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INTERVIEWING PRISON INMATES

Robert C. Sorensen

Professor Sorensen is a Sociologist on the Faculty of Law in the State University of Nebraska. He was formerly Director of the Pre-legal Division of the John Marshall Law School in Chicago. During the summer of 1948 he was a member of the Northwestern University faculty. He is associated with several interview research projects and during the present summer is employed on a special project by International Public Opinion Research, Inc.—EDITOR.

In a study comparing the administration of justice in counties employing and not employing a public defender, the writer has found it necessary to obtain the opinions of over two hundred prison inmates. This research, undertaken by the newly formed legislative laboratory of the University of Nebraska College of Law, is concerned with the reactions of people who have been variously represented by a public defender, their own lawyer and court appointed counsel. Other respondents had elected to plead guilty without benefit of counsel.

Little has been written on the technical problems encountered in interviewing the prison inmate.¹ Usually, the opinions and sentiments of the prisoner are elicited pretty much for a single purpose: to discover what a man has to say of his *violation of the law and of his incarceration*. This has allowed a latitude to the inmate-respondent usually resulting, I suspect, in what he wants to say overshadowing what he really feels in the content of his response.

Information from the inmate, like his counterpart who escaped prison sentence but who also experienced the courtroom situation, is absolutely worthless unless we know he is telling us what he actually believes. While his present status is naturally tied up with the circumstances of his incarceration, we endeavored to distinguish in his reactions between the fact that he was imprisoned and the manner in which he was represented in court. We did not solicit his sentiments because we want to discover what an inmate is in the habit of saying anymore than a public opinion pollster should want to elicit what a doctor might feel he MUST say with reference to the Truman health plan.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN PURSUIT OF THIS GOAL

1. The vast majority of inmates are convinced that they need not be in prison. Once incarcerated, the individual is easily persuaded that had the nature of his defense been different, had the court been more sympathetic to his welfare, had the state been more generous, had the

1. A stimulating interview procedure with regard to therapy is proposed by MARSHALL C. GRECO, *Socioanalysis: A New Approach to Criminology*, AMER. J. SOCIOLOGY, January 1948, 53, No. 4: 289.

pressures of such diverse and "unfair" forces as politics and public opinion not been operating, he would be a free man. Of all the varying types of people polled, I believe that the prisoner has the greatest inclination to blame some other thing or person for his present position. It is therefore very difficult to obtain an adequate evaluation from a prisoner regarding the nature of his defense when he believes that he need not be undergoing a prison experience—the situation in which the interview takes place.

2. The admission of researchers within penitentiary walls is controlled by management; without such admission there is no access. The prisoner therefore wonders what relationship exists between warden and interviewer. He feels no sure guarantee that what he has to say will not be communicated to the warden, the pardon and parole board, law enforcement officials or the courts. Knowing the warden from a perspective where he is granted few favors and experiences constant discipline, the inmate questions the purpose of the warden's allowing him respite from the usual grind for the unique experience of talking with an outsider. It is the interviewer's announced university affiliation, his expression of disdain for the "squealer," his request for the respondent's cooperation in a scientific effort to better the administration of justice that help break down this reserve.

3. The manner in which the presence of the interviewer is announced to the respondent will affect (to an unknown degree) what he will say even before he and the interviewer meet. A guard carries a call slip to the desired respondent wherever he may be. Suggestions should be made to these guards as to how best to approach the respondent. The prisoner knows that he is not required to speak to anyone. A guard might suggest that the prisoner "should or else" which would damage the interview situation if the prisoner chose to comply, or the guard might by his manner suggest a "don't bother, I'm just delivering this slip to you" attitude.

If any informal social controls are operating at the moment to deprive him of gains he would otherwise make—playing cards or satisfying the request of a shop supervisor—he might not bother to see the interviewer. Having no idea of what is going to occur, or hearing only what others have to say about the interviewer may minimize his interest. On the other hand, he may choose to indulge himself with any deviation from the old routine. Thus he may prolong the interview experience without caring whether the researcher obtains what he is after. The inmate's personality—an unknown quality in this discussion—and the form and content of the announcement determine his initial response to the interview

situation. With so much elapsing between notification and confrontation of the inmate-respondent, the interviewer faces an herculean task in developing interview techniques adequate for his needs.

4. A few of the inmates, in their interviews, have expressed concern about what fellow inmates and prison guards may believe they are saying to the interviewer. They wonder whether or not they will be treated any differently because they consented to talk to an interviewer. And, of course, there is always the question of whether or not anything said will get back to the guards or fellow inmates. The nature of the social controls capable of exertion in the prison situation emphasizes to a degree greater than almost any other public opinion polling situation, the need for successful assurance of confidence.

5. Finally, the inmate is conscious enough of his differences from the non-criminal world that he is likely to interpret comments and questions of an interviewer as offering help or suggesting blame. The interviewer in this project is, of course, interested in neither and finds it imperative to acquaint the respondent with his role as a sympathetic listener whose only help might be toward improving the administration of justice in the future.

The writer is of the opinion that the prison inmate offers a challenging interview situation which has been neglected by researchers and pollsters. There are such tasks as painstakingly analyzing the "don't knows," separating the unconscious fictional responses from the conscious ones, and controlling the intervention of the inmate's specialized and freedom-lacking environment all of which arise out of the five problems elaborated above. The lawyer and the researcher should recognize, however, that these are not problems unique to the prison inmate; they do exist as a challenge to reliability in all interview situations where they possess great influence but often attract less notice.