Social Psychology: Stanford Prison Experiment

I became interested in the Stanford prison experiment after one lecture on social psychology and social roles. I wondered in the same type of situation would the fact that participants self-selected have accounted for there cruelty. A paper by Carnahan, T. & McFarland, S (2007) explored the Big Five personality factors they hypothesized that those who would volunteer for “a psychological study of prison life,” recruited with the same ad as used in the Stanford prison experiment, would be higher than those who volunteered for “a psychological study” (failing to mention “prison life”) on measures of aggression, authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance but lower on dispositional empathy and altruism.

The research was carried out in2004 and involved participants ranging from six universities ages 18-25 were selected and from that, they were selected at random to receives one of the two example advertisements. These adds were placed in each uninvited newspaper.

Example of add: Male college students needed for a psychological study of prison life. $70 per day for 1-2 weeks beginning May 17th. For further information and applications, e-mail: [e-mail address].

Based on a previous Stanford prison experiment this study shows the prison study and control study volunteers varied as predicted on all seven trait constructs. Individuals that volunteers for the psychological study of prison life were much higher than those volunteers for the psychological study in aggressiveness, authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance and significantly lower on dispositional empathy and altruism.

I found the results to be interesting, as it shows that people who volunteered for the prison study where found to score higher on the scale for aggression, narcissism, and social dominance than the psychological study. This would there for show that those who self-selected do have more tendencies to be cruel. However, another explanation for such results could be the efforts of self-presentation could have caused the differences that showed on the scales. As these prison study volunteers knew that they were applying for a psychological study of prison life this could have made them try to portray themselves as an idle candidates for this study. In the same way, the control study volunteers could have made themselves more ideal for a general psychological study.

This shows that self-selection for such an experiment could indicated a higher score in aggression, narcissism, and social dominance. Can a study conducted in 2004 indicate volunteer self-selection that might have affected the Stanford prison experiment results in 1971? I believe that it can’t these where two very different times in life. Both prison life and social concerns have changed substantially, so might not factors that influenced volunteering in these two historical moments be quite different? Of course, in 2004 there was much more insight of what prison life was there was films such as Shawshank Redemption (1994) that showed the portal of prison life. I would be interested in further developments of the self-section and if it has led to cruelty now in 2020 as we have a much wider knowledge of the working of prison life.