

1967

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### Recommended Citation

Lawrence E. Hazelrigg, Examination of the Accuracy and Relevance of Staff Perceptions of the Inmate in the Correctional Institution, 58 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 204 (1967)

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## AN EXAMINATION OF THE ACCURACY AND RELEVANCE OF STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF THE INMATE IN THE CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION\*

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This paper reports the results of an exploratory study of staff perceptions of the inmate: his loyalty to the "inmate system", his adherence to criminal value orientations, and his identification with criminal associates. Comparative data from staff evaluations of inmates and the results of inmate self-reporting instruments suggest that staff perceptions may be largely governed by an unfavorable stereotyped image of Inmate, at least for the particular institution used in this study. As compared with the inmate self-reporting inventory data, both custody and treatment personnel over-estimated the inmate subjects on all three trait scales. Furthermore, this discrepancy was far more pronounced for those inmates whose responses to the self-reporting instrument inferred "low" scores on the traits than for those who were scored as "high".

This paper presents an exploration of the relevance and accuracy of staff perceptions of the incarcerated offender in terms of three response-inferred traits: "inmate loyalty", "criminality", and "criminal identification". The body of literature relevant to this problem is somewhat limited. The majority of studies in what might be called the sociology of correctional processes have been mainly concerned with the inmate membership group—its values and normative system, its leadership patterns and role types, situational deprivations, its amenability to rehabilitation or resocialization—and not with the staff as a complementary membership group and the interactive context which the two groups generate. This is understandable, since the problem of crime is defined by society in terms of the criminal, and the problem of correction in terms of the captured and encapsulated inmate.

The inmate is not the only critical factor in the rehabilitative process; nor is he in the more complex process of resocialization. An understanding of the *complete* interpersonal context in which strategies of therapeutic intervention are cast is critical to the success of those strategies, and this context necessarily includes the strategists and tacticians of change as well as the inmates.

The basic proposition of the present study is that staff perceptions of the inmate are somewhat

stereotyped perceptions, and that to the extent perceptions of "other" influence one's interactions with "other," attempts by the staff member to induce behavioral change in the deviant are often counteracted. The staff member often interacts with a stereotyped *persona*, Inmate, rather than with the individual behind the mask.

### STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF THE INMATE

The study proceeded in two phases, each comprising a slightly different approach to the problem. First, a general survey of upper-echelon correctional administrators and their perceptions of the inmate on scaled tests of the three traits was conducted, and these perceptions were compared with the results obtained by Glaser in identical scaled tests of a sample of inmates.<sup>1</sup> Second, the staff members of a youthful offender institution were asked to evaluate a sample of that institution's inmates on the three trait scales, and these perceived profiles were compared with the actual profiles obtained by direct testing of the inmate sample.

The scales of measurement, borrowed from Glaser, employ the Guttman technique of ordinal scaling and provide relevant response-inferred trait variables.<sup>2</sup> The inmate loyalty scale, hereafter denoted the IL scale, is a measure of the inmate's normative solidarity with his membership group. The scalar items, in increasing order

\* The author is grateful to Professor Daniel Glaser of the University of Illinois for his valued criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper. Responsibility for any errors and oversights must rest with the author, however.

<sup>1</sup> GLASER, *THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A PRISON AND PAROLE SYSTEM* (1964).

<sup>2</sup> GLASER, Appendix E.

of inferred loyalty or solidarity and with the loyal responses indicated by plus signs, are:

1. If I'm on a prison work crew digging ditches and I enjoy working hard because I'm feeling pretty good, but the other inmates complain that I'm digging my part faster than anybody else, and that the officer will start rushing them to keep up with me, I would:

+ 1. Slow down so as not to get ahead of them.

+ 2. Slow down a little so as not to get too far ahead.

\_\_\_3. Work as hard as before.

\_\_\_4. Work harder than before.

2. I would let myself be punished by institutional officials for something I didn't do:

+ 1. Only to protect a close friend.

+ 2. To protect inmates that I know well.

+ 3. To protect any inmate at all.

\_\_\_4. Never.

3. If I had a good friend in here who told me he had a five-dollar bill smuggled to him during a visit, and he thought he was going to be frisked, so he wanted me to hold it for him, I would:

+ 1. Certainly hold it for him.

+ 2. Probably hold it for him.

\_\_\_3. Probably refuse to hold it for him.

\_\_\_4. Certainly refuse to hold it for him.

4. If two inmates with long sentences wanted to escape and could escape if I smuggled them something from my work assignment, but I'd lose at least a year of good time if got caught helping them this way, I would:

+ 1. Help them even if I knew that after they escaped the officials would be able to prove I helped them.

+ 2. Only help them if I thought I had a pretty good chance of getting away with it.

\_\_\_3. Only help them if I were sure I could not possibly get caught for it.

\_\_\_4. Not help them under any circumstances.

For purposes of gross classification, a loyal response to none or the first of the items was scored "low"; loyal responses to three of the four items including the fourth were scored "high"; and all other combinations were scored "medium".

The criminality scale (C scale) measures the

inmate's adherence to criminal value orientations. It consists of four items, each possessing four alternative response categories ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree":

1. It's all right to "get around" the law if you do not actually break it.

2. It is difficult to break the law and keep one's self-respect.

3. A man should always obey the law, no matter how much it stands in the way of his ambitions.

4. It's all right for a person to break the law if he doesn't get caught.

For gross scoring, the following combinations were used: agree or disagree with the first item, agree with the second and third, and disagree with the last ("low"); agree with the first and third items, and disagree with the second and fourth ("medium"); agree with the first item, disagree with the second and third, and agree or disagree with the fourth ("high").

The criminal identification scale (CI scale) infers the degree to which the inmate positively identifies with criminals on the basis of perceived similarity. The three items of this scale employ the same response categories used in the criminality scale:

1. People who have been in trouble with the law have the same sort of ideas about life that I have.

2. People who never break the law are a lot different from me.

3. People who have trouble with the law are more like me than people who don't have trouble with the law.

Scoring categories for the CI scale were: agree with none or the first of the items ("low"); agree with more than this ("high").

#### SURVEY OF UPPER-ECHELON ADMINISTRATORS

This phase relied on a survey questionnaire, incorporating the three trait scales, which was sent to the departmental director and one warden of each of the fifty state correctional systems, plus the District of Columbia and federal systems.<sup>3</sup> The eleven items of the scales were intermixed

<sup>3</sup> Wardens were selected as respondents primarily on the basis of inmate population; the warden of the adult male institution having the largest population became the representative of that correctional system. Exceptions to this included the federal system, from which six wardens were selected at random from the various adult male institutions and centers, and the wardens of three state-level institutions generally acclaimed as "progressive."

with nonrelevant items in an attempt to minimize the occurrence of response-set. Since the objective was to obtain the respondent's perception of the inmate with respect to these traits, the structure of each item was altered to a third-person plural approach ("Most inmates. . .").

The administrator's scaled response patterns are presented in Table 1, along with the actual response patterns obtained by Glaser in his comprehensive study.<sup>4</sup> A comparison of these two sets of data reveals a possibly significant discrepancy, if we can assume that the patterns coming from Glaser's tests are even roughly indicative of probable behavioral response in real situations. The majority of the administrators tended to over-estimate the inmate on all three scales, though the picture is less precise for the inmate loyalty perceptions. Seven per cent of the respondents felt that "most inmates" were low in their loyalty to the inmate membership group; 38% believed the proper evaluation to be a score of "medium". However, Glaser's study reported a percentage of "low" responses nearly equal to the percentage of "high" responses (36% versus 49%). Again from Glaser, the majority of the inmates scored "low" in criminality (55%) and in criminal identification (69%), but most administrators perceived something nearly opposite. Eight per cent indicated that "most inmates" were low in their adherence to criminal values, and the comparable figure for identification with criminal associates was 16%.

TABLE 1  
COMPARISON OF UPPER-ECHELON CORRECTIONAL ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF GENERALIZED INMATE WITH ACTUAL INMATE TRAITS AS MEASURED BY GLASER

Response-Inferred Trait Scales	Upper-Echelon Administrators N = 75	Inmates N = 1427
Inmate loyalty		
low.....	7%	36%
medium.....	38	15
high.....	55	49
Criminality		
low.....	8%	55%
medium.....	8	16
high.....	84	29
Criminal Identification		
low.....	16%	69%
high.....	84	31

<sup>4</sup> GLASER, Table E.2.

On two of the three scales the respondents were decidedly uniform in their perception of the generalized inmate. On the IL scale, however, where discrepancy was least, variation among the administrator responses was greatest. This provided a suitable opportunity to test for correlates to the observed discrepancies.

An hypothesized correlate of the administrator responses was formulated as the "progressiveness of the administrator's correctional system in attaining the goal of therapeutically induced change". This variable was measured on a reputational basis, using a panel of twenty-four expert judges. Eight academicians and sixteen upper-echelon administrators, all with extensive interest and experience in corrections, rated the fifty-two systems on a five-point scale of "progressiveness": very high; above average; average; below average; very low. Significant correlation between the two measures was sought by Kendall's tau coefficient for grouped data.

A major difficulty with this scheme of measurement lies in the lack of assurance of any direct relationship between the "progressiveness" of the given administrator and that of his correctional system. Obviously in many cases there is not a perfect congruence; factors other than the "progressive-mindedness" of the administrator can sometimes demonstrate an almost logical sufficiency in the determination of an organization's character. Yet some relationship of compatibility over time seems likely to exist.<sup>5</sup>

According to the tau coefficients, there was no significant relationship between the "progressiveness" variable and any of the trait scales. For the IL scale, which exhibited the greatest internal variation, the tau coefficient was .035.

A search among other administrator attributes and attitudes also did not produce any significant correlates. It had appeared somewhat plausible to expect a relationship between occupational experience and the trait scale responses; that is, the longer the administrator's continuous involvement in correctional roles, the higher he would rate the generalized inmate in loyalty to the "inmate system," criminality and criminal identification. An analysis of variance, however, yielded

<sup>5</sup> A second difficulty with the reputational rating system concerns the fact that changes in an organization's reputation often involve a time-lag; i.e., an organization can actually improve (or degenerate) but experience no immediate change in reputation. This difficulty is usually pronounced only when dealing with organizations on an individual basis; in a large number of organizations the errors tend to cross-cancel.

no significant difference at the .05 level. Nor was the administrator's pre-corrections experience related when measured by nominal categories (Kruskal-Wallis H statistic). Geographic region of the correctional system was not significantly associated with the response patterns at the .05 level, although, as shown in Table 2, three regions accounted for nearly all the observed variation in trait responses—Northeast, Midwest and West—and six of the top nine systems, i.e., those rated "above average" or "very high" in the reputational rating, are within these three regions.

The educational experience of the respondents was measured by three items: highest grade-level completed; college degree(s) obtained; and, academic area of concentration. Seventy-one per cent of the administrators reported at least one college degree, and of these 49% reported a bachelor's and 38% a master's as their highest degree. No significant variation in trait responses was found either within or between any of these categories, including the categories labeled "no college degree" and "non-high school graduate".

TABLE 2  
COMPARISON OF UPPER-ECHELON ADMINISTRATOR  
RESPONSES BY GEOGRAPHIC REGION OF  
ADMINISTRATOR'S CORRECTIONAL  
SYSTEM\*

Response-Inferred Trait Scales	North- east N = 9	Mid- west N = 16	West N = 10	Remaining Regions
<b>Inmate Loyalty</b>				
low.....	22%	13%	13%	0%
medium.....	33	38	50	49
high.....	45	49	37	51
<b>Criminality</b>				
low.....	11%	19%	10%	2%
medium.....	0	13	10	4
high.....	89	68	80	94
<b>Criminal Identifica- tion</b>				
low.....	22%	25%	40%	4%
high.....	78	75	60	96

\* Correctional systems included in each region are: Northeast: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont, plus selected Federal facilities in those states.

Midwest: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin, plus selected Federal facilities in those states.

West: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon and Washington, plus selected Federal facilities in those states.

Finally, an attempt was made to relate the trait scale responses to the respondent's general attitudes toward the so-called revolution in criminal justice. This rather crude variable was measured on the basis of the respondent's agreement or disagreement with the Gideon decision of 1963 (state-provided legal counsel for indigent accused felons), the Durham decision's "product test" of legal culpability, and the "sex psychopath" laws as necessary additions to the administration of criminal justice. There was some variation in responses to all three items, but the majority agreed with the first two and disagreed with the third. None was significantly associated with the trait responses at the .05 level.

The significance of the perceptual discrepancies suggested by this survey is bound by certain disadvantages of approach. In the first place, there was no explicit, direct relationship between the inmate sample whose responses were used as an estimate of "reality" and the administrators' perceptions of that "reality". Since they were not measured within the same framework, they could be compared only indirectly and therefore with some sacrifice of confidence. The second phase of study provides a counterbalance to this limitation.

A second limitation cannot be so easily circumvented, however. This concerns the implied translation from the inmate's self-rating as an attitude to the inmate's actual behavior. Disregarding the occurrence of intentional misrepresentation, which was probably quite low, there is still a large and rather complex gap between a person's attitudinal projections as states of readiness for action and the action itself. Thus it would be difficult—well-nigh impossible—to say exactly what proportion of the observed discrepancy came from what source: the administrators' perceptions of the inmate or the inmates' self-ratings, or a combination of both.

One might further complain that it is misleading to make broad generalizations of the type employed in the survey questionnaire (i.e., "most inmates . . ."); that what is true of one inmate would not necessarily be true of another. The complaint is a valid one. But the proportion of respondents who apparently had no qualms about making such generalizations regarding the inmate was surprisingly high, even though they were enjoined throughout the questionnaire to be as conscientious as possible and adequate space for comment was provided. Very few (6%) were sufficiently moved to offer any critical comment about the generalized statements. Admittedly, the fact

that the respondents selected for the survey are commonly pressed for time and may not have been able to give the questionnaire more than cursory consideration could be a mitigating circumstance. But in general it would seem safe to conclude that for many of them this usage posed no problem.

#### PERCEPTIONS OF "KNOWN" INMATES

In the second phase of the study a sample of 238 inmates was randomly selected from those inmates committed to a youthful offender institution during the interval January 1 to May 31, 1965. The institutional population consists primarily of male first offenders (few have ever been committed to juvenile training schools) within the age range 17 to 23. The three scales of inmate loyalty, criminality and criminal identification, again with all items intermixed, were applied to this sample in December of the same year, at least six months after the sample members' confinements began. This produced 238 "response profiles", each composed of an IL score, a C score and a CI score. Scoring procedure was identical to that outlined in the survey questionnaire portion of the study. From these 238 profiles fourteen homogeneous profiles were selected at random as test objects. Eight were homogeneously low—that is, they scored "low" on all three trait scales—and six were homogeneously high. These will be referred to as the low profile (L-P) and high profile (H-P) groups, respectively.

Ten institutional staff members—five custody and five treatment—were used as test subjects. The custodial members were line officers of various ranks and the treatment members consisted of counselors, educational personnel and a chaplain. Each staff member was asked to indicate how well he knew the fourteen inmates by rating his knowledge of them on a simple five-point scale ranging from "very well" to "not at all." Then each staff member was asked to evaluate every inmate whom he knew "fairly well" or "very well," using the same IL, C and CI scales, with scalar items intermixed and altered to the third person ("This inmate . . ."). The perceived profiles were subsequently compared with the actual profiles of the fourteen inmates, and the percentages of response discrepancy were recorded.

Total perceptual "error" for the fourteen profiles was 53%; in other words, slightly over half of the responses given by total staff did not fit the actual trait scores obtained by direct measure-

ment of the inmates. Table 3 places this total percentage in relief.

The most notable discrepancy occurred between the staff evaluations of the H-P inmates and of the L-P inmates. On all three trait scales, staff's perceptual measurements of the L-P group were considerably different from the group's self-ratings, which may mean that staff *over-rated* these inmates, but with reference to the H-P group there was generally close agreement between the perceived and actual profiles. Moreover, there was no significant difference between custody's and treatment's evaluations of the L-P inmates at the .05 level of confidence, while on two of the trait scales custody's evaluations of the H-P inmates were significantly more consistent with the self-ratings than were treatment's evaluations.<sup>6</sup>

This difference in discrepancies between the two profile groups suggests that, assuming the inmates did not intentionally misrepresent themselves and that the self-ratings are approximately accurate indicators of probable behavior, either the staff members were better acquainted with the H-P inmates or the perceptual referent used by staff in their evaluations was closer to the H-P inmate than to the L-P inmate. The first alterna-

TABLE 3  
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF TREATMENT- AND CUSTODY-STAFF EVALUATIONS OF LOW- AND HIGH-PROFILE INMATE GROUPS

Response-Inferred Trait Scales	Low Profile		High Profile	
	Treat- ment	Custody	Treat- ment	Custody
Inmate Loyalty				
low . . . . .	21%*	26%*	0%	4%
medium . . . . .	46	37	33	13
high . . . . .	33	37	67*	83*
Criminality				
low . . . . .	42%*	52%*	27%	4%
medium . . . . .	16	17	20	4
high . . . . .	42	31	53*	92*
Criminal identifica- tion				
low . . . . .	25%*	31%*	7%	13%
high . . . . .	75	69	93*	87*

\* Asterisk indicates how inmate members of two profile groups rated themselves on each of the three trait scales.

<sup>6</sup> Significant differences on the IL and C scales at the .01 level, one-tailed test.

tive would be theoretically compatible with Wheeler's "selective visibility" account of role conflict patterns in the correctional institution.<sup>7</sup> Yet certain empirical qualifications of that explanatory model are derived from the present study. First, according to the model, the most visible inmate is generally the inmate most violative of institutional regulations. The inmate who from the staff point of view most often interferes with the maintenance goals of the organization is the inmate most likely "known" by staff. But an analysis of institutional violation rates by profile groups revealed no significant difference.<sup>8</sup> By this criterion, the H-P group should have had no greater visibility than the L-P inmates. Second, an analysis of the staff's knowledge ratings of the fourteen inmates showed no significant differences between profile groups, nor was there any in the non-response rates of the staff evaluators.

Apparently, then, the second alternative was primarily operative. In evaluating the inmates, the staff members used as their referent a pre-conceived "representative inmate", high in his adherence to criminal values, his allegiance to fellow travelers and his identification with other criminal individuals and/or groups. This does not imply that selective visibility is not at all relevant; rather it seems that high visibility is not concomitant with high inmate loyalty, criminality or criminal identification. Possibly the highly violative and therefore highly visible inmate is used as the "representative inmate", but even he is erroneously perceived at times. By virtue of his violativeness, institutional personnel may see him as "obviously" high in all these traits, whether in fact he is or not, and since he is "representative" all other inmates tend to be seen in a similar light.

Returning to the data of Table 3, we noted that when compared with the inmate self-ratings the custody staff members were significantly less discrepant in their evaluations of the H-P inmates than were the treatment members, but that there was no significant difference with regard to the L-P group of inmates. One would expect the two staff bodies to hold somewhat different conceptions of the inmate, according to their respective role commitments. Traditionally committed to a control and management function which often degenerates into little more than a surveillance

for punishment opportunities, custody may tend to perceive the inmate as nearly homogeneously high in inmate loyalty, criminality and criminal identification. To the extent these role commitments do exist, such perceptions become quite compatible; they possess a self-confirming character. Consequently, the custodial staff member consistently over-rates the L-P inmates in these traits but accurately appraises the H-P inmate, though it is questionable how much of this observed accuracy is due to accurate perception of the individual and how much to chance convergence.

The treatment role, on the other hand, emphasizes the basic necessity of individualized knowledge of the inmate to effective strategies of induced change; however, the emphasis is usually more professed than practiced. Treatment personnel, as well as custodial, often fail to utilize individualistic personalized perceptions and are forced to rely instead upon a stereotyped conception of the inmate, although their conception may be somewhat more moderate than custody's. This difference in content probably reflects role ambiguities suffered by treatment members of the organizational staff. Placed in a largely custodial environment, they must operate in a sort of netherland, rejecting the value orientations of custody but unable to fully realize the professed values of therapeutic intervention. As a result, treatment activities seldom achieve more than a "house-keeping" and "crisis-amelioration" status. The nature and implications of these ambiguities have been treated more fully elsewhere. Garrity, for example, recalls the fact that the traditional value system of the correctional institution has not been updated to fit the needs engendered by the introduction of treatment as a manifest function of the system. This, in his estimation, is the fundamental problem to be solved before the institution can become an effective agent of resocialization—the existence of logical contradictions in its organizational structure.<sup>9</sup> McCorkle and Korn, in their "Resocialization within Walls" article, invited attention to the neutralization of therapy goals resulting from a confused distinction between systematic treatment processes and humanitarian motives of "helping."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Wheeler, *Role Conflict in Correctional Communities*, Chapter 6 in *THE PRISON* (Cressey, Ed. 1961).

<sup>8</sup> No significant difference at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

<sup>9</sup> Garrity, *Some Implications of Prison Organization for Penal Objectives*, 11 *HOWARD JOURNAL* 166-79 (1964).

<sup>10</sup> McCorkle & Korn, *Resocialization within Walls*, 293 *ANNALS. AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI.* 88-98 (1954).

It would be plausible to suggest that many treatment members genuinely attempt efforts at effective treatment, but their efforts are poorly conceived and thereby defeated when they fail to consider the structural realities of the institutional setting. By concentrating on only the techniques and goals of the treatment program and ignoring the relevance of the contextual framework within which the program must operate, their efforts seldom escape failure. Eventually, rehabilitation as both process and motive begins to seem futile, and the staff members increasingly rely upon an unfavorable stereotyped image of the inmate as a rationalization of the failure and futility. Not uncommonly a person well-trained in and profoundly committed to the practice of therapeutic change enters the institution with enthusiasm abundant, but only to become disenchanted and pessimistic.

#### CONCLUSION

The original proposition of this study was, in part, that staff perceptions of the inmate are somewhat stereotyped perceptions; the data presented above tend to confirm this statement. At this point,

however, some consideration should be given to the variations in organizational character among correctional institutions. As Street, among others, has shown, not all institutions suffer from an entrenched opposition between inmates and staff.<sup>11</sup> Some systems concentrate more on the maintenance function—tight control, an immaculate physical plant, high industrial and/or agricultural production—while others place greater emphasis on the therapeutic function, which requires the development of more authentic interpersonal relations. The institution which served as the base for the second phase of this study has been traditionally maintenance-oriented; the general “atmosphere” approaches an almost surgical-room sterility and staff activities tend to be highly routinized. It is entirely possible, therefore, that reliance upon an unfavorable stereotyped image of “inmate”, which was so prevalent in this particular institution, would not exist in institutions with a more open character, at least not to the same extent.

<sup>11</sup> David Street, *The Inmate Group in Custodial and Treatment Settings*, 30 *AM. SOC. REV.* 40-55 (1965).