

A User's guide to

# THE EXPERIMENT

Exploring the psychology of groups and power



## Manual to accompany the video

*The Experiment* was a ground-breaking piece of social psychological research and one of the most ambitious to have been undertaken in the last 30 years. Filmed by the BBC and conducted by two senior British academics — Professor Alex Haslam and Dr Steve Reicher — it was a major investigation into the psychology of groups and power.

*The Experiment* examined the behaviour of 15 participants who had been assigned to roles as Prisoners and Guards within a purpose-built environment over a period of nine days. The results provide fascinating, powerful and thought-provoking insights into processes of social, clinical and organizational psychology.

*The Experiment* was broadcast by the BBC in four one-hour programmes that met with widespread critical acclaim. These are now available on video from BBC Worldwide Education.

The programmes cover a range of issues that help to understand the way that people and organizations work. They offer vivid, powerful and dramatic examples that bring alive topics such as leadership and negotiation, conflict and co-operation, work satisfaction and stress, tyranny and resistance, power and powerlessness, research methodology and social scientific theory.

The video is accompanied by a 132-page manual that has been produced by the psychologists who conducted the research. In four sections, this provides extensive details of *The Experiment's* background, findings, controversies, and conclusions.

To stimulate discussion and focus learning, it also includes discussion questions, exercises, definitions of key psychological concepts, and suggestions for further reading..

This material is designed to be accessible to any reader, but it will prove invaluable for teachers and other professionals who can use *The Experiment* to update their courses, to engage students, and to explore issues that are central to contemporary psychology and society.

QuickTime™ and a  
Photo - JPEG decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

### Media commentary on *The Experiment*:

“Surveillance, authority, rebellion and group identity — it’s all here in this bold psychology test (which also makes great TV)” [The Guardian](#)

“This is the ultimate psychological experiment. The results are astonishing, providing remarkable insights into human behaviour and, in particular, the nature of power and rebellion.” [Heat](#)

“What happens is a revelation, the most exciting and interesting televised social experiment so far.” [The Observer](#)

“Fascinating, gripping and quite brilliant. Raw, dramatic, watchable ... with a serious dose of political philosophy.” [The Daily Telegraph](#)

“Surprisingly riveting.” [Time Out](#)

### Academic commentary on *The Experiment*:

“This is an amazing series! There is so much of great scientific value in this programme that its usefulness for teaching will be phenomenal. This is a "must-see" for any social psychology course.” [Professor Nyla Branscombe, University of Kansas](#)

"The screening of *The Experiment* coincided with a four week course we teach on group dynamics and intergroup relations. The students were instantly gripped. It brings a range of key topics quite literally to life, allowing for intelligent and informed debate of major issues in psychology. It isn't hard to get students talking after they have watched this." [Professor Russell Spears, University of Amsterdam](#)

“This is the most exciting piece of social psychology teaching I have seen for many years. It gets straight to the heart of core topics such as group process, leadership, conformity, influence and stereotyping and provokes students to respond both emotionally and intellectually. It is rare to find pedagogy which is profound, socially engaged and yet immediately accessible to the whole range of social psychology students from introductory to postgraduate levels.” [Professor Margaret Wetherell, Open University](#)

## Contents of the Manual

### 1: Background to *The Experiment*

#### A: The issues

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- Questioning Zimbardo's analysis
- Rationale for *The Experiment*

#### C: Social identity and the psychology of resistance

- Social identity theory
- Explaining social change
- Aims of *The Experiment*

#### D: Setting up the study

- Selection of participants
- Consent
- The participants
- Assignment to groups
- Planned interventions
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- Guards' resources and Prisoners' rights
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- Psychometric measures
- Ethical safeguards
- Initial set-up

### 2: Findings of *The Experiment*

#### A: Qualitative findings

- Episode 1 — Conflict
- Episode 2 — Order
- Episode 3 — Rebellion
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#### C: Integrating the findings

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#### A: Explaining the findings

- Taking on social identity
- The psychological consequences of social identity
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#### B: Methodological issues

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- On the impact of prior knowledge
- On simulation and reality
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### 4: Conclusions

### 5: Additional material

#### A: Further reading

#### B: Other references

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