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Leadership Phenomena in a Prison Community

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LEADERSHIP PHENOMENA IN A PRISON COMMUNITY[1]

DONALD CLEMMER[2]

This investigation of the phenomena of leadership in a penal institution is part of a larger study which deals with the prison as a social world. The inquiries cover a period of three years while the writer was engaged as clinical sociologist in a state penitentiary. This institution has a population of 2,400 male felons, 45 per cent of whom are from large industrial cities and 8 per cent from a developed coal mining area; 27 per cent have been predominantly conditioned in smaller cities and towns and the remaining 20 per cent have previously resided in rural sections or villages. The administration of the prison has been neither especially poor nor markedly progressive. Excluding the more advanced prisons of the East and those adjacent to large cities as Sing Sing and Joliet, the locale of the present study is probably quite typical of American prisons today.

Studies of leadership become exceedingly complex in a prison community because the overt behavior of the men is controlled by the regulations of the institution. Additional complexity is added by the changing population and the unique character of group life.[3] A third obstacle is the difficulty in formulating a method which will collect pertinent and reliable data from prisoners.

Notwithstanding the difficulties involved, a knowledge of leader-

[1] The Penitentiary referred to in this manuscript is the former Southern Illinois Penitentiary, located at Chester, Illinois. Since June of 1933 when legislation was passed providing for classification of inmates, the prison is now known as the Menard Branch of the Illinois State Penitentiary.

It is probably quite typical of most American prisons. Austin H. Mac Cormack, formerly Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, described it as, "just another place where men do time."

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[3] An unpublished manuscript by the author entitled, "Some Aspects of Social Affiliation in Prison." The paper was presented before the Section on Criminology, American Sociological Society, June 29, 1933. This study indicates that the prison community is not essentially made up of closely knit groups. It was shown that about 40 per cent of inmates play more or less a solitary role in which intimate reciprocities with other inmates have no part. About 18 per cent of prisoners were found to belong to "primary groups" and 42 per cent to "semi-primary groups."

ship is deemed important for professional workers in prison and administrative officials as well especially in reference to segregation, and data have been collected which lend meaning to the following topics: (1) the personality traits of prison leaders, (2) the methods of gaining leader status, (3) the tenure of the leader and, (4) the general nature of leadership among prisoners and its effect in the prison community.

For the purpose of this study the leader has been defined as a person who influences and directs the opinions and behavior of others and who shows the way by action or a reputation for action. He is the person who becomes the center of rapport.[4] He is the person about whom the informal, unregulated group life exists. It is evident that a precise definition of leadership can not be drawn due to the wide variety of situations in which leaders function. Although a concept of leadership has been assumed, it remains, paradoxically enough, one of the objectives of the study to gain a more refined understanding and a clearer definition of leaders and leadership in the prison community. In considering the four topics we are to deal largely with the attitudes and behavior of inmates. To a prison official a leader is usually a trouble-maker. While in some instances, as will be shown, leaders have also been trouble makers, the duality does not frequently exist. This investigation does not intend to cover the leadership factor during periods of chaos, such as riots or group escapes. It has been impossible to do so as no such situation occurred during the time of the inquiry. Reference is made to situations, however, in which participation has proved to be important in the rise to leadership. In general this article attempts to portray the ordinary day-by-day phenomena of leadership in the collective life of the prison.

Four sources of material were available for this study: first, schedules relating to social affiliations and group life presented to 60 inmates; second, intensive studies by interview, and by biographical and autobiographical techniques, of men known to be members of informal groups; third, the studies of all inmates made by the Mental Health staff, a staff consisting of a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a physician, and a sociologist; fourth, observations made by the writer during three years of active participation in the life of the prison. It is evident that the value of the fourth body of material depends largely on the confidence built up in the inmates by the

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4 Hiller, E. T., Principles of Sociology, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1933, p. 560.

observer. Coaching and playing football, baseball, and other athletic games, lending a sympathetic ear, aiding the sick, and encouraging the unhappy, all helped in building rapport. Also it was of advantage to the writer that he came from an office which had a good reputation among the prisoners, and which had no disciplinary obligations.

The first objective was to locate primary and semi-primary groups[5] and to ascertain which men were the leaders. After months of observation and inquiry it became evident that the informal groups existed in relation to certain prison regulations. One variety of group was found to have members whose work placement was of such a nature that the members were not confined to one particular locality in the prison yard, and were able to circulate more or less freely within the prison walls. Six of such groups whose membership was prison-wide were found and studied. For a sample of groups of a primary nature in an administrativevly restricted segregation, two work divisions made up of 60 men, and in which eight informal groups were found, have been studied. Sampling of this kind has been necessary for it is impossible to understand the maze of interaction among 2,400 inmates. Only passing attention has been given to the groups of twos and threes, not that leaders may not exist but due to the lack of broad influence of the dyads and triads. It has been learned, however, that in the smaller units one is usually dominant and the others submissive in varying degrees. Such affiliations are cemented by one or more of the following bonds: mutual home background, association in crime, expressed or unexpressed homosexual attraction, mutual toleration by a forced propinquity, the wish of a submissive personality to share in the prestige of a notorious and dominant one and the men who plot and plan for future crime.

When the membership of the larger groups became known the writer casually talked with the men at frequent intervals over a period of months. Gradually rapport was established and it was possible to determine who among the group members was con-

[5] *Op. cit.*, pp. 17, 19. "The phenomena to which the term 'primary group' has been applied refers now to small cliques of inmates who are held together by a common body of knowledge which produces a sympathetic human relationship among them. The mutual interests lead to a solidarity and a closely knit neighborliness sufficient to control certain aspects of behavior in the prison community. . . . While there is much fluctuation in the 'warmth' of social relationships in both types of groups, we reach the conclusion that the 'we-feeling' is less strong and more transitory than in a comparable aggregation in a free community. . . . The degree of integration commonly supposed to exist in prison groups of a primary nature has been found to be exaggerated."

sidered as the leader. In Table I is shown the age, mental age, height, weight, and offense of each leader. The leaders "A" through "F" have headed those groups which have been described as prison-wide and the balance have been leaders of groups assigned to definite restricted work divisions. Leaders "I" and "N" are Negroes.

TABLE I

Age, Mental Age, Height, Weight and Offense of
14 Selected Prison Leaders

Leader	Age	Mental Age	Height	Weight	Offense
"A"	46	18-0	6-0	165	Murder
"B"	26	17-10	5-7	140	Burglary
"C"	34	17-2	6-0	178	Robbery Armed
"D"	35	15-2	5-5	155	Robbery Armed
"E"	34	16-9	5-4	131	Robbery Armed
"F"	31	12-1	5-8	148	Murder
"G"	26	14-7	5-10	167	Robbery Armed
"H"	31	12-8	6-0	167	Murder
"I"	29	11-4	5-9	171	Robbery Armed
"J"	35	11-11	6-3	145	Robbery Armed
"K"	28	15-6	6-0	174	Robbery Armed
"L"	29	17-2	5-7	147	Robbery Armed
"M"	48	16-6	5-11	184	Robbery Armed
"N"	26	9-6	5-6	144	Robbery Armed
Average	32	15-0	5-9	158	

The average age of the leaders is shown to be 32. The average age of the population as a whole is 34 years and 8 months.[6] The intelligence of leaders is above that of the general population which has been found to be 13 years and 6 months for white men, and 11 years and 5 months for negroes.[7] Considered collectively weight and height seem to have little importance yet it will be observed that none of the men are overweight. Of the 14 leaders 9 have been in other prisons, reformatories, or workhouses for periods of 18 months or more. The case of each man has been carefully studied in reference to criminality and every leader has been engaged in crime more or less professionally. An appraisal of the life history of the leaders reveals that they have all been reared in cities of 50,000 population or over excepting "H" and "N" who have lived in large cities since adolescence. Half of them have been married. School

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[6] Computed from the files of the Record Clerk. ·
[7] Computed by the writer from psychological test results.

achievement has not progressed beyond the eighth grade except in the cases of "E" and "L" who had two years of high school and "A" who quit college during the first year. It has become clear from a study of the history of the men that before incarceration none of them had been leaders in any sort of organization group other than those which were held together by criminal activities. Thus, "D" had no prestige as a school boy or in early employment until he became a dealer in whiskey during prohibition. Gradually, however, he rose from a hanger-on to the leader of an organized mob of bootleggers and later, of robbers. "J" was a leader of a boy's gang which operated in a delinquency area of a large city. "A" who advanced in school farther than the rest held some prestige as an athlete although he seems not to have been a leader. The leadership quality of "K" developed in a school for juvenile delinquents when he was 12. Even as early leaders, however, there seems to have been frequent disassociation and fluctuation in role varying between being an acknowledged leader, a quasi-leader and a follower. For example, before coming to the prison where this study was made "A" had no similar status in another prison. "M" had no following until he had been in residence for three years. While the social experiences which the leaders have had have been important in conditioning them for the status they hold as leaders, there seems to be no situation common to all unless it has reference to having engaged in delinquency at a relatively early age. The following material will show that the attitude of followers in regard to the leaders has pertinence only for the qualities demonstrated in the present or immediate past.

Numerous statements have been obtained referring to the personality traits that the leaders appear to possess of which the following passages seem to be representative. An advanced offender who has completed 12 years on a life sentence for murder, noted as leader "A" in the table, writes:

"I think that in a well integrated group the man who is most trusted and has the most equable disposition is the chosen leader. . . . In sports proficiency qualifies one's fitness for leadership only if he is square, too. In anything else ingenuity in devising new pastimes or escapades qualifies it. Outstanding intellect is a liability since it is usually distrusted. In a group which is not integrated the aggressive organizer is the leader although he may not last long.

A forger who has been a member of a semi-primary group comments about his cellmate who is leader "F" of another group:

He arrived here about eight years ago without creating much excite-
ment. Later he became interested in physical culture and built up his
body. He is a proselyter and became a leader of certain men who were
interested in that kind of thing. . . . He has a bull dog face and a mild
manner. His speech is better than one would suppose for a man with
his appearance, and he possesses a sentimental gregariousness which
makes him intimate with anyone he chooses to cultivate. . . . He has a
good sense of humor and is . . . never running to officials.

A supposed follower in one of the concededly better organized
groups is not inclined to think too highly of his leader whom he
describes, "nice guy, sure enough, and while I like him personally
I know that if it were him or me—I know who he'd take." The
same theme comes from an inmate who is not a member of a group
and who the writer considers to have unusual perspicacity. He
remarks:

"L" has got guts and I think his audacity will lead to queer doings
and he will catch another inmate off guard . . . but neither he nor any
other man can manage anything in here. He couldn't start a riot and
he can't get any breaks (favors). A prison leader can spread propa-
ganda and official stupidity does the rest.

"B" is recognized as a leader not only by the inmate population but
by the administration as well. He has pronounced ideas as to the
qualities with which leaders are endowed. In his statement one per-
ceives some personalization and self-reference:

Physically the leader is not small or large. I know of small leaders
and I know of large leaders. Mentally they are above the average
although that does not mean much in here considering the low mental
average of most prisoners. Temperamentally he is of the emotional type,
the type who is quick to condemn the officials and anyone else. . . .
Suggestions from this and that usually spring from him and he seems
able to imbue his followers with enthusiasm. . . . I run over in my
mind half a dozen leaders I know in here and the main trait that they
all have in common is that they are absolutely "right."

A schedule was presented to 60 men who were members of
groups in which the leaders operated. The men were asked to
enumerate not only the major traits which appeared to be import-
ant in their ideas of leadership but the lesser traits as well. The
data obtained are considered too subjective to quantify. The ad-
mirable traits assigned to leaders by members include first and most

frequently the orientation known as "being right."[8] Other charac-
teristics were described as courage, generosity, modesty, education,
an interesting vocabulary, personal cleanliness, clever gambling,
the ability to "con" (fool) officials, a reputation for holding liquor,
possession of money with which luxuries could be dispensed, a
large body knowledge about a particular technique of crime, a fund
of vulgar jokes or songs, the possession of attitudes against the
judiciary, the prison administration, the parole board, and God,
demonstrable sophistication in female companionship as evidenced
by suggestive letters, the dignity and poise that come to some men
after long years of prison life, participation in a spectacular crime,
riot, or escape, a great capacity for eating, the ability to turn hand-
springs, seduce younger men, and play a guitar. Possession of a
few of these traits is not sufficient to qualify a man for leadership.
The essential trait is reported to be a concept of "rightness." Dis-
honesty of considerable proportions may be tolerated unless it in-
volves group members or other prisoners in an unfavorable situation
with officials. When such a condition becomes known the prestige
of leadership is gone.

The acquiring of leader status in most cases is a gradual and
unmeasurable process. In a few instances a change in group con-
trol is accomplished through conflict. When a man enters prison
he is virtually ungrouped unless he has associates. More often
than not friendly relations among associates is absent. A bank
robber who has seen men enter prison for eleven years expresses
the initiation process thus:

> When "fish" (new inmates) come in here they act lost but I've never
> seen it to fail that the "hoosiers" (undesirable persons) group up with
> the hoosiers, the "stools" (informers) with the "stools" and the prosti-
> tutes with their kind—the "right guys" don't group up for some time.
> You see them looking the guys over before they choose their friends.

Eventually, however, about 60 per cent of the men who come to
prison enter into or initiate some form of primary group life. If the
group is already formed a degree of consensus is reached before a
new man shares in the full social life. He may, and frequently
does, upset the equilibrium of established interaction. There may be

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[8] "Rightness" or "being right" in prison terminology has especial reference
to an inmate's capacity to withhold information from an official while under
pressure of third degree, or cross-examination or in spite of potential rewards.
The connotation includes loyalty to the prison group as a whole, honesty in such
other situations in which the safety of inmates is involved, and physical courage.

many personal conflicts and much disassociation before a new bal-
ance is reached. It is as a result of such changes and interchanges
in role that new leaders emerge. Not only does this condition apply
when a new inmate enters prison but also when a hanger-on of
one established group attempts to be included in or become a leader
of another group. The particular personality traits notwithstand-
ing, a person tends to become a leader when there has been some
rift in the ordinary cohesion of group life. The traits of persons
involved in the changes either accelerate or retard the speed with
which the change takes place. To illustrate: An inmate was trans-
ferred from another prison in the same state because of conduct
difficulties there. He was reputed to be courageous and to possess
anti-administration feelings. After the transfer he was assigned
to a work division in which there was much informal group life.
One of the most prominent of these cliques had recently been dis-
rupted due to an unfaithful act of its leader. As a result the new
inmate who was known to have the correct orientation soon came
to be a member and later the leader. The deposed leader men-
tioned several months later, in explanation:

He came from ———— with a tough reputation and his leadership is
based on his reputation there. He has a punch and that gains prestige
anywhere.

The leader here referred to lasted only six months when he was
found to be inordinately selfish. He later led in a daring escape
with a totally different group in which a guard was severely beaten.
He was recaptured within two months after having committed sev-
eral professionalized robberies. He returned to prison and again
became a leader of yet another group. After eleven years he was
released and shortly afterwards was arrested and indicted for
murder.

Some inmates attempt to gain the leader's role and fail. This
results usually in reference to two conditions: first, the character
faults of the individual, and second, the questionableness of the
program he is sponsoring in relation to the absence of need for a
new leader. The following instance is revealed by leader "M" who
describes an inmate with a poor reputation:

He was long suspected of being a "rat" (informer) and he tried to
get some petitions signed first in one shop or work-gang and then an-
other. Shop after shop and gang after gang was approached without
results. To the inmate's question, "who is handling this petition?"—

the prisoners, when told, answered, "why that dirty fink (informer), he's got a lot of guts trying to get that petition signed." . . . Among the hundred who refused to sign or have anything to do with the dirty fink, there were scores of other finks who didn't have any confidence or trust in the first fink,—who was like themselves.

Other men become leaders by organization schemes. Leader "E" set up a round-robin tournament among six baseball teams, appointed himself manager of one team and for weeks was distrusted by his ten close associates. Although they highly approved of the idea, they thought "E" was seeking the Warden's favor because of his activities in managing the soft ball league. In an argument with an official, however, leader "E" defended the players against the official and was then generally accepted as a real leader. By and large it seems that leaders gain their status by action or a reliable reputation for action that prompts admiration by the followers. This behavior always implies some of the values which the group holds in esteem as well as a possession of attitudes that they themselves lack, at least to a degree.

In conducting this study it soon became evident that there were frequent changes in leaders. Of the 14 groups with whom the writer had the closest connection, 3 of the leaders had held their position between a year and 18 months. Six had been leaders between 9 and 13 months and 7 had been leaders between 6 and 9 months. While these data are approximated from an appraisal of the followers their complete accuracy is open to question. Even in the groups which seemed the most stable there. were frequent quarrels. In 3 groups it was found that at one time two persons may have had about the same prestige. This does not indicate a constant striving for leadership but is related to popularity which is considered as a different phenomena.

An evaluation of leadership in a closed community is not, of course, comparable to that of a normal community. The main difference seems to be related to the leader's goal, objective, or program. Prison leaders, except in conflict situations, have no definite program. The only objective which the group and leader share is to make the time pass as agreeably and as comfortably as possible. When the group is made up of baseball players there is a goal, i. e., the championship, but this is transitory and never very important. Individualism, or the tendency to oppose the wishes of others, while sometimes subjected to the pressure of the group controls, still crops out and prohibits a common agreement as to

objectives. Thus it follows that a leader without a program is not
apt to have the permanence that a leader does who is fighting for
a cause. Another prominent factor in the tenure of leadership is
the surprising number of times that a leader thought to be "right"
proves only too shortly to demonstrate some weakness. It is prob-
able that many of the personality attributes that led to conflict
with the larger social order and caused incarceration are operating
to prohibit the leader from continuing his role.

The general nature of leadership depends, of course, on the
culture in which the leader operates. While this report cannot
attempt to give a portraiture of the prison culture, it has been im-
plied that the prison is a highly complex community, in which the
social processes vary with those found in a free community. Folk-
ways and mores, for example, have, except in a few instances, little
universality, and there is seldom common definitions of most situa-
tions. The confusion of standards found in prison is related to the
condition of the conflicting folkways and mores as well as to the
fact that a large proportion of inmates have been reared in malad-
justed homes and neighborhoods where other conflicts in social
customs existed. These conditions plus the frequently changing
population considered together with the penitentiary regulations
brings about an impersonalization of social contacts. Impersonaliza-
tion plus the individuation of most prisoners makes of the peni-
tentiary an atomized society. It is little wonder then that in such
a milieu we find prison leaders whose functions are minor and
tenure uncertain, and it is not surprising that in the vast literature
on leadership little similarity is found for leaders within and without
the walls. In this connection one inmate remarks:

> Historical heroes—leaders who have received the loudest acclaim
> from biographers have been warriors who led their people to conquest
> or freedom. Their dominant characteristics have been many—selfish
> Napoleon, ambitious Alexander, patriotic Washington, bigoted Cromwell.
> Would any of these be recognized as leaders in our modern prisons?
> I think not. They would be known within the walls as, "handshakers,"
> "administration men," and, "rats."

In spite of the nature of the prison world, groups and leaders ex-
ist, and a few approach in structure and function the primary
groups in a normal community. Before men come to prison they
have been members of and have shared in various forms of group
life. Official regulations notwithstanding, the pattern tends to con-
tinue. Before commitment some men were of the dominant type

and some were submissive; this condition tends to continue. The attitudes of new inmates have been modified during the arrest, detention, and trial process so that when they enter the penitentiary they have no strong affiliational drive because their attention rests on the damage which has been done to their egos. They are highly self-centered. They think in terms of "me," "I," and "my case." Eventually, however, they become increasingly aware of the social life about them. Other personalities, usually leaders, become sources of interest. Gossip flourishes: by word of mouth they learn who is "right" and who is "wrong." Life comes to be dramatic at least for a time. The primary group is the theatre and the leader manages the staging. The mechanism is an escape from the dull, deadening monotony of an impersonalized existence of which prison life otherwise consists. The leader, by consensus, keeps the group intact. By virtue of some outstanding trait he is able to provide and guide entertainment, thus offering a counter-irritant to the social stresses and strains which are inherent in prison life. He develops new subjects of conversation; he engenders new hates or rekindles old ones; he devises new forms of recreation and he may tentatively enliven hope. He may lead a protest or sponsor a riot. But there is no real permanency. After years of prison, conversation that was once stimulating becomes dull. Hopes and hates dwindle. In the readjustment after conflict as in riot or pro-test, prisoners nearly always lose. Values fluctuate and personali-ties change. The bonds in a group, seldom very strong, weaken. Social lassitude leads to impersonalization and symbiotic contacts. It is this situation that accounts for the nature of group life in prison and the nature of the leaders.

The concept that prisoners are geographically near but socially distant would seem to be substantiated by the following data ob-tained from the followers who were given a schedule on social affili-ations. (.1) Seventy per cent of these men state that friendships in prison result from the mutual help that man can give man. (2.) Seventy-seven per cent of the subjects stated that familiarity in prison breeds contempt. (3.) Seventy-two per cent report that friendships in prison are of short duration. (4.) Ninety-five per cent conclude that most prisoners are more interested in themselves than in in any other prisoners.

Conclusion: While a type of leadership phenomena has been found to exist in a prison, it differs greatly with leadership as ordinarily conceived in an unrestricted society. The differences

have reference to the particular structure of the informal group
life, the absence of consensus for a common goal, the individualism
of most prisoner's orientation, the official controls of discipline, the
personality traits of those who become leaders, and the atomization
of the prison community. For the purpose of furnishing a concept
the prison leader may be considered as the person who, for a rela-
tively short period of time, guides and controls the less important
opinions and behavior of his group in a minor way by behavior
which they tentatively approve. The esteemed behavior consists
of an anti-administration ideation and a complex of other traits
which draws attention to the dramatic milieu which is the group and
away from the burdensomeness of an isolated existence. The prison
leader holds prestige until there is disassociation in the group usu-
ally brought about by conduct of his own which is inconsistent with
the role the group expected him to play. A new leader achieves
his status by action or a capacity for action plus certain personable
traits approved by the group. He maintains his position until a
change, either in his own behavior or in the values of the group,
takes place. Such leaders as have been found to exist are some-
what more intelligent, slightly younger and more criminalistic than
the population in general.