

Review Article

The Psychological effects of Incarceration on inmates : Can we Promote Positive Emotion in inmates

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Introduction

Plenty of research has examined preparation of inmates for life outside prison, but few studies have examined supporting them while they're there, says Morgan (quoted by Crawford¹). There's a great need for these folks to receive psychological services, and most people don't want to work with them, some inmates need help coping with the length of their incarceration, dealing with being separated from loved ones and friends or accepting that the prison is going to be their home for a period of time or forever. Others need to be taught how to live and survive in the prison environment. It's in everyone's best interest to give him "crisis intervention" involving, for example, a "no-harm" contract in which an inmate and a therapist agree verbally or in writing that the inmate will not harm himself for a designated period, or until at least one therapy session is held. Providing such services can be a challenge, because of limited resources, an environment that limits social support and the inmates' confinement to a small space.

Many early researchers concluded that imprisonment had negative psychological and physical effects on its inmates, leading to psychological deterioration. These effects included emotional withdrawal,² depression,³ suicidal thoughts or actions⁴ and increasing levels of hostility.⁵ One of the earliest and most criticised studies about imprisonment, by Cohen and Taylor,⁶ suggested that long term prisoners have an obsessive fear of deteriorating due to imprisonment. Modern research also seems to conclude that the most damaging factor to an inmate is the loss of their life in the outside world and relations with

family, rather than the actual regime or conditions of imprisonment.^{7,8}

Indeed, crisis intervention in prisons sometimes requires nontraditional methods, Morgan and colleagues (quoted by Crawford¹) at one prison developed a "recreational behavioral contingency program" that allowed inmates to receive puzzle books for good behavior. "This helped mentally ill or disturbed inmates have something to focus on and placated inmates with behavioral problems.

The Purpose of Prison

Historically, imprisonment was based on punishing those who wronged society, by inflicting suffering of the body – similar to the pound of flesh depicted within Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. In contrast to this concept, today's imprisonment is no longer simply intended as an acute form of corporal punishments, but a method by which to work on a person's mind as well as his body, through 3 distinct areas – which include:

1. Punishment
2. Deterrence
3. And Rehabilitation

These 3 unique areas, when interlinked into a single process are intended to allow society to remove criminals from a position where they may continue their criminal behaviour, place them into an institution that satisfies the masses who desire some form of retribution, persuade other would be criminals that such activities are not beneficial, and in time sculpt them into productive and law abiding citizens through positive psychological conditioning, who may later be re-integrated into society.

In theory, such a concept fairs well – but unfortunately in reality, a large range of negative psychological experiences encountered within prison, do not lead to this otherwise well thought out plan. The welfare and psychological freedom of the individual inmate does not depend on how much education, recreation, and counseling he receives but rather on how he manages to live and relate with the others inmates who constitute his crucial and only meaningful world.

Effects of Prison

It is not only an emotional or psychological fear, It is a practical matter. If you don't threaten someone at the very least, someone will threaten you. Many times, you have to "prey" on someone, or you will be "preyed" on yourself.⁹ Prisons aim to cure criminals of crime however their record has not been encouraging. Instead prisons do more harm than good. The pains of jail confinement affect all prisoners in different ways. To begin with the prisoners need to withstand the entry shock by adapting quickly to prison life. Prisoners are exposed to a new culture, which is very different from their own culture. While being in prison, the prisoner must determine his/her way of passing the time since the hours appear endless.⁹

For some prisoners the major source of stress would include the loss of contact with family and friends outside the prison. There is also the fear of deterioration. There is lack of personal choice within the prison environment which may affect prisoners. After many years of being told what to do, they may well lose the ability to think for themselves and make their own decisions and choices freely.⁹

Psychological effects

The use of prison was originally designed to allow prisoners to rediscover their own conscience and better voice through spiritual conversion. Unfortunately, it was later discovered that it is a form of torture, because it ended up causing within many prisoners adverse psychological effects^{3-6,8,9} such as:

- delusions,
- dissatisfaction with life,
- claustrophobia,
- depression,

- feelings of panic,
- and on many instances madness.
- stress
- denial
- nightmares and the inability to sleep
- phobias
- substance abuse
- criminal activity
- and some forms of self destructive behaviour

Four short term effects that have been noted by prison psychologists include feelings of :³⁻⁵

- Guilt – particularly in men who get an erection and feel as though they were active participants.
- Shame – at not being able to defend ones self and their masculine inadequacies
- Suicidal tendencies – due to fear of continued victimisation or the possibility of having contracted diseases.
- And the fear of becoming, or having become homosexual.

Other effects are

- Dependence on institutional structure and contingencies.
- Interpersonal distrust and suspicion.
- Emotional over-control, alienation and psychological distancing.
- Social withdrawal and isolation.
- Incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture.
- Diminished sense of self-worth and personal value.
- Post-traumatic stress reactions to the pains of imprisonment.
- The threat or persistent fear of victimization among inmates that is presented in the prison environment can lead to hypervigilance. Hypervigilance is the "sustained heightened cognitive and affective arousal in the service of scanning the environment for threats,"¹⁰ and is a key component of anxiety related syndromes.
- Hayes and Blaauw¹¹ suggest that certain features of the prison setting can negatively affect coping and adjustment to imprisonment. These include: fear of the unknown, distrust of authoritarian environment, lack

of apparent control over the future, isolation from family, the shame of imprisonment and the dehumanizing effects of imprisonment.

Prison adjustment and well-being

Adjustment refers to the “psychological processes through which people manage or cope with the demands or challenges of every day life”.¹² The extent to which an inmate’s adjustment to imprisonment is influenced by the prison environment itself (indigenous) or influenced by the prisoner’s ‘pre-prison characteristics’ (imported) has long been of considerable debate.¹³

However, as a result of individual history, attributes, beliefs and coping capabilities, one person could interpret the lack of control as the result of personal inadequacy, while the other could interpret it as continuing abuse by others. While the first may sink into depression, apathy and withdrawal, the second might become resentful, angry and rebellious in an attempt to counter the control. The way the two individuals deal with their long sentences could also determine how they are each affected by the environment. While one might cope with the stress of long confinement by avoiding all thoughts of the future, the other may cope by finding a safe and comfortable behavioural niche within the institution. The first could take on the behaviour and values of the other inmates and be seen by outsiders as acting impulsively and carelessly, the second might have much weaker ties to the inmate subculture.¹⁴

Social isolation experienced by inmates is one of the main factors which affect their adjustment to imprisonment. Many other studies have also found a link between frequent visits from family and friends and positive prison adjustment.¹²⁻¹⁵ Similarly, inmates seem to adapt better to imprisonment when they are allowed some measure of control over their immediate environment,¹⁶ suggesting that lower security prisons allow for better adjustment.

Maladaptation to imprisonment is characterised by violence, aggression, anxiety, depression, distress and suicide.¹⁷ In their study, McShane and Williams¹⁸ used 6 concepts to measure adjustment: outside contact, unit assignment stability, good-time earning ability, security classification, work history

and disciplinary history.

Positive Intervention in the Prison System: A New Approach

Positive Psychology, or the study of the factors that produce and nurture positive emotion, is a relatively new but very popular field in Psychology. Named by Martin Seligman¹⁹ and championed by David Seligman, Positive Psychology has seen considerable use with so-called “problem” populations. Because of the abundance of negative feelings in prison, it makes sense that men who are incarcerated would welcome an opportunity to experience positive emotions. Dealing with the mental health needs of inmates can be a grinding experience and negative experiences can easily outnumber positive ones.

Researchers have demonstrated the power of the prison environment to shape behavior, often to the detriment of both prisoners and prison workers. The Stanford Prison Experiment, which Haney co-authored in 1973 with Stanford University psychologist and APA Past-president Philip G. Zimbardo, is one example²⁰. It showed that psychologically healthy individuals could become sadistic or depressed when placed in a prison-like environment.

The Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) is implementing a successful positive intervention for female inmates. This program organized around the “Habits of Mind” (HOM) curriculum,²¹ seeks to teach inmates life skills through immersion in their everyday environments, work, living unit, school. “This strength-based approach is built on the understanding and integration/utilization of 16 aspects of behavioral intelligence, or life skills that increase one’s ability to problem solve effectively.²¹

The inmates are also trained in “Challenging Choices”, a program designed to support the participants in intentional thought and present mindedness regarding the choices, they could make at critical moments²². Early results from this program have been promising. Findings show that recidivism has declined for participants by almost 40% and life satisfaction has risen. Additionally, the workforce output and quality in the prison road sign and license plate production areas has increased by 50%.²³

The application of Positive Psychology is evident in this program. Participants develop positive habits, shift their focus to the positive, and learn to control their thoughts. Women have stated that they feel like they “know what to do now”, “can act better as a team”, “feel happier” and “can focus on what’s important”. The DOC program is a positive intervention of the highest order.²⁴ We know that “positive affect is an active ingredient in human flourishing”.²⁵ Positive Psychology approaches have also been effective in decreasing or preventing depression. The work of Reivich & Shatté²⁶ and Seligman, Rashid and Parks²⁷ are salient to this discussion and will be used in terms of the intervention application.

Indian Scenario- A Brief Look

The modern prison in India was originated by the TB Macaulay in 1835, who rejected all humanitarian needs and reforms for the prisoners. It is the Prisons Act IX of 1894 by Government of India, on the basis of which the present jail management and administration operates in India. This Act has hardly undergone any substantial change. In the report of the Indian Jail Committee 1919-20, for the first time in the history of prisons, ‘reformation and rehabilitation’ of offenders were identified as the objectives of the prison administrator. The Government of India Act 1935, resulted in the transfer of the subject of jails from the centre list to the control of provincial governments and hence further reduced the possibility of uniform implementation of a prison policy at the national level. In 1951, the Government of India invited the United Nations expert on correctional work, Dr. W.C. Reckless,²⁸ to undertake a study on prison administration and to suggest policy reform. His report titled ‘Jail Administration in India’ made a plea for transforming jails into reformation centers. He also recommended the revision of outdated jail manuals. Accordingly, the Government of India appointed the All India Jail Manual Committee in 1957 to prepare a model prison manual. The report made forceful pleas for formulating a uniform policy and latest methods relating to jail administration, probation, after-care, juvenile and remand homes, certified and reformatory school, borstals and protective homes, suppression of immoral traffic etc. The report also

suggested amendments in the Prison Act 1894 to provide a legal base for correctional work.

The Committee prepared the Model Prison Manual (MPM)²⁹ and presented it to the Government of India in 1960 for implementation. The MPM 1960 is the guiding principle on the basis of which the present Indian prison management is governed. The All India Committee on Jail Reforms (1980-1983), the Supreme Court of India and the Committee of Empowerment of Women (2001-2002) have all highlighted the need for a comprehensive revision of the prison laws but the pace of any change has been disappointing. The Supreme Court of India has however expanded the horizons of prisoner’s rights jurisprudence through a series of judgments. Various Committees, Commissions and Groups have been constituted by the State Governments as well as the Government of India from time to time, to study and make suggestions for improving the prison conditions and administration,³⁰ with a view to making them more conducive to the reformation and rehabilitation of prisoners.³² In its judgments on various aspects of prison administration, the Supreme Court of India has laid down three broad principles regarding imprisonment and custody. Firstly, a person in prison does not become a non-person; secondly, a person in prison is entitled to all human rights within the limitations of imprisonment; and, lastly there is no justification for aggravating the suffering already inherent in the process of incarceration.

Despite the relatively low number of persons in prison as compared to many other countries in the world, there are some very common problems across prisons in India, and the situation is likely to be the same or worse in many developing countries. Overcrowding, prolonged detention of under-trial prisoners, unsatisfactory living conditions, lack of treatment programmes and allegations of indifferent and even inhuman approach of prison staff have repeatedly attracted the attention of the critics over the years^{31,33-35}. Kazi³⁸ mention that prisons are excellent venues for infectious disease screening and intervention, given the conditions of poverty and drug addiction.

In a seminar, efforts made at the Tihar Jail³⁶ by the University of Delhi faculty and students of law in the field of legal aid were highlighted. These included imparting legal literacy to the prisoners,

sensitizing the prison administration, taking up individual prisoners to provide legal aid, involving para-legal staff to work with prisoners, both convicts and under trials. A similar finding was noted in the NIMHANS and National Commission for Women study in the Central Prison, Bangalore.³⁷

The plight of disturbed in prisons was virtually ignored for many years, but in the past decade, many prison systems and socialite have realized that providing mental health care is a necessity, not a luxury, says Fagan. But they often struggle to implement such programs while keeping up with their regular prison caseloads. "Right now there's such a focus on punishment—most criminal justice or correctional systems are punitive in nature—that it's hard to develop effective rehabilitative programs," says Morgan. The findings suggest that individual-centered approaches to crime prevention need to be complemented by community-based approaches.

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the mental health of inmates and a growing need for psychologists to provide basic mental health care. The realization of the increasing numbers of offenders with mental illnesses in the prison, correctional system has led to the development of a Mental Health Strategy and to an increase in the demand for psychologists in order to tackle the problem. Psychologists within the correctional system play a major leadership role and are involved at every step of the Strategy.

Thus, there has been a significant shift in the role of the psychologist within the correctional system, with the provision of mental health care becoming an increasingly important component. Psychologists are frequently called upon to provide crisis intervention for offenders. There are opportunities to develop programs and strategies related to criminogenic needs, to carry out specialized assessments, and to provide clinical treatment. Psychologists are also conducting research to evaluate treatment and programming efficacy as well as exploring new areas such as forensic, correctional and clinical psychology.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future

The common sense view of offending is based on the notion that committing a crime is the outcome of a rational decision-making process underpinned

by free will. In many cases, offending does not actually work this way. Depending on which perspective is taken, offending may be seen as the outcome of a variety of process that the offender does not fully control including the learning of inappropriate attitudes and ways of behaving and the failure to develop appropriate control of emotional responses like anger. These perspectives on offending open up the possibility of using therapeutic techniques to equip offenders to avoid criminal behavior in future. It is not generally suggested that these techniques should *replace* judicial sanctions for crime, but it is possible that they might play a part in the reform of offenders who are undergoing judicial punishment in prison or in the community. Early attempts to treat offending therapeutically were based on a psychodynamic model of offending and met with little success.³⁹ Later attempts have been based on learning theory and cognitive models of offending. With this, Positive Psychology is taking place slowly in the Correctional Psychology, which has new vision for inmate's emotions and adjustment in prison.

It is costly, time consuming and requires a great deal of dedication and collaboration from various factors. Support from the correctional authorities is required, and data collection necessitates a great deal of support from research assistants, psychologists, wardens, and staff. To conduct further research in this area, correctional authorities should encourage psychologists to perform additional research. A decentralized operational research function brings great benefits to correctional authorities. The field itself is among the most quickly evolving due to extensive research over the past few decades on the prediction of criminal behavior and on evidence-based treatments.

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