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# A STUDY OF CERTAIN ATTITUDES OF PRISON INMATES

Raymond Corsini

No systematic exploration of either the stable or fluid attitudes of prisoners has ever been undertaken. Surveys of intelligence levels are less difficult to make and less important. This preliminary study should be followed by others.

The author, institutional psychologist at Auburn Prison, began his prison service career in 1935 at Welfare Island and has been on the staffs of six prisons to date. He was engaged in research respecting Italian delinquents with Dr. Nino Levi until the latter's untimely death.—EDITOR.

A list of twelve prepared questions was asked of fifty consecutively interviewed inmates at Auburn Prison during the winter and spring of 1942-43, in order to determine what their attitudes were toward a number of factors. These men had been given release dates by the State Parole Board, and were waiting for their date of departure. The occasion of the prepared interviews was a routine re-orientation interview for the purpose of assisting the men to be released to adjust to any personal situations. During the therapeutic interview the men were informed of the prepared interview, substantially in the following manner:

"Now that you have spent a number of years in prison, I would like to have your honest opinion about a number of things. I have prepared a list of twelve questions that I am going to ask you, but you do not have to answer any of them if you don't want to. I have written the questions at the top of these sheets, and I am putting the answers I get on these same sheets. In this way no one can ever know who made various statements since I am making no record of names. Besides, since you are leaving, you can afford to be frank, because no matter what you say, nothing can make much difference. You can be absolutely sure that my purpose for asking these questions is solely to learn more about the men's attitudes."

Fifty-one consecutively interviewed men were asked to cooperate in answering this questionnaire. One man refused to answer, so the replies below are those of fifty men.

No information about the age of the men, the length of years served, or any other statistical information is available. The group was selected randomly, since the sample consisted of 50 men chosen solely on the basis of release date. This group represented about 3.5 percent of the total prison population. There is no reason to believe that the attitudes of these men do not reflect those of the total group.

During the period this investigation was going on, eleven adult graduate students in a morale seminar at Syracuse University under the leadership of Dr. F. H. Allport were apprised of the investigation and were asked to predict what the responses would be to the various questions.

The responses of the inmates can be contrasted with the "guesses" of these mature students of psychology. In this manner we shall be able to discover any significant differences between the two. We shall also obtain indications about the attitudes of the public about men in prison. Furthermore, the reader can contrast his own opinions with these two estimates.

#### QUESTION I

*Have you been reasonably happy in Auburn Prison?*

Responses: Yes — 25; No — 25.

*Students:* The average prediction that the response would be "Yes" was 40 percent. The individual guesses ranged from 2 to 85 percent.

*Remarks:* 50 percent of these fifty men stated they had been reasonably happy in Auburn Prison. While some men unhesitatingly answered "yes" or "no," some men hedged and had to be urged to give a definite answer.

#### QUESTION II

*What was the main cause or causes of your unhappiness?*

*Responses:* 93 responses were obtained from the 50 men. They broke down into five major reasons for unhappiness, embodying 67 of the total responses. The most important reason clustered about the family with 23 mentions; next came confinement items with 20 mentions; next, prison conditions as opposed and differentiated from confinement with 11 mentions; next mentioned were feelings of guilt and remorse; fifth were expressions of self-pity.

*Students:* The students were asked to predict the three main reasons for being unhappy in prison. Thirty-two responses were obtained from the 11 students. Classification showed that the first guessed reason was confinement with nine mentions; next, with five mentions came prison conditions; third was food with four mentions; and three reasons tied for fourth place with three mentions each: lack of amusement, poor class of associates, and family.

*Remarks:* The obvious discrepancy here is the family. While inmates mentioned thoughts of their family as first cause for their unhappiness, being mentioned 25 percent of all reasons; the students mentioned the family only 9.5 percent of the times. Food, which the students thought would be the third most important reason for unhappiness, was actually mentioned only twice by the inmates.

#### QUESTION III

*What did you think of mostly while you were here?*

*Responses:* The family came first again with 28 mentions; rehabilitation items next with 19 mentions; remorse items

third with seven mentions; fourth were items involving the various social, economic, and educational losses incurred as a result of incarceration.

*Students:* The students were asked to guess what they believed the three dominant thoughts of inmates would be. Future activities and the family tied for first place with five mentions each; date of release was in second place with four mentions; women came third with two mentions. The other responses were unique.

*Remarks:* In the matter of what is on the inmates' minds, it appears that the family comes first together with rehabilitation. Thirty-one percent of the responses involved the family, but only 18 percent of the students' responses mentioned the family. While the students placed future plans among the more dominant thoughts of the inmates, none mentioned rehabilitation specifically, which appears to be the second uppermost thought in the minds of the inmates. Remorse, which was third most frequently obtained, was not mentioned once by the students. Apparently, students think men are not penitent in penitentiaries.

#### QUESTION IV

*Do you think the average inmate benefits from his incarceration?*

*Responses:* 17 answered "yes"; 15 answered "no"; four said either "50-50" or "some"; five said "very few"; eight said they did not know; and one man stated "yes, if a man serves less than five years."

*Students:* They were asked to predict the percentage of "yes" responses. Estimates varied from two to 60 percent, with 50 percent being the median guess.

*Remarks:* This question is actually an estimate of what inmates believe is the value of a prison in terms of rehabilitation. 34 percent believe that prison improves men; while 30 percent do not believe men are improved.

Students apparently feel that inmates believe that other prisoners benefit through incarceration to a greater extent than they actually do. If we may interpret the students' responses to indicate what they actually believe themselves, we see they are more optimistic of the value of imprisonment than are inmates.

#### QUESTION V

*Do you think that you have benefitted by your stay at Auburn?*

*Responses:* Yes — 30; No — seven; Yes-and-No — three; refused to respond, or answered ambiguously — 10.

*Students:* They guessed that from two to 60 percent of inmates would answer "yes" to this question, the median guess was 45 percent.

*Remarks:* Although 34 percent of inmates believed that others benefitted by their stay in prison, 60 percent believed that they themselves had benefitted. The students believed that while 50 percent of inmates would feel that others were benefitted, only 45 percent would admit being benefitted themselves.

#### QUESTION VI

*Did any person help you to understand yourself while in prison?*

*Responses:* 61 affirmative specific replies were received from 32 men, while 18 men claimed that no one had helped them.

*Students:* They predicted that 45 percent of men would say they had been assisted toward adjustment. Individual guesses ranged from five to 85 percent.

*Remarks:* 64 percent of the men claimed to have been helped by a total of 28 separate civilian and guard personnel, and by eleven inmates, but 36 percent of the men felt they had not been assisted towards re-adjustment by anyone. The students believed that even a smaller percentage of men would feel that they had been assisted.

#### QUESTION VII

*Have you been able to learn anything, such as a trade, which will assist you economically on your release?*

*Responses:* Six men stated that they did not need to learn anything, since they already knew trades. 27 men said they had learned nothing; 17 men stated they had learned a total of 27 skills. These 27 skills were divided into 18 separate classifications. Some men learned more than one skill which explains why 17 men learned 27 skills.

The most often mentioned skill was: "Learned to live within my means," which was mentioned eight times. Machine shop work was mentioned twice, so was basket making. All the other skills were unique and included such skills as baking, carpentry, electrical work. One man learned how to make violins.

*Students:* They predicted that 40 percent of the men would state they had learned some economic skills. Guesses ranged from 20 to 90 percent.

*Remarks:* While 17 of the men claimed to have learned 27 economic skills, eight of them learned the art of getting along on a little, and two learned what they considered to be an impractical skill. This leaves seven men out of fifty who learned a total of 17 useful vocational skills. The percentage of men

who claimed they learned useful, practical skills reduces to 14 percent.

#### QUESTION VIII

*Do you think more could have been done for you? If so, what?*

*Responses:* 31 of the 50 men felt that all had been done for them that could have been done. 19 men felt that more could have been done. These 19 men gave 18 different classes of suggestions, with 21 responses. Three believed that they should have been taught a trade; and two stated they did not know exactly what, but that more should have been done for them. 16 responses were unique.

*Students:* They predicted that 70 percent of men would feel that more should have been done for them. Individual guesses ranged from 20 to 100 percent.

*Remarks:* We find a large difference here. Only 38 percent of the inmates felt that more could have been done for them, but the students felt that 70 percent would feel this way. 62 percent of the men felt that they did not need any sort of help. It appears that inmates are more self-reliant than students believe them to be.

#### QUESTION IX

*What changes do you think could be made in this prison to help men?*

*Responses:* 28 men either refused to answer or stated they had no ideas. 22 men mentioned 41 different changes for a total of 48 responses. 10 changes referred to psychological and psychiatric treatment; five mentions were made of educational and vocational training; four suggestions were made about changing the routine; three changes were suggested in the architecture (modern school, indoor recreation hall, larger yard); and two changes related to classification. Other reasons were unique.

*Students:* They guessed which would be the three most mentioned changes. Changes in food and routine were each mentioned five times; education came second with four mentions; and more conveniences was third with three mentions.

*Remarks:* While the inmates mentioned changes involving emotional and mental rehabilitation and education as primary changes, the students were far more mundane. They mentioned routine and food.

#### QUESTION X

*What bothered or annoyed you most while you were here?*

*Responses:* 18 men said nothing had bothered them; 32 men mentioned 50 complaints. Classification is not too helpful, since complaints were for the most part specific. 20 of the

complaints referred to the institution or its personnel; 17 referred to the inmates; three complaints referred to confinement. In order to indicate the nature of some of the complaints, the first ten obtained are mentioned here: regimentation, inefficiency, red tape, inconsiderate inmates, noise at night, morals of inmates, excuses of poverty advanced as causes of crime, radio reception, conscience, the fact "I can't support my family," sexual degenerates.

*Students:* The students were asked to guess the three chief peeves. First was routine, with 10 mentions; next, other inmates tying with poor food for second place with six mentions each; the guard force came third with two mentions.

*Remarks:* Comparison is rather difficult, but in general it appears that the prison routine and the prison personnel come first, with other inmates second in terms of annoyance. Again, we see that the students mention food, which was not mentioned at all by the inmates.

#### QUESTION XI

*How well do you think you'll get along after release?*

*Responses:* Very well — 37; don't know — 9; all right if I'm working — 3; not well — 1.

*Students:* They predicted that 75 percent of the men would say they would get along well. Guesses ranged from 20 to 100 percent.

*Remarks:* About 75 percent of inmates believe they will manage to adjust satisfactorily on the outside. That the obtained percentage was so low is an indication of the validity of this method of obtaining measures of attitude. This same question when asked of men at pre-parole interviews gives practically a 100 percent "Very Well" response. That 26 percent of the inmates felt insecure even during the war period is indicative of the emotional attitudes of the men. Naturally, the 26 percent is a minimum, since it is to be expected that men will be more confident than is warranted, besides, there is the ever-present factor of deliberate lying.

#### QUESTION XII

*What was the cause of your crime?*

*Responses:* Six men stated they did not commit a crime. The other 44 men gave 58 responses, classifying into 24 separate groups. Need for money came first with 13 mentions; drink was second with 11 mentions; foolishness was third with five mentions; and environment was fourth with three mentions.

*Students:* They were asked to predict the three most often mentioned reasons for committing crime. 25 responses were obtained which broke down into 12 general reasons. Environ-

ment came first together with poor associates with five mentions each; poverty was second with four mentions; drink and family reasons were mentioned twice each.

*Remarks:* Need for money is the most frequent assigned reason for committing crimes. Drink is second. These are the two big reasons, according to the inmates. The students felt, however, that the environment was the most important reason.

The inmates tend to accept the blame for their crimes, rather than to put the blame on outside causes. They seemed to feel that they were the captains of their destiny, although they did excuse themselves secondarily for the actual crimes. Less than six percent of the inmates felt that the environment was the cause of their crimes. Perhaps the difference is due to the point of view: the students looked at crime from the abstract, while the inmates considered each his particular crime.

#### DISCUSSION

The discovery of truth by means of interviews has many pitfalls. To use this method with prison inmates, who are generally regarded as consistently notorious fabricators, may seem too precarious to merit attention as a scientific technique. What can be said for the validity of the method?

The men picked were practically ex-inmates. While each still wore prison gray, each had been given his release date, and each was due to go home soon. No semblance of compulsion or coercion existed during the interview. Several of the men refused to answer various questions. The general attitude, however, was co-operative.

The answers to the various personal questions, V, VII, and XI were not entirely favorable to the men. The naive outpourings, and the many criticisms obtained to questions II, VIII, and IX are a further indication of honesty.

The fact that the prepared interview fitted within the universe of a therapeutic interview, and came at a time when rapport was relatively good, is a further factor. A man will speak more frankly when the situation is well-defined than when he is not sure of himself, and ample effort was made to define the situation, besides calling on a form of flattery for assistance.

The argument that prison inmates are absolutely not to be trusted when lying will protect them may be true. Mere purposeless lying is psychopathic, however, and probably is almost as common among free men as among incarcerated men.

While the interview technique may appear to be cumbersome, depending greatly on the examiner, it appears to have certain advantages.

1. Coming within the universe of another interview, it can be started, if at all, when rapport is well-established.

2. The introduction to the interview can be varied to suit the interviewee's mood.

3. While each statement is read to the interviewee, it may be further interpreted or elaborated.

4. When answers are diverse, or ambiguous, various supplementary questions can be asked. The situation is analogous to an individual intelligence test item, where the examiner can press the point, but must not in any way suggest the answer.

5. While the response may be rambling, as given by the interviewee, the written response may be a few words which most exactly tell what the interviewee means.

6. If the more innocuous questions are asked first, and the more crucial ones later on, the interview within interview rapport becomes better established, and more candid replies will be obtained.

7. It may be valuable to repeat the various questions after the interview is over to see if further additions will be made.

#### CONCLUSION

1. 50 percent of inmates admit they have been reasonably happy in prison.

2. Unhappiness in prison is due mostly to thoughts of family.

3. Inmates asserted their families were first on their minds, rehabilitation, remorse and various personal losses following in that order.

4. Inmates feel that 34 percent of fellow inmates benefitted from incarceration.

5. 60 percent of the inmates felt that they personally had benefitted from incarceration.

6. 64 percent of the men stated that some one had helped them to understand themselves.

7. Only 14 percent of the men stated they had learned a worth-while vocational skill, but 16 percent stated that they had learned to live within their means, which they felt was definitely worth-while.

8. 38 percent of the men felt that more could have been done for them, 62 percent feeling that all had been done that could have been done.

9. 56 percent of the men refused to answer a question about needed changes in the prison, but the 22 men who did answer gave 48 separate responses. Psychological and psychiatric assistance came first, with vocational training, routine, architecture, classification and segregation in the order stated as needed changes.

10. 36 percent of men stated nothing had bothered or annoyed them. The other 32 men mentioned 45 different kinds of complaints. The institution and its personnel were first, other inmates second, confinement third.

11. 74 percent of men believe they will get along very well on release, with 26 percent being doubtful.

12. The chief stated cause of crime was need for money; next, drink; next, foolishness; and lastly, environment.