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The Social Psychological Consequences of Confinement

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Not all confinement is experienced negatively. For example, submarines, monasteries, compact cars, Boeing 747 jets (tourist section only), tuberculosis wards, trips through Lion Safari Country, and times in one's own room can provide confinement experienced positively, voluntarily sought out, and associated with personal development or goal-achievement. In contrast, this chapter addresses the psychology of involuntary confinement and attends to processes and events that occur when individuals are incarcerated without choice or free will. The involuntary nature of prisons and of incarceration separates them qualitatively from most other life experiences.

Historically, psychologists have been primarily involved in clinical activities in corrections. In the last half dozen years, several academic programs have emerged, preparing psychologists for applied, academic, and research careers in criminal justice and corrections.* Furthermore, there has been a series of class action suits since 1970 in which psychological evaluation and knowledge of prison functions and effects have played key roles. Indeed, orders issued by judges at the federal district, appeals, and supreme court levels have drawn heavily on psychological knowledge. Such knowledge has become central to the setting of standards, formulation of programs, and allocation of societal resources (e.g., *Laaman v. Helgemoe*, 1977; *Bowing v. Godwin*, 1977).

Historically, the psychological focus has been a search for psychopathology of individual inmates. Psychologists have played Cassandra, crying of illness, and

*These programs are offered by The University of Alabama, Brigham Young University, The California School of Professional Psychology, Florida State University, Hahnemann Medical College, John Jay College, Middle Tennessee State University, The University of Nebraska.

predicting psychopathological doom. The goal of much research and professional activity has been a search for the so-called criminal personality, a concept no longer credibly acknowledged. Indeed, this search for the criminal personality and for the differentiation of psychopathology among inmates was the rationale for development of classification and diagnostic centers in corrections. Following World War I, the coming together of psychological assessors and correctional needs led to a massive organizational and professional effort to classify inmates, by intelligence and personality. This effort is part of an individual-blame model, believing that there are criminogenic illnesses or disorders. The assumption that there must be something wrong with the confined individuals or they would not have committed their crimes is at odds with existing knowledge of massive base rates in crime surveys in Philadelphia (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin, 1972) and literature analyses of prison psychodiagnoses (Brodsky, 1973).

In the field of psychological criminology, a fundamental shift in attention is occurring. Instead of searching for internal causes, investigators have redirected their search toward the dynamics and analyses of crime-producing situations and prison processes. The prison itself becomes the object of study and the object of attribution of blame. Research has been addressed to the effects of incarceration, critical environmental factors within prisons, correctional officer socialization and activities, and programmatic emphasis that lead to differential types of prison patterns and prisoner behavior (Hawkins, 1976; Monahan, 1976).

Certain behaviors appear to be caused by being in prison. The term "cause" is used guardedly because cause and effect relationships are as difficult to assess in prisons as in other settings. Certainly many behavior problems may be enhanced, or may arise from synergistic processes between preexisting tendencies and situational influences. Let us start by examining violence.

VIOLENCE

There is substantial reason to believe that the rate of violence in prison settings is anywhere from two to one hundred times the rate of that in free-world settings. The rate of known violence in American society is 188 violent crimes (murder, rape, assault) per 100,000 people (Megargee, 1976). In some prison settings examined by the authors, the incidence of assault victims is as much as every other person. In a recent discussion with seven randomly chosen inmates at the Baltimore City Jail, all of them reported to us that they had personally engaged in fights in the institution. Similarly, the rates of physical assault and sexual assault at one Alabama prison studied by the present authors, indicated that virtually everyone had at some time personally engaged in either aggressive, self-defensive, or victim roles in violent acts; virtually everyone was armed with a knife.

Why this level of violence? Some interpretations use frustration-aggression theory, noting the thwarting of goals of self-satisfaction, efficacy, and worthwhileness. Anxiety-based explanations observe that anxiety is very great and is seen in U-shaped curves. The highest levels of anxiety are experienced toward the beginning and toward the end of prison terms, with lowest levels in the middle. Anxiety becomes transformed into hostile actions in correctional settings as part of a lessening of emotional controls and an acquisition of antisocial values and behaviors.

CROWDING AND PRIVACY

Overcrowding and lack of privacy occur particularly in prison settings, and seem to be associated with negative behavior changes among inmates. These phenomena are of special interest because they have been attacked in a series of prison class action suits and because they have been the subject of several psychological studies. The first issue is the extent of the crowding. The Baltimore City Jail and the Tuscaloosa (Alabama) County Jail were inspected by the authors as part of suits that alleged that the crowded conditions caused significant psychological harm to the inmates. Our testimony confirmed that this was true for substantial numbers of the prisoners, observing that the square footage per prisoner, or population density, ranged from 21 to 32 square feet per person.

In a study of prisoners at a federal correctional institution, in which the overall population density was 69.1 square feet per inmate, Megargee (1977) found a correlation of .52 between square feet of living space available per inmate and number of disciplinary violations for misconduct and disruptive behavior. Generally, laboratory research with college students has not demonstrated harmful effects of crowding. However, Megargee posits that the long-term restrictions on personal space are indeed toxic with prison populations:

Chronic high-density living conditions are associated with negative behavior when the crowding is involuntary and when there is little hope for relief in the foreseeable future. In such conditions the adverse effects of crowding are probably exacerbated by the individuals' feelings of powerlessness. (p. 296)

D'Atri and Ostfeld (1975) reported that inmates living in close confinement in dormitories in three Massachusetts correctional facilities experience significant and hazardous rises in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure levels. In their cross-sectional study, they found a progressive rise in blood pressure after the first 30 days of confinement, as part of a long-term maladaptive pattern. In such correlational studies of crowding as well as clinical observations, there is reason to believe that with crowded conditions anxiety, psychological maladjustment, and sensitivity to loss of privacy do indeed accelerate.

NOISE

The National Clearinghouse for Criminal Justice Planning and Architecture (1977) has recently completed a thoughtful analysis of noise in jail and prison settings. It had been observed that regular conversation can occur only at ambient noise levels that are at or below 60 decibels (dB). The use of telephones, for example, becomes difficult at noise levels of 70 dB, and if individuals are going to speak in a normal voice, the amount of noise must be 66 dB or less. The noise levels at the Manhattan House of Detention, also known as "The Tombs," averaged between 75 and 80 dB in the recreation areas. In normal conditions, with television sets on, the noise levels in the officers' bridge averaged 75 dB with peaks over 80 dB. During meal times, and in areas in which there were openings and closings of cell doors, the transient peaks rose to 94 dB. The noise levels were cited in a federal district court ruling to close down "The Tombs" for constitutional reasons. The noise levels were not only held by the district judge to be "intolerable," but the judge ruled that they represented a "gross tax on the mental health" of the inmates.

IDLENESS

If crowding and noise represent two vehicles of prison pathology, idleness is clearly the third. In prisons all over the country, inmates sit about, often locked in their cells, for 17 to 22 or 23 hours a day. Even in institutions that claim to have "full-employment," large numbers of inmates loiter in industrial shops, watching other inmates work. We suggest that individuals need to have some constructive or positive activity as affirmation of their self-worth as human beings. Prolonged idleness and long periods of time without any product to represent one's value lead to a deterioration in self-concept, restlessness, and impaired personal functioning. Federal courts have ruled that there must be opportunities for participation in correctional work assignments, vocational training, educational programs, or treatment programs. In *James v. Wallace* (1976), Judge Frank M. Johnson stated that these elements are four of eleven fundamental constitutional rights for inmates, and that any inmates who have the ability to benefit from such programs, and are interested, must have such opportunities provided to them.

MEDIATING FACTORS

Subjective perceptions, personal opinions, and perceived distress in correctional settings are as important as the objective data provided on blood pressure, square footage, and rates of violence. Much of what goes on in prisons is perceived by residents as being arbitrary. No consistent rationale or basis for prison events is understood. This applies to rules that govern the prison as well as to the very

cause of imprisonment. Over a period of time, a shift in attribution occurs. Instead of individuals' assuming responsibility for their crimes and seeing themselves as perpetrators, their views shift, and they see themselves as victims of an unjust society acting in a criminal way.

The low-trust, high-control syndrome is important to note in this context. A pervasive underlying process in correctional settings is low-trust, high-control of others (Brodsky, 1977). Correctional officers and inmates alike simply do not trust the other group, and indeed often trust few of their own colleagues. A continuing effort is made to maintain control over one's own life and the lives of other persons. Because of this distrust and effort to control, manipulation is the fundamental motive attributed to others. Suicide attempts by inmates are interpreted frequently by officers as being manipulative in nature. Homosexual rapists or rape victims are sometimes dismissed or ignored by officers. Minimum empathy is available among individuals who perpetually distrust the other persons with whom they live and work. A corollary rule for prisoners is "Don't squeal"; never tell anything to people in authority. Although it is regularly broken, the basic implicit rule for inmates is not to report events to guards.

A perceived zero sum game is part of the low-trust, high-control process. It is believed that there are just so many interpersonal, physical, and organizational resources available. Every time an inmate makes a gain in correctional institutions, it is felt as a loss by the officers, and vice versa. In one penal institution, when a plan was put forward to build a swimming pool for the inmates, the guards protested and picketed. Their rationale was that it would interfere with their ability to control the inmates. In actuality, the availability of recreation resources probably would have made it easier to control inmates; indeed the resources for swimming might have been available for the officers themselves during some time periods. This zero sum perception operates in other ways as well. Every time there is increased inmate freedom, officers experience it as a limitation in their own work and freedom. The mirror image works equally well in prisoners' perception of guard power and roles. Zero sum judgments in correctional settings truly are the prisoners' dilemma.

One antecedent condition for harmful events in corrections is the rigid exclusion of outsiders. The geography of prisons' locations, the walls themselves, and the decisions of officials to maintain privacy and secrecy, all contribute to such exclusion. Indeed, problems as seen by reformers, inmates, and concerned citizens, have been dealt with by denying or closing off their existence. As Bergan Evans has observed, "What can't be cured, must be obscured." Burns (1969) has described this process in corrections as part of a miniature totalitarian state, characterized by a single party ideology and a single party leader, complete control of communications and the economy, impermeable barriers between the institution and the outside, and an underground.

The concerns of inmates are present in correctional officers as well. Officers themselves have increasing psychological difficulties over time in ways which parallel those of inmates. They are at the bottom of a military hierarchy and in a graceless position. They have received a bad press in the newspapers, and in many correctional texts as well. Their occupational roles may be described as representing a no-win situation; except in minimum security prisons, they only reinforce negative actions—they punish and control. Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo (1973) generated powerful arguments from the Stanford prison experiment, to indicate that correctional officers are occupationally socialized to roles of brutality and harm. In their simulated prison, normal and well-adjusted college students were malevolently transformed to assume controlling, coercive, and psychopathological roles. Brodsky (1974), in his analysis of officer roles and activities, identified an occupational bill of rights for correctional officers. This list of rights assumes that every person has a need to see personal improvement and growth. For many individuals, occupational self-improvement is the central source of growth. Thus, one occupational right for correctional officers is to see personal improvement through occupational growth. Still another is to have a "piece of the action," and yet another important element is to have a sense of contributing positively and in a worthwhile manner to societal interests.

TOWARD POSITIVE CHANGE IN CORRECTIONAL SETTINGS

We have observed few individuals who show extraordinary and remarkable personal growth in correctional settings. It is easy and inaccurate to offer a blanket condemnation of corrections as being pathology-producing and negative. In one study by Osterhoff (1973), 15 percent of all Minnesota state reformatory inmates through the first 18 months after imprisonment showed improvement in their psychological well-being, as evaluated by the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory.

The issue of psychological survival in prisons has been addressed recently by Toch (1977), who has studied positive coping skills of inmates and nonstressful aspects of correctional environments. Toch asked inmates what the best possible prison would be for them, what correctional characteristics would be easiest, would be most profitable personally, and what could have made them happier while they served time. Conversely, the inmates were also queried about the worst possible prison, and the institutional characteristics they hated the most, which would make them most miserable. Individual prison environments were studied through the use of a "self-anchoring scale" and through the Prison Profile Inventory (PPI), a 56-item comparison scale.

The principal features of the best institutions as seen by contented inmates were programs that facilitated self-improvement, and "fellow inmates who are

'my brothers.''' The discontented inmates at this same prison—Coxsackie in New York—attended much more to the characteristics of correctional officers. They described inmate participation in selection of officers and understanding officers from one's own environment as most valued events in the best possible prisons.

When 234 youthful inmates were compared to 229 older inmates on the PPI, officer behaviors and quiet housing and conversation differentiated the groups. The item sets that discriminated best were:

Guards who are consistent
Guards who are friendly

Housing that keeps out the noise
Housing that lets people rap

The pursuit of safety and maintenance of sanity in prison environments are never simple. As Toch (1977) observes:

Diminished structure can signify painful ambiguity for one man and relaxation of lenition for another. One man's social stimulation is another's lack of privacy; it may be a third's impaired safety. And safety is best secured by threatening an aggressor's prized freedom. (p. 189)

Still, prison environments do differ remarkably, and the profiles of Toch (1977), demonstrate great contrasts in the amount of freedom, initiative, privacy, and activity within prisons of the same nominal custody levels. The unfolding task is somehow to engineer these positive traits into our correctional institutions in ways that are both just and accountable.

There have been many cases of individual inmates maturing in what would be toxic settings to most people. Two examples will be considered. Ahmed A. had been an impulsive, hyperactive youth. As a late adolescent and young adult, he was involved in civil rights activities and then criminal pursuits, particularly distributing drugs and operating illegal businesses. When incarcerated in a state prison, Ahmed found himself greatly restricted in his range of possible actions. He began to develop his powers to manipulate and change other people. Seeing a vacuum in the authority structure of the Black Muslim group in the prison, he assumed a position of leadership. He was soon selected by his fellow inmates as minister of the Muslims and quickly transformed the group into a powerful influence. The group provided protection for black inmates, then a minority in the prison, gave him an opportunity to negotiate with prison authorities, and created considerable safety for him, since he was guarded at all times. He developed his abilities to speak, to influence other peoples' behavior, and to lead.

Despite his diminutive size, within a short time he became the acknowledged leader of the entire prison, and little could occur without his approval. His fundamental transformation was from an insecure, diffuse, unhappy, and ineffective individual into a person who had managed to mobilize his intellectual and personal resources in highly effective, goal-directed ways. Furthermore, the skills acquired persisted and were evident in his effectiveness in college as well. Before his incarceration, he had performed poorly in undergraduate studies on several occasions. His inability to focus on any task over time caused him to fail his courses or get into trouble, and then to be expelled from school. He is now completing a degree with good grades at a difficult and competitive university.

Hector M. came from a family associated with organized crime in the Northeast, and had never considered any alternative to a career in crime. While traveling to visit a relative in the South, he was arrested for robbing a motel. During his incarceration, he discovered that he had considerable talent for art. He began painting and soon was teaching other inmates to paint. He found that he had an ability for quiet leadership in a culturally appreciative and active group of prisoners. His intelligence, artistic skill, and considerable leadership ability resulted in inmates' respecting him as a trustworthy and high-status person. His goals were to continue his art career and to obtain a teaching position. He has done so, and is functioning well as an art teacher and an administrator of a community arts program.

But for each successful prisoner, there are many who come with adequate functioning and who depart with major deficits in their ability to cope or succeed. Nevertheless, it is important to consider individuals who grow in an oppressed setting. The case histories described here identify individuals who were verbally and interpersonally fluent and above average in intelligence. It has been observed that "men, like bullets, go furthest when they are smooth." This is surely true in prison settings for such verbally smooth individuals. Both of these men were also physically attractive and reported experiences in childhood of being extremely important to their parents, highly regarded, and treated with great affection.

CLASS ACTION SUITS

The class action suit is of critical importance because it represents a formal mechanism for introducing minimum standards of mental health care and allowable psychological harm in correctional settings. It has been found unconstitutional to replace the brains and hearts of confined citizens with the functional equivalent of pats of butter left sitting in the sun too long. Do individuals deteriorate psychologically during the time they are in prison? The evidence, based on a series of studies and a series of court rulings in at least half a dozen class ac-

tion suits, is powerfully and strongly yes. The Osterhoff (1973) study, which identified 15 percent of individuals as improving, identified over 50 percent of reformatory inmates as deteriorating over the 18-month period involved.

Rehabilitation has not been established as a right of inmates in any of the cases heard in federal courts. In fact, it has been specifically ruled out by the decision of the Fifth Circuit Court in *James v. Wallace*. However, Judges Frank M. Johnson and Hugh Bouns have ruled that prison systems cannot create situations in which it is impossible for individuals to rehabilitate themselves or in which individuals lose skills as a result of incarceration.

In the case of *Palmigiano v. Garraty* (1977) in the United States District of Rhode Island, the judge cited an 18-year-old who was repeatedly gang-raped on a number of occasions over a period of years. Finally, he suffered a "nervous breakdown." Shortly afterward, he was denied parole for the sole stated reason that he needed psychiatric counseling (which had never been provided). This represents the prototypical Catch 22. That is, an individual who is caused mental anguish or suffering as a result of the incarceration is then punished further because of the incarceration harm that he has suffered. Indeed, it is fundamentally the issue of mental health deterioration about which the class action suits have revolved.

In the case of *Bowring v. Godwin* (1977), the United States Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals decided for the first time that a right to treatment was required for individuals confined in correctional settings. This right to mental health treatment was qualified by the observation that it had to be treatment which would work and treatment which could not be delayed until after the prisoner was released. By contrast, in the Fifth Circuit the claim that prisoners deteriorated was dismissed by Judge Coleman, who stated that "everyone deteriorates and there's nothing anyone can do about it." This statement of the Fifth Circuit is reminiscent of Roman Hruska's classic misstatement, in the Senate confirmation hearing of Judge Harold Carswell, of the need to have mediocrity represented in the Supreme Court.

It is becoming clear that individuals have a right to be confined in conditions that will not deteriorate or harm their mental health or well-being. This is an important rule, with far-reaching implications. After all, mental health services in corrections typically attempt to repair the damage caused by living in an oppressive, crowded, and fundamentally harmful environment.

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