

## Impact case study (REF3b)

<b>Institution: University of Exeter</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment 4: Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience</b>
<p><b>Case Study 4:</b> The BBC Prison Study: Improving our Understanding of Group Dynamics, Power, and Tyranny</p>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The BBC Prison Study provided novel theoretical insights into group dynamics, leadership, tyranny, and resistance. Beyond its academic impact, it has had a profound impact (a) on educational practices — in particular, through becoming a core study within the A-level curriculum (since 2008) — and in undergraduate studies, and (b) on public debate and understanding of these issues — most notably by challenging conclusions derived from the Stanford Prison Experiment (one of the best known experiments in psychology).</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The BBC Prison Study is one of the largest field studies in social psychology in the last 30 years. It was carried out to re-examine conclusions from one of the best-known social psychological experiments of all time and the understanding of group dynamics that it promoted.</p> <p>In 2001 Alex Haslam (appointed Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at Exeter in 2000, now Professor and ARC Laureate at the University of Queensland, continuing part-time at Exeter) and Steve Reicher (Professor of Social Psychology at St. Andrews) were approached by the BBC to discuss the possibility of conducting a major study in a simulated prison environment to replicate the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). The SPE was conducted in 1971 by a team of researchers led by psychologist Philip Zimbardo and has played a major role in shaping both psychological theory and public understanding of tyranny and oppression. Beyond mere replication, however, Haslam and Reicher were interested in (a) exploring new theoretical ideas derived from social identity theory, (b) testing critically the original conclusions that were derived from the SPE, (c) broadening understanding (and teaching) relating to issues of tyranny and oppression, and (d) working with the BBC to promote awareness of their research and its findings.</p> <p>In the original SPE, participants were assigned to the roles of guards and prison inmates. It was found that, over the course of the experiment, the guards became increasingly abusive and violent while the prisoners displayed increasing levels of anxiety and stress. As a result, the experiment had to be abandoned after 6 days. On the basis of these findings, Zimbardo and other researchers concluded that when people assume positions of authority, it is 'natural' for them to conform to their roles by engaging in oppressive and abusive behaviour. Due to its dramatic findings, the SPE (and the understanding it was seen to support) had a major impact not only within psychology but also in other academic fields (e.g., history and politics) and in public debate more generally (e.g., through the media). Because of the practical complications posed by ethical considerations, replications are difficult to carry out, with the result that these original conclusions remained largely unchallenged within popular and academic discourse in the final three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.</p> <p>The BBC Prison Study (BBC-PS) took around one year to design. This allowed the researchers to gain ethics approval from the University of Exeter and the British Psychological Society and for the study to be overseen by an independent ethics panel (chaired by an MP and including representatives of the Holocaust Memorial Trust and the Howard League). It also allowed them to develop an innovative methodology that would ultimately allow them to challenge the original theoretical conclusions that were drawn on the basis of the SPE. This centred on the construction of a purpose-built prison-like environment in North London, where participants would be studied for a period of up to 10 days. Participants were randomly assigned to roles of guards and prisoners, and a series of planned interventions was designed to impact on intra- and inter-group dynamics (in ways predicted by social identity theory). Over the course of the experiment it was found that, despite their high-power position, the guards' identification with their group decreased and that this, in turn, diminished their capacity for organization and leadership. The prisoners, in contrast, showed increasingly high levels of identification with their group, and this allowed them not only to work as a group (in ways that the guards could not) but also ultimately to make the guards' regime</p>

## Impact case study (REF3b)

unworkable. These findings challenged Zimbardo's role-based account of tyranny and instead supported more nuanced theoretical explanations of these issues centring on the role of group dynamics — and group members' identification with social groups — in determining when and why people engage not only in tyranny and oppression but also resistance. Furthermore, the work provided powerful and dramatic insights into processes of organization, leadership, stress, and mental health.

The theoretical insights that have been developed and tested on the basis of the BBC-PS were published in leading peer-reviewed journals in social and organizational psychology (see below). As well as being broadcast in 4 one-hour programmes on BBC2, the findings were also widely disseminated in other popular outlets (e.g., magazines, newspapers, radio programmes).

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. D. (2012). When prisoners take over the prison: A social psychology of resistance. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 16(2), 154-179. doi:10.1177/1088868311419864.
- Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. D. (2007). Beyond the banality of evil: Three dynamics of an interactionist social psychology of tyranny. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33(5), 615-622. doi:10.1177/0146167206298570.
- Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. D. (2006). Stressing the group: Social identity and the unfolding dynamics of responses to stress. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(5), 1037-1052. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.91.5.1037.
- Reicher, S. D., & Haslam, S. A. (2006). Rethinking the psychology of tyranny: The BBC prison study. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 45(1), 1-40. doi:10.1348/014466605X48998.
- Reicher, S. D., Haslam, S. A., & Hopkins, N. (2005). Social identity and the dynamics of leadership: Leaders and followers as collaborative agents in the transformation of social reality. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(4), 547-568. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.06.007.
- Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. D. (2007). Identity entrepreneurship and the consequences of identity failure: The dynamics of leadership in the BBC prison study. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 70(2), 125-147. doi:10.1177/019027250707000204

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The work on the BBC-PS has had impact by (i) shaping educational practice and content (at both secondary school and university level) and by (ii) informing academic and public debate and understanding of issues around leadership, tyranny, oppression, and resistance.

#### Impact on Educational Practices

This work has laid the foundations for (a) the reform of educational curricula, (b) the production of educational resources, and (c) engagement with students, teachers, and academic staff.

##### (a) Reforming Educational Curricula

From 2008 on, the A-level exam board OCR has designated the BBC-PS as a “core study” for their A-level (AS and A2) syllabus<sup>1,2</sup>. Between 2008 and 2013, over 100,000 students took OCR Psychology at A level, with more than 60,000 students also taking it at AS level. The study was also incorporated as a key component of the Open University's introductory course in Critical Social Psychology<sup>3</sup> and is taught as part of university courses on classic studies in psychology.

Haslam and Reicher were awarded the British Psychology Society's Annual Award for Excellence in Teaching in September 2009. The citation for the award recognized “*the pioneering way in which Haslam and Reicher have contributed to teaching psychology in the UK by developing innovative resources and engaging with both teachers and students*”. This award has itself been the subject of positive follow-up articles in a range of outlets (e.g., *The Psychologist* and *The Higher Education Academy Psychology Network Newsletter*).

In September 2010 Haslam received a National Teaching Fellowship from the Higher Education

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

Academy in recognition of his work on the BBC-PS. The citation for the award stated: “*It is hard to make good television programmes; it is hard to do good science; it is hard to develop high-quality teaching materials. But although each of these things is hard on their own, the task of combining them is far harder. However, ... work on the BBC Prison Study [shows] that these combined goals can be achieved and that when they are, the dividends are enormous. This project has made a real difference to the landscape of psychology, and, through this, to public debate about the most important of topics.*”

**(b) Producing educational resources**

Haslam and Reicher worked with BBC Active (the educational arm of BBC Publications) to produce a boxed set of Videos/DVDs<sup>4</sup> which has been sold to over 250 institutions, and includes a full transcript and a 140-page teacher’s manual. First published in 2005, *The Experiment* became one of BBC Active’s five best-selling products for the Higher Education market.

Haslam and Reicher also worked with On-line Classroom (an independent producer of academic resources) to develop a 30-minute introductory DVD<sup>5</sup> for teachers and students (released in 2009, bought by more than 100 institutions worldwide). Additional material included a summary of the main quantitative findings from the study (in the form of an animated presentation of graphs that describe results of key psychometric measures) and ‘Frequently Asked Questions’. As one reviewer noted: “*This is easily the best DVD that Online Classroom have produced so far in terms of editing, animation and use of original footage. (...) I will be using the DVD as a revision lesson for my students this year and because of this will do a much better job of teaching this fab study next year*”<sup>6</sup>.

**(c) Engaging with students and teachers**

Haslam has disseminated this work in more than 25 lectures to school students, typically to groups of around 800 at a time. Moreover, this work has been the basis for various keynote addresses including an OCR conference on the new core studies in 2008, the Association of Psychology Teachers’ Conference in 2009, the AS Psychology Student Conference in 2012, and the British Psychology Society’s Annual conference in 2013. Haslam has also spoken about the BBC-PS at numerous national and international academic seminars and conferences: e.g., invited lectures at Yale University (where Milgram conducted his obedience studies in the 1960s), and at the Universities of Cambridge, Cardiff, Coventry, Dundee, Exeter, Keele, Gloucester, Leeds, LSE, Manchester, Oxford, Surrey, Sussex, Southampton, and York.

**Impact on Public Debate*****Shaping debate through media outlets***

This work has had a fundamental impact on discourse around issues such as group dynamics, tyranny, leadership, and stress within and beyond academia. Following dissemination in broad disciplinary magazines like *The Psychologist*<sup>7</sup>, and in interdisciplinary publications such as *Scientific American Mind* and *PLOS Biology*<sup>8</sup>, the research has been widely discussed in national and international newspapers, magazines, and television programmes — e.g. BBC’s *Newsnight* and *Hardtalk*. In April 2013 the study was the focus of an extended treatment on the BBC Radio 4 programme *Digital World*. In May 2013 it also provided the frame for an interview (with Haslam) in the podcast series *Voices on Ant-Semitism* organized by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum<sup>9</sup>.

***Shaping debate through the BBC Prison Study Website***

The BBC-PS has become a key reference in the public’s understanding and debate of issues around power, tyranny, and resistance. Indicative of this, a Google web search with the phrase “BBC prison study” generates a total of 41,400 hits (Nov 2013).

In 2008 Haslam and Reicher created an official BBC Prison Study website ([www.bbcprisonstudy.org](http://www.bbcprisonstudy.org))<sup>10</sup> which outlines the study’s key findings and presents a comprehensive analysis of relevant theoretical issues. Moreover, as a way to address specific user groups, it includes frequently updated sections providing (a) answers to FAQs, (b) academic publications, (c) teaching resources, (d) a glossary and useful links, (e) useful quotations, and (f) a summary timeline that describes pivotal events and interventions of the study. The website also includes a blog about contemporary real world issues (also published in *The Psychologist*) and a range of

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

activities (i.e., discussion questions, exercises, and psychometric tests).

Since its launch in later 2008, this website has been used with increasing frequency (see Figure below): it has received over 600,000 unique visitors. Over the two years ending in July 2013, it recorded more than 350,000 sessions, with an increasing proportion outside the UK and USA. (Clearly its audience goes way beyond UK students.) On this basis, the study can lay claim to being not only one of the largest field studies in social psychology of the last 30 years, but also one of the most influential.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. OCR A-level psychology specification of core studies: <http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/70740-specification.pdf>
2. OCR specimen exam questions and answers for AS Psychology: <http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/67773-unit-g542-the-core-studies-specimen.pdf>
3. Open University podcast: <http://podcast.open.ac.uk/oulearn/psychology/podcast-dd307-social-psychology#!79543b3f81>
4. BBC Video Materials : <http://www.classroomvideo.co.uk/Product.aspx?id=4691>
5. Online classroom about the BBC prison study: [http://onlineclassroom.tv/psychology/catalogue/understanding\\_psychology/the\\_bbc\\_prison\\_study](http://onlineclassroom.tv/psychology/catalogue/understanding_psychology/the_bbc_prison_study)
6. Psychblog about the BBC prison study: <http://www.psychblog.co.uk/reicher-and-haslam-bbc-prison-study-949.html>
7. Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. D. (2008). Questioning the banality of evil. *The Psychologist*, 21(1) 16-19  
[http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive\\_home.cfm?volumeID=21&editionID=155&ArticleID=1291](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive_home.cfm?volumeID=21&editionID=155&ArticleID=1291)
8. Review article in *PLoS Biology* (a high-impact Biology journal): Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. D. (2012). Contesting the 'nature' of conformity: What Milgram and Zimbardo's studies really show. *PLoS Biology*, 10(11), e1001426. doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.1001426 See also <http://www.sciencenewsline.com/articles/2012112104260011.html>
9. US Holocaust Museum podcast [www.ushmm.org/confront-antisemitism/antisemitism-podcast/alex-haslam](http://www.ushmm.org/confront-antisemitism/antisemitism-podcast/alex-haslam)
10. The official Website of the BBC Prison Study: [www.bbcprisonstudy.org](http://www.bbcprisonstudy.org) (and related article: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3700209.stm>)

