

# Research in Penal Institutions

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RESEARCH in penal institutions is research conducted by people (researchers) on or with other people (inmates or staff), helped or hindered by these people or by yet other people (who have certain vested interests in these matters). All this adds up to a very complicated situation indeed and one cannot, in a short article, take up more than a few aspects of it or put to you anything more subtle than one obviously loaded view of it, that of a prison psychologist.

There are certain problems which some of us are very conscious of and feel very strongly about. These centre largely around questions of whether research should be done by inside people or outside people or both together; whether some research is best done in one of these ways and other research in other ways; what are the advantages and disadvantages of one method over the other and so on. We could look at all this from the point of view of research theory and design, but it may be more useful to begin by personalising these questions and giving the

flavour of the kind of feelings that in practice intrude into the discussion and handling of these problems of research planning and execution.

Very briefly, the general background situation as regards research in penal institutions can be regarded as one in which many people in the field, both specialists and laymen, recognise the need for research, want to do it themselves but have little scope for this—partly because the pressures of practical routine work prevent them and partly because the authorities have been slow to accept the idea of either pure or applied research as an essential and integral part of any institutional treatment system which aspires to be efficient. According to this view the real need is for “a fully-built-in operational research procedure”.

Some time ago, prison psychologists as a group expressed very similar opinions. After recognising that there is a place for all sorts

\* Based on a paper read to a British Sociological Association Weekend Conference, December 1960.

of research in the world of criminology, we went on to say this: "At the best, however, we regard 'outside' research by universities or other research organisations or by individual research workers, with mixed feelings. We realise that some of these investigators may bring to their task skills and knowledge which we ourselves lack; we also know that most of them are seriously deficient in specialised knowledge of prison conditions. In their most extreme form, these deficiencies not only vitiate the research results of such workers but also result in distorted accounts of prison work. As regards the latter, we are particularly concerned with the unfortunate repercussions which such work will have, and has in fact had in some circumstances, on the work of prison psychologists and especially on our relations with colleagues and inmates.

"At present, we are expected to 'co-operate' with outside workers and to provide advice, as well as assistance for them. We are also driven to do so in many cases to protect our own professional interests. The paradox exists of psychologists devoting time to assisting in activities which to a large extent run counter to their own research aspirations. The ambivalence and frustration underlying such concealed assistance to others makes even the assistance itself of very dubious quality.

"This situation is clearly unsatisfactory for all concerned. We would suggest that prison psychologists, either as a group or through

their Chief, should be consulted on the necessity and advisability of any piece of 'outside' research at the earliest possible point, i.e. when any particular scheme is being planned or projected and before official permission is given. We feel that in all cases our views should be sought on whether any project agreed as necessary should be undertaken by outside workers alone or in real partnership with prison psychologists or whether prison teams could best conduct such work themselves. As regards the first of these possibilities, we feel that any advice we might offer should be duly acknowledged and that such advisory roles should be recognised and budgeted for as part of our work load.

"We are, however, concerned that such outside research might be regarded as completely adequate by itself, that research be left at that without any recognition of the need to supplement it by other approaches which, as far as the Prison Service is concerned, we should regard as more realistic and likely to prove more fruitful in any case.

"We consider that research done within the prison field by prison personnel in contact with offenders and experienced in the understanding of their attitudes and behaviour is a really urgent necessity. We feel that at least equal priority should be given to investigations of what actually happens in prison in terms of the mental processes and social relationships of people undergoing

training, to studies of the nature of the prison culture and its impact on the persons concerned. More specific training problems, such as 'the good prisoner', resistance to training, absconding, failure, the detection of potential recidivists among Star prisoners, we regard as pre-eminently suitable for research by prison staffs, even as likely to be investigated successfully only in this way. We feel that, though such work should probably be conducted by research teams involving various types of prison personnel, psychologists are particularly well suited, by the nature of their training and techniques, to occupy central roles in the planning and execution of such projects.

"Beyond that, we see a place for 'pure' research, whether by use of tests and questionnaires, or from the vantage point of intimate training and therapeutic contact with prisoners, on a wide range of matters from, for example, the effect of family separation in childhood to the results of physical treatment of mental abnormalities.

"Finally—and more fundamentally—we would like to see adequate recognition given to research as a central feature of the psychologist's whole approach to his work, acceptance of the scientific attitude of mind as involving constant scrutiny of methods, validation of techniques, the rigorous testing-out of hypotheses and verification of judgments. This can only be achieved if adequate time and

opportunity is provided for psychologists within the normal operational performance of their duties for continuous follow-up of their diagnosis, conclusions and recommendations into the succeeding stages of training and return to society."

In another context this has been said: "One is driven to regard the research model of academic teams attempting to operate largely on their own without properly integrated and recognised field assistance as an extremely uneconomic way of spending research money".

We should perhaps concentrate on the general point of view which is expressed in such passages rather than their detailed content. It seems likely that such feelings are not peculiar to psychologists in prisons but are shared to a greater or lesser degree by others—doctors, assistant governors, social workers and so on. Indeed one would suspect that similar feelings might easily be generated in Probation Officers for example or certain specialists in factories in relation to outside investigators in these areas.

This kind of problem crops up in its most acute form, of course, when the "outside" research threat involves the same discipline "inside". To some extent the problem is easier, for example, for sociologists who penetrate into prisons since there are no sociologists in there already, occupying either scientific or inmate roles as far as I know. Yet something of

these difficulties exists for sociologists as well because boundaries are difficult to define (where does sociology end and social psychology begin) and because prison personnel of all types and levels tend to guard their experience jealously, to be over-sensitive about it, to over-value it in some ways and under-value it in others. In general they tend to be suspicious or sceptical of the expertise possessed by any outsiders. All of this gets muddled up in controversies about the value of practical knowledge and experience of real criminals as opposed to academic theory.

Much could be said about the pros and cons of one type of research worker as opposed to another or of different types of research roles, especially in relation to the kind of sociological-psychological research that almost all of us would regard as overdue in penal institutions—studies of the prison organisation and culture and their effects on prisoners either directly or indirectly. One can balance the advantage of, say, the fresh outside approach against time wasted by naive students learning the facts of life inside or contrasting the relative independence of the outsider with the restraints and prejudices operating on inside workers because of their "official" roles, responsibilities, and so on. My own bias here tends to favour the operational research role as neither necessarily reducing one's objectivity nor limiting one's information, at least, not more than

any other kind of role. One can often see the researcher from outside taking up or being seduced into concealed roles of which he may not even be aware. He is then no more free from emotional distortions or biases than the inside worker but is simply caught up in involvements of a different kind. Indeed one could argue that one of the advantages which the experienced inside worker may have in this respect is that of having worked through a lot of these problems whereas the outside researcher may still have to struggle with his feelings for the duration of his project, distorting his data in the process.

## II

The kind of problems which arouse the greatest heat or concern in inside personnel are probably those which arise in the area of "treatment research".

As regards "objectivity", for example, it can seriously be argued that research with the aim of evaluating a treatment technique, such as group counselling by lay staff, or a training system such as that of detention centres, is most appropriately conducted by people whose attitudes to the methods in question are more positive than negative and who are themselves practised in these methods. To regard this as simply a device for ensuring that these techniques will be seen at their best rather than their worst by investigators with positive identifications is too crude a way of putting the position. One

wants rather to ensure that the investigator is accepted as sufficiently benevolent or understanding to enable group counsellors, for example, to behave normally, i.e. without the anxieties and inhibitions which would be created by a person seen as hostile or even as completely uninvolved. One might take this position further and argue for the researcher having a "helpful" operational role in this case, for example, the provision of technical support and supervision in staff counsellor groups. One would prefer, of course, if such a research worker also had a certain self-awareness to enable him to minimise distorted perceptions of his data and to off-set any gross bias in his interpretation of his material and his own effect on it. The inside researcher may be seen as a rival but the outside researcher is in danger of landing in the much more difficult situation of being regarded as a critic as well. It does not require much imagination to see that the investigation of social interaction among and between inmates and staff in a prison wing may constitute a much greater threat for prison officers or officials than for inmates. The defensive behaviour thus generated in such personnel may range from the most obvious obstructiveness through subtle interchange with the social situation which is being studied, to all sorts of concealed and unconscious resistance to the whole research operation.

One could also discuss "naive research" in this field—research,

which is not research at all because of its lack of satisfactory design. One could criticise "successful experiments" which are "experiments" only in the sense of trying something that has never been tried before and "successful" only because people have assessed them uncritically or from a need to justify them. A more serious danger, however, is that of new developments being written off as "failures" when the crudeness of their investigation or the interpretation of "inconclusive" results has played into the hands of those who are resistant to change.

The classical, one might even say the "academic" approach to these evaluations problems, has tended to rest on simple control designs which compare "treated" samples with "untreated" controls.\* Blanket treatment comparisons, or "one-factor" studies, based on this model have proved to be singularly unsuccessful in providing clear-cut answers to the questions asked. The disappointments and frustrations suffered by researchers in America has forced them to doubt the value of "proving" or "gross" research conducted on such a basis and to argue the need for intensive "finding-out" research as a preliminary and for further "fine" (i.e. theory-integrated) research as

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\* The term "untreated" is misleading for a start. In our field it is always a question of comparing people being given one treatment (the new) with people given another treatment (the old) or deprived of the new.

a necessary sequel to any crucial studies.\*

Simple control designs are on the way out and the whole trend of American studies is one which recognises that when treatment or training methods, which, no matter how tightly devised, inevitably include variations, are applied to groups which are inevitably heterogeneous, differential responses can be expected in the different sub-groups involved. This being so, an "interaction" design is necessary to take care of the possibility that such sub-group differences or trends within groups may cancel each other out and treatment effects thus become "masked" or lost in over-all

group comparisons. As Grant\* has recently summarised the Californian position: "The question is changing from 'which correctional program is best' to 'which program is best for which kind of delinquent?' Our researchers are trying to develop *classifications* which are *related* to treatment *alternatives*."

The treatment field is perhaps at its most vulnerable in the face of "premature research" which can be wasteful and misleading in its results. There is no great virtue in rushing in during the development stages of some technique and getting negative treatment findings which would have been anticipated by well informed expert opinion. Such "destructive" research can only be justified where exaggerated, stupid or dangerous claims are made for a treatment method or no serious attempt at all is being made to develop limited evaluative studies aimed at refining technique and tying it up with some sort of rationale or theory. It may take a long time to build up in this way

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\* There is an excellent discussion of the relative values and functions of "gross" as compared with "fine" research by Wellman J. Warner in Chapter IX of *Youthful Offenders at Highfields*. H. Ashley Weeks et al. University of Michigan Press. Ann Arbor 1958.

Similar references to "proving" as opposed to "finding-out" research (especially when the former has a one-factor design) can be found in Norman Rudy's Appendix I, *SIPU Phase II, Thirty-Man Caseload Study*, pp. 30-31. California Department of Corrections. 1958. The general conclusions here are that without adequate qualitative exploratory studies as a preliminary, quantitative "proving" research may be uneconomic and even futile.

See also *PICO, First Technical Report* 1958, p. 75 and *IT (Intensive Treatment Programme) First Annual Report* 1959, p. 14.

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\* Grant, J. Douglas, in *The Research Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March, 1961, California Department of Corrections.

The classical reference in this connection is to Grant, J. D. and Grant, M. Q. *A Group Dynamics Approach to the Treatment of Non-conformists in the Navy*, Annals. Vol. 322, March 1959, pp. 126-135.

to the point where one can meaningfully or usefully apply crucial tests,\* i.e. in terms of efficiency in relation to some criterion such as re-conviction or detectable personality change. (By "useful and meaningful results" I mean ones which enable people to work out where they go from there.)

The fundamental dilemma here is one where pressure is exerted to push ahead with "proving" or "gross" research to evaluate new techniques as soon as possible. The earlier one does this the less likely is one to be in a position to make such research "sensitive" or precise, i.e. designed in such a way as to make its results meaningful and conclusive enough to lead to sound practical decisions. Warnert† has pointed out that, left to himself, the social scientist would rarely seek answers to the kind of questions that the public or the policy-makers ask, at least in the form in which they are asked. The closer the research worker is integrated within the penal field, the more certain this is. The paranoia of those who would like to see research done from the inside often takes the form of a

suspicion that the outside researcher is much more likely than they themselves are to collude with the authorities in asking the wrong questions.

This is no place to explore the jungle of criteria against which to judge "success". One aspect of this, however, is of special importance to us. Those who make excursions into prisons from ivory towers outside are mainly (and rightly) concerned with the "outcome" of new or existing training methods as measured "objectively". Inside operational researchers, and the innovators themselves, tend to regard them as doing less than justice to more immediate considerations, effects on institutional processes and so on, which often seem amenable only to "subjective" assessment. Fenton\* has expressed this view very firmly in relation to group counselling in California and its complicated repercussions on, for example, institutional morale and management.

The general point to be emphasized is that the attitudes to research which underlie this kind of assertion are those which are typically generated from the "inside". Outside research workers tend to be regarded with the suspicion that they not only fail to share but fail to "understand" these views. They tend to be distrusted as likely to apply methods and criteria which those in the field would regard as inadequate,

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\* Fenton, N. *Group Counselling: A Preface to its use in Correctional and Welfare Agencies*. Institute for the Study of Crime and Delinquency, California, 1961, p. 34. "Once begun, the program should be given sufficient time under patient and critical auspices before making any comprehensive evaluations as to its usefulness."

† p. 138, op cit. Note 2.

\* pp. 20-21, op cit. Note 4.

or to draw conclusions which those inside would regard as oversimplified and even unfair.

### III

Ideally one would look forward to a situation which fostered or facilitated real co-operation between research workers from outside and those with research and operational roles inside. It is only too obvious that this would profit all concerned. It is also becoming obvious that the most effective studies in institutions are likely to be those conducted by interdisciplinary teams comprising whatever clusters of specialists and lay field experts seem most appropriate to any particular penal institutional problem.

It may be some time, however, before we achieve this ideal research situation. We can perhaps best work towards it by recognising the situation for what it is now.

If operational research by inside personnel is allowed to grow to reasonable proportions and to develop "along the right lines" (!), we shall become more receptive to what is often seen at the moment as the intrusion of the outside worker. Until we solve our own problems here, we are hardly likely to be falling over ourselves in order to solve other peoples'. Not that anyone need despair. By and large we are quite nice people who are capable of settling to work and get on reasonably well with other

nice people, even if there is a certain amount of emotional wear and tear in the process of achieving these good relationships.

In the same way, as outside researchers learn to involve inside personnel in their projects, from the planning stage onwards, they will be received even more warmly. (Here I don't mean the professor in charge having a high level chat with some remote official in the Home Office or the Prison Commission, but contact made almost from the start at the institutional working level with those most likely to be directly concerned.)

As things are at present, it would seem that we need to pay a lot more attention to the interpersonal aspects of research situations, especially as they affect other workers in prisons. My own guess would be that a good deal more could be done, especially for young research students, to prepare them in advance about this, to alert them without creating panic, to what sort of emotional experience they are in for when they come into penal institutions, to support them while they are undergoing these trauma, in short to make them more sophisticated about what is involved in the conduct of research by people, on people, with people, or despite people, in penal institutions.

### IV

One might well let these matters rest there as reasonably complete and sufficiently complicated but certain bright young men in



California<sup>7</sup> have taken things even further and begun to open up the possibilities of involving inmates in research roles.

Now to those who have read *My Six Convicts*\* or *Life Plus 99*† the notion of prisoners as research assistants, administering and scoring tests or questionnaires and doing statistical calculation will not appear as entirely new. But that was only a beginning. One of the many suggestive and significant ideas which emerged from the work done by the U. S. Navy with non-conformists at Camp Elliott‡ during the war was that of using correctional institutions as self-study communities. This "do-it-yourself" approach has now spread to the Research Unit of the

Californian Medical Faculty.§ Flippancy, however, will have no effect in undermining the solid arguments used to justify these innovations—the opportunity they give the offender for repaying his debt to society, their relevance for the development of the "therapeutic community" atmosphere, the methodological gains for research itself in cracking the inmate culture from within or reducing personal bias by a diversified team approach. Need one spoil these beautiful thoughts by enlarging on them? Perhaps we can risk one final comment.

Questions of whether research in penal institutions should be undertaken by outside or inside staff or by anyone at all may not yet have become very hot issues, except for those most directly concerned. But should these ideas of inmate participation in research ever look like being imported and taken up seriously, then watch people rush to get into the act.

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\* Wilson, D. P., London, Hamish Hamilton, 1951.

† Leopold, N., London. Gollancz, 1958.

‡ Grant, J. Douglas, *The Use of Correctional Institutions as Self-Study Communities in Social Research*. B. J. Delinq. Vol. VII, 4 April 1957.

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§ op cit. Note 3. This edition of the Quarterly contains three articles on research work by prisoners (two of them by inmates). The first describes a survey on women's attitudes to group therapy, planned, conducted and analysed by inmates, and the other two refer to the part played by inmates in a data-processing unit, not only in scoring these tests etc. but in planning data analysis and writing reports.