GUARDS IN POWER OR THE POWER OF SELF-REGARD: ‘NEW STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT’



A still from Netflix’s “The New Stanford Prison Experiment,” released on Wed, Oct. 21. The enforcement of a strict daily routine, lack of privacy or choice in food and minuscule cells with very real locks were all effective in forming a believable simulation.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NETFLIX

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The release of the “New Stanford Prison Experiment” on Netflix on Wednesday, Oct. 21, was an inconceivable headline for all familiar with its predecessor.

In 1971, professor of psychology at Stanford University Philip Zimbardo led an experiment involving 24 students, in which 12 were assigned to be the guards of a mock prison, and the other 12 acted as inmates. The planned two-week-long experiment was halted after just six days, and was deemed unethical and dangerously abusive. It was such an intense model of the influence positions of power have on personal morals that it’s still used as an example in college psychology courses today. Most of us believed, however, that Zimbardo’s analysis was one to be studied, and not one to be repeated. As it turns out, replicating such an experiment accurately was not possible anyway.

It’s important that I include a disclaimer that this review is based only on the first episode of the TV show and written reviews of the whole series.

In Episode 1 “The Experiment Begins,” in typical reality TV fashion, the screen regularly cuts to the “experts” — the hosts — gathered separately, overseeing everything through security cameras.

“How do power dynamics influence people’s behavior?” questioned Alison Wood Brooks, a behavioral scientist and Harvard professor.

She was joined by Trymaine Lee, a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and Michael Cantrell, a retired federal corrections officer.

“How much of who you are can you keep?” Cantrell wondered, as participants entered the first of the four pre-determined stages: transformation, hierarchy, role-reversal and self-governance.

One soon-to-be-guard, Chris Lee, a self-titled CEO and business coach, credited his prior entrepreneurship to “positioning [himself] as the one that has the power or authority.” As a life motto, Lee claims to only accept overruling of his word if the other man can “out-alpha” him.

While the premise of the experiment remains in selecting participants to be guards or inmates by chance, nothing about the role assignments felt random. Lee led the night shift with a strong but friendly demeanor, beginning a relationship that more resembled campers and camp counselors than guards and prisoners. The nervous persona of several inmates and confident, muscular, all-American guards felt tacky and forcibly reminded viewers that they were watching a reality TV show.

One of the contestants, “Scary” Larry Foy, was unique among inmates because he’d actually been to prison. He estimated having spent at least 300 cumulative days behind bars for various crimes and misdemeanors. He was the first to quit the experiment, emotionally distraught after realizing how powerful the triggers of the show’s location were, reminding him of his time in jail.

The enforcement of a strict daily routine, lack of privacy or choice in food and miniscule cells with very real locks were all effective in forming a believable simulation. Prison guards leaned into their roles, loudly demanding actions and being harsher than necessary. Despite the steep budget and attention to detail, it was clear the participants were leaning into their characters, and it was hard to believe they experienced the simulation genuinely.

The hosts of the show were curious; will the guards abuse their power? And if they do, will the inmates succumb to their ruling, or somehow fight back against it?

In a review of the show, The Guardian referred to the inmates as self-aware “co-authors of a piece of entertainment,” and implied that their presumable lack of harsh punishment enabled them to act out, shaping the way the story of this experiment developed.

One main critique is that participants were less likely to weaken under the pressure of security because, as viewers and actors alike are unable to forget, their situation was not real. Moments of high conflict were followed by individual interviews, giving participants a chance to share their feelings. This was not unlike to-camera presentations shown between high drama action clips of “Survivor” and “Love Island,” and was difficult to take seriously. There is a stark contrast between the reality TV elements of this show and the physical beatings and psychological torment clearly undergone by participants of the original Stanford Prison Experiment.

Either the goal was never to conclude the experiment with new psychological findings on the influence of power, or willing TV personalities in the modern age of competitive and superficial reality media are incapable of truly immersing themselves into such a trial.

SUBOG Weekly Events:

October 19th - November 8th

November 4th – GTA VI Trivia @ 7:00 pm in the Student Union Theatre

November 5th - Coffee House @ 4:30 pm at the Benton Museum

November 6th – Jersey Day @ 6:00 pm in SU 325

November 7th – Harvest Fest @ 12:00 pm on the Student Union Mall

November 8th – Amazing Race @ 11:00 am across campus

Any questions? Email subog@uconn.edu.

RATING

