McNeil Island Penitentiary, Humanistic Psychology and Another View of the Prison System

by Tim Scully, HPI Research Fellow early 1979

Almost everyone agrees that the present prison system does not work well. The Bureau of Prisons and most politicians have discarded rehabilitation as a concept that failed. Prisons are overcrowded and violence in them is common. The crime rate continues to increase and little is being done for the victims of crime. What can be done about these problems?

There won't be any simple answers. The problems are as complex as the millions of people entangled in them. But it is possible that looking at these problems from fresh viewpoints may help to generate more solutions. For this reason I'd like to share some of my experiences as an inmate at McNeil Island Penitentiary and as a humanistic psychologist working in that environment.

Before I arrived at McNeil Island for the first time in 1974, my image of prison life was a rather vague and frightening one which had been formed from the media. I expected the prison to be a dangerous and very unpleasant place where survival would be a struggle. I spent only a few months at McNeil before being released on appeal bond, but during that time my image of prison life changed. After my return to McNeil three years later, upon losing my appeals, the prison and my view of it changed still more.

In 1974 McNeil Island was a comparatively mellow prison. There was little violence. The main cellhouse, designed to hold four men per cell contained six per cell, but this overcrowding was not serious. The average inmate age was high, in the late 30's. Most men were serving long sentences and had made the prison their home.

As in most modern prisons, inmates were encouraged to work at a regular job assignment from 8am to 4:30pm, five days per week. Thus inmates cooked the food, cleaned and maintained the institution's grounds and buildings, washed laundry, etc. Federal Prison Industries, a government corporation, employed about one third of the inmate population in the manufacture of furniture, electronic cables and equipment. In the evenings inmates were encouraged to attend classes taught by the faculty of local community colleges and universities, inside the prison compound.

We were provided with clean clothing and the food was about average institutional standard. The living quarters were warm and dry and for many men the bars were useful as shelves on which to store books or possesions. The gym and exercise yard provided ample facilities for maintaining physical health and the U.S.Public Health Service hospital attached to the prison took care of those who became ill.

In many ways the atmosphere of the prison in 1974 was that of a boarding school for oversized teen-agers. No guns were allowed inside the compound; these were restricted to the guntowers, and the guards and other staff circulated freely among the inmates. Many inmates who had "done time" in other prisons said that McNeil wasn't a real prison.

In real prisons, they said, an inmate might be murdered if he were seen talking to a guard, on the assumption that he must be informing or "snitching." At McNeil even the hardened "cons" could be seen talking and joking with the guards. In many state prisons there are armed guards who constantly monitor the

inmate population from gunwalks which run everywhere inside the prison, and these guards from time to time find it necessary to shoot inmates. At McNeil Island being "shot" implied being written up in a disciplinary report and possibly locked up in disciplinary segregation, not a trip to the hospital or morgue (except for the few inmates literally shot while trying to escape).

Though the comparatively peaceful atmosphere at McNeil Island was partly a tribute to the skillful manipulation of men's expectations (everyone knew that McNeil wasn't a place for violence), it was also reinforced by the immediate transfer to another prison of any seriously misbehaving inmates.

Despite the prison's mellow atmosphere, the gulf between staff members and inmates went much deeper than might be guessed from surface appearances. Surprisingly to me, most inmates viewed themselves as victims of an unjust and unfair system. They saw society, the government and especially the prison staff as enemies in an unending conflict, viewing themselves in much the same light as American prisoners of war in Germany during WW II. In this struggle almost any tactic was considered to be justified.

Few inmates considered themselves to be criminals, few believed that they had done anything wrong and almost all had constructed elaborate rationalizations for their criminal behavior. A bank robber who felt mistreated by the system would plot the robbery of more banks, to "get even," for example.

Violations of many of the prison's rules were so common as to be almost expected. In fact, I eventually came to believe that many staff members covertly encouraged trivial rule-breaking behaviors because these minor "hustles" kept many inmates happily occupied in comparatively harmless behavior. It seemed to me that a major goal of most inmates was to "get away with something" as often as possible.

Thus, the inmates working in the laundry would separate out the most desirable clothing and sell it to inmates who would pay with packages of cigarettes. The inmates working in the mess hall would steal the best food to sell it to men who would cook it in their cells on cleverly designed stoves which burned toilet paper. Considerable inventiveness and creativity was applied to such rule-breaking and surprisingly successful improvisations were made from limited materials. Needless to say, the trading and selling of anything among inmates was illegal, as was cooking food in the cells.

The theft of sugar is a good example of minor rule-breaking. The prison's commissary sold sugar and coffee (among other things) which inmates could keep in their cells for personal use. The food served in the mess hall was not to be removed from the mess hall (a sanitation rule). Inmates rarely bought sugar in the commissary. At mealtimes it was common to see a furtive inmate glancing at the guards before slipping a sugar container off his table, to empty it into a bag under the cover of the table top. Other men would simply steal container and all, later discarding the glass sugar dispenser in a trash can.

Spoons were another target for theft. Inmates would often steal a spoon from the mess hall for their coffee and then would throw it the garbage after using it, rather than wash it and reuse it. When questioned about this behavior, they might proudly point out that this obstructs "the system" and hence is good. Laundry provides a final example. Some inmates would carefully toss dirty clothing into the garbage instead of into the laundry, proudly increasing the expense of operating the prison in any way possible. Interestingly, these men

were the first to complain loudly when there was a shortage of spoons and clothing.

Stealing among inmates was also common and armed robbery, sometimes with a stolen and sharpened screwdriver as a weapon, was not unheard of. Of course lying and manipulation were common modes of interaction.

Drugs were easily available and gambling was very common. Both of these activities often involved the exchange of "green" money, illegal for inmates to possess. Searches by guards would occasionally turn up tens of thousands of dollars in contraband cash. Homosexuality, gambling and drugs were considered by inmates and staff to be the focus of most violent incidents

Men chose various ways of adapting to prison life. Many inmates simply "did their time" as quietly as possible. Some organized a "hustle" and led a busy life involved in many "deals." Some men convinced the hospital staff to prescribe medication for them and spent most of their prison sentence sleeping. In extreme cases, a man might sleep nearly 20 hours daily. Some inmates became heavily involved in "programming", participating in every possible rehabilitation program in an effort to win early release, usually with open cynicism when talking to fellow inmates and with polished dishonesty when talking to staff members. And, of course, some inmates made sincere efforts to make their time in prison a time of growth and learning.

Many of the prison staff were retired military men seeking a second retirement pension. But some of the staff were younger and some were college students studying criminology or psychology, hoping one day to become prison administrators. The older staff were mostly cynical, viewing inmates as "animals" who must be kept under control and certainly never trusted or believed. The younger staff members often started out with an open and trusting attitude and with a sincere desire to help inmates. But usually this idealism would vanish in bitterness after countless lies and manipulations by the most polished criminals. I was surprised at the level of fairness and tolerance which most of the staff managed to maintain.

In a well-known study, Rosenhan (1973) arranged for healthy pseudopatients to request admission to 12 different mental hospitals, pretending prior to admission that they experienced auditory hallucinations. Upon admission to each hospital the pseudopatients stopped simulating any symptoms. The histories they gave to the admitting doctors were honest expect in describing their professions and symptoms. Once on the ward each pseudopatient behaved as he normally would.

The pseudopatients were never detected by the hospital staff members although many (about 1/3) of the mental patients recognized the pseudopatients' health and deduced from their notetaking behavior that they were doctors or reporters, checking up on the hospital. The staff members of the hospital interpreted each normal behavior of a pseudopatient as another symptom of illness, behaviors which would of course be seen as healthy by observers with other expectations.

In addition to powerful expectation effects similar to those reported by Rosenhan (1973), in the prison setting the sociopathic label is tremendously reinforced by the fact that most inmates actually are engaging in sociopathic lying and manipulation of the staff. Thus any behavior is interpreted as just more evidence of this pathology and very little trust or open communication exists between inmate and staff. One staff member explained to me: "It doesn't matter what you say or do, I'm not going to believe that you are sincere."

Many convicts are extremely sexist and common cellhouse conversation is full of boasting and tales of the exploitation of women. Yochelson and Samenow (1977) suggest that the criminal personality is incapable of sustained sentimentality. Though criminals may be briefly very sentimental over small children or pets, they rarely feel empathy for the victims of their crimes - especially their family and friends who are manipulated and hurt many times over the years.

The prison's inmate population contains many blacks and Chicanos, and many of the remaining Caucasian population are from the lower economic and social classes. White middle-class inmates are a minority here. The preponderance of "minority" group inmates suggests one of the many correctional dilemmas. Social theorists (e.g., Schur, 1969) and most prison inmates hold that their disadvantaged environment was responsible for their life of crime and that they were helpless victims of society. At the other extreme, criminal personality theorists Yochelson and Samenow (1977) hold that the criminal alone is totally responsible for having chosen to be an outlaw. I suspect that the truth lies between the extreme positions.

One popular sociological model of deviance (Lemert, 1951) separates deviants into two main categories: primary deviants who are labeled deviant because of their unexpected deviant behavior and secondary deviants who behave in a deviant manner because they have been labeled deviant and they are simply living up to the expectations surrounding that label. Of course all ghetto dwellers who are exposed to the pressures which produce secondary deviance do not become criminals. Most choose to live responsible lives. But it is clear that the crime rate is higher in the lower classes and this must be at least partly attributable to economic and psychological pressures.

Regardless of how they became criminals, almost all prison inmates assume the victim stance (and usually overlook the victims of their crimes).

The victim stance is a mirror image of the humanist view of life, a view in which each person enjoys accepting responsibility for creating his or her present experience. The victims argue that they were molded by genetic and environmental factors and that they couldn't help becoming criminals. This starkly determinist view of life is a needlessly gloomy one. The humanist will agree that environmental and genetic factors are strong influences on human behavior, but they are not the only influences. The humanist believes in the existence of free will as a metaforce potentially more powerful than environmental or genetic factors.

The victims live by reacting and resisting the circumstances which they believe victimize them. Rollo May (1969) had something insightful to say about this life position:

> Protest is half-developed will. Dependent, like the child on parents, it borrows its impetus from its enemy. This gradually empties the will of content; you are always the shadow of your adversary, waiting for him to move so that you can move yourself. (p. 193)

Many prison inmates do lead shadow lives. Sensing this, they seek excitement and stimulation whenever possible, in an effort to feel more alive.

Many of the heroin addicts I talked with at McNeil Island agreed that they would not want to get their heroin at a clinic, for free. They said that the excitement of stealing and robbing, selling the stolen goods, finding a "connection", buying drugs and playing "cops and robbers" was at least as

important as the drug experience. For such men, life at a regular job is a kind of living death. They are excitement addicts.

Meaning in life does not have to be negative, a resistance against. As Victor Frankel's (1959) experience in concentration camps reveled, positive meaning may be found in any experience.

Cohen (1955) suggested that delinquents turn middle class values upside down to create a value system in which they can succeed. But it is clear that at least one major middle-class value has not been inverted: the drive for status. The emphasis our society places upon success, material gain and status has produced pressures which some "losers" relieve by becoming outlaws, members of a subculture where success appears easier to attain.

This inversion of values appears in prison society in many ways. Convicts who are friends may establish a pattern of ritually exchanging blows and/or extremely profane insults daily. An inmate who wants to express approval of something or someone may say "that's really bad!" A heroin addict will brag about how large his habit was, when he was "on the streets."

Perhaps another way of looking at this is from Erickson's (1968) viewpoint. He holds that a person's identifications are critically important in molding behavior. Society's "losers" in some cases choose to identify with the defiant outlaw who wins in battle with a corrupt system, or who loses in heroic style.

The Transactional Analysis (Steiner, 1974) idea of life scripts which people choose at an early age is another model related to Erickson's (1968). It is very common for prison inmates to have a life script which calls for an early death, often in a gun battle with the police. Inmates who participate in the prison's TA peer counselor program frequently describe such imagined scenes, and sadly they all too often go on to act them out later. Other popular scripts also have tragic endings at an early age, with grieving relatives weeping with sorrow at the end, in a very "satisfying" manner.

An inmate committee selects the films which are shown in the auditorium here. The choice of films yields further insight into the role models with which inmates identify. Almost all of the films selected are concerned with violence and/or sex. As might be expected, the most popular films are those in which outlaws outwit the red-necked and bungling police, usually with considerable violence. The killing of informers is another popular film topic.

Although there has always been an undercurrent of tension in the prison, this was much more intense in 1977. The population had grown so that the four man cells now contained ten and twelve men. During the first 18 months of my return to prison there were five murders in the institution and many violent incidents of lesser severity. The Federal prison system had become so crowded that it was no longer possible to transfer all violent inmates to other prisons. The average inmate age dropped to nearly 30 years, and the younger inmates were more often involved in violent incidents.

I hoped to help to lower the tension level by offering biofeedback stress management training. A new and sympathetic psychologist had joined the staff while I was free on bond, and he shared my interest in offering new programs for the inmate population. Over a period of a few months we integrated a group of related programs: biofeedback training, yoga, Zen meditation, tai-chi and Transactional Analysis T-groups. Later in my stay at McNeil Island I began doing work for the Drug Abuse Program (DAP) as well. The DAP unit offers Rational Self

Counseling (Maultsby, 1975), Criminal Personality (Yochelson and Samenow, 1977), a jogging group, biofeedback training and classes in interpersonal relations. All of these programs are voluntary although the DAP unit offers better living conditions for inmates who participate in therapy groups.

I think it will be helpful to briefly discuss the various rehabilitation programs at McNeil Island. They can be divided into two groups: "talk" therapies which deal only with the mind (such as Rational Self Counseling, Criminal Personality and Transactional Analysis T-groups) and those which deal with the mind/body system (such as biofeedback, yoga, Zen meditation, tai-chi and jogging).

Alexander Lowen (1967) and other humanists who focus on the mind/body system have suggested that knots in human consciousness (traumatic incidents and complexes in the unconscious) may create corresponding knots of muscle tension in the body. These theories also suggest that many people live very limited lives, cut off from their bodies and from a full experience of life. Psychosomatic, stress-related disorders are common among inmates. It can be argued that many of these problems develop because people learn to cut off awareness of their bodies' warning signals. It is noteworthy that many prison inmates adopt a "mask", a bland facial expression to hide feelings which others may not accept.

Biofeedback training is one effective method of teaching people to regain awareness of their bodies and to relax chronic tension. Tai-chi and yoga are also good techniques for learning such skills. The theory of tai-chi discusses the flow of "chi" or energy through the body and the breaking up of blockages which impede that flow. This may lead to resolution of old psychic conflicts and better mental health. It may improve a person's ability to live fully.

Jean Ayres (1974) suggests that some behavioral disorders stem from a lack of vestibular integration. This theory suggests that the cerebral cortex has to take over some routine motor tasks if the lower brain systems (e.g., cerebellum) fail to handle them, and this excessive loading of the cortex interferes with the proper development of higher mental abilities and thus leads to behavior and learning disorders. Disciplines such as tai-chi and yoga promote vestibular integration and may help to correct such dysfunctions.

Many inmates live out of the present. They may relive the past over and over, recounting tales of past crimes or defeats to themselves and to each other, or dreaming about future riches or revenge. One of the common threads running through the Psychology Service programs is emphasis on experiencing the present moment fully. This focus on present-time experience is an old concept in Eastern traditions (e.g., Zen, tai-chi and yoga) which has been adopted by the Gestalt therapists of the West (Perls, 1969).

Most humanists would agree that our culture places an excessive emphasis on competition, domination and acquisition. Some prison inmates argue that these powerful drives, amplified by constant advertising in the media, forced them into crime. One of the goals of an ideal treatment programs would be to help these men shift their perceived locus of control in the internal direction, to give them an opportunity to examine alternative value systems and select their own values consciously.

Richard Alpert visited me in the San Francisco County Jail, early in my entanglement in the prison system, and suggested that we try to convert the prisons into monasteries. He pointed out the parallels between the institutions:

in both places the inhabitants do not have to make decisions about food, clothing or housing since these are standardized and provided. There is plenty of time for contemplation and meditation.

Some inmates, who would never volunteer to participate in a "treatment" program, were happy to participate in Zen meditation, yoga and tai-chi when they were viewed as spiritual disciplines. Thus these programs were treatment for some, self-improvement for others and spiritual for others.

The Criminal Personality (Yochelson and Samenow, 1977) treatment program focuses on individual responsibility. The theory suggests that criminals are extremely irresponsible and that they suffer from a number of "thinking errors" which distinguish them from responsible citizens. The treatment method concentrates on changing these thinking patterns, making extensive use of phenomenological reports. Impeccable behavior and sustained self-disgust are two of the main goals of the program. It is probably not surprising that few inmates choose sustained therapy of this type. Those who maintain long term participation do seem to derive real benefits from the therapy.

The Rational Self Counseling therapy deals teaches inmates to accept more responsibility for their emotions and helps to shift their locus of control in a more internal direction. The techniques are simple and a fair percentage of the participating inmates succeed in applying them in their daily lives in prison.

The Transactional Analysis T-groups deal mostly with people's interactions (transactions) with each other. These groups are led by inmates trained in Aequalis, a peer counselor training program. Although there is considerable emphasis on the techniques of Transactional Analysis, Gestalt and Psychodrama are also sometimes used. As with the other therapeutic modalities, some inmates seem to derive real benefit from the program, but there are still cases of "advanced" inmates lapsing into extreme criminal behavior.

Although some inmates unquestionably benefit from these programs, only a portion of the inmate population chooses to get involved in them and only some of those men actually are sincere. Perhaps five percent of the inmate population, to be generous, is sincerely interested in rehabilitation or self-improvement. Most inmates can easily identify the sincere few, but staff members have a difficult time separating the sincere from the manipulators.

The self-improvement programs offered by the Education Department succeed at about the same low rate. Many men participate in college classes only because they can collect substantial Veteran's Administration benefits for their attendance. I think that the largest percentage of sincere students can be found in the Chicano group in the Adult Basic Education classes.

The logotype of the Federal Bureau of Prisons consists of three nested "C's". These stand for custody, care and corrections, and are said by some to symbolize the primary functions of the prison system. I think that our correctional systems might improve if we reexamine our ideas of their purposes.

I attended a symposium at U.C. Santa Barbara in 1974 where a number of prison wardens and correctional experts shared their views of the criminal justice system. These experts made several interesting points. First, they pointed out, the prison system processes such a small portion of the total criminal population that it is impossible for it to directly produce any statistically significant change in the crime rate. Only through a secondary process such as general deterrence could the prison system hope to have any impact on crime

rates. Many of the experts agreed that general deterrence is not very effective for many crimes, although it may work well for others (e.g., speeding on the highways is deterred fairly effectively by police giving out citations conspicuously).

Thus, they argued, it really doesn't matter, from one point of view, if they execute every criminal in prison or if they rehabilitate all of them. They suggested that the purpose of the prison system is not to reduce the crime rate but rather to perform a ritual symbolic act which upholds society's part of the social contract which requires the individual to give up his or her right to personal vengeance. The process is politically mediated. Citizens put pressure on political leaders to change the prison system if they perceive the punishment there as too harsh or too lenient. This process is sometimes complicated by mistaken beliefs in rehabilitation, they said.

They argued that rehabilitation is a concept which has been proven to fail. One of the wardens suggested that it was a concept which had never really been tested. He pointed to the civil service structure of prisons, explaining that is it almost impossible to fire incompetent staff. Thus, he said, many staff members are poorly qualified to administer new rehabilitation programs and they often actively oppose them.

I believe that forced rehabilitation is unlikely to work, and I think that voluntary programs are doomed to low success rates while inmates are living in crowded prisons where the hard-core convicts set the social norms and values. An inmate sincerely interested in change is quite unpopular in that community and all the social pressures work against rehabilitation. I think that attempting to combine several functions in one system has resulted in none of them being performed very well.

The prison system does perform the necessary ritual symbolic act for society. But it certainly does not do this with maximum efficiency. Public punishments of one sort or another (e.g., a return to the use of stocks, public whipping, etc.) might do this cruelty. But we also expect the prisons to isolate criminals from society, in the vain hope this will reduce the crime rate. We expect the prisons to rehabilitate criminals and at the same time we expect them to punish and deter.

Separating these functions in some manner might yield better results. It also would be beneficial (at least on the symbolic level) if the criminal justice system showed more concern for the victims of crimes, as individuals. Sentencing non-violent criminals to make restitution to their victims through community service work might be a step in this direction. For some criminals this might lead to empathy with their victims. I also suggest the use of treatment programs where the density of criminals is low enough to minimize the negative social pressures which help to discourage change.

The present prison system, because it combines punishment with efforts at rehabilitation, cuts off the normal expression of inmate sexuality (there is no conjugal visiting in the Federal prison system). Consider Maslow's (1948) hierarchy of needs in connection with this. When sexual needs remain unsatisfied it is much less likely that a person will seek self-actualization (with the exception of those who can adapt well to monastic life). Further, any therapy aimed at rehabilitation of the criminal should ideally include his whole family. These considerations suggest that a therapeutic community should include entire family units whenever possible.

I don't pretend to have answers to the complex correctional problems which have been briefly discussed above. I do suggest that redefinition of the problems may help generate solutions. Of course many of the problems, discussed here in connection with prison inmates, are not unique to them. Most of these problems are more general in our culture.

Although the criminal must accept responsibility for his offenses, society clearly must also accept some responsibility for creating a climate in which crime breeds. The unjust social conditions and the excessively materialistic and competitive ethics of our time also need to change if we want less crime and a more healthy society.

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