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# THE SELECTION OF PRISON GUARDS\*

RICHARD N. DOWNEY AND E. I. SIGNORI

Mr. Downey has had several years of experience as a personnel and research psychologist in business and industry. After completing the required probationary period as a prison guard he took an M.A. in psychology at the University of British Columbia. In 1954 he was appointed prison psychologist at Oakalla prison farm where he is currently planning further projects on the assessment and rating of prison guards.

Dr. Signori is associate professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia. During the war was engaged in aircrew personnel selection research with the R.C.A.F. In 1952 he served on the University screening committee set up to deal with the release of Doukhobor prisoners from B. C. Penitentiary and in 1953 took part in the Forums held at Oakalla Prison Farm on behalf of drug addicts. He is currently a member of several professional advisory committees on the Rehabilitation, Treatment and Prevention of Narcotic Addiction—EDITOR.

## INTRODUCTION

Only a few studies have been published that are concerned with the problem of the scientific selection of prison guards. Lundberg (1) in his survey concluded that "methods of selection of the Prison Guard are generally loose and include little experimental study of validity. Of the some 13,000 guards in this country it is safe to say that over three-fourths have been selected by unscientific methods . . ." Up to 1946 only two states, Michigan and New Jersey, regularly used a standardized mental test in selecting guards. An earlier study by Hubbard (2) was limited to measuring skills for specific technical jobs such as "painter" and so on, rather than the selection of guard applicants. Moreover, so far as one can discover, there are no reported attempts to investigate the problem of prison guard selection in terms of interest and personality objective testing procedures. Material pertaining to interest and personality is generally gathered by subjective interview methods and as such is subject to all of the inaccuracies that inhere in such methods.

## PROBLEM

The present report concerns an objective study on prison guard selection that was conducted at Oakalla Prison Farm 1954-1956. The project involved the administration of four objective ability, interest and personality tests viz., the Wesman Personnel Classification Test (3), Kuder Prefer-

\* The authors are obliged to Warden H. Christie and Deputy Warden D. Clark for their cooperation and assistance in this study.

Digits in parentheses refer to the bibliography.

ence Record-Vocational (4), Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (5), and the Manson Evaluation (6), to a sample of 100 employed guards who were subsequently given forced-distribution ratings (7) by prison authorities on overall job proficiency. A comparison of test scores was then made between the 27 percent in the tails of the distribution who received the extreme 'good' and 'poor' job performance ratings.

## RESULTS

The results of the study showed that 14 out of an aggregate of 38 measurement variables discriminated between the good and poor rated prison officer. The significant scales with the pertinent statistical details are shown in Table I.

A qualitative description of these results suggests that the good officer group as compared to the poor officer group is characterized by: a better verbal ability, higher social service interests and lower clerical and computational interests. In terms of personality characteristics those in the good officer group are more self-confident and less critical and intolerant of others; manifest more dominance in face-to-face situations and are less inclined to withdraw from social contacts; are subject to less worry and depression and manifest fewer mood swings; have a broader pattern of interests and a better ability to concentrate, which leads to more frequent completion of important social objectives such as education, work mastery, etc., than those in the poor officer category. Generally speaking these qualities suggest a more mature and emotionally stable adjustment on the

TABLE I

COMPARISON OF GOOD AND POOR RATED OFFICERS IN TERMS OF MEAN SCORES, STANDARD DEVIATION, DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEANS AND S.D.'S AND BISERIAL COEFFICIENTS (SIGNIFICANT SCALES ONLY)

Tests	N = 27 Good Officers		N = 27 Poor Officers		Difference between		Biserial Correl. <sup>a*</sup>
	1. Mean	2. S.D.	3. Mean	4. S. D.	1 and 3	2 and 4	
<b>Personnel Classification Test</b>							
Verbal Scale	19.62	4.38	12.40	6.35	7.22'	-1.52	.46'
Total Score	26.74	6.12	18.22	8.98	8.52'	-2.86	.41'
<b>Kuder</b>							
Computational	24.74	7.35	28.74	6.99	-4.00"	.36	-.20
Social Service	58.88	8.54	40.81	17.61	18.07'	-9.07'	.49'
Clerical	38.11	6.25	44.26	10.45	-6.15"	-4.20"	-.24"
<b>MMPI original scales</b>							
F# Validity scale	2.30	1.48	3.80	2.75	-1.50"	-1.27'	-.27"
D Depression	48.40	7.45	55.59	9.19	-7.19'	-1.74	-.30'
Pt Psychasthenia	47.27	7.24	52.90	9.08	-5.63"	-1.84	-.27"
<b>MMPI additional scales</b>							
Si Social introversion	45.81	6.12	51.26	9.12	-5.45"	-3.00	-.30'
Ho Hostility	45.64	10.14	51.85	9.46	-6.21"	.68	-.26"
Do Dominance	18.81	2.59	16.25	2.28	2.56'	.31	.38'
<b>Manson Evaluation</b>							
DF Depressive	1.55	1.17	2.40	1.79	-.85"	-.62"	-.23"
IN Incompleteness	4.07	1.71	5.40	2.30	-1.33"	-.59	-.26"
Total Score	11.70	5.84	16.44	8.48	-4.74"	-2.64	-.26"

\* Reference (8).

' < .01%

" < .05%

(-) minus in difference columns indicates difference in favor of poor officers.

part of those officers who received the good performance ratings.

#### DISCUSSION

Although the obtained correlation coefficients are not as high as one might desire in a test validation study, nevertheless it is suggested by a 'cut-off score analysis' that certain of the tests might be readily applied to strengthen present selection procedure. Thus, for example, if a cut-off score of 13 on PCT (verbal) and a cut-off score of 45 on the Kuder Social Service Scales had been used in the present sample at the time of hiring, 93 percent of the poor rated group and only 8 percent of the good rated group would have been eliminated. Moreover, it should be noted that the members of the sample used in this study had already been partially screened and they had met the physical fitness requirements for employment, had undergone a five-day orientation course in basic training and had had at least three and in most cases over six months of on-the-job experience. Thus, it would seem that on a group of raw applicant per-

sonnel the selective power of the tests could be presumed to rise. If this should prove to be the case and if the tests were used on applicant personnel, prison authorities might be spared some of the costs involved in having personnel take a part of the training program before those who are unsuited for this type of employment can be identified.

Moreover, it is anticipated that further improvements in studies on prison guard selection will take place in regard to the validation criterion. Although for the present it has been necessary to rely on standard gross rating procedures in setting up a criterion, it seems that the application of Flannagan's critical incident technique (9, 10) might conceivably provide a more objective and refined basis for evaluating guard performance. The comparatively isolated and confined operations of a prison seem to provide an ideal setting in which it would be possible to collate the information on incidents pertaining to guard performance that might be easily obtained from prisoners, guard supervisors and prison guards themselves.

With this development one might reasonably expect a more discriminating predictive efficiency of psychometric testing procedures such as those that were employed in this study.

The increasing emphasis that contemporary psychology has been placing on interpersonal relations in the field of Psychotherapy points to the tremendous importance that attaches to the selection of the proper person to serve as a guard in prison settings. It is no accident, as this study affirms, that the good rated guards are less critical and intolerant of others and Signori (11), drawing from psychotherapeutic writings has described how the proper kinds of interpersonal reactions on the part of the teacher in the classroom might change pupils' personalities and improve their powers of critical thinking. There is no reason to suppose that similar principles might not be effectively utilized by prison guards in their reactions to prisoners. A quotation from Taft (12) by a New York state prisoner illustrates rather clearly what the practical consequences of the right kind of interpersonal relations between guard and prisoner might be:

"I have all respect for doctors, the social workers, teachers and other workers in the institution and I believe they do a good deal of good, but the greatest influence that can affect a man while in prison is his respect for someone on the prison staff whom he is under. I met such a man in Officer Blank of the Michigan State Prison. My great respect for him and the influence he exerted on me completely reformed my life and I feel that it will continue to exert its influence for my entire future."

#### SUMMARY

Fourteen psychometric scales of ability, interests and personality were found to differentiate

between prison officers who receive good and poor ratings according to the forced-distribution rating method. The good officer as compared to the poor officer was found to have higher verbal ability and social interest, lower clerical and computational interests and a pattern of personality characteristics which reflects a generally more mature and emotionally stable adjustment.

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