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SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

SUBJECT FILE

1st March, 1978.

The Effects of Role-Reversal in a Simulated Prison

Report on research carried out under Research Project 21/76 from the Criminology Research Council.

The experiment was conducted precisely as outlined in the grant application, and the grant monies were fully expended. It is intended to publish the results of this experiment together with those of two related experiments that have been conducted in the School.

Subjects

Twelve volunteer subjects were each paid \$15 per day for participating in the experiment over a period of four days.

General Procedure

The procedure followed closely that used for the Standard Custodial groups in our previous experiment (The University of New South Wales Prison Experiment; U.N.S.W.P.E.). The training of officers, induction of prisoners, prison rules, schedules, and response measures taken to ensure the well-being of participants, were identical in the two experiments.

Experimental Design

Initially six subjects were allocated by a random procedure to the role of prison officer and were required to work in shifts. The remaining six subjects were allocated to the role of prisoner (Phase I). At the end of the second day, the subjects were required to reverse roles, i.e. the prisoners, from that time, became officers (after appropriate training) and the officers became prisoners (after undergoing the induction procedures). The participants continued in their changed roles for the next two days (Phase II).

Expected Outcomes

If subjects in simulated prison experiments simply act out their roles in an essentially superficial, stereotyped manner, the data obtained on days 1 and 2 would be expected to differ little from the data obtained on days 3 and 4. That is to say, the experience of subjects on days 1 and 2 would be expected to exert little influence during days 3 and 4.

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On the other hand, if the behaviour of subjects is determined primarily by the objective nature of the prison regime (e.g. power relations, behavioural constraints, extent of de-individualization) plus the developing character of the interpersonal interactions, it would be expected that the role transition would not be a simple matter. In particular, it would be expected that the events of days 1 and 2 would be a continuing source of influence during days 3 and 4, thus producing distinct differences in atmosphere between the two periods. For example, hostility generated in days 1 and 2 could be expected to carry over and be exacerbated in the role reversal. Since hostility takes some time to develop in new groups, a clear difference should emerge between the early stages of days 1 and 2, and days 3 and 4.

Results

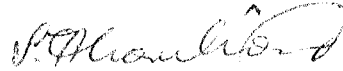
The behaviour of both role-groups and the character of interpersonal relations in Phase I were broadly similar to those in the Standard Custodial groups in the U.N.S.W.P.E. Though subjects complied with the role-reversal instruction the situation that developed in Phase II differed in a number of quite fundamental ways. Most notably:-

- (a) The prisoners continually provoked, argued with, and disobeyed the officers. A climax was reached at 3.00 p.m. on Day 3 when, as a group, the prisoners refused to obey further orders (the 'Superintendent' had to intervene after 1½ hours of unproductive officer/prisoner argument).
- (2) The prisoners were a highly cohesive group who collaborated in their actions against the officers. In the case of important issues (i.e. refusal to obey orders) they acted on majority vote.
- (3) Although they attempted to comply with the requirements of their role the officers were largely unable to establish effective control over the prisoners. (The prisoners accorded them little authority).
- (4) Among the officers there developed a marked degree of disunity with open disagreements concerning action to be taken, mutual criticism (over lack of support), and at least one clear hostile confrontation between two of the officers.

When the prisoners refused to accept the officers' authority, the officers, within the means available to them, were unable to impose effective control. In short, following role-reversal, it simply was not possible to re-establish essentially the same type of situation (i.e. functional prison) that had prevailed in Phase I of the present experiment and in the earlier Standard Custodial condition of the U.N.S.W.P.E.

The results were interpreted as supporting the view that the behaviour of subjects in simulated prison experiments strongly reflects the objective social relations (particularly power relations) of the prison, and the character of the interactions that develop within the constraints of the social relations.

Finally the present experiment provides further support for the view that changes in the social relations of prisons in the direction of participatory rather than custodial regimes will result in a substantial improvement in officer/prisoner relations (see paper of Lovibond, Mithiran and Adams for a discussion of caveats and qualifications).



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