

The Psychology Behind the Bars

Kavya Kolli

The Loomis Chaffee School

November 19, 2019

Many aspects of social psychology emerged on our trip to Osborne Correctional Institute. Through prior research, I entered with preconceptions about what it would be like. Parts of the tour and presentation supported my research but some parts also differed from what was said online. Many topics such as the toll prison life takes on both officers and inmates came through. Other aspects such as the main goals of rehabilitation and interactions between officers to inmate and inmate to inmate were also discussed. I connected the stories the officers and inmates told to topics such as aggression, heuristics, conformity, self- justification, persuasion, attributions, and prejudices. Through the many negative social aspects of prison, I concluded that the system overall affects everyone involved in it. I have also concluded that it has grown from aggressive models to more rehabilitative punishments in hopes to create a more positive and safe environment. Both the officers and inmates operate in groups where they each either work to stabilize trust among the groups or conform to fit in with the decisions of the others. They both also find many ways to justify their reasoning behind being a part of the prison system.

At Osborne Correctional Institute, there was a strong focus on rehabilitation. The officers continually described the ways they are working to set the inmates on a good track for after prison. The most publicized program seen on the website and heard throughout their discussion was the Service Dog program. Fox News 61 did a report on the program and it was shown as a program that helped inmates rehabilitate during their time in prison. Though the effort is great and the inmates such as Devante Pickett stated to the media how it changed his life, the program has some inconsistencies within the prison. Only a few inmates who changed their behavior and proved they were worthy of the program were allowed to participate in the program geared towards rehabilitation, still leaving a large focus on punishment within the prison. However,

though there is punishment, they have moved away from aggressive models of discipline (**chapter 6**). Officer Rubner discussed the ways he utilizes de-escalation to deal with intense punishment situations rather than getting physically aggressive. Another program they focused on and showed on their website was the education program allowing inmates to receive a college education from Asnuncktuck Community College while incarcerated. One of the inmates, Lenny, described the system as have been set up to allow for a growth mindset within and has created a goal the inmates can work towards to help them after life in prison (**chapter 2**). Since the education program is for those who behave well, the inmates who participate in the program are sliders within the prison community since they change from deviants to a team player along with the rest of society (**chapter 4**). Lenny also described how the rehabilitation program has been set up where other inmates who have turned their life around help those that have not. Another goal of the prison connected with rehabilitation is for them to build trust between officers and inmates (**chapter 5**). Officer Rubner stated that as a group the officers do not assert their authority as to not create a boundary of distrust and that they have conversations with the inmates geared towards understanding how they are feeling. However, another inconsistency is that they said they do not speak to the inmates for more than 20 seconds, causing me to question how they can build trust in such a short amount of time.

The officers stated that there are many effects of working in a prison. Due to the long hours and time they spend at the prison, they tend to act more like they do when they are on duty when they are outside of the prison. Officer Rubner self-justified how he acts outside of prison and said that he is more aggressive and uses foul language regularly due to his job (**chapter 3**). This is also an example of situational attributions, where he blames the environment around him

as the reason for how he acts (**chapter 2**). Officer Rubner also described the effects of the outside environment on how both the officers and inmates act in prison. He stated that in the summer when there is lots of heat, the aggression level goes up among both groups (**chapter 6**). Though some of how he acts may be because of his time in prison, I believe many of his actions are also due to his natural temper. I thought that he seemed to be more assertive and authoritative in his house as well, as seen when he said he decided to be an officer to have a steady income for his family as head of the household. Another example of his nature was when he described how he talks to his wife. He said due to prison he is more aggressive towards her, but it may also be how he is. All the officers reiterated how much they loved their job. They used the peripheral route to persuasion by using simple and vague explanations rather than using statistics to make themselves feel better about their career path (**chapter 5**). Officer Tebo stated that she was curious about the ongoings of prison and that it was the reason she was introduced into the system. I thought that when she said “there is always something new” as a way to describe the positive ongoings of prison, it was more like she was convincing herself that her job was fun and enjoyable all the time. She was using an aspect of the halo effect heuristic, where she tried not to use feelings to guide her thoughts, so that her mindset would remain happy even though her career is not very positive (**chapter 2**). Another action Officer Rubner described was priming when dealing with inmates. He described that when interacting with the inmates, you have to always be aware of what is going on. The officers use the small social cues to show the inmates that they have crossed the line, such as when they get more aggressive (**chapter 2**). One example of this is how Officer Rubner moves closer when he senses tension between another officer and an inmate. This may cause the inmate to change what they are thinking and it reestablishes the

aspect of punishment. This awareness is something all the officers carry with them within and outside of the prison.

The inmates also shared their stories and experiences on the effects of living in a prison.

The first inmate who spoke, Lenny, described how he was first introduced to the life of crime. He blamed his father, who was in jail when he was growing up and used situational attribution to justify his actions (**chapter 2**). Since his family on his father's side was very involved in crime, he too became involved due to his family situation. He also blamed his actions on the fact that he felt like he was missing part of his father since he was not able to grow up with him in the house. He did not blame his internal mindset or disposition. To prove that his actions were not due to his upbringing by his mother, he compared himself to his sister. He used social comparison by showing the difference between his sister's achievements as a pharmacist and his lack of accomplishments due to his bad actions (**chapter 2**). His use of social comparison seems to have made him feel more guilty about his actions. The isolated environment of prison also must have festered his guilt making him think about why he chose to make poor decisions. By comparing himself to his sister and seeing his sister succeeding and achieving things, he seems to have used that as inspiration to get an education and pursue a career in computer science for a career after prison. The other inmate who spoke to us was named Rob. As an older inmate who has experienced prison for many years, specifically in the 80s, he has gained status as what they called "OG." This has caused him to have credibility and prevalence within the prison where others listen to what he says and respect him (**chapter 5**). This also may have caused him to possibly have power over the other inmates and also have allowed him to either guide or support the inmates that listen to him. Lenny described the social interactions between prisoners as well.

He spoke about being a peer supporter and being the image of positive actions after life in prison. He told us about how he helps others who want to turn their lives around. However, sometimes his efforts do not work. He explained that due to the large groups of gangs, many people turn back to the life of crime and making bad decisions. This is an example of groupthink and conformity (**chapter 4**). The inmates who revert to their old mentalities feel like they belong when they are a part of their gang, so to fit in they continue to make bad decisions along with the others in the group. Another social aspect Rob discusses between the inmates was prejudice and discrimination depending on the crime the inmate committed (**chapter 7**). Rob discussed his thoughts on child molesters and abusers where he said that many of the inmates do not support those types of crimes and immediately discriminate against the inmates who have committed such crimes.

The Osborne Correctional Institute has been a place that represents many aspects of social psychology. The entire system seems to try to utilize rehabilitation rather than aggression to enhance the environment for officers and inmates. Both the officers and inmates make decisions based on both their environment and disposition, and they both justify their actions with the fact that others have caused them to act the way they do. There are also many power dynamics in many ways such as between inmates and from officers to inmates, which causes authority figures to arise. All the people who are a part of the system also find ways to cope with being there such as using different routes of persuasion and working to better themselves. The interactions between all the people dictate how each person acts, and they tend to work together in groups to create the most beneficial situation for themselves in hopes to fit in and stay safe.

## Reference Page

Osborn CI. (n.d.). Retrieved from

<http://www.ct.gov/doc/cwp/view.asp?a=1499&Q=265440&docNav=|>.

Service dogs trained by inmates ready to help Veterans in need. (2019, October 9). Retrieved November 2019, from

<https://fox61.com/2019/10/08/service-dogs-trained-by-inmates-ready-to-help-veterans-in-need/>.

Aronson, E., & Aronson, J. (2018). *The Social Animal*. New York: Worth Publishers, Macmillan Learning.