoners. Moreover, even if participants did behave in the role, there were hints that this did not emerge naturally but instead involved considerable leadership on the part of the experimenters (e.g., as seen in Zimbardo's briefing of the guards in the 1989 film *Quiet Rage*; Zimbardo, 1992). Our suspicion was strengthened by the fact that in the BBC Prison Study, where we deliberately refrained from providing such leadership, both guards and prisoners were unwilling to accept their assigned roles.

For decades, though, it was impossible to fully evaluate our suspicions. There was simply no way of knowing how much leadership was involved in the SPE or precisely what form it took.

That has finally changed. We see from Zimbardo and Haney (2020) that it is now possible to debate the processes involved in the SPE, and the broader nature of human cruelty, because—in line with the principles of open science—the original materials from the study are now publicly accessible. We are grateful to Philip Zimbardo for

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putting these materials online and to Thibault Le Texier (2019) for his forensic examination of them.

Thanks to this access we can now see how leadership permeated the study from start to finish. Indeed, leadership was exercised to a much greater degree than we had ever realized or has previously been acknowledged either by Zimbardo and colleagues or in textbook accounts of the SPE (Griggs & Whitehead, 2014). We can also see how this took the form of identity leadership whereby the experimenters sought to engage the guards by presenting cruelty as a necessary component in the noble (and collective) enterprise of challenging prison abuse (Haslam, Reicher, & Van Bavel, 2019).

Of course, this is not a final word on the matter, and we welcome the contribution of Linus Chan and colleagues to this debate (Chan, Woodard, Zubrod, & Conway, 2020). Identity leadership is not just a matter of the content but also the form of words that leaders use (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, in press). So, among other things, the complexity of leaders' language clearly has an impact on their status as insiders or outsiders. Indeed, here we are reminded of Cardinal Richard Cushing's advice to John F. Kennedy: "Jack, you have to learn to speak more Irish and less Harvard" (cited in Alexander, 2010, p. 65).

More generally, Chan and colleagues (2020) provide a vivid illustration of how open debate drives theoretical advance. Their perspective can add further depth to our understanding of how leadership functioned in the SPE and can help refine a growing body of work on the importance of identity and leadership for the emergence of collective cruelty. We look forward to future empirical studies that examine these issues in still greater depth.

It is important to note that this debate is now accessible to all. The gates of the prison are open. Accordingly, all students, teachers, and researchers now have the opportunity to judge for themselves whether the guards in the SPE became cruel spontaneously or whether (and how) their

behavior may have been shaped by the urgings of the experimenters-as-leaders. That is the true democracy of science. In a darkening world where, increasingly, authority seeks to define truth and deny reasoned debate, this opportunity is something to cherish.

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