Activity 1 – Pre-Learn Vocabulary

basement (n.) – the level of a house/building that is underground

*Ex) I keep all the tools and extra cleaning supplies in the **basement**.*

premise (n.) – a basic idea, especially one that is used as proof of a theory

*Ex) The **premises** of his argument are true, but I think he comes to the wrong conclusion.*

brutality (n.) – the quality of being brutal, cruel, treating other people very badly, usually with violence

*Ex) A child was killed and his body cut into pieces. The **brutality** of the crime shocked the community.*

innate (adj.) – if a quality is "innate," it means you are born with it

*Ex) If you don't have **innate** talent, you can still succeed if you work hard.*

blindfolded (v./adj.) – having a cloth covering your eyes so that you can't see

*Ex) The circus performer can walk across a tightrope while **blindfolded**.*

harass (v.) – irritate someone with verbal attacks or actions

*Ex) In that country, beautiful women wearing revealing clothing often get **harassed** by men on the street.*

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petty (adj.) – small and unimportant

*Ex) My sister and her husband often have huge fights over **petty** issues that aren't worth arguing over.*

demeaning (adj.) – humiliating in an insulting way, which makes the person feel or seem less than human

*Ex) That commercial attempts to use racial stereotypes in a humorous way, but many people view it as **demeaning**.*

veer (v.) – to turn suddenly from the main direction, to a very different direction

*Ex) The driver, trying to avoid hitting a dog, **veered** off the road and crashed into a tree.*

curtail (v.) – to stop something or cut it short

*Ex) New laws are being passed to **curtail** corruption in the government.*

trauma (n.) – serious injury; can be physical or emotional

Ex) After the accident, the biker was taken to the hospital with severe head ***trauma***.

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Extra Vocabulary

"the extent to which groups of volunteers would **conform** to their respective roles as guards and prisoners."

To "conform" means to correspond in form or behavior.

"seventy-five volunteers were **screened** for psychological abnormalities"

To "screen" people/things means to examine them systematically, to determine if they are appropriate or meet certain standards

"After the **mock** prison was constructed"

The word "mock" as an adjective means simulated, pretend, not real.

"a prison, complete with tiny cells, bars on the doors and windows, and bare, **whitewashed** walls."

*"Cells" are the rooms in a prison. If something is "bare," it means it is plain, without any decoration – and "whitewashed" simply means painted white.*This word is typically used for walls and buildings.

"observe the situation as it **unfolded**."

In this context, the word "unfolded" means "developed."

"sneakily telling the guards **snippets** of information"

A "snippet" is a tiny piece of something

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"even **siding with** guards over potential troublemaking **inmates**."

To "side with" someone means to take their "side" in a conflict, to agree with and support them. "Inmates" are prisoners; people confined to a prison.

"36 hours of **incarceration**."

The word "incarceration" means being in prison.

"His thoughts had **spiraled** into the **realm** of **irrationality**"

This means that his thoughts quickly **went down** (spiraled) into the **area** (realm) of **non-logical thinking** (irrationality).

"perhaps it is the result of an **inherently** flawed system"

If something is "inherently flawed," it means that a mistake, error, or problem (flaw) is included and can't be avoided/removed (inherent). The only way to correct an "inherent flaw" is to completely change or replace the system.

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Full Text

The treatment of prisoners by prison guards has been a hot topic in psychology and sociology over the years. In 1973, Philip Zimbardo decided to set up an experiment in a basement at Stanford University to investigate the extent to which groups of volunteers would conform to their respective roles as guards and prisoners.

The main premise of this study was to test the assertion that the perceived brutality of prison guards owed more to their innate personalities than the dynamics of the prison environment.

After the mock prison was constructed, seventy-five volunteers were screened for psychological abnormalities and offered fifteen dollars a day to play their roles as guards or prisoners. Twenty-one participants were selected and randomly assigned their roles as prisoners or guards.

To keep the situation as realistic as possible, the 'prisoners' were arrested at their homes on an unannounced day and taken to the local police station, before being processed and transferred to the 'prison.' During processing the prisoners were fingerprinted, photographed and 'booked' as though they were real criminals. Afterwards they were blindfolded and driven to the psychology department basement, which had been converted into a prison, complete with tiny cells, bars on the doors and windows, and bare, whitewashed walls.

The 'guards' were given uniforms, whistles, handcuffs and shaded glasses to restrict eye contact with 'prisoners.' The only real rule set in place was the prohibition of physical violence – and Zimbardo settled back to observe the situation as it unfolded. The experiment was scheduled to run for 14 days.

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Within just a few hours, the prison 'guards' had begun harassing the 'prisoners' with insults and assigning them petty and demeaning tasks and duties. The prisoners also began to assume their roles, gossiping about prison issues and sneakily telling the guards snippets of information about their co-prisoners in the hope of gaining favor. They took the rules of the prison increasingly seriously, even siding with guards over potential troublemaking inmates.

As the prisoners became more submissive, the guards became more aggressive and strict. One of the prisoners began to scream and cry uncontrollably, and had to be removed from the role-play after just 36 hours of incarceration. His thoughts had spiraled into the realm of irrationality and he had begun to veer towards deep depression. Three others had to be removed over the following days due to fears about the deterioration of their mental state. All of these 'prisoners' were able to resume their normal mental functions quickly after removal from the experiment.

After just six days the researchers decided to curtail the experiment, concerned

about possibly causing serious psychological or emotional trauma to the participants.

The study suggests some interesting conclusions about personality, human nature, and the power of socially- and institutionally-supported authority. When prison guards are accused of being vicious and despicable towards prisoners, it may not necessarily be due to defects in their individual character – perhaps it is the result of an inherently flawed system and circumstances that encourage abuse.

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