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THE USE OF PROGRESS REPORTS IN PRISON

Jess Spirer

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While in State work Dr. Spirer was impressed by therapists' disinclination to find information about inmates' prison life from the observations of non-professional workers.—EDITOR.

It is a truism in modern penology that those prisons which have efficiently functioning classification clinics have no "forgotten men" within their walls, for systematic classification ensures the periodic review of all inmate's cases by the clinic staff. And classification procedures wherever given a fair trial have so thoroughly proved their worth to inmates and administration alike that it seems hardly necessary to argue in their behalf.

In this paper we are concerned only with one of the tools which makes possible the efficient operation of the classification system: the progress report.

It is self evident that a classification system can function effectively only where there is wholehearted cooperation among all of the personnel of an institution. It is equally evident that reliable information in abundance is a *sine qua non* if classification is to be meaningful; for how can one seriously contemplate a treatment or rehabilitation program for an inmate about whom he knows little or nothing? The discerning prison administrator sees the necessity of providing for the free and frank flow of information among all of his personnel. The progress report is one of the channels through which this goal can be attained.

One can readily understand that if a classification system is to be more than a matter of going through motions, provision must be made for relatively frequent check-ups which help to determine whether or not individualized programs are properly fitted to the needs of the respective inmates. It has been our experience that these check-ups can be facilitated by means of a questionnaire which is completed by all members of the prison staff, both custodial and non-custodial, who supervise or have frequent contact with the particular inmate whose case is to be considered for reclassification. This questionnaire should be simple in design, made up of not more than seven

or eight questions touching on specific spheres of adjustment, and should be so worded that the answers will contain at least as much fact as opinion.

At the Western Pennsylvania State Penitentiary these questionnaires are sent to members of the prison staff by the Department of Case Work. A member of this Department contacts each new employee, explaining the purpose of the report to him and indicating the kind of information desired. Informants are subsequently interviewed personally when the information they submit is incomplete or raises questions which require further explanation. It has been found that some informants are unable to furnish complete reports without assistance. The following reports describe the same inmate but were submitted by different supervisors. The first report reads: "Inmate does not like his job. Does not complain, but is hardly satisfactory." This informant was interviewed for the purpose of obtaining further information which he had but evidently did not know how to express. The second report on this inmate, written by a highly intelligent officer, runs thus:

This inmate, when told that his work is not right, immediately has an alibi and invariably the poorest specimen of alibi that could be offered. He consistently tries to get the officer into a conversation, apparently trying to win his way into the officer's confidence. He has been running with _____, who has a poor reputation. His associates seem to be the scum of the prison.

We are constrained to suggest a word of caution regarding the use of progress reports. In the first place, it is imperative that the case worker evaluate his informant to discover what his pet biases or emotional sets are. Some supervisors see every inmate as a sex pervert; others, probably hoping to gain status in the eyes of the inmate body, write glowing reports indiscriminately about all men. At times one encounters officers who are strongly prejudiced toward certain religious or racial groups, and this fact is consistently reflected in their statements; others may resent physical peculiarities or certain conduct abnormalities. The point is, of course, that it is as necessary to know the informant as the inmate.

Furthermore, it is essential that the case worker have thorough knowledge of the institution in which he is employed. He should be familiar with the physical plant, know all of the personnel, and be well aware of administrative policies and procedures. He must have a clear picture of physical and psychological conditions under which inmates live. This general background of information provides an invaluable screen through which all reports are almost unconsciously sifted, and gives meaning to the data received from informants.

Finally, it goes without saying that it is impossible to interpret progress reports with any degree of accuracy unless the

case worker has intimate knowledge of the inmate's life history and personality. Two reports may be identical in content, but when viewed from the standpoint of the background and make-up of the two inmates concerned they may have entirely different meanings.

Progress reports can furnish answers to many questions in which the case worker and other institutional officials are interested:

How Adequately Is the Inmate Adjusting to Institutional Life?

By this question we do not wish to imply that we are concerned only with superficial compliance to institutional rules. Rather, the case worker is interested in knowing how fully and how sincerely the inmate is attempting to participate in the various programs the institution makes available to him. Compliance cannot be taken as a measure of adjustment, for of two inmates who have clear conduct records, one may be earnestly making an effort to adjust and the other may be continually disgruntled and complaining, grudgingly cooperative. Thus, while official records may show no difference in behavior, progress reports bring such differences into clear relief, making it possible to interpret the compliance, and to determine the motivation underlying it.

Is a Job Change Indicated for an Inmate?

Not infrequently an inmate may appear to be a behavior problem simply because he has been placed at a job for which he is either intellectually or temperamentally unsuited. The classification clinic can render valuable service to both the inmate and the institution by deciding whether a job change is indicated. In one case a supervisor reported: "He can follow directions but has practically no initiative. Tends to be careless in his work." In time this inmate was transferred from hospital to kitchen work. It was deemed advisable to check his adjustment after the move, and the first progress report received from the new supervisor contained the following statements:

"When this inmate first came on the job, he was uncooperative, lacked initiative and seemed to be just on the verge of getting into trouble, although he did not do anything serious enough to warrant a report. About six weeks later he suddenly became cooperative and cheerful, learned to smile, began to look for things to do and asked for extra work."

Subsequent reports have confirmed the trend noted above, and initial maladjustment, which seems to have been related to his employment, is no longer in evidence.

Depth of Anti-Social Feeling

The case worker is interested in knowing the extent to which an inmate has identified himself with anti-social ideals. How thoroughly is the inmate habituated to crime; does he consciously rebel against conformity? The answer to these questions is often indicated by two facts: first, the nature of the inmate's associates in the institution and the degree to which he has identified himself with them; and, second, by the sincerity with which the inmate accepts or rejects the authority of the prison itself. Thus, the report on the following inmate who was sentenced to prison for a murder arising out of an acute emotional situation seems to indicate that he is trying to get along in prison, and at the same time has a sense of responsibility for the maintenance of safety and order:

Inmate is very neat and clean about his person as well as his work. Although he is apparently well liked and seems to have a lot of friends, he prefers to be alone and can usually be found in his cell or in the supply room of the Dining Room. He is very courteous to all officers and quite diplomatic with the inmates working with him. He hates the degenerate element and will not tolerate it around him. He does not come and tell petty offenses that the other men pull, but if he thinks that anything may have serious results, he reports it immediately. Not long ago he discovered a rope concealed in the rafters of the supply room and told me about it right away.

It must be pointed out here that all overt compliance cannot be taken as a sign of social responsibility or as an indicator of rehabilitation. Too often the prison "stool pigeon" who tries to prove to the administration that he is now an advocate of righteous conduct is deliberately following this course to further his own ends. The carrying of tales is suggestive of a ruthless disposition, and the inmate usually shows little appreciation of what he is doing. He informs on others not because he honestly believes that in doing so he is rendering a true service to prison authorities, but purely because he hopes thereby to gain official favor. The observant supervisor soon becomes aware of this underlying motive, as may be noted in the following progress report: "Inmate does his work very well but is not liked by officers or inmates. Is constantly running to officers, reporting infractions of rules by other men, hoping to gain our favor. We have found him to be dishonest, unreliable and undependable. I think he 'stools' on others hoping that we will leave him alone." In the latter case, conformity, in the light of the progress report, is actually diagnostic of antisociality.

Diagnosis of Psychopathy

Progress reports are especially helpful in diagnosing certain mental abnormalities, especially psychopathic personality.

Some inmates, particularly the psychopaths, seem to be impervious to institutionalization. They have no appreciation of why they were sent to prison and their conduct in the institution is usually a continuation of the anti-social activities which characterized their behavior on the outside. In these cases, the progress reports frequently show sporadic improvement followed by involvement in difficulties. At no time is there a steady, consistent improvement in behavior, and except for occasional spurts the inmate is usually in trouble for infractions of the rules. In a case of this type, the first progress report, written a short time after commitment, included the following statements:

This inmate bears a lot of watching when there is anything edible around. Although he has been caught stealing fruit and desserts only two or three times, I am certain that he has been guilty much more often. If he makes up his mind he can turn out excellent work, and quickly. On the other hand, if he is not in the right humor he just passes up things and messes up more. He apparently holds no grudge over a reprimand or a correction for on different occasions I have had to order him to go over his work or reprimanded him for doing poor work and five minutes later he will come around smiling and talking as though nothing had happened.

Repeated check-ups have produced the same kind of reports, except that over a period of years the inmate has added gambling and sexual perversion to his list of activities.

Pre-Psychotics and Psychotics

Another valuable feature of periodic progress reports is that they make it possible to spot psychotics who can be isolated at once. Recently, an officer in reporting on an inmate wrote: "This fellow seems queer. He is a regular mule for work. Always keeps his work done right up to the minute. He is rather melancholy, has nothing to do with anyone. Just stands around. Never plays games, doesn't even talk to other men. In his cell he reads nothing but the Bible. He never addresses anyone unless they first speak to him." Psychiatric examination made upon receipt of the above report established the existence of a psychosis with the result that the inmate was soon transferred to a hospital for the insane to receive treatment.

It is especially helpful to have progress reports in the cases of men who displayed abnormalities prior to commitment. It is not unusual to receive a letter from a sentencing judge to the effect that the man whom he has sentenced impressed him as being "queer" or "peculiar." The judge usually requests the institution to decide whether or not the man should be transferred to a hospital for the criminally insane, a responsibility which the court should have assumed at the time of trial. Such a request was sent to the Penitentiary regarding an in-

mate who had killed his wife when he learned she had been unfaithful to him. The first progress report read in part:

This prisoner acts mighty strange at times. He lies on his back in the potato cellar where he works, raises his legs in the air, and pretends that he is shooting 'the son of a bitch who seduced my wife.' He makes gestures with his hands as though firing a revolver. He cannot sleep at night because he is upset about his crime. As a result he frequently falls asleep while on the job. Is unkempt about his person. Other men tease him; they stop him and have him demonstrate how he is going to shoot his wife's lover or how he is going to pull a telephone pole out of the ground and hit him over the head.

Subsequent reports received from medical and custodial officers indicated improvement in his mental condition and the last report which has been received states that "This inmate is doing excellent work. He cleans up after work, is neat, courteous and very alert in his conversations. Spends most of his spare time with fellow workers." The progress reports in this case will be especially important when the time comes to consider the inmate for release on parole and will also provide the supervising parole agent with data which should aid him in understanding and guiding the inmate on parole.

Adjustment After Discipline

The clinician is always interested in knowing what effect punishment has had upon an inmate. Has the man become embittered, cooperative, brooding, aggressive, repentant? As a matter of routine, the Senior Psychologist at the Western State Penitentiary interviews every inmate who is punished. This is done for at least two reasons: first, to interpret the punishment to the prisoner; second, to determine how he has reacted to punishment. Progress reports obtained a short time after release from isolation give valuable information on the question of adjustment and provide a check on data obtained by the psychologist from the inmate. The following report is a rather good description of such adjustment:

When this man first came to work in this shop he was apparently misled into thinking that he could work where and when he pleased. He was sarcastic and careless. He finally refused outright to do certain kinds of work. He was reported and spent a week in the Screen Cell. When he came out of the Screen Cell he came back to work in the shop. From then on he has been one of the most efficient workers I have. He is always neat and clean about himself and his work and is mannerly to officers.

Reliability of Inmate as Informant

One need not labor the point that talk is cheap and that good intentions expressed by an inmate during interviews with the case worker are not always carried over into behavior. A prisoner may convincingly protest that he has thoroughly reformed, and since the psychologist or psychiatrist cannot

peer into the mind to learn whether or not the man lies, his actions in prison should be carefully observed to determine whether he practices what he preaches. An officer's statement to the effect that "This inmate grumbles all the time, complaining that he is being overworked; he thinks he is being imposed upon. He associates with the worst element in the place" should be at least a warning to the case worker that the reformation of which the prisoner has been boasting needs further investigation. It is possible, of course, that the officer submitting the report has erred, but it has often been found that improvement and insight verbalized by offenders have not, in fact, been apparent to officials in a position to observe the offender's behavior at close range.

We have suggested only a few ways in which progress reports can be put to good use. There are many more. A simple statement from an officer that "Joe feels very much ashamed of the crime he committed and wants to make reparations" suggests that one is not dealing with a hardened, hopeless case. Or a sentence, "This inmate began to improve as soon as he knew his case was going to be considered for parole," sometimes gives meaning to a sudden change in conduct which has almost miraculously made its appearance.

Finally, over and beyond these specific uses, there is an extremely important purpose the progress report may serve. In most prisons today, official records relating to an inmate are entirely negative in character. That is to say, in too many institutions the official records describe and are concerned only with instances of misconduct and maladjustment, utterly disregarding positive efforts toward adjustment which appear nowhere in the dockets. It is as though one were interested only in unfavorable qualities and in the bad men do. Certainly, if we are to be fair and just when evaluating any given inmate, we should have as part of his official record a clear picture of the initiative he has displayed toward rehabilitation. The progress report makes this possible and is significant in scientific prison work for this, if for no other reason.
