
THE ROLE OF THE PRISON PSYCHOLOGIST

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In the December, 1946 issue of *The American Psychologist* Dr. Carroll L. Shartle of Ohio State University outlines a job description for each of 28 principal psychological occupations. In his discussion of the prison psychologist five main duties are listed, and later in the examination of prospects in the field the author mentions that "Several states are planning postwar expansion in buildings and services rendered in this field."

In an attempt to re-evaluate the role behavior of the psychologist in the American penal institution from the stand-point of the prison administrator, a mimeographed letter was sent on November 3, 13, or 18 of this year to 265 persons responsible for the welfare of incarcerated charges. The present paper will deal only with the United States and Canadian replies which to date have surpassed the 40% mark. This unusually high return maybe accounted for in that the letter attempted to appeal to professional interests, was made to appear personal, and all out-of-state letters were sent by air-mail. Of those questioned there were included 100 wardens, 38 governmental (county, state and federal) directors, and 25 psychiatrists and psychologists. About 65% of the answers were sufficiently complete for coding and inclusion in this report. About half of the remaining 35% were notifications of referral.

The letter sent was not of the questionnaire type, and centered around the question, "What do prison administrators expect from the psychology section of their institutions and from other psychologists working elsewhere in this general field?" The latter part of this query was for the most part neglected.

The previously mentioned five points of Dr. Shartle are presented here in summary form:

1. Administers and interprets intelligence, vocational aptitude, and personality tests.
2. Interviews prisoner and prepares case reports.
3. Makes recommendations for parole and supplies technical information at staff meetings.
4. Assists in planning or revising programs for medically sponsored cases including psychiatric and severe disability cases.
5. Participates in research by investigating problems of penal psychology or test construction and prepares reports of findings.

Approximately 86% of the correspondents reported category one (that of testing) as important. Only a quarter of the sample mentioned interviewing, and about half felt that the advisory position on boards was an important task of their psychologists.

When number four is expanded into needs for group and individual therapy, beside that indeterminate desire for help expressed as "We want our psychologist to counsel and help in any way he can," it is discovered that the therapeutic role of the psychologist has greatly increased in the past few years. About 20% of the correspondents requested individual therapy procedures while 25% spoke of group therapy. There were in this category much overlapping, some very positive statements in both directions, and some evasiveness in the goal directives to be set up.

As to research in the penal institution it was gratifying to note that 28% of those replies studied mentioned expectations of research conducted in their institutions. Also about 10% of these sections are carrying on teaching of some kind on the graduate level with psychological and psychiatric internes.

This paper is based on the administrator's returns and this suggests further investigation might be made on what the psychologist himself believes his job to be. One might even ask the prisoners what they expect from the psychologist.

No separation was made in this study of the types of offenders under the jurisdiction of those contacted. This suggests that there might be significant differences in the work of the men involved in psychological study with juveniles as compared with an extreme represented by adult second, third, and fourth offenders. The trend seems to be that the former seeks to aid more by diagnosis and therapeutic correction, usually on an individual basis, while the latter attempts to classify and rehabilitate through group methods. There appear to be two main reasons for these differences: (1) due to lack of personnel and time individual methods are not practical for the large numbers of adult offenders and the psychologist can best spend his time orienting the prisoner vocationally for return to society, (2) because of the youth of the juvenile, social factors are seemingly more important than any other facet of his life, and he is often still pliable enough to be instructed or guided into proper social amenities by individual methods. An important exception is the highly successful supervised cottage life existing in many reformatories for adolescent boys and girls and young women where beside the individual attention offered, an important contribution is rendered by the effect of the group itself upon its members.

The psychologists in these institutions usually work immediately under the psychiatrist or classification officer, but even when the psychology section is somewhat separated from these allies, it must be stressed, especially to the members just entering clinical work, that they are part of a team. Psychologists are not competitors seeking to show evidence that they have an ability lacked by another group, which makes them unique in a rare manner and enables them to aid the prisoner more successfully if they are independent of their professional associates. A few correspondents, mainly from academic situations, spoke of the rivalry between the psychiatrist and psychologist both doing deep-level therapy. As we are here attempting to describe the role played as seen through the eyes of the administrator, such a controversy will not be discussed further. To us in the field, however, this may serve as an example and bring to mind some of the difficulties arising when there is lack of harmony in a clinical group.

The psychologist, therefore, in his advisory capacity has no right to assume that he can dictate policies, but he is usually urged to make suggestions and recommendations to the proper parties so that in the end, the warden, superintendent, or director of correctional activities will be informed as to more efficient methods and means of working with his charges.

Two main grievances were expressed by the data contributors. These were that: (1) psychologists too often express themselves in reports so filled with technical language that they were useless to the layman, and (2) recommendations were quite often not in keeping with the physical limits of the institution. In other words, what good is it to a warden to receive information that an inmate has the aptitude to be a watch repairman without explaining his aptitudes in terms of similar vocations offered by the prison?

Perhaps these objections are partial reasons for thirteen reports of individual state institutions having no resident psychologist. These included the state penitentiaries of Wyoming, Connecticut, Colorado, Idaho, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Oklahoma. This does not imply that each of the other states has a psychologist in its principal prison, and does not mean that the states mentioned do not take advantage of consultants.

In a terse two-line epistle from one warden we glean the following sentiment: "Dear Mr. Knowles, Received your letter in regard to the use of psychology at this institution. We do not have any psychologists employed here. Yours very truly." We should not like risking interpretation of this brief, matter of fact statement, but were it possible it would be interesting to have the answer to, "Why not?"

The other side of the scene shows that some prisons give the title and status of deputy warden to the staff psychologist, and others maintain that although they have two or three excellent psychologists already, they desire more.

Many of the administrators expect too much while others expect too little of their psychologists. Here as in other topics already discussed there was a large range of feelings expressed. Possibly this can best be illustrated by a few brief excerpts from the letters received.

From a warden in Wisconsin: "I would say that so far as we are concerned at this prison we expect quite a lot of things of a psychologist. I expect the psychologists on our staff to be the right-hand assistants of the psychiatrists." He goes on to say, "Fortunately for me, here at this institution I have three good psychologists, and they are of tremendous help to us."

From a reformatory superintendent in Connecticut: "At one time we had a full-time psychologist but, when we brought on the staff on full-time and in residence a physician with psychiatric training, testing became the only work asked of the psychologist."

A Colorado girl's reformatory writes: "I can not speak for other administrators but I would rather have one good psychologist than five psychiatrists. The former will try to help his clients by letting other staff members know their finding with the person they are working with. The latter will withhold information that other could use advantageously, and I have never caught a psychologist trying to play God."

A New Jersey woman's reformatory superintendent reports sixteen duties of the resident psychologist including "Psychometrics, helping inmates prepare bastardy charges, and taking groups of visitors around the institution."

An army colonel's letter reads, "The functions of a psychologist assigned to a disciplinary barracks and one practicing his profession in a free community differ mainly in the environment in which he practices."

The reply from an assistant superintendent of an institution in New York states: "The correctional field has provided a situation in which, for the present at least, the prison psychologist must be actively concerned with therapy. The recent use of group therapy as a means of developing insight has shown some promise for the correctional picture. Wherever such programs are in effect the psychologist must be expected to give his assistance."

On the other hand an Indian superintendent takes a different view, when he says, "The only generalization I would care to make and one which is made frequently is that too often our programs emphasize analysis and exhibit a *lack of planned action for individual treatment.*"

A Maryland man seems to attack the question in this manner, "The likelihood of the psychologist doing any treatment is small. Much of what passes for treatment is nothing more than reassurance that has turned out well." He goes on to say, "An exception to this is the group meetings that psychologists sometimes direct, in which men get a chance to speak out and relieve themselves of their feelings. This is called "group therapy" and it does relieve the tension that accumulates in prisons and so makes for better custodial care. (This is not the group therapy whereby personality is changed through affiliation with a group)."

The writer of this paper does not wish to delve into prognostications but it is apparent that the future role of the penal institution psychologist rests in the hands of men now in and those soon to enter the field. Several wardens and teachers recognize the following needs: A Michigan man writes, "A specific point I would like to stress is the matter of selection of students. Selection of students for training in correctional psychology should take into consideration temperament, physique, and general personality . . . Were we forced to select a prison psychologist on the basis of personality or on the basis of education, we would tend to select on the basis of personality, hoping that we would compensate for academic deficiencies later."

From an Indiana writer's letter we extract, "Psychologists MUST recognize and appreciate the problems of security and discipline — and — prison guards will therefore be much more amenable to some of the programs suggested by the professional group. In short, I often wonder if any university should grant a Ph.D. (to a man intending to enter this field) before the student has worked at least a year as a guard or shop supervisor."

No matter what our feelings might be after examining the differences of opinions and the seemingly confused status of the role here described, it is comforting to consider the question raised by the late Justice John Forbes Perkins of the Boston Juvenile Court who asked, "Which shall we have? A Philosophy of Achievement or a Philosophy of Excuse?"

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS: When 265 prison administrators and others working in penology were polled as to their attitudes upon the role of the penal institution psychologist it was found that these opinions varied greatly on some important points, but taken collectively several conclusions could be drawn that would be applicable to the general field:

1. The first of these and probably the most important is that the psychologist coming into an institution of this nature must adapt to the policies established by the heads to whom he is responsible. He must attend to their needs particularly as an advisor, serving thereby as a professional consultant.
2. The means by which he gathers data from the prisoner is generally considered to be by the use of psychometric instruments. Some officials desire the psychologist also to be an interviewer and case worker, but this is usually left to the psychiatric social worker or sociologist.
3. The amount and kind of therapy practiced is the most variable task and differs from institution to institution, ranging from little or none, through assisting the psychiatrist in his program, to the maximum of leading both group and individual sessions aimed at rehabilitation, correction, and psychological assistance.
4. Teaching on the graduate level and research is conducted in about 10-25% of the institutions polled.