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Coping, Behavior, and Adaptation in Prison Inmates

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Preface

This book is the report of a collaborative effort. Frank Porporino and I
arrived at the starting point for our work together by very different routes.
Originally trained as an experimental psychologist, I had become in-
creasingly restive within the confines of the laboratory, and spent a sab-
batical year in the equivalent of a clinical internship. I then spent some
time as a part-time consultant in a local penitentiary.

Most of my time in the institution was spent with inmates with a variety
of problems, probably about 50 individuals over the course of a year.
Although this was far fewer than a full-time psychologist in the system
might encounter, it served as a quick cram course on problem prisoners
and prisoner problems. Very quickly my stereotypes about convicts were
shown to be virtually useless. I learned that the criminal classes included all
levels of society, and that the behavior of prisoners was the same as that of
other human beings in a difficult environment.

My preconceptions about the destructive effects of imprisonment had
been reinforced by the obvious unpleasantness of the environment, so I
expected to find many men who were functionally disabled, but this was
not what I saw. Of course my prison "clients" were almost all having trou-
ble dealing with life. This was not surprising, for they would not have been
referred to me if they were perfectly adapted and content with their cir-
cumstances. At the same time, they were very different from the more
passive inmates I had seen in other types of institutions, for most of them
seemed to be actively trying to deal with their problems. Indeed, I was
impressed with the energy with which many of them struggled, but often I
had the image of a fish on a hook: the harder it struggles, the worse things
become.

It struck me that in many ways their behavior was similar to that por-
trayed in the literature on the training of coping skills. Thus, I was led to
abandon prior notions and to the idea that many prison inmates have
inadequate coping skills. I thought that their deficiencies might be linked
to some of their problems in prison.

At about this time, I had begun speaking to Frank about the possibility

of supervising his Ph.D. thesis. He had come to Queen's University with an M.A. in clinical psychology, with particular expertise in psychometric methods. He had also worked for several years on the front lines as a psychologist in a federal penitentiary. When I tried to tell Frank about my new ideas, I discovered that he had been thinking along the same lines. After a few discussions, we shaped each other's thoughts until we agreed on the potential usefulness of coping theory in dealing with prisoner behavior, and we decided to attempt some systematic research on the subject.

The result is a story of a little study that grew. We realized that we needed some financial and political support in order to carry out the research, so we spoke with people in the Research Division of the Solicitor General in Ottawa. We were encouraged to make a formal proposal. Of course, this meant that we had to work out procedures and measures, so we spent close to a year in the preliminary stage. There was also a lot of waiting for clearances, permissions, and signatures. The longer it took, the more we wanted to make the work definitive, for we were not sure we would ever get a second chance, or would want to fight through the process again. So the study grew and grew, but we hope it is better as a result.

At the time of this writing, it has been over eight years since our original letters of intent. In the interim, Frank finished his thesis on a project closely related to our principal line of research (but not included here) and moved on to the Ministry of the Solicitor General in Ottawa. By now, we have been through so many discussions that neither of us knows who originated any specific idea. We have also gone through so many stages of the written report that it would take a stylistic analysis by a sophisticated computer program to disentangle our separate contributions.

During the course of this study, we had a wide range of experiences, from the drama and shock of an assistant taken hostage, to moments of bathos and low comedy in some of our interviews with subjects. (Imagine, for example, an interviewer and an inmate locked in a room together when the lock breaks; after the guards make emergency calls for tools to take the door out of the frame, the inmate calmly finishes the discussion and then picks the lock.) However, these are perhaps best told in other places, perhaps in the play I keep threatening to write.

We are grateful to the many people without whose efforts this work could not have been done—or done as well. Naming them all would fill several pages. However, we must single out Julia Kalotay who was the principal research assistant for most of the study. She conducted the majority of the actual interviews; undoubtedly her sensitive and sympathetic questioning was a major factor in maintaining the level of cooperation we got from both subjects and institutional staff.

We are also grateful to the Research Division of the Solicitor General of Canada for both material and personal support. Hugh Haley encouraged us at the beginning, John Evans helped us through the rough spots, and

Helen Durie was indispensable at all stages. Their vision and support were often beyond the call of duty, and without them we could not have accomplished anything.

In our presentation of the study, we have worked to strike a balance. On the one hand, we have tried to objectify and quantify things rigorously in the data and in its analyses; as scientists, we could do no less. On the other hand, we have also tried to remember that behind the statistical agglomerates and analyses, we were dealing with real people in real situations; as psychologists, this is our responsibility. From either side, the things we found were often discrepant with our expectations or desires, but we have done our best to convey an accurate picture of the reality we found rather than our preconceptions. We hope that the reader will judge our efforts to be not entirely unsuccessful.

Kingston, Ontario   Edward Zamble
July 1987

No mind is much employed upon the present; recollection and anticipation fill up almost all our moments.

—Samuel Johnson

The past is dead. If I think about it, it will kill me too.

—Inmate subject X

How often do I think about the future? If I get through this day, I have 5,000 more exactly like it ahead of me. I just try to survive each hour.

—Inmate subject Y

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Introduction

Corrections has changed in significant ways over the past several decades. Prisons have become less militaristic, more humane, and somewhat less insular. For the most part, they have been transformed into institutions that function under the rules of procedure, administrative policies, and organizational cultures of complex, street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky, 1980).

Corrections, in one sense, has progressed. It has moved to become more mindful of the rights of offenders, the concerns of staff, and the expectations of the public. In other ways, however, it has remained riddled with problems so severe as to challenge the very meaningfulness of the entire enterprise.

In the past decade or so we have witnessed growing fear of crime and a swing towards more punitive, retributive, and intolerant public attitudes. The criminal justice system has responded in kind. Rates of imprisonment have been rising in many Western countries, and in some places they have reached an all-time high (Austin and Krisberg, 1985; Gottfredson, 1986). For example, it has been estimated that one out of every 35 adult American males is currently under some form of criminal justice restraint (Gottfredson, 1986). At current rates, one out of every 20 males born in the United States can be expected to serve a term in a state prison (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1985). Despite an unprecedented increase in prison construction, resources have been strained to the limit, and prison crowding may have become the predominant and pervasive correctional problem of the decade (Blumstein, 1986; Garry, 1984; Gottfredson and McConville, 1986).

The character of correctional populations has also changed substantially. Prisons must now manage a more diverse group of offenders serving longer prison terms for a wider range of offences. They must contend with greater concentrations of mentally disordered offenders, drug and alcohol abusers, young violent offenders, racial and ethnic minorities, and, especially, offenders with histories of serious violent acts.

With all of this to confront, debate as to the proper role and aims of

imprisonment as a means of crime control has left corrections in a state of uncertainty and ambivalence regarding its mission. Correctional staff and administrators often feel frustrated and demoralized by the confusing diversity of demands on the system and the variety of conflicting goals that they are often asked to implement. Perhaps as a result, they remain focused on the daily functioning of their institutions, with the persistent need to maintain order and control despite a never-ending stream of operational crises and chronic shortages of resources.

In short, corrections has evolved to where it is pulled rather than driven. Observers and students of the prison have continued in their attempts to clarify purpose (Cullen and Gilbert, 1982; Johnson, 1987; Thomas, 1987). Yet the effect on correctional policy and practice seems minimal. Reforms may be contemplated, but the persistence and vision needed to pursue them vigorously seem to be lacking.

We believe that one reason for this situation is that the knowledge as to how to redirect corrections is also lacking. In order to be sound and reasonable, the design and operation of prisons should be based not on any particular theory or ideology, but on some fundamental understanding of how imprisonment affects individuals. The clarification of the mission for the correctional system must begin with a valid and verifiable appreciation of how imprisonment impinges on human beings: whether it damages or leaves them intact; whether it affects some and not others; whether it affects people only in some ways or under particular circumstances.

The question of how imprisonment affects individuals has concerned social scientists for over half a century. In the face of more complex and more pressing problems in the correctional system, the question becomes even more important. Corrections will likely remain troubled and confused until we understand more clearly how imprisonment affects prisoners.

This book is concerned with the behavior of men in prison. At some points it reaches farther and touches on aspects of a theory to explain much of criminal behavior, but it centers on what prisoners do under the conditions of contemporary confinement, how they approach their lives, and how they adapt to the problems and difficulties they experience. In subsequent chapters we will describe the methods, results, and implications of a major-scale empirical study that examines these issues. However, before we proceed to the study this chapter will consider the background of the ideas involved and will attempt to explain the theoretical perspective from which the work derives.

Theory and Context: Understanding the Causes of Behavior

Western thought about the nature of the forces that shape human behavior has been essentially bifurcated for several centuries. On one hand is the

assumption that the wellsprings of our actions are within us. On the other side is the view that we are shaped by our external environment.

While we are oversimplifying the distinction here for heuristic purposes, one cannot overestimate the importance of this division into two kinds of explanation. The controversy between the two paths has dominated the development of ideas for generations of theorists in a variety of fields. We may see the conflict between the ideologies of capitalism and communism as one example of how the contrasting explanations of behavior can inspire deep philosophical and political differences. Clearly, the rift of difference between these two approaches in accounting for behavior can be wide and deep.

In the universe of psychological problems, the difference is embodied in the historical controversy between environmentalists and nativists or personality theorists (Mischel, 1973). The former, most radically personified by extreme Watsonian behaviorists, argue that external events and contingencies can overwhelm all other determinants and force behavior into predictable and uniform patterns. Individual differences may be explained as the result of differing environmental histories, and failures of prediction can be rationalized as the fault of insufficiently powerful contingencies.

In contrast, many other theorists have attempted to show how a variety of internal mechanisms may be used to explain or predict actions. These include everything from global personality constructs of overriding theoretical importance to controllers of minor responses. They include explanations of universal behavior, usually seen as the inevitable expression of shared genetic material or the result of universal personality archetypes, and also of individual differences, seen as the result of variety in genetic or other internal structures. All these explanations have in common the expectation that behavior can best be understood as the result of consistent and enduring internal structures.

The conflict between adherents of these two opposing viewpoints has been renewed episodically over the history of modern psychology. The resulting interchanges have been often vehement, sometimes bitter, and ultimately probably fruitless. For despite the temptations of slogans, such as the catchphrase reducing the controversy to "nature versus nurture," as is usually the case in polarized conflicts the debate has over the decades generated more heat than light.

This may, of course, have occurred because the details of the correct position are yet to be worked out, as adherents customarily claim, but we believe rather that it is because the reality of behavior resists the simplifications of either side. In their insistence on the ultimate sensibleness of either model, the great majority of theorists have ignored the interaction of internal and external determinants. Very few models have considered how specified aspects of the environment will affect individuals with differing behavioral propensities, or how individuals with particular personal characteristics will react to variation in external conditions and situations.

In a few cases, we expect that behavior will be uniquely determined by environmental conditions. For example, a total lack of food ought to lead to some sort of food-seeking behavior in every intact individual. Similarly, we can predict that some internal characteristics will have inevitable results on actions. For example, we can predict that a blind person will fail to react to any purely visual cues.

However, when we study the range of situations that commonly occur in our lives, we can conclude that there are few internal dispositions that are so powerful as to uniquely determine actions in all situations, and few environmental events that can compel identical responses from people of every disposition. In general, we would expect that the interaction between individuals and situations will be the most powerful predictor of behavior.

Interaction and Action

While the debate between internal and external theorists of behavior has employed many arguments, we believe that in the end both extremes are incorrect. While each has some evidence to support it, each is wrong in denying the influence of other factors. The most sensible answer comes from a synthesis that recognizes the evidence on both sides. In some ways, both sides are wrong, both are right, and the answer lies somewhere else. We can see that neither viewpoint alone can provide adequate explanations or predictions of behavior.

Take first the environmentalist approach. We can recognize that external events can have some very powerful effect on behavior, for example through conditioning and motivational or reinforcement processes. In an infant these may have powerful effects on observed behavior. However, we know that environments differ across individuals, and also across time for the same individual. If we believe that the environment leaves its effect, then after an accumulation of experiences the way a person reacts to his environment will be altered.

It matters not that this is caused by the action of external forces: the end result is that we cannot predict actions from knowledge of local conditions alone. Eventually, the accumulation of experience produces individual differences in ways of responding, and an understanding of behavior requires that these be taken into account. In effect, even a strictly environmentalist position requires that "personality" be taken into account, even if it is originally created by the action of external factors.

Similarly, even the strictest personality theorist must agree that the consequences of our actions have some internal representation. Even if action is determined by strong internal propensities, memories of past actions will be taken into account in determining new actions. No reasonable theorist would argue that behavior is invariant regardless of circumstances, and this implies that the external situation must be represented internally.

If this is so, even if the effects of the environment are represented in ways determined by individual personality patterns, such effects must be considered in order to make any sensible predictions about behavior. Thus, when one deals with a mature individual the effects of experience must be considered, regardless of the original source of the actions which comprise that experience.

These arguments lead us to the position that in the end the differences between the two schools of thought are moot. Regardless of which side one starts from, it must always be acknowledged that behavior results from an interaction of both internal and external factors. The general debate about which side is correct reduces to consideration of the specific factors entering into the control or evocation of specific actions at particular times and under specified circumstances. We believe that most of the interesting variance in behavior lies in the interaction between internal and environmental factors, and a century of debate between extreme positions has served only to obscure this fact.

In the work to be described in this book, we wanted to deal with the behavior of men in prison. Our particular interest was to understand how prisons affect individuals and, conversely, how individuals function to shape their prison experiences. Our approach was grounded in an interactionist model of the causes of human behavior (Bowers, 1973; Lazarus and Folkman, 1983; Magnussen and Endler, 1977). Therefore, we decided that we must study not just the conditions and situations that arise during imprisonment but also how individual offenders come to perceive these conditions, react to situations, and behave differently as their term progresses.

We did not suppose, as others have done before us, that the pains of imprisonment would have inevitable effects on behavior (Goffman, 1961; Johnson and Toch, 1982; Sykes, 1958). Similarly, we did not expect that the characteristics and dispositions of offenders on admission would be so predominant as to determine behavior across conditions or situations of confinement (Clemmer, 1958; Irwin and Cressey, 1962). We set out to find evidence for a more underlying process that would tell us how external and internal factors might interact in determining different kinds of reactions to imprisonment.

The part of the process that we chose to study is the subject of contemporary psychological theories about how humans respond to, or cope with, stressful life circumstances. We will elaborate the model later in this chapter. Suffice it to say at this point that we set out to operationalize our interactionist perspective by examining the appraisals and coping behaviors that appear as offenders negotiate their time in prison.

To summarize our perspective here, we begin from the assumption that the determinants of real behavior are complex, multiple, and interactive. This applies to the behavior of prisoners as well as to that of other individuals in other circumstances. Actions can be explained only by consider-

ing both the situation and the ways of reacting that a person brings to that situation.

The emphasis on the interaction between persons and events is far from unique here. Indeed, it is arguably becoming the predominant point of view in contemporary psychology. It should be noted that the change has seemed to accompany the rebirth of interest in the nature and role of cognitions among academic research psychologists (Estes, 1975). Perhaps this is because interactions are so readily apparent in cognitive processes, or perhaps it is because the demonstration of the usefulness of interactionist thinking in cognitions provides a good concrete example of how such thinking can be extended to other sorts of behavior.

In any case, the position argued here is but one example of a general trend in contemporary experimental and clinical psychology. Moreover, there are indications that even this is only part of a more general trend, and that similar ideas are also having their effect in other areas. For example, Cullen (1983) presents an argument for a restructuring of deviance theory in sociology. Although his terms are different, it is readily apparent that the direction of his thinking is entirely parallel to ours.

In general, however, theory and research in psychology has had only a minimal impact on criminology. The mainstream of criminology, for the most part, seems to have ignored the application of cognitive and social learning principles for explaining offender behavior. (There are a few exceptions: for example, see Little and Kendall, 1979; Ross and Fabiano, 1985.) This seems to be particularly true in the area of corrections, where the forces that account for the behavior of prisoners during confinement have befuddled criminologists for decades.

Before we proceed with a more detailed explanation of our coping model for behavior, it is appropriate here to review previous research on the effects of imprisonment. This literature spans the fields of sociology, psychology, and psychiatry. It has been reviewed in considerable depth elsewhere (e.g., Bonta and Gendreau, 1987; Bowker, 1977; Bukstel and Kilmann, 1980; McKay, Jayewardene, and Reedie, 1977; Thomas and Petersen, 1977; Walker, 1983; Wormith, 1984a). Therefore, our purpose here is only to consider where this research has brought us, and, in particular, to highlight its methodological and conceptual deficiencies. We shall see that studies in the area have failed to advance our understanding a great deal, and we will argue that this is principally because they have ignored the need for interactionist thinking or methodologies.

We should also mention that some autobiographical and qualitatively based accounts of the prison experience have provided rich and compelling descriptions of how prisoners cope (e.g., Abbott, 1981; Alper, 1974; Caron, 1978; Clayton, 1970; Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Manocchio and Dunn, 1970; Pell, 1972). While we acknowledge the value of some of the ideas in this work, we must admit that it served to reinforce our interests

but not to guide our thinking. Our reviewing of the area focuses on the empirical literature.

Sociological Analyses of Imprisonment

The sociological literature on imprisonment is dominated by what are fairly dated analyses of prisoners' adoption of subculture norms, attitudes, and various institutional argot roles. Early field studies detailed the emergence of an informal social world within the prison environment, one with its own unique social classes, language, economy, and rules governing behavior (Clemmer, 1958; Garabedian, 1963; Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Morris and Morris, 1963; Schrag, 1954; Sykes, 1958; Sykes and Messinger, 1960).

From the functional or systems perspective which was then emerging within sociological theory, the social control processes in the prison were regarded as having a profound and direct influence on the behavior of all inmates. These processes were seen as representing the central collective solution to the peculiar problems and "pains of imprisonment." The dynamics of assimilation into the prison culture, summarized by Clemmer with the term *prisonization*, have since preoccupied sociological research and theory on the prison experience.

Until recently, the research has followed two competing hypotheses, summarized as the deprivation and importation models of prisonization (Thomas and Petersen, 1977). The deprivation model emphasizes intra-institutional pressures and problems generated by the actual experience of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958; Sykes and Messinger, 1960). Prisonization is seen as the consequence of "depersonalizing and stigmatizing effects of legal processing and induction into the prison, coupled with the alienative effects of the coercive power exercised by prison officials in their attempts to maintain social control within the prison" (Thomas, 1977, p. 137).

Studies based on the deprivation model have examined the relationships between prisonization and a variety of factors, including: (a) the length of time in prison and the time remaining to be served (Akers, Hayner, and Gruninger, 1977; Atchley and McCabe, 1968; Clemmer, 1950; Wellford, 1967; Wheeler, 1961); (b) interpersonal involvements and the social role assumed by the inmate (Garabedian, 1964; Schrag, 1961; Sykes and Messinger, 1960); (c) the type of institution and organizational structure (Akers et al., 1977; Berk, 1966; Cline, 1968; Street, 1965); and (d) the degree of alienation or powerlessness experienced by the inmate (Thomas and Poole, 1975; Thomas and Zingraff, 1976; Tittle and Tittle, 1964).

The deprivation model's closed-system emphasis on prison-specific influences is challenged by the importation model. Importation theory highlights the effects that preprison socialization and experience can have on adaptation to prison life. Within the importation model, the degree and