Changes in Attitudes Toward Law Concomitant with Imprisonment

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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 discipline 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-

1 The 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.

**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. ________________
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. ________________
37. Strict discipline for a child ________________
38. Under certain circumstances crime ________________
39. The happiest time ________________

**FIGURE 1**

Experience 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. 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 Blank 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 five-point 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. Inter scorer 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...
TABLE I
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ATTITUDES TOWARDS ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE JUSTICE, AGE INTELLIGENCE, AND TIME SERVED IN A PRISON POPULATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Time served</th>
<th>Army Alpha</th>
<th>Concrete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>-.504**</td>
<td>.214*</td>
<td>.541**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>-.655**</td>
<td>.212*</td>
<td>xxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** P. = .01.
* P. = .05.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Murder</th>
<th>Violent</th>
<th>Sex offenders</th>
<th>&quot;Intellectual&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract Score</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Score</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (yrs.)</td>
<td>35.54</td>
<td>30.12</td>
<td>35.88</td>
<td>33.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months served</td>
<td>26.08</td>
<td>31.65</td>
<td>24.54</td>
<td>19.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.A. score (N. par)</td>
<td>111.80</td>
<td>106.12</td>
<td>103.58</td>
<td>125.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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. These differences were found to 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 +.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.