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PRISON BEHAVIOR

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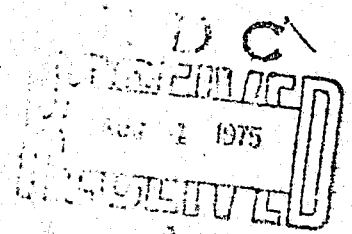
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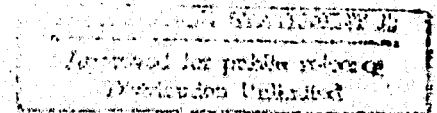
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13. ABSTRACT Prison behavior can and should be analyzed in terms of the complex social and political system in which it occurs. Purposes of imprisonment, both manifest and latent, affect the psychological environment with the institution, as well as the frequency with which an institutional "solution" is selected. Behavior which is largely the product of situational contingencies will appear abnormal or disordered as a function of the pathology of the situation and the perspective of the observer.		

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DETERRENCE						
INCARCERATION						
INSTITUTIONALIZATION						
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PRISON						
PSYCHOLOGY						
RECIDIVISM						

Prison Behavior

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Typically, "prison behavior" refers to the unusual or extreme reactions of prison inmates within correctional settings. A more enlightened conception, however, recognizes the impact of the prison upon the cognitive, affective, and instrumental behaviors of all those associated with the institution--guards as well as prisoners, noncustodial staff as well as members of the community in which the prison operates. This more molar view will be utilized in describing the prison environment as a complex social and political system that exerts a powerful controlling force on human behavior. The analysis of observed and first person accounts of prison behavior should be framed in terms of the history and purposes of incarceration, the physical and social structure of confinement, the psychological adaptation to life in prison and the ineffectiveness of various treatment modalities upon the rate of recidivism (the probability the person will be resented to prison after being released).

Societies establish institutions of social control such as the prison, almshouse, and insane asylum to provide an efficient, impersonal means of dealing with people who represent a potential source of danger to the life and property of the majority who label and often perceive the offenders as dependent, deviant, or different in some significant way. Historically, the treatment received by inmates of such institutions has varied according to prevailing assumptions about the origins of poverty, crime, and insanity. In fact, when violators of the criminal code were viewed not as society's

outcasts but as ordinary citizens who had "sinned," institutionalization was quite infrequent. Fines and mild corporal punishment were used as sanctions instead. Gradually, as the law's basic function shifted from the preservation of morality to the protection of property, the state took a more active part in criminal prosecutions, and those convicted were sentenced to imprisonment (Nelson, 1967). Later, in Jacksonian America, the discovery and proliferation of the asylum for those who broke the laws of the state or of reason was predicated upon the belief in the corrupting influence of the social community. The institution was to be a place of solitude, isolating the prisoner from the temptations and contaminating forces in society (Rothman, 1971).

Where and when criminal behavior and insanity are seen as the innate properties of certain classes of people or particular individuals, treatment is custodial rather than remedial and coercive rather than supportive. A medical model of mental illness and psychopathic behavior has generated individualized therapies of a psycho-biological nature. More recently, behaviorist assumptions of faulty learning in the insane and criminal have given rise to behavior modification programs utilizing aversive conditioning and token economies. Work furlough programs, half-way houses and other attempts to gradually reintroduce the prison inmate to his or her society are also currently being practiced, and reflect a belief in criminality as defective adjustment.

All such intervention attempts (and including occupational and educational training) are classified as part of the rehabilitative function of prisons. The assumption is that predilections toward criminal behavior, as the products of a diseased mind, poor socialization, or inadequate interpersonal skills can be altered by changing the psychological and

cognitive characteristics of prisoners during the time they are confined.

Other functions of incarcerating people for acts in violation of the law are: general and specific deterrence, retribution, punishment, and restitution. As a general deterrent, the incarceration of one person may serve as an example for others not to behave similarly, while as a specific deterrent, being in prison keeps that particular prisoner from committing further crimes. (But, see Salem & Bowers, 1970). The retributive aspect of imprisonment, based on biblical injunctions of an "eye for an eye," or the Roman rule of Lex Taliones, emphasizes punishment in kind for anti-social acts. Restitution to society for crimes against its members or institutions is seen in the efforts of prisons to utilize the free or cheap labor of prisoners for the "public good" (road construction, license plates, building school equipment, etc.). Restitution to individual citizens victimized by the unlawful act is not yet a common feature of our criminal justice system, although it was once a prevalent remedy at Common Law (cf. Nelson, 1967).

Systematic studies of the effectiveness of rehabilitative treatment programs within prison settings conclude that there is no statistically reliable reduction in recidivism which can be attributed to treatment (e.g., Martinson, 1974). Although recidivism rates are subject to statistical manipulation by selecting type of crime, time since release from prison, number of previous arrests, age of the inmate, and a host of other variables, the general figure is often reported to vary around sixty percent. This datum has been used as evidence for contrary interpretations and recommendations about prison behavior. More conservative opponents of the current system call for longer sentences, harsher punishment, segregation of allegedly violence-prone inmates, and an end to rehabilitation programs because of the nonmodifiability of the "criminal mind." On the other hand,

more radical critics of the system point to the criminalizing effects of the prison experience itself, to the injustices of status, influence, and economic power. In calling for alternatives to incarceration, many social scientists have advocated a view of crime as a function of social conditions and not individual pathology. Even those who recommend more severe criminal punishment recognize that ex-convicts are likely to participate again in criminal activity if opportunities available to them in society remain unchanged. One such researcher for example, has observed that "it is plausible to assume that legitimate opportunities become scarcer relative to criminal opportunities in periods following conviction for crime, because of the criminal-record effect on legitimate job opportunities" (Ehrlich, 1973, p. 264).

Well over a hundred years ago de Tocqueville observed, "While society in the United States gives the example of the most extended liberty, the prisons of the same country offer a spectacle of the most complete despotism." Such a condemnation of the prisons persists today, despite apparent attempts at change (see Struggle for Justice, American Friends Service Committee, Prisons in Turmoil, Hearings by the Select Committee on Crime of the House of Representatives, 1971-1972). Indeed, one commentator (Erikson, 1966) has suggested that perhaps "we find it difficult to change the worst of our penal practices because we expect prison to harden the inmate's commitment to deviant forms of behavior and draw him more deeply into the deviant ranks" (p. 15). Nevertheless, the failure of prisons to have any substantial impact on recidivism or crime is compounded by the reality of increasing violence and crime within prison, riots, and dissatisfaction of guards, inmates, and administrators.

The behavior of all those within the confines of a prison are, to a considerable degree, under the controlling influence of physical and social



structural variables. Thus, to understand the pathological consequences of the prison experience, it would seem reasonable to focus more on the general kinds of psychopathology that the prison environment produces in incarcerated people, than on the kinds of idiosyncratic pathology that some people may bring into prisons. This change in perspective away from a search for dispositional, trait-based causes of prison behavior (e.g., Gough & Peterson, 19 ; Jensen, 1973) toward an attributional analysis in terms of situational forces is congruent with the shifting emphasis in both personality and social psychology research. A growing body of social science literature attests to the poor predictive value of personality-type classifications relative to the utility of situation-specific variables (Mischel, 1968). Although prison officials attempt to prevent violence within prisons by ordering isolation or "lock-downs" of inmates assigned to "violence-prone categories, research scientists insist that "we can't predict who is dangerous" (Steadman & Cozza, 1975). Understanding of violence inside prison must be based on social systems analysis of which any individual is but a part in transaction with other individuals similarly situated.

Another study lamenting the inability of personality characteristics and diagnostic data to predict violent behavior concludes in appropriately transactional and situational terms: "violence typically erupts out of a crisis" (Wenk, et al., 1972, p. 401). Indeed, such crises may be provoked by any of the manifold stresses with which the prisoners must cope. A publication of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons lists: basic survival needs, assaults, sexual identity, status, prestige conformity, loss of freedom, dependence, loneliness, uncertainty and abandonment. To these must be added the dynamics of institutionalization which most often compound rather than alleviate the effects of the stressful environment. The initial phases

of incarceration are filled with feelings of powerlessness in an institution dominated by power relations, physical strength, and often arbitrary rule control. The search for modes of adaptation involves observational learning of "successful others," testing limits, gathering information and determining the nature of relevant contingencies. Suppression of affect is common among prisoners and guards to maintain an image of toughness while concealing fears and vulnerability. Learning to get along without others, to make it on one's own, may lead to a persisting asocial orientation. What appear to be paranoid delusions about, for example, the contamination of food or threats against one's life cannot easily be subjected to normal "validity checks" in a total institution where information is controlled and freedom of inquiry is not possible. Of course, much of the coping which is adaptive within this atypical environment where privacy is diminished and the territorial imperative prevails, is pathological or dysfunctional in the outside environment to which inmates will return.

Conversely, what appears to the observer as abnormal or disordered prison behavior may actually be normal and functional adaptations to extreme and pathological circumstances. The three most widely reported features of prison behavior are best interpreted in this light: prevalent homosexuality and autoeroticism, physical violence of inmates toward each other and toward guards as well as staff violence toward inmates, and criminal activities such as gambling, drug dealing, loan-sharking, stealing and manufacture of alcoholic beverages.

Interpersonal relationships are characteristically intense because of the physical proximity, lack of opportunity of "social escapes" and great potential danger or support every inmate and guard possess for every other. However, this intensity is somewhat tempered by the boredom of long periods

of time with little or nothing constructive to do and the insignificance of daily or weekly events.

Commenting on the prisoner's adaptation to his confinement, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons notes that "the initiation process appears ended when a consistent behavior role is assumed." This role may be that of tough guy, prison lawyer, madman, homosexual, inadequate "lame" or "chump", informer, or others. But basic to the prisoner role will be compliance to the myriad of institutional rules, moderated by adherence to the inmate's code of limited conformity.

There appear to be few, if any, long term studies of the effects of being in the role of prison guard (or "correctional officer"), despite evidence of the great stress such a role induces. The constant danger of the job, surveillance and control orientation, hostility of the inmates toward the guard functions and the physical barrenness of the working environment are coupled with the need to conceal emotional displays. As a likely consequence psychosomatic illnesses, such as tension headaches, muscle spasms and ulcers often develop. Further, situational demands likely condition the manner in which guards interact with and attempt to maintain control over prisoners. Laboratory studies of roles analogous to those of guards attest to the profound influence power has over those who possess it. As one research study concludes, "the possession of unilateral coercive power reduces the susceptibility of the wielder to the influence of the personal characteristics, moral appeals, or personal relationship of the target and . . . to have coercive power is tantamount to using it" (Schlenker & Tedeschi, 1973, p. 437).

The minimal training received by guards (often less than one week) hardly suffices to prepare them for the difficult role they are called upon to enact.

A comprehensive and objective analysis of the effects of imprisonment on behavior is hampered by the lack of systematic and controlled observation, psychological evaluation (before-during-and-after confinement), and formal experimentation. Most available information comes from the retrospective accounts of articulate ex-convicts, diaries and letters of inmates, reports of governmental investigative committees and some unclassified studies by research units of the state departments of correction and the federal bureau of prisons. The absence of an impartial observer who is neither prisoner nor guard, nor a representative of the prison system itself makes it difficult to separate fact from bias in reports of prison behavior.

However, the marked changes that can be generated in normal individuals by the experience of imprisonment were studied in a recent simulation experiment (Haney, Banks, Zimbardo, 1973). College students who were within the normal range of psychological functioning on a battery of a dozen personality measures were randomly assigned to the roles of mock guards or mock prisoners for a two-week period. A realistic physical environment of a prison was constructed in a university building basement and many prison operating procedures were followed. All behavior was monitored throughout by observers, video recordings and testing instruments. The aggression by the guards occurred initially in response to resistance and rebellion by the prisoners, but its level escalated daily, and became greatest when prisoners were most passive and docile. Half of the prisoners had to be released within five days because of their severe emotional distress. All the guards at some time behaved in ways that could be characterized as alien to their normal functioning--cruel, brutal, sadistic. They varied only in how often and how extreme they behaved in this aggressive, dehumanizing manner. The experiment was in fact, prematurely terminated because the subjects seemed to have lost the boundary between role identity and self

identity. The effects of even this simulated prison milieu upon those who populated it, although transient, were profound and pathological.

This research, and other comparable studies on the effects of institutions on the behavior of those confined within them points to the powerful forces which total institutions bring to bear in modifying beliefs, perceptions, values and behavior. Successful and complete adaptation to such regimented, restricting environments is incompatible with a life of relative freedom in the society outside the institution.

The importance for psychology and psychiatry in better appreciating the dynamics of institutionalization and the social-situational forces involved is vital for any efforts to improve the functioning of our prisons, mental hospitals, old age homes and other total institutions.

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