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THE PRISON AS AN AUTOCRACY

Norman A. Polansky¹

One potential source of information, not only about prisons but also about the sort of social environment of which the prison is typical, is the inmate group itself. As yet this source has been but little exploited on anything approaching a quantitative level. The neglect of this source is unfortunate, since information obtained in studies of the inmates can be of considerable use both in formulating practical penological policy, and in constructing socio-psychological theory.

From the point of view of social psychology, the prison is especially interesting at the present time as a prime example of the autocratic group; i.e., a group in which policy is, for the most part, determined by the top members of a hierarchy. From the angle of penological practice, it is clear that no program aiming at anything more ambitious than mere segregation and punishment can be effective without taking into account the reactions of the majority of its subjects. It is important to know not only what the program means to the administrator, but also what it means for the prisoner. Reliable information about the meaning for the prisoner can be obtained only by going directly to large numbers of the inmates themselves.

That there are practical difficulties in the way of such an attack will be immediately apparent to anyone familiar with this field of research. In addition to the difficulties that always attend socio-psychological research, there is the added factor of the position in which this particular group finds itself. The investigator is liable to be met on the one hand with fear and hostility, and on the other with an exaggerated desire to please him. Neither of these difficulties can be completely overcome merely by the application of a particular research technique. The present investigator was fortunate in occupying a position in which a tradition of complete confidence and free personal relations between the psychologist and the inmates had been established over a period of years.² Under these circumstances, it was possible to employ the technique outlined below. It is offered here as one means of securing relatively objective data in this general area.

The specific aims of this study were as follows:

1. To discover which characteristics of the prison environment, from the standpoint of "most prisoners," are of greatest importance

¹Child Welfare Research Station, University of Iowa. The work under discussion here was done in the Fort Madison, Ia., State Prison under the direction of Drs. F. E. Haynes and Kurt Lewin.

²The kind co-operation of Warden Glenn C. Haynes has helped to make this situation possible.

in determining with what degree of contentment they will undergo confinement.

2. To study the effects of different kinds of prison "atmospheres" on the structure of the inmate community.

Procedure

The study was conducted by personal interviews with inmates who had served previous sentences in other penal or reformatory institutions. A face-to-face relationship was necessary to persuade some of the inmates of the usefulness of co-operating, and to make possible additional explanations where either questions or procedures were not clearly understood. After the inmate had entered the room, and a few minutes had been spent in explaining our object to him, his previous institutionalizations were noted, and the following general instructions were read to him:

We should like to have you rate these places for us on various factors. We're interested in how the prisoner feels about these things. What we want is *your* opinion. Nothing you say here will be used for or against you, so don't consider this from that angle.

When you're asked to compare one place with another, try not to let the fact that you found it good on one thing make you rate it high on everything. Consider each question on its own merits entirely.

In the case of those men who had been in more than one institution previously, a *ranking* of the places on the given factor was secured. Where there were many, or where the man was inclined to rate them vaguely as "all alike" we sometimes resorted to presenting the institutions in the manner of paired comparisons. The ranking method was chosen for this study as the most easily understood rating method. It is also the one least liable to ambiguities due to varying frames of reference toward the scale on the part of the subjects.

The questions were then asked in the order and wording given below and the responses noted on the questionnaires, which served also as the record blank.

The Questionnaire

1. Which place would you say had the best building and general plant set-up?
2. Where would you say the food was better?
3. Which place had the best inmate newspaper?
4. Where would you say you did better time?
5. Which place had the best athletic program for the inmates?
6. Where would you say the prison administration—the officers in general—were liked the best, or you might say disliked the least?
7. Which place had the best chances for schooling or reading materials for the inmates?
8. Where was the discipline stricter—bigger punishments and more rules to get into trouble with?
9. Which place had the better work program as far as the inmates were concerned?

10. In which place would you say the inmate politicians were most looked down upon?

11. Which place had the best amusement program?

12. In which place would you say there were the most fights, or quarreling and bickering among the inmates?

13. Where would you say they had the best release set-up as far as parole or indeterminate sentences and so forth are concerned?

14. Where did you find the other inmates better guys to do time with?

It will be noted that an attempt was made to word the questions in the language usual among the group. There are a few comparatively neutral "warm-up" questions at the beginning. In order to cancel halo effects somewhat, interrelated questions are always separated by questions on a different theme.

Possibilities for Generalization

The extent to which the results here obtained permit generalization is dependent on the degree to which this sample may be regarded as representative of all inmates in all prisons. The subjects were 51 inmates of the Iowa State Prison. They had all been confined in at least one other penal institution, the average total number of institutionalizations being 3.38. Other criteria were their willingness to answer the questions, and their ability to operate at a sufficiently abstract level to make the comparisons. The form of this study is intended to keep the latter two biases at a minimum, but it must be expected that they existed. The other limitation is imposed by the institutions sampled. A total of 39 state and Federal institutions are involved over a span of 29 years. A large percentage of the comparisons, however, involved institutions in Iowa and neighboring states.

Method of Analysis

One possible method of analyzing these results would have been to establish rank orders of the various prisons on each question. To do this, however, would require having all possible inter-comparisons between the prisons considered, and, since no one man could possibly have been in all, to make the assumptions: a)—that all prisoners are equal in their reactions to a given prison environment, and, b)—that prison environments remain constant over a long period of time. Since neither of these assumptions was tenable, and since we did not have the requisite inter-comparisons, the method of analysis given below was used.

For any individual, the places in which he had been confined were arranged in pairs so that each place was compared with every other one. It was then possible to take any two questions on the questionnaires, and to see whether the institution which was rated higher on one question was also rated higher in regard to the second question. If this was the case, it was scored as an "agreement." If one prison was above the other on one question but below it on the other question, the comparison was scored as a disagreement. If,

in regard to *one* of the questions, the two prisons were rated as equal, this was scored as half an agreement—half a disagreement. The percentage of agreement for the two questions (over all our subjects) is then a measure of the degree to which high rating of a prison on one aspect goes parallel with high rating of that prison on the other aspect. The degree to which this relationship tends to differ from chance expectancy (50%) is indicative of its extent. This method, then, amounts to a rough sort of rank-difference correlation technique.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS:

Factors of Importance in General Contentment

Question four is: "Where would you say you did better time?" This is equivalent to asking where the inmate had been able to endure confinement most contentedly. By obtaining the percentages of agreement of this question with each of the others, we are able to make a rank order of the degree of association of this factor with each of the others. We interpret the extent of the agreement of some other factor with this one as a measure of its *importance*, for the group as a whole, in inducing similar rankings on the variable, "contentment."

TABLE I

Comparison of Other Factors with the Degree of Contentment.

	Per Cent Agree (Total)	Per Cent Agree (-50%)	Total No. Compar- isons	S.E. ^a
1. Liking for administration....	77.8	27.8	151	3.4
2. Quality of the food.....	74.8	24.8	166	3.4
3. Quality of amusement program	70.4	20.4	164	3.6
4. Quality of work program....	70.2	20.2	164	3.6
5. Quality of athletic program...	69.5	19.5	162	3.6
6. Strictness of discipline ³	31.0	-19.0	166	3.6
7. Quality of inmate newspaper..	66.5	16.5	143	3.9
8. Quality of the buildings.....	66.1	16.1	156	3.8
9. Chances for inmate schooling or reading materials.....	61.8	11.8	162	3.8
10. Liking for other inmates....	59.7	9.7	159	3.9
11. Amount of internal squabbling among inmates	41.9	-8.1	116	4.6
12. Quality of the release set-up..	55.3	5.3	150	4.1
13. Resentment toward inmate politicians	46.2	-3.8	133	4.3

^aAgreement scores of less than 50 per cent may be taken as indicating a negative relationship. The sampling distribution of measures of this kind is unknown to the writer. An approximate test of the null hypothesis may be made, however, by comparing the given standard errors of percentage with the deviation of the agreement score from the fifty per cent point.

One thing which will be noted is the relatively low position occupied by all scores involving relations with fellow inmates. The prison is an autocratic institution, and factors controlled by the administration play the predominant roles in determining how the inmate group will get along there. Thus we see that although liking for the administration is perhaps most important, liking for other inmates is in tenth place. The significance of the proper selection of official personnel is here further accentuated.

Of considerable practical interest are the relative positions of some of the other questions. The tremendous importance of the food in prisons is already well-recognized by men with experience in the field. Of equal interest are the comparatively unimportant roles played by such things as the inmate newspaper, and schooling and reading opportunities. It would, perhaps, be not amiss to interpret the discrepancy between these things and the roles of amusements and athletics not only in terms of inmate interests, but also in terms of the greater integration of the latter factors in the general policies of administrators. And it is the administration group which determines the "mood" of the institution.

*Effects of Strictness of Discipline on the Structure of
the Inmate Group*

A phenomenon well worth investigating is the effect of varying degrees of strictness of discipline on the structure of the group. In the comparison of the rankings on Question 8 with those on certain of the other factors, the following relationships are obtained:

TABLE II.

Comparison of Strictness of Discipline with Other Factors

	Per Cent Agree (Total)	Per Cent Agree (-50%)	Total No. Compar- isons	S.E.
1. Liking for administration.....	22.1	-27.9	147	3.4
2. Degree of contentment.....	31.0	-19.0	166	3.6
3. Amount of internal squabbling				
among inmates	65.9	15.9	116	4.4
4. Liking for other inmates.....	42.1	-7.9	161	3.9
5. Resentment toward inmate politicians	56.8	6.8	133	4.3

Since our measures are indicative only of relationship, interpretations in terms of cause and effect are gratuitous. It does appear, however, as seen through the eyes of our subjects, that the following things are true: where the discipline is stricter, the administration is more disliked; and this group of subjects, at least, is less content serving sentences in such places. In other words, places in which the discipline is strict may be regarded as "tough joints."

What is the effect of such an atmosphere on the prison com-

munity? We have already seen that, for one thing, there is a greater tendency for the inmate group to be more sharply differentiated from the administration group. In the inmate-to-inmate relationship, we might expect either of two things to happen. Under pressure, the group might be welded more closely together in common opposition to the administration: or each individual might be put under such a state of tension that the group would actually be disintegrated. The above results indicate that the latter effect is more generally the case. For in prisons of stricter discipline, and in spite of the practical difficulties in communicating with each other in such places, there is a greater tendency toward fighting and internal dissension among the inmates. We find, too, that the inmate "politician"⁴ group tends to be the more resented, and that the other inmates are generally less well liked.

In an experimental study of groups of children, Lewin, Lippitt, and White⁵ set up one group with a democratic atmosphere, and one with an autocratic. The autocratic atmosphere was characterized by great organizational dependence, there being six times as much member-to-leader contact in the autocratic group as in the democratic. The atmosphere was also much stricter. In this atmosphere they found much more member-to-member aggression than in the democratic. It was clear that, in the autocratic group, the important relationship was between the individual and the source of authority. There was neither the opportunity nor the need to co-operate voluntarily with individuals of one's own status. Contacts were frequently only a means of venting resentment engendered by the authority which could be expressed in no other way. The prison offers a parallel situation.

The Atomistic Character of the Inmate Society

Clemmer⁶ describes the inmate society as "atomistic" (i.e. disproportionately ego-centric), and our findings are in agreement with his. We have evidence for this not only from Table I, but also from the following comparisons:

TABLE III

Comparison of Liking for Inmates with Other Factors

	Per Cent Agree (Total)	Per Cent Agree (-50%)	Total No. Compar- isons	S.E. _p
1. Resentment against politicians	53.1	3.1	131	4.4
2. Amount of internal squabbling among inmates	37.5	-12.5	112	4.6
3. Liking for the administration . . .	62.9	12.9	159	3.8

⁴"Politicians" are inmates who, by virtue of the assignments or privileges accorded them, are thought to have carried favor with the administration.

⁵Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., and White, R. K., Patterns of aggressive behavior in artificially created social climates, *J. Sec. Psychol.*, 1939, 10, 271-299.

⁶Clemmer, D., *The Prison Community*, Boston, 1940.

In determining whether the other inmates shall be liked, the relationship to the administration is as important as interrelationships among the inmates. This atomism, the relative indifference of the inmate to another of equal status with himself, is intensified by the fact that many of the inmates despise others of their number for the very crimes for which they themselves were introduced into the group.

Conclusion

By its very nature, the prison group, run according to strict authoritarian lines, will show more member-to-administration dependence than member-to-member dependence. There is neither the desire, nor, in the circumstances, the opportunity, for the development of those self-imposed responsibilities which make possible the smooth conduct of a free society. Since, during the period of an inmate's incarceration, the other inmates constitute his society, it will be readily seen that prisons naturally have an almost infinite capacity for the anti-socialization of their inmates. And the more onerous one makes prisons, the more will he facilitate the process of atomization and social disruption.

MR. WILLIAM A. WILTBERGER IN THE ARMY

In a letter to the Editor dated May 25 Mr. William A. Wiltberger informs us that the San Jose State College Police School, of which he is the Director, is a temporary war casualty. Due to a shortage of personnel the school has closed for the duration.

Since June first Mr. Wiltberger has been with the United States Army Air Corps Depot at Hill Field, Ogden, Utah. It is his expectation to reopen the school and to resume his educational work at San Jose when he has finished his contribution toward winning the war.

The San Jose Police School and "Bill" Wiltberger have been identified with each other since the autumn of 1930. Mr. Wiltberger can, therefore, properly be described as one of the pioneers in police education in the United States. August Vollmer of Berkeley, as always in such matters, was called upon for counsel and he contributed liberally out of his wisdom and wide experience.

In this JOURNAL, XXVI, 2, July-August, 1935 is an article by T. W. McQuarrie, then President of the San Jose State College in which one may find an account of the origin of the school and a description of the curriculum as it was at the outset. By the simple expedient of reading that matter today we can see the distance Wiltberger and others have traveled since 1930.