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Charles L. Hulin

Brendan A. Maher

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CHANGES IN ATTITUDES TOWARD LAW CONCOMITANT WITH IMPRISONMENT¹

CHARLES L. HULIN AND BRENDAN A. MAHER

Charles L. Hulin is enrolled as a student in the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University.

Brendan A. Maher is Associate Professor of Psychology in the Louisiana State University, since September, 1958. Prior to that time he was an undergraduate student in the University of Manchester, England and a graduate student at Ohio State University. He obtained practical experience with prisoners in England while he served as Psychologist at H. M. Prison, Wakefield, England. He was Assistant Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University during two years prior to September, 1958.—EDITOR.

Prison is an environment devised with the aim of achieving certain goals. Apart from the objectives of revenge, deterrence and preventive custody, an explicit purpose of incarceration is to reform the prisoner. Reformation implies that certain desired changes in the future behavior of the prisoner will occur. These include changes in the prisoner's attitudes toward the concepts of legality, justice, and toward the officials responsible for the administration or enforcement of legal codes. It is important to know whether changes like these are occurring in prisoners who have been officially deprived of their freedom by the authority of the state. For the only test of laws and procedure, and of administration of justice generally, is to be found in their effect upon people who have been dealt with by them. Indeed, a search for these effects and an attempt to describe them is logically a function of those who are engaged in the administration of the laws—criminal laws in the present instance. Nobody—judge, lawyer or other—regards his work as finished before he has seen how well it answers the purpose which it was designed to serve.

In view of this it is surprising that psychologists have given so little attention to the question how satisfactorily, if at all, our administration of justice appears to be affecting men and women in prison. It is encouraging, however, that the courts and the bar appear to be increasingly thoughtful in this regard. The study reported here represents an approach to the problem of investigating the effect of incarceration upon the

attitudes of prisoners. It may be suggestive, at least, to others who are interested in the same problem.

In a previous investigation of the relationship between prisoners' attitudes toward law and justice, and their attitudes toward parental discipline² it appeared possible that many prison inmates hold attitudes toward law and justice as a social ideal, which differ from their attitudes toward their own personal experiences with the lawyers, judges, witnesses, policemen and others who comprise the system. Thus, a prison subject could state "A judge is a very fine man," and "My trial was a farce," without appearing to recognize the lack of congruence of these two opinions.

Common observation suggests that this discrepancy of attitudes is not rare, and that the conditions leading to the acquisition of attitudes toward justice as an ideal (cultural tradition transmitted by way of education, fiction, the press, etc.) differ in impact from the conditions under which an individual gains first hand experience of the law. Two attitudes, which are to some degree independent of each other, may be expected to be included therefore, when a conglomerate attitude toward the law is measured. One attitude, or complex of attitudes, will refer to law in the abstract, and the other to concrete instances of its operation upon the particular individual. Inasmuch as imprisonment is intended to bring about changes in both attitudes, and as imprisonment represents a prolonged concrete ex-

¹The writers are indebted for the assistance and cooperation of Warden Joseph P. Ragen, Drs. Roy G. Barrick, and Neil Schoper, Mr. Wilson Meeks, and especially to Mr. Arthur V. Huffman.

²WATT, NORMAN & MAHER, BRENDAN. *Prisoners' Attitudes toward Home and the Judicial System*. J. CRIM. LAW, CRIMINOL., 1958, 49, 327-330.

Incomplete Sentences Blank

Complete these sentences to express *your real feelings*. Try to do every one. Be sure to make a complete sentence.

1. With women I am _____
2. Back home _____
3. Parents _____
4. My intelligence _____
5. Marriage _____
6. Justice _____
7. Childhood _____
8. The State's witness _____
9. My greatest fear _____
10. Most cops _____
11. My personality _____
12. A man's wife _____
13. The Law I broke _____
14. When I was a child _____
15. People treat me _____
16. My lawyers _____
17. A prisoner should be _____
18. All my life _____
19. My religion _____
20. Our laws _____
21. I regret _____
22. Other people _____
23. My father _____
24. Only a sucker _____
25. My sentence _____
26. I trust _____
27. My judge _____
28. A mother _____
29. The legal profession _____
30. I pray _____
31. The officer who arrested me _____
32. Punishment _____
33. I feel sad _____
34. If I could be someone else _____
35. Witnesses _____
36. I _____
37. Strict discipline for a child _____
38. Under certain circumstances crime _____
39. The happiest time _____

FIGURE 1

perience with the judicial system, a study of these attitudes in a prison group seems to offer some promise of insights into the psychological processes involved.

The investigation reported here was designed to elucidate (a) the relationship between expressed attitudes toward law and justice and expressed attitudes toward personal contact with the law, in a population of convicted prisoners; and (b) the effect of length of imprisonment upon this relationship.

METHOD

Subjects: The subjects were 126 inmates of a maximum-security, state penitentiary. As the attitude measurement involved verbal facility, S's (subjects) were selected from inmates scoring better than the 50 percentile level in the Army alpha test on admission.³ In order to obtain a heterogeneous distribution of S's with regard to type of offense, the sample was subdivided into four crime-type groups. The groups were: murder, 35; violent crimes, (intent to murder, assault and battery, armed robbery) 26; sex offenders, (rape, incest, crime against child, etc.) 33; intellectual, (fraud, forgery, confidence game, embezzlement), 32. Selection, within the limits described above, was conducted by including all admissions starting with the prisoner admitted most recently and working retroactively until all four crime groups had reached a minimum total of 25 S's in each. Population data available included length of time already served, and chronological age.

Attitude Scale: Attitudes were measured by scores derived from a sentence completion test. This is a modification of the Rotter Incomplete Sentences Blank⁴ to include stems relating to the attitudes under scrutiny. The stems used in this study are presented in Figure 1. Each response was classified as being pertinent to abstract justice, concrete experience, or irrelevant. Each pertinent response was scored on a fivepoint scale of positive-negative polarity, 5 points being scored for a response expressing a highly favorable attitude, 1 point being assigned to a highly negative attitude, intermediate responses being scored appropriately. The scoring method is described in detail elsewhere by Watt and Maher.⁵ Interscorer reliability was calculated, using the mean attitude scores from a sample of 30 protocols and two scorers. A reliability coefficient of +0.93 was obtained. The scores of one of these judges was used in the analysis of the total population in the study.

Administration: Subjects were tested in groups of approximately 20, mixed as to crime classification. Composition of the groups was determined by the penitentiary authorities on the basis of work schedule of the S's. The tests were completed

³ Army Alpha Scores were not available for all S's. In some cases the AGCT had been administered. The same cutting percentile rank was used to select these.

⁴ ROTTER, JULIAN B. & RAFFERTY, JANET E. THE ROTTER INCOMPLETE SENTENCES BLANK MANUAL. New York: The Psychological Corp., 1950.

⁵ Op. cit.

TABLE I
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ATTITUDES TOWARDS ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE JUSTICE, AGE INTELLIGENCE, AND TIME SERVED IN A PRISON POPULATION

	Age	Time served	Army Alpha	Concrete
Abstract.....	.115	-.504**	.214*	.541**
Concrete.....	.103	-.655**	.212*	xxx
N.....	126	126	98	126

** P. = .01.

* P. = .05.

TABLE II
AGE, INTELLIGENCE, LENGTH OF SENTENCE, AND ATTITUDE SCORES OF ALL GROUPS

Group	Murder	Violent	Sex offenders	"Intellectual"
N.....	35	26	33	32
Abstract Score.....	2.62	2.68	2.71	2.71
Concrete Score.....	2.60	2.56	2.51	2.75
Age (yrs.).....	35.54	30.12	35.88	33.56
Months served.....	26.08	31.65	24.54	19.81
A.A. score (N. par- enthetically).....	111.80 (25)	106.12 (24)	103.58 (26)	125.87 (23)

anonymously, the S being requested to place his prison number on the blank with the assurance that they would be kept by the E (Experimenter) and not made available to the authorities. Any S who wished to withdraw from the group was permitted to do so. A total of 14 men did decline to respond, and withdrew. Comparison of the characteristics of this group on the known variables indicated no differences between it and the responding S's. Actual administration of the test was carried out in a schoolroom. It was preceded by an explanation that the co-operation of the group was being sought for research purposes and no privilege or penalty would be involved for the S's.

RESULTS

The correlations between the two attitudinal scores and other variables are reported in Table I. Differences in mean scores on the two attitudes between the four crime groups were compared by Student's *t* test.⁶ These differences were found to

⁶ Differences between the mean scores of two groups in an experiment may be tested for significance (i.e. improbability of occurring by chance) in several ways.

be statistically insignificant and are regarded as due to the operation of other random factors. Age and intelligence data for these groups are given in Table II.

As both attitudes appear to shift towards the negative pole of the scale with increasing length of time in prison, the high degree of correlation between them requires evaluation with the imprisonment factor held constant. A partial correlation was computed on this basis, and found to be +0.32. A similar computation holding intelligence constant produced a partial correlation of +.52.

DISCUSSION

Attitudes towards the law, in both the sense of the law's abstract social function and its concrete manifestations appear to become increasingly negative or hostile as imprisonment is prolonged. In the process the distinction which might exist between these two attitudes appears to become blurred, the degree of independence of the attitudes being significantly greater at the outset of imprisonment than it is as the sentence progresses. Trends in the data also suggest that the greater increase in hostility occurs in respect of the abstract attitude, although the difference between the two correlations just fails to reach statistical significance.

While the foregoing appears to be a simple summary of the implications of the data analysis in this investigation, several problems need mention. It is possible that imprisonment has the effect of generating diffuse hostility towards society, and that a similar analysis of, for example, changes in political attitude would produce a parallel conclusion. Consequently, it is impossible, at this point, to assume that imprisonment has some particular effect only upon the attitudes studied here. A second problem relates to the measuring instrument. Prisoners just entering on a term in the penitentiary may be more cautious in expressing opinions than those who have been in prison for some time. Thus the apparent increase in hostility may be, at least in part, a reflection of a decline in defensiveness. Without an independent

One of the most common is Student's *t* test, first reported in 1908 and described in any standard text book of statistics. A simple exposition is available in STATISTICAL PROCEDURES AND THEIR MATHEMATICAL BASES, by C. C. PETERS AND W. R. VAN VOORHIS, McGraw-Hill, 1940.

measure of defensiveness its influence is difficult to isolate. Nor should it be overlooked that the time spent in prison may be accompanied by some "incubation" of hostility, unrelated to the prison experience itself. A similar study of, for example, offenders sentenced to be fined, but not imprisoned, might clarify the possibility that sheer time since conviction is related to increase in hostility.

It should be noted that the data contain no

evidence of hostility directed specifically at the prison environment. No items relevant to this appeared in the sentence completion blank, as it seemed probable that their inclusion would increase any suspicions on the part of the respondents, and diminish co-operation.

Finally, the selectiveness of the sample with regard to intelligence and crime limits the population to which generalization may be made.