Fearful Custodial or Fearless Personal Relations: Prison Guards’ Fear as a Factor Shaping Staff-Inmate Relation Prototype

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Abstract: A previous article described five relationship prototypes, ranging from punitive to integrative, that exist between prison staff and inmates. The present study describes the relationship between these prototypes and anxiety that results from personal, professional, and job insecurity. The greater this anxiety and insecurity, the more likely a staff member is to be punitively oriented. In recent years, there has been a revival of the rehabilitation orientation in the criminal justice system. The results suggest that unless measures are taken to reduce anxiety and insecurity among prison staff, they will be unable to tolerate the close staff-inmate relations necessary in a rehabilitation-oriented institution.

A number of researchers recently have found correctional officers’ attitudes toward prisoners to be an increasingly salient research topic. However, most existing research focuses on the now archaic “therapy-custody” conflict (Steadman, Morrissey, & Robbins, 1985) with only very little attention paid to the wide range of orientations open to prison officers (Ben-David, 1992).

In addition, existing literature presents contradictory findings regarding correctional officers’ attitudes toward prisoners. Some studies suggest that many prison officers have a pro-inmate orientation (Whitehead, Linquist, & Klofas, 1987) and are interested in expanding the human service component of their roles (Shamir & Drory, 1982). Others report quite a different picture, suggesting that there are still some officers who live up to old stereotypes (Marquart & Roebuck, 1985); repeated incidents of correctional officers’ violence in prison are reported (Poole & Pogrebin, 1987) as well as reports of guards who become more and more intolerant of inmates over time (Crouch & Alpert, 1982).

The apparent contradiction in these findings may be attributable to different conditions existent in the prisons investigated. Steadmean et al. (1985) cautioned that “we can be led astray by seeking generalizability, or propositions that hold for all organizations regardless of their situational context” (p. 165) and suggested that the strategy most likely to advance our knowledge about complex organizations is to identify the conditions under which our theoretical formulations are valid.
Following this line of reasoning, the present article aims to identify some of the conditions that may account for differences in orientation and in staff-inmate relations that have been found to exist not only among prisons but also among staff members working at the same correctional institution.

Fear and anxiety are emotions that arise in response to danger. Real danger is a danger that is known, and realistic anxiety is anxiety about this danger. If a specific object is linked to the danger, the emotion is termed "fear"; if there is no specific object connected to the danger, the emotion felt is termed "anxiety" (Freud, 1926). Insecurity, or lack of safety, also causes anxiety (Sandler & Joffe, 1987). In addition to arousing affective states, danger and insecurity also trigger protective behaviors (Freud, 1926; Sandler, 1987). Type and magnitude of fear or insecurity in prison officials appear to be factors that may account for the existence of both the conservative "custodial" orientation on one hand and the more liberal "humanitarian" orientation on the other (Anson & Bloom, 1988; Glaser & Fry, 1987; Kauffman, 1988; Poole & Pogrebin, 1987; Shamir & Drory, 1982; Shapira & Navon, 1985). In this article, we analyze the importance of staff's feelings of fear and insecurity in the prison situation and the impact of these factors on staff-inmate relations.

SOURCES OF PRISON STAFF'S FEAR AND INSECURITY

Three facets of insecurity that have been widely discussed in research and theory on management, submissiveness, employment, and workplace relations have a bearing on the subject of staff-inmate relations:

1. fear for personal or physical security;
2. professional insecurity; and
3. job insecurity or lack of peer, managerial, or administrative support.

Fear for personal safety was found to be relevant to interpersonal relations in general (Tadeschi, Gaes, & Rivers, 1977) and to relations in the workplace in particular (Flori & Mackenzie, 1971). Many people may argue that they face more physical danger in their jobs than do prison staff. However, few occupations entail daily contact with such a variety of sources of anxiety, fear, and insecurity. The possibility of serious injury—even death—from the hands of inmates is an every-day danger in prison (Anson & Bloom, 1988; Kauffman, 1988).

An even more fundamental source of insecurity is the prison official's feeling of professional insecurity—the feeling that his or her power has been eroded and forfeited due to an ongoing series of prison reforms (Hepburn, 1985, p. 149). Prison officers may feel that they lack the power necessary to do their jobs and to ensure their own safety as well as the safety of the inmates (Kauffman, 1988; Poole & Pogrebin, 1987; Willet, 1983). This professional insecurity is felt even more extremely by therapists working in prisons (Steadman et al., 1985) because,
although there are no clear criteria for "successful" therapeutic intervention, therapists constantly are faced with their "failures": recidivist prisoners (Cox, 1974).

The third source of insecurity is job insecurity—the feeling that prison officers lack the support, backing, and encouragement not only of their superiors (Willet, 1983) but possibly of their fellow officers as well (Kauffman, 1988). In addition, there is the constant threat of being sued by inmates (Poole & Pogrebin, 1987). All this leads the prison staff to feel isolated and vulnerable, betrayed and unsupported by the "system" (Poole & Pogrebin, 1987).

Generally, fear or insecurity may lead in opposite reactions: fight or flight, where the flight may be either physical or psychological (Lorenz, 1968; Rosenhan and Seligman, 1989; Sturup, 1968). Fear and insecurity can cause the prison officer to retreat toward ritualism and toward keeping a low profile (Poole & Pogrebin, 1987; Willet, 1983). Fear may also beget violence (Kauffman, 1988; Willet, 1983) and a punitive and tough attitude toward inmates and penal policy (Crouch & Alpert, 1982).

PROTOTYPES OF STAFF-INMATE RELATIONS

A previous article (Ben-David, 1992) conceptualized and validated five prototypes of staff-inmate relations. These prototypes, which exist on a continuum from "punitive" to "integrative" ("personal"), may briefly be described as follows:

The "punitive" type abstains as much as possible from communication with inmates, maintains authoritative status by ordering and demanding submission and obedience, and stereotypes all inmates—regardless of physical or mental status—as "bad" or "mean."

The "custodial" type relates to inmates as "kept" people and views guards' task as one of keeping the ward and the inmates clean. Inmates are expected to obey orders, and communication is limited to talk and role requirements.

The "patronage" type is protective, generally an authoritative figure who grants assistance, protection, and guidance to inmates perceived as weak and who answers inmates' instrumental needs and requests. Inmates are expected to cooperate with guidance efforts but not to "obey" or "submit."

The "therapist" type views inmates as patients—or as suffering from illness—and views his or her role as one of advising or guiding willingly cooperative patients. Interaction is limited to professional, therapeutic interactions, and relationships are controlled by ethical and professional considerations.

The "integrative" or "personal" type has an egalitarian orientation and is flexible, adaptable, and readily available for interaction. Inmates are perceived as people with status equal almost to that of the staff. Mode of interaction varies with need and circumstance and may be punitive, therapeutic, or custodial.
This study examines the hypothesis that the previously mentioned sources of insecurity are determining factors in the formation of staff-inmate relations prototype.

**METHOD**

The present study was carried out in the psychiatric ward of Ayalon prison, a maximum-security prison in Israel. The ward is administered by the Center for Mental Health and Clinical Criminology, which was founded in 1954 for the evaluation and treatment of prisoners with mental illness and mental disturbances (Silfen et al., 1976).

Although a psychiatric cell block may appear to be unique, in reality such a block is surprisingly similar to other blocks. It has bars, iron doors, lots of noise, and a concrete yard—just like any other prison ward. In its physical appearance, it bears no resemblance whatsoever to a quiet, pastoral psychiatric ward. The majority of the staff members are regular prison staff who are on duty 24 hours a day. Medical personnel are on duty only during regular business hours (with the exception of the duty psychiatrist and nurse). All rules and regulations of the prison are enforced; patients are required to clean and dress themselves and to work in accordance with their abilities. The patients are subject to the same strict rules of punishment and reward as are other prisoners (except in cases where the medical staff specifically intervenes) with regard to visitation, vacation, and parole.

Most information regarding staff-inmate relationships in total institutions is derived from anthropological observations conducted in selected institutions (Shapira & Navon, 1985). This method raises some question as to the validity of the findings. In a previous article, Ben-David (1992) employed both participant observation and self-report inventories to define prototypes. This article briefly reviews the self-report data on interaction prototype presented previously and presents new data on source of insecurity and on the connection between these two factors.

**PROCEDURE AND APPARATUS**

The self-report staff questionnaire (SQ) is an inventory consisting of 84 Thurstone scale-type items divided into four subscales matching the four components of staff-inmate relations: perception of the inmates, orientation of the relationship, relations model, and social distance (Ben-David, 1992, p. 210). The questionnaire was administered to each staff member. The degree to which each
TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF STAFF-INMATE RELATIONS PROTOTYPES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Punitive</th>
<th>Custodial</th>
<th>Patronage</th>
<th>Therapeutic</th>
<th>Integrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guards (N = 16)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapists (N = 19)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses (N = 5)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (N = 10)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N = 50)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

item reflected a given scale was assessed by the judges. Agreement with a given statement was coded as judged weight for that statement. The respondent’s score for each scale was computed as the median value of all the statements with which he or she agreed.

SUBJECTS

A total of 50 staff members, comprising 91% of the staff employed during the study, completed the SQ. Of these, 16 were guards and regular prison staff, 5 were nurses, 19 were therapists, and 10 were other staff (occupational therapists, secretaries, and social workers).

RESULTS

The distribution of the staff members’ relation prototypes is presented in Table 1. The findings suggest that the five prototypes are almost equally distributed among the staff of the psychiatric ward. Because some of the professional groups were small, they were combined into one category. Overall, the therapeutic prototype was the most prevalent (24.5%), followed by the punitive and custodial prototypes (20.4%), the integrative prototype (18.4%), and the patronage prototype (16.3%). Although these differences may be significant, the small sample size precludes generalization of findings at this stage (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Stinbrenner, & Bent, 1975).
TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF LEVELS OF INSECURITY, BY SOURCE OF INSECURITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Personal Insecurity</th>
<th>Professional Insecurity</th>
<th>Job Insecurity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>7 (14.3)</td>
<td>15 (30.0)</td>
<td>20 (40.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>16 (32.7)</td>
<td>14 (28.6)</td>
<td>14 (28.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>26 (53.0)</td>
<td>20 (40.8)</td>
<td>15 (30.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49 (100)</td>
<td>49 (100)</td>
<td>49 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Percentages are in parentheses.

TABLE 3
DISTRIBUTION OF THE FIVE STAFF-INMATE RELATIONS PROTOTYPES, BY SOURCE OF INSECURITY (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Insecurity</th>
<th>Punitive</th>
<th>Custodial</th>
<th>Patronage</th>
<th>Therapeutic</th>
<th>Integrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (n = 7)</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (n = 16)</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (n = 26)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (n = 20)</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (n = 14)</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (n = 15)</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (n = 10)</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (n = 13)</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (n = 26)</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among therapists, the integrative prototype was the most prevalent (42.1%), and all prototypes were manifest. Among the guards, all prototypes except the interactive one appeared, and the punitive prototype was the least prevalent. Among the nurses, the punitive prototype was by far the most prevalent, and the custodial and therapeutic prototypes were not represented.

Distribution of levels of personal, professional, and job security are presented in Table 2. Information for these variables was obtained for 49 of the 50 subjects. Results indicate that the majority of the subjects experienced low levels of personal insecurity (53.0%) and professional insecurity, but high levels of job insecurity (40.8%).

Table 3 shows the interactions between relationship prototype and source of insecurity, and Table 4 presents gamma and Pearson correlations between these variables. As seen in Table 3, most (71.0%) of the staff members who felt a high
level of personal-physical insecurity were characterized as punitive. All staff members characterized as integrative displayed a low level of personal insecurity. No staff members who felt a high level of personal insecurity were characterized as therapeutic, whereas 18.8% of those who felt a medium level of personal insecurity were thus characterized. A similar but less clear trend was found regarding professional insecurity. About half (53.0%) of the staff members who reported a low level of professional insecurity were characterized as integrative, and no member of the integrative group reported a high level of professional insecurity. Many of those staff members who felt a high level of insecurity were characterized as punitive (35.0%) or custodial (35.0%).

Surprisingly, 20.0% of those staff members who felt a high level of job insecurity were found to be characterized as integrative, and no staff member who felt a high level of job insecurity was characterized as therapeutic. Most other staff members who felt a high level of job insecurity were characterized as punitive (40.0%) or custodial (30.0%). This distribution is similar to those found in the other two insecurity categories.

The correlation between the level of personal-physical insecurity and staff-inmate relations (gamma = .727) suggests that this source of insecurity is the most significant determinant of relations prototype to job or professional insecurity. Second is professional insecurity (gamma = .631), and the least significant source of insecurity is job insecurity (gamma = .489). Because there is no measure of significance on the gamma test, the Pearson coefficients were also computed. All correlations were significant at the p = .000 level.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Realistic anxiety and fear are affective reactions to perceived danger, to expectation of specific impending harm (usually in the immediate future [Rofe, 1989; Rosenhan & Seligman, 1989]), or to insecurity (Sandler, 1987). The degree of danger one encounters has to do largely with one's job, and being on the staff
of a maximum-security psychiatric ward exposes one to a high degree of danger.

Perception of danger triggers a protective reaction (Freud, 1926), which may be one of fight or of flight, where flight may be either physical or psychological (Lorenz, 1968; Rosenhan & Seligman, 1989; Sturup, 1968).

Because fight reactions are highly reprobated by prison authorities and also leave one open to disciplinary, legal, and civil actions, the most viable reactions open to staff members are those characterized as flight. Thus it was not surprising that we found a high correlation between fear and insecurity and staff-member relation prototype. It was found that fearful staff members retreat to the safety of social boundaries and physical distance from the inmates characterized by the punitive relations prototype (see Poole & Pogrebin, 1987; Willet, 1983). Only those staffers not afraid of being injured by the inmates were able to loosen the boundaries and maintain closer relation with the inmates, as characterized by the integrative relations prototype.

Because “fear is aroused whenever we feel unable to control the probable outcome of a threatening situation” (Rofe, 1989, p. 151), a high level of professional insecurity—feelings of inadequacy, powerlessness, and/or lacking the professional tools to keep one’s self and the inmates in one’s charge safe—enhances the perception that one is in danger. Unfortunately, professional insecurity is inherent in the occupations of all prison staff (Hepburn, 1985). Prison personnel’s professional accomplishments are judged by the behavior of the prisoners of whom they are in charge: the degree to which prisoners adhere to ward regulations, keep the ward clean and quiet, and so on. In addition, prison personnel encounter again and again recidivist criminals who personify their inability to rehabilitate inmates. This may cause or enhance staff members’ feelings of inadequacy and their fear of being exposed as worthless, useless, and redundant (Cox, 1974; Kauffman, 1988; Poole & Pogrebin, 1987; Willet, 1983).

Job security, administrative or managerial support, and reinforcement can reduce professional insecurity. However, many staff members find themselves alone in the block, ward, or clinic, lacking job or administrative support and backing from their superiors (Willet, 1983). As a result, they do not feel free to be flexible or to act in accordance with constantly changing conditions and different prisoners’ requirements. They may also lack the necessary personal, job, and professional security factors that would enable them to deal more competently with dangerous violent prisoners and to face dangerous situations.

Despite the fact that the correlations described in this article are significant, the results should be interpreted with caution. The setting in which the experiment took place may be viewed by some as unique, and the small sample—made even smaller when broken down by profession—limits generalizability of the findings. Future research must address this problem in both mental and penal institutions.

In addition, this study addresses only the subjective perceptions of insecurity and their behavioral manifestations without addressing the internal or external etiological factors that contribute to them. It would be productive to examine
factors such as personality and object relations (Kernberg, 1984), which may contribute to the way personnel interpret reality and react to it.

The importance of this study lies mainly in the operational imperatives suggested by the findings. The correlation between insecurity of staff members and interaction prototype suggest that enhancing job, professional, and personal security is necessary to bring about more flexible and open staff-inmate relations. This will help to ensure better functioning of both staff and prisoners and, subsequently, of the entire prison system. In recent years, there has been a return to the rehabilitation model of criminal justice, and many prisons are becoming rehabilitation oriented and sponsoring educational and other rehabilitation programs (Glickman, 1983; Grande & Oseroff, 1991; Johnson, 1988; Junger-Tass, 1992; Louis & Sprager, 1990; Smith & Berlin, 1988). However, unless staff are free of the fear, anxiety, and insecurity that accompany their positions, they will not be able to tolerate the close relations that are necessary in a rehabilitation-oriented institution. Without minimal feelings of personal, professional, and job security, staff members are prone to choose between the fight or flight behavioral patterns and to behave in accordance with the punitive prototype rather than the more humanitarian and preferable prototypes.

REFERENCES


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