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An imperfect Panopticon? Surveillance and the BBC Prison Study.

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RUNNING HEAD: SURVEILLANCE AND THE BBC PRISON STUDY

An imperfect Panopticon? Surveillance and the BBC Prison Study.

The BBC Prison Study (Reicher & Haslam, 2006a) has quickly established itself as part of social psychology's disciplinary canon. Conducted in 2001, and featured in a four-part television documentary series broadcast on BBC television in Spring 2002 (Koppel & Mirsky, 2002), the study has led to a proliferation of scholarly articles, and from 2008 was included on the A-Level Psychology syllabus of one of the UK's leading examination boards (OCR, 2008). In a discipline still largely dominated by paper-and-pencil questionnaire research and laboratory-based experimental work, the BBC Prison Study represents a return to the type of ambitious design which enriched social psychology from the 1950s to the 1970s, and which, as Reicher and Haslam (2006a) point out, largely disappeared following the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE; Haney *et al.*, 1973a, b; Zimbardo, 2007).

The scale and ambition of the BBC Prison Study means that the present article is not the place to discuss in detail its findings and their implications. Instead, following a short summary of these, I will outline just one small issue which seems central to the events of the study, but which has thus far, to my knowledge, escaped detailed scrutiny. This issue concerns surveillance, but it is not the sort of broad brushed critique offered by Zimbardo (2006), who effectively questioned the authenticity of behaviour performed under the gaze of television cameras, but instead concerns what might at first appear to be a rather trivial issue: the location of the guards' observation post in the layout of the prison. The aim is not to be critical, or to offer a radically different perspective on the BBC Prison Study's findings, but instead to add another layer of complexity to the debate regarding the impact of surveillance on behaviour in the study, and to draw on recent literature which points to the importance of spatiality and the physical environment for analyses of social identity.

In this respect, the limited analysis provided here can be seen as complementary to, rather than in competition with, the analysis provided by Reicher and Haslam (2006a)

The BBC Prison Study

The BBC Prison Study was a partial replication of the SPE (Reicher & Haslam, 2006a), and, like the SPE, involved the random assignment of participants into two groups: prisoners and guards. However, in contrast to the SPE, the BBC Prison Study was designed as a theoretically informed test of hypotheses derived from Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These hypotheses revolved around the key SIT variables of permeability, legitimacy and cognitive alternatives (although Reicher and Haslam (2006a) point out that their intended legitimacy manipulation was never actually put into practice as the prisoners had already come to perceive the social system as illegitimate). In contrast to the SPE, the guards in the BBC Prison Study were generally unwilling to use their power to enforce discipline amongst the prisoners, and the prisoners began to taunt the guards and subvert the system. Reicher and Haslam (2006a) explain how their empirical measures of social identity across the study demonstrated that whilst the guards never really identified with their identity as guards, the prisoners displayed increasing levels of social identity as prisoners over the course of the study. As the study went on, some of the prisoners eventually engineered a break out from their cell, which ultimately led to the end of the prisoner-guard system and the establishment of a commune-like arrangement. This, however, was short-lived, with a small group of three ex-prisoners and one ex-guard preparing to put in place a 'coup' style seizure of power which would involve the establishment of a more authoritarian prisoner-guard system. At this point, Reicher and Haslam

drew the study to a close after eight days due to concerns that the proposed new regime may breach the ethical protocols of the study.

As indicated above, this brief summary cannot do justice to the complexities and subtleties of the findings from the BBC Prison Study as outlined by Reicher and Haslam in relation to areas such as tyranny (Reicher & Haslam, 2006a), agency (Reicher & Haslam, 2006b), leadership (Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Reicher *et al.*, 2005) and stress (Haslam & Reicher, 2006b). However, this brief overview is adequate for the purposes of the present article which seeks to draw attention to some of the dynamics of surveillance within the BBC Prison Study. It is therefore worth noting at this point that, given the involvement of the BBC in the study, with the ultimate goal of aiming to derive a series of television documentaries based on the findings, one of the grounds on which the BBC Prison Study has been criticised (most notably by Zimbardo, 2006), is that video cameras were recording the participants at all times, and, furthermore, that the participants were aware of this constant surveillance.

Surveillance in the BBC Prison Study

In the debate between Reicher & Haslam (2006a; Haslam & Reicher, 2006a) and Zimbardo (2006), the issue of visibility and surveillance is key. Zimbardo (2006, p. 50) argues that the mere fact that 'everyone knew this was a made-for-TV study; that everything they did would be shown on national British television' ensures that the observed behaviour cannot be treated as reliable evidence of people's behaviour in unequal social settings. This sort of criticism – that knowledge of being observed somehow makes one's behaviour 'artificial' – is countered by Reicher and Haslam (2006a; Haslam & Reicher, 2006a), who point out that '[f]or most of our social lives,

we are under observation and our behaviour can be examined by audiences who are not present' (Reicher & Haslam, 2006a, p. 25), and go on to argue that 'the television cameras … highlight in dramatic form an aspect of human experience, which is all too often overlooked in psychology' (*ibid.*, p. 26).

From the perspective adopted in the present paper, Reicher and Haslam's approach to dealing with the issue of surveillance and its impact on behaviour is preferable to Zimbardo's – the challenge is to build the impact of surveillance into one's theoretical accounts, rather than simply dismissing as unreliable any behaviour where individuals know they are being observed. However, it is notable that the debates regarding surveillance in the BBC Prison Study have thus far tended to concentrate upon the observation of participants by television cameras. It is my contention that this represents only one of three key surveillance relationships in the study, which are as follows:

1. Television cameras monitoring all the participants (and the experimenters).
2. The experimenters monitoring the participants.
3. The guards monitoring the prisoners.

When one compares these surveillance relationships, what is striking is that whereas in 1 and 2 those who were being monitored could have been monitored at any time (or at all times), in 3 those who were being monitored were aware of when they were being monitored, and when they not being monitored. The reason for this is simple: the guards' observation post (which incorporated video screens monitoring the inside of prisoners' cells) was positioned such that the prisoners could see from their cells if it was occupied (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

It is quite conceivable that this arrangement might have had an impact on prisoners' behaviour, and that it may have contributed to the outcome of the study. More details on this are discussed below, but first it is worth sketching out some of the implications of this by considering Foucault's (1979) discussion of Panopticism.

The Panopticon

Foucault's (1979) celebrated elaboration of Jeremy Bentham's notion of the Panopticon has been hugely influential in explicating the operation of power and surveillance in society. The basic layout of Bentham's Panopticon involved a central tower from which an authority could observe inmates housed in cells organised around the tower. The arrangement of tower and cells was such that whilst the observer in the central tower could observe the inmates, the inmates could not discern whether they were being observed at any given moment. The effects of this Panoptic gaze are outlined by Foucault as follows:

> the major effect of the Panopticon … [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in

> a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. To achieve this, it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself [*sic*] to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so. In view of this, Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. In order to make the presence or absence of the inspector unverifiable, so that the prisoners, in their cells, cannot even see a shadow, Bentham envisaged not only venetian blinds on the windows of the central observation hall, but, on the inside, partitions that intersected the hall at right angles and, in order to pass from one quarter to the other, not doors but zig-zag openings; for the slightest noise, a gleam of light, a brightness in a half-opened door would betray the presence of the guardian. [endnote omitted] The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.
>
> (Foucault, 1979, pp. 201-2)

Foucault applied the idea of the Panopticon to the operation of power in a range of contexts, and more recently his work has been used to inform analyses of video and other forms of surveillance (see e.g. the contributions to Lyon, 2006, and Wood, 2003). As applied to the BBC Prison Study, we can see that of the three surveillance relationships outlined above, only the first two are characterised by a Panoptic gaze.

The third fails to constitute Panopticism by virtue of the possibility of the prisoners being able to observe when they were being monitored by the guards. It therefore must be considered that at least part of the reason for the guards' failure to impose any kind of authority on the prisoners may have been due to the imbalance in these surveillance relationships. The guards were subject to a dual level of Panopticism, but were themselves unable to exercise a Panoptic gaze over the prisoners.[1]

Any attempt to outline some of the possible consequences of this in relation to the specific events of the BBC Prison Study is, of necessity, speculative, but it is useful nonetheless to illustrate some of the possible implications of this line of argument with reference to one significant event in the study.

The event in question is covered in episode three of the television documentaries. Of interest is the way in which three prisoners, JE_p,[2] PP_p and KM_p, engineer their escape from their cell during the night of day six, an event that ultimately leads to the complete breakdown of the prisoner-guard system, and the establishment of the short-lived communal system. It is notable that, in order to effect their breakout, they must first ensure that no guards are able to observe them in their cells. This they do by taunting one guard in particular, TQ_g, until he leaves the area from which he can see, and be seen from, the prisoners' cells. Crucially, as can be seen on Figure 1, this is also the area where the guards' observation post was located. In driving TQ_g away from this area, then, the prisoners are ensuring that he is unable to observe their behaviour by any means. This then leads to the question of how the

[1] The guards were able to observe the cells from the upper level of the prison, however this arguably did not constitute a Panoptic gaze as (a) they could not necessarily observe each individual prisoner within the cells from this vantage point; and (b) as the level was above the cells, it would seemingly be possible for prisoners to be able to ascertain when they were being observed by, for example, listening for footsteps.

[2] The notation for prisoners and guards adopted here is that used by Reicher and Haslam (2006a), in which participants are referred to by their initials followed by a subscripted 'p' or 'g' indicating, respectively, membership of either the prisoner or guard group.

events might have unfolded if the observation post had been located out of view of the prisoners, so that in getting TQ_g to leave the area where he could observe them directly, they were simply driving him to an area where he could observe them *without himself being observed by the prisoners*. Such a hypothetical layout might take the form represented in Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The contrast in the operation of power can be seen by comparing the escape with an earlier incident in which the same prisoners considered the possibility of escaping through the roof of their cell (covered in episode one of the documentaries). In this instance, the guards were again not in attendance at the observation post, but the experimenters, observing the prisoners tentatively pushing up the roof panels, and reluctant to allow access to the roof space which contained potential electrical hazards, called the guards to advise them that an incident was taking place in the cell. On arriving, the guards were met with apparent normality and further taunting from the prisoners. Reicher and Haslam (2006a) quite rightly point to this as an example of how the prisoners, whilst challenging the guards, always seemed to respect the authority of the experimenters. What this incident suggests is that the explanation of the differences in intergroup relations between prisoners and guards, and prisoners and experimenters, is embedded in a context of differential access to surveillance by the higher status groups in each of those relationships (guards, experimenters), which is itself quite literally built into the design of the study's prison environment.[3] It is

[3] It is worth noting that in their discussion of surveillance and the operation of power on the factory floor of a manufacturing organization, Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) made a similar observation regarding the relationship between the physical layout of the factory and surveillance. Interestingly, they discuss the concept of an 'Electronic Panopticon' in which 'a disembodied eye can overcome the

notable that recent work on social identity has begun to engage specifically with the locatedness of social identity processes, with several studies emphasising the importance of the relationship between social identity processes and the spatial/environmental contexts in which these processes occur (e.g. Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Hopkins & Dixon, 2006). It therefore makes sense to consider the identity dynamics and intergroup relations within the BBC Prison Study with reference to the physical layout of the prison.

Concluding remarks

Given that Zimbardo's (2006) critique of the BBC Prison Study involved a comparison, through the words of two of the study's participants, to the television programme *Big Brother*, it seems apt to conclude by revisiting the original 'Big Brother', and recalling the nightmarish Panoptic regime outlined by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.
>
> Orwell, 1983/1949, p. 744

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constraints of architecture and space to bring its disciplinary gaze to bear at the very heart of the labour process' (p. 283).

Where the 'Big Brother' of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was operated by authorities ready to act on the events captured by the surveillance, its modern televisual namesake merely substitutes these authorities for the viewing public, ready to vote to remove one inmate rather than another from their confinement. In contrast to both, the BBC Prison Study had an authority, in the form of the guards (however uncomfortable they may have been with their status), but what that authority did not have was a Panoptic 'Big Brother'. It is, of course, mere speculation to ponder whether the results would have differed had the guard-prisoner surveillance arrangements been different, and even if the guards had been able to access Panoptic surveillance, it may be questionable as to whether they would have made effective use of it, given their reluctance to utilise other disciplinary techniques available to them. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider the outcome had the guards been able to observe the prisoners from a position of Orwellian/Foucaultian Panoptic obscurity. At the very least, an appreciation of the way in which this surveillance regime was 'built in' to the prison environs might augment our understanding of the dynamics of intergroup relations in the study.

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Figure 1: Layout of the prison used in the BBC Prison Study (reproduced from Reicher & Haslam, 2006a, p. 8)

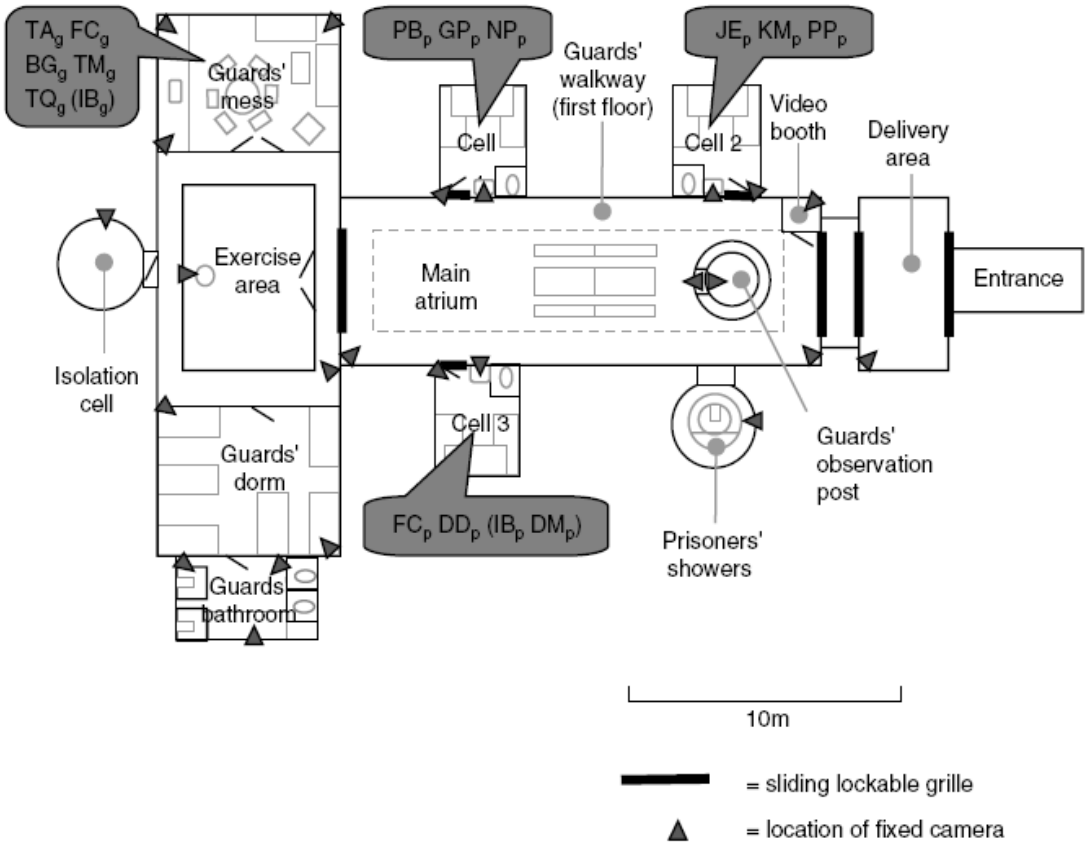
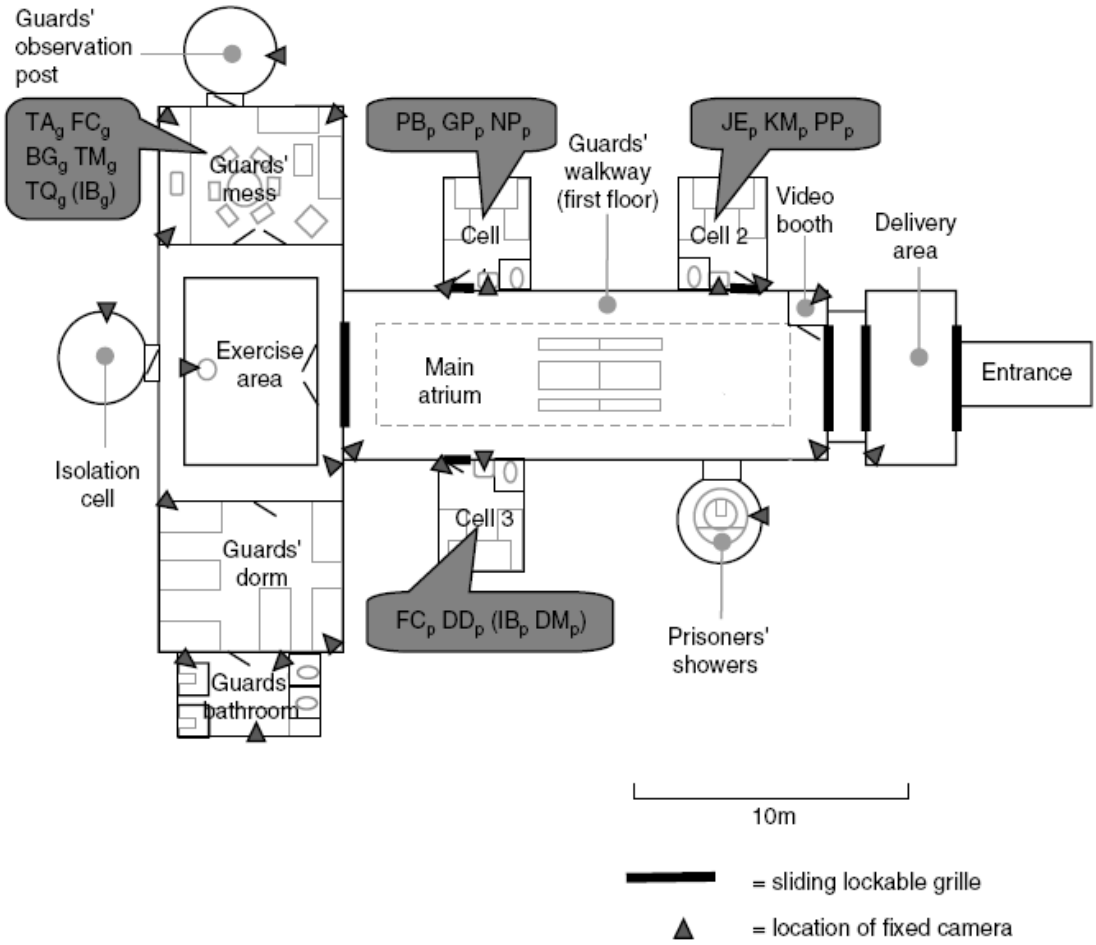
Figure 2: Hypothetical 'Panopticon' layout of the prison used in the BBC Prison Study (adapted from Reicher & Haslam, 2006a, p. 8)