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# RESEARCH NOTES

## THE EFFECT OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION ON THE DELINQUENT INMATE'S SELF CONCEPT\*

ROBERT G. CULBERTSON\*\*

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The major thrust of the theoretical literature describing the effect of penal institutions on inmates has focused on adult institutions. Clemmer contended that the effect of institutionalization was distinctly harmful to the rehabilitation of the inmate as the inmate assumed the mores and customs of the prison society. The result, according to Clemmer, was the internalization of a criminal self concept.<sup>2</sup> Wheeler noted the incompleteness of Clemmer's perspective in that Clemmer failed to include a temporal frame of reference.<sup>3</sup> Wheeler's study, which utilized a cross-sectional design, tended to support Clemmer's position with some modification.

While we found a larger percentage of inmates who were strongly opposed to staff norms during the last stage of their confinement than during the first, we also found a U-shaped distribution of high conformity responses over the three time periods: there were fewer than half as many high conformity respondents during the middle phase than dur-

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<sup>1</sup> The term "self concept" is used in a non-hyphenated form since this was the manner in which Fitts used it in the Tennessee Self Concept Scale, the measuring instrument used in this study. Fitts, *The Tennessee Self Concept Scale: Ten Years of Research in Mental Health*, 4 MIND OVER MATTER 1 (1964).

<sup>2</sup> D. CLEMMER, *THE PRISON COMMUNITY* (1940).

<sup>3</sup> Wheeler, *Socialization in Correctional Institutions*, in *HANDBOOK OF SOCIALIZATION THEORY AND RESEARCH* 1005 (D. Goslin ed. 1969).

ing the early and later phases of imprisonment.<sup>4</sup>

Other writers have also noted the negative effects of institutionalization on the inmate. Sykes contended that the inmate's personality and sense of worth are eventually destroyed by institutionalization.<sup>5</sup> Goffman described institutionalization as a process of "role dispossession" in which the inmate is stripped of his identity and experiences a "civil death."<sup>6</sup> Sarbin contended that as a result of the desocialization process which occurs in many prisons, the inmate becomes defined as a non-person.<sup>7</sup>

The most significant study in the area of juvenile institutions is the study conducted by Street, Vinter and Perrow.<sup>8</sup> Their research focused on six juvenile institutions which were categorized as "obedience/conformity," "treatment" and "re-education/development." Each of the categories included two institutions. Important to this research is a major hypothesis of Street's study:

Inmates of the treatment institutions will have more positive perspectives on self than those in the obedience/conformity institutions.

Rationale: We assume that the more custodial and degrading experiences at the obedience/conformity institutions will reinforce the feeling of rejection by society embodied in being sent there; the more positive practices of the

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 1007.

<sup>5</sup> G. SYKES, *THE SOCIETY OF CAPTIVES, A STUDY OF A MAXIMUM SECURITY INSTITUTION* (1958).

<sup>6</sup> E. GOFFMAN, *ASYLUMS—ESSAYS ON THE SOCIAL SITUATION OF MENTAL PATIENTS AND OTHER INMATES* (1961).

<sup>7</sup> Sarbin, *The Dangerous Individual: An Outcome of Social Identity Transformations*, 7 BRIT. J. CRIM. 285 (1967).

<sup>8</sup> D. STREET, R. VINTER & C. PERROW, *ORGANIZATION FOR TREATMENT* (1966).

treatment institutions should have some effects that counter this rejection.<sup>9</sup>

In the Street study the researchers utilized a cross-sectional design to assess the probable effects of institutionalization over time. The data obtained from three measures of self-perception tended to confirm the hypothesis. The data was also used to assess Clemmer's prisonization model and Wheeler's U-shaped pattern which were discussed above. The researchers concluded that:

The fit of these models varies with organizational type. Net change in the obedience/conformity institutions is somewhat akin to that of the prisonization model; in the treatment institutions it is in the opposite positive direction, with the U-shaped pattern seen to some extent when one looks at the middle phase.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE PRESENT STUDY

One of the purposes of the research conducted by this author was to focus on changes in self concept in order to examine the consequences of institutionalization for the delinquent. The following hypothesis was the major hypothesis tested in the study:

Self concept will decrease with increasing time incarcerated, and the decrease will be linear in direction.

The purpose of this hypothesis was to assess the impact of institutionalization on the boy's self concept. The research previously cited supports the contention that incarceration in an institution for delinquent offenders often results in depreciated self concepts as the time incarcerated increases. It should be noted that this study utilized a cross-sectional design and such a design only approximates the temporal frame of reference.

Previously cited research, which also utilized the cross-sectional design, found that different institutions have differential impacts on the inmates. While institutionalization initially resulted in lower self images for the inmates in all of the institutions, treatment institutions were differentiated from custodial institutions with regard to the direction of the change. In

treatment institutions, the direction was U-shaped and reflected an initial depreciation of self concept. There was improvement in self concept as the child reached the end of his time in confinement. In custodial institutions, the direction of change in self concept was linear. That is, the increased categories of time resulted in a continually decreasing self concept.

#### THE SURVEY PROCEDURE

The research was conducted at the Indiana Boys' School, Plainfield, Indiana. The Indiana Boys' School, similar to many other institutions for delinquent boys, has historically functioned as a custodial institution. In his controversial study on juvenile institutions, James frequently cited the Boys' School as an example of a "junior prison."<sup>11</sup> The population in the 1960s often ranged between 600 and 700. This high density behavior setting produced social control problems that were sometimes resolved by the former superintendent by means of a "flogging strap" described as being "at least two feet long, as broad as a man's hand, and half as thick as a finger."<sup>12</sup>

The population at the Indiana Boys' School presently ranges between 200 and 400. The population decline over the last five years may be attributed to several factors, including a substantial number of federally funded programs which were developed to divert youth from the juvenile justice system.

Self concept was measured with the Tennessee Self Concept Scale.<sup>13</sup> The 100-item copyrighted instrument, referred to as the TSCS, provides a variety of information about the individual and how he views himself. The major score obtained from the Scale is the Total Positive Score which reflects the overall self concept. In turn, this is partitioned into a 3 × 5 matrix of sub-scores. The three-row scores utilize an internal frame of reference and represent "Basic Identity," "Self Satisfaction" and perception of "Behavior." The three-row scores may be seen as focusing on: (1) "What

<sup>11</sup> H. JAMES, *CHILDREN IN TROUBLE: A NATIONAL SCANDAL* (1969).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 105.

<sup>13</sup> Fitts, *The Tennessee Self Concept Scale: Ten Years of Research in Mental Health*, 4 MIND OVER MATTER 1 (1964).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 198.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 212.

he is:" (2) "How he feels about himself:" and (3) "What he does." The five-column scores utilize an external frame of reference and represent "Physical Self," "Moral-Ethical Self," "Personal Self," "Family Self" and "Social Self." The TSCS also provides a number of additional scores. The validity of the Scale has been established through four types of validation procedures: content validity; discrimination between groups; correlation with other personality measures; and personality changes under particular conditions. Test-retest reliability coefficients fall between .85 and .92 for the Total Positive Score which was used in this research. The results of the research testing the validity and reliability of the Scale have been reported by Fitts.<sup>14</sup>

The research utilized a cross-sectional design which made it necessary to test the entire population at the Boys' School on the same date. The Scale was administered to 236 boys in their respective living units by graduate and undergraduate students in criminology. In order to enhance the clarity of the instructions, a standardized set of instructions was prepared with the assistance of a consultant in special

education. In addition, the TSCS format was slightly modified to make it easier for the boys to record their answers, although the order and content of the items were not changed. Finally, those boys who had reading grade placement levels of 4.0 or below were sorted out and the Scale was administered to them orally.

The responses of fourteen boys were not included in the analysis of data. Of these, four had not been committed to the Indiana Boys' School, but had been temporarily placed there for diagnostic purposes, and ten did not complete the instrument. The elimination of ten subjects from the analysis of data did not appear to bias the findings as the subjects were fairly evenly distributed on the continuum of the number of days incarcerated.

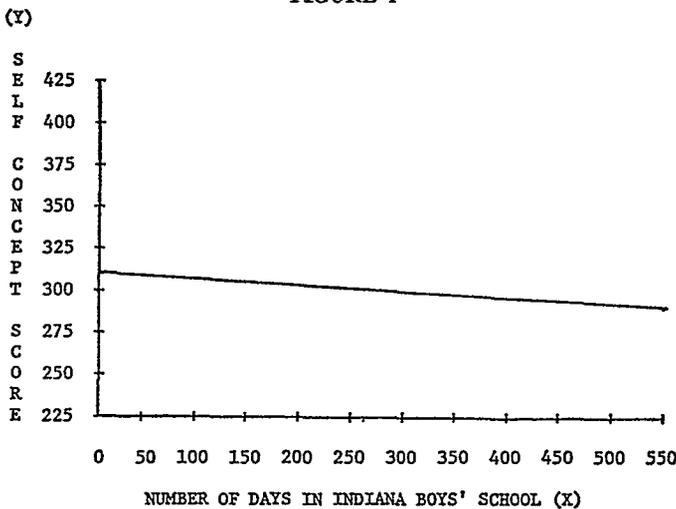
Background information was collected from each boy's institutional record, including whether or not he had been previously incarcerated in the Indiana Boys' School. Eighty-six boys had been previously incarcerated in that institution. Information on previous incarceration in juvenile institutions in other states was not available.

RESULTS

As indicated in Figure 1, the first part of

<sup>14</sup> W. FITTS, *MANUAL FOR THE TENNESSEE SELF CONCEPT SCALE* (1965).

FIGURE 1



$r = -0.119$   
 $N = 222$   
 $F_{1,220} = 3.17; .10 > p > .05$

Regression of self concept based on days incarcerated in the Indiana Boys' School for the total population.

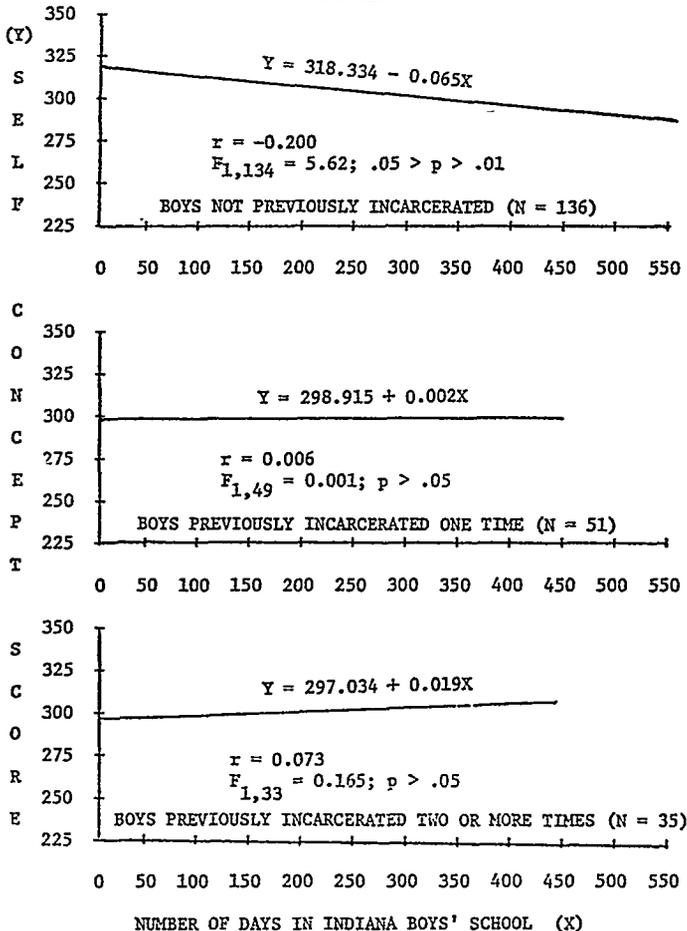
the hypothesis was not supported. A product-moment correlation test was computed to establish the amount of spread about the least-squares equation for the independent variable—days incarcerated in the Indiana Boys' School—and the dependent variable—self concept as measured by the Tennessee Self Concept Scale. While there is a negative correlation, it approaches but does not reach the .05 significance level.

An analysis of variance test for non-linearity was computed using eight categories and the second part of the hypothesis (that the decrease in self concept would be linear) was supported. However, because the correlation is low and a large amount of the variance is not

accounted for, the finding appears to indicate that there is little change in self concept for the total population over time using a cross-sectional design.

A number of boys had not been previously incarcerated in the Indiana Boys' School, while others had been incarcerated on one or more previous occasions. If correctional institutions have a negative impact on inmates, it would appear that such an impact would be greater for those boys who have not been previously incarcerated. The hypothesis was tested again using as a sample only those boys who had not been previously incarcerated in the Indiana Boys' School. Figure 2 indicates that the hypothesis is supported when the sample

FIGURE 2



Comparison of regression of self concepts based on days incarcerated in the Indiana Boys' School for boys not previously incarcerated, for boys incarcerated one time, and for boys incarcerated two or more times.

consists of only those who have not been previously incarcerated.

A product-moment correlation test was computed to establish whether the correlation between the number of days of incarceration and the self concept scores in the sample could have occurred by chance if there was no correlation in the universe. While the result is significant at the .025 level, interpretation is somewhat limited. The sample is quite large ( $N = 136$ ) and only four per cent of the variation has been accounted for.

Even though the relationship is weak, the finding that it is negative should not be overlooked. Data was collected on all delinquents in the Indiana Boys' School who had not been previously incarcerated. By treating this group as a random sample from a hypothetical infinite universe of incarcerated delinquents not previously incarcerated, we can reject the null hypothesis: there is no relationship between the incarcerated delinquent's self concept and the number of days he has been incarcerated.

The results lend tentative support to the author's contention that incarceration in an institution for delinquents has a negative impact on the self concepts of those delinquents, at least for those delinquents who have not been previously incarcerated. Again, the hypothesis that the decrease would be linear was supported by an analysis of variance test for nonlinearity.

In examining the differences between boys who had not been previously incarcerated and the boys who had been incarcerated one or more times, Table 1 indicates that there is a highly significant difference between the self concept scores of these two groups.

To further examine the differences in this area, boys previously incarcerated were divided into two groups: those previously incarcerated on one occasion and those previously incarcerated on two or more occasions. The results of the product-moment correlation test for these two groups are also reported in Figure 2. The Y-intercept for the two groups is almost the same, and the slope for the group previously incarcerated on one occasion is almost zero. This indicates exceedingly little change in self concept during incarceration. However, the slope for the group incarcerated on two or

TABLE 1

Comparison of Institutionalized Delinquents Not Previously Incarcerated and Institutionalized Delinquents Incarcerated One or More Times on the Basis of Self Concept Scores

	Not Previously Incarcerated	Previously Incarcerated One or More Times
N	136	86
$\bar{X}$	310.97	299.17
s	32.23	27.25

$$t = 2.92, 220 \text{ d.f.}; .005 > p > .001$$

more occasions, although not significant, is slightly positive.

It is interesting to compare the data for the group of boys not previously incarcerated, the group incarcerated on one occasion, and the group incarcerated on two or more occasions (see Figure 2). As indicated by the Y-intercept of 318 for this group, boys incarcerated for the first time commence their incarceration with fairly positive self concepts. As indicated by the negative slope, as time incarcerated increases, there is a significant decline in their self concept scores and there is a self concept score of 282 for the group at the end of the time period. For the second group (those boys who have been previously incarcerated on one occasion), it is noted that they commence their incarceration with a self concept score of 299. This is indicated by the Y-intercept. This score is considerably below the score for the group not previously incarcerated, but somewhat above the self concept score for the not previously incarcerated group at the end of their incarceration. The slope is almost zero ( $r = .006$ ) and indicates that the self concept for this group remains about the same for the duration of their incarceration.

Finally, in examining the data for the third group (those boys incarcerated on two or more occasions), it is noted that they commence their incarceration with a self concept score almost the same as that for the group of boys previously incarcerated on one occasion,

at the end of that group's period of incarceration. The slope for the third group is somewhat more positive than in the case of the group previously incarcerated on one occasion, and they complete their incarceration with a self concept score of 305.

Since the design is cross-sectional, it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions from these data. However, it appears that over time as the number of incarcerations increase, the incarcerated delinquents' self concept scores, indicated in Figure 2, assume a U-shaped pattern.

Because each new incarceration had as its antecedent continued involvement in delinquent behavior, one might hypothesize that the improved self concept with an increase in times incarcerated is a consequence of the boy's increased delinquency orientation and acceptance of a delinquent self concept. Research conducted by Hall and Schwartz and Stryker would support this interpretation. Hall contended that an increase in delinquency orientation had the effect of raising the level of self-evaluation.<sup>15</sup> Schwartz and Stryker found some support for their hypothesis that positive self concepts are related to commitment to a deviant role.<sup>16</sup>

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The self concept scores of 222 delinquent boys were analyzed by using a cross-sectional

<sup>15</sup> Hall, *Identification With Delinquent Subculture and Level of Self Evaluation*, 29 *SOCIOMETRY* 146 (1966).

<sup>16</sup> M. SCHWARTZ & S. STRYKER, *DEVIANCE, SELVES AND OTHERS* (1970).

design. While there was not a significant decrease in self concept scores for the total population, the decrease was significant and linear for those boys not previously incarcerated. This indicated that for this group the institution had the impact of a custodial institution as defined by Street, Vinter and Perrow. Because of the institution's history, it was anticipated that the decline in self concept scores would have been considerably greater. The findings appear to indicate that the Indiana Boys' School is an institution in transition between a custodial orientation and a treatment orientation. That is, the institution is beginning to accept, in part, the treatment philosophy of the present superintendent.

In cases where an increase in self concept was found, the groups showing that increase had become increasingly involved in delinquent behavior. This indicates that perhaps they had begun to internalize a delinquent value structure and a delinquent self concept.

It is not contended that the research presented here is a test of labelling theory. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that by using a cross-sectional design, the self concept scores for delinquents not previously incarcerated did decrease significantly. One prediction of labelling theorists is that involvement in the juvenile justice system commences a negative labelling process and that the result is depreciated self concepts for those children so labeled. It is the author's contention that this study provides some tentative support for the labelling perspective.