Group Dynamics and the Prison Guard Subculture: Is the Subculture an Impediment to Helping Inmates?

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Abstract: *It is often argued that correctional officers as a group hold values that are antiethical to helping inmates. This assumption links "guard subculture" values to reinforcing group solidarity among correctional officers. This paper explores some of the literature on correctional officers from the perspective of the social psychology of group dynamics. Its conclusion are that factors which appear to foster group cohesion and group identification among correctional officers are relatively weak or absent. Under conditions of stress, however, these conditions are capable of mobilization. In general, this paper finds that the guard subculture is not necessarily an impediment to positive guard behaviors.*

I. Review of the Literature

In recent years the study of correctional officers has taken some new and promising directions. We are beginning to emerge from the stereotypical view of correctional officers as anti-inmate and immune to efforts aimed at diverting repressive activities in more positive and helpful directions (Johnson, 1977; Johnson and Price, 1981; Lombardo, 1981; Lombardo, 1982; Toch and Klofas, 1982). As we gain perspective, the guard/custodian is being understood as a potential and actual human services agent: providing goods and services, acting as a referral agent and aiding in the institutional adjustment of inmates (Lombardo, 1982).

Though "ground" has been broken in the area of correctional officer "role" characteristics and new data and perspectives are providing fresh insight into highly relevant aspects of prison life (Johnson and Toch, 1982), the image of the "prison guard subculture" remains largely intact. The content of the guard subculture and the peer pressure reinforcing the "group norms" of this subculture are still portrayed as powerful forces in maintaining anti-inmate and anti-prison reform sentiment among guards. For example, Crouch and Marquart (1980) reflect this view when they describe the "Fundamental Tenents of Guard Work" (89-90). These tenents include: (1) that security and control are paramount; and (2) that social distance must be maintained from inmates. Descriptively these tenents and the guard subculture are characterized by suspicion of inmates and administrators, with rigidity as a response to potential changes in custodial routine. In addition, role conflict (custody/treatment), cynicism,

and authoritarian attitudes become part of the guard subcultural experience (Crouch and Marquart, 1980:91-95). Crouch and Marquart base these findings on an examination of published studies of guard socialization blended with four and one-half months of participant-observation working as "...uniformed officers in large (over 1500) maximum security prison facilities located in separate states..."; and data gathering during "formal and informal" interviews with guards at a variety of prisons.

In defining the subculture of violence, Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) suggest that "...a given conduct norm or set of values must function to govern the conduct in a variety of situations in order to classify that norm or value-set as a (sub)culturally expected or required response and not merely a statistical modal reaction." These authors maintain that those "Tenents" of the guard subculture described by Crouch and Marquart must actually govern behavior and not merely exist as an expression of opinion.

There is little evidence on this question of attitude-behavior consistency among correction officers. In studying guards at Auburn Prison in New York, Lombardo (1981) did discover that his subjects failed to provide evidence of normative consensus among the officer group. For example, when officers were asked to specify those forms of guard behavior that officers generally find unacceptable, 50 officers mentioned 17 different behaviors and only one item (dealing in contraband) was identified by more than 25% of the men. This finding raises some suspicions concerning the strength of the guard subculture as an inhibiting factor in the development of positive guard behavior and adaptiveness to change.

In a recent article, Klofas and Toch (1982) approach the guard subculture through the use of opinion surveys among correctional officers in New York State in an attempt to analyze group data and to test whether or not and to what extent correctional officers: (1) share the views of their fellow officers; (2) believe that others share their views; and (3) maintain anti-inmate and anti-reform biases. Surprisingly, in light of the normal view of the guard subculture, Klofas and Toch (19820 reach conclusions which appear to contradict those of Crouch and Marquart. They write:

> If a CO "subculture" refers to shared procustodial norms, such a subculture is a myth. It is a myth given the level of professionalism in the sample and subsamples. We see differences in distributions of types in settings, but pro-professional attitudes prevail in all prisons; at worst (at Ossining), the subculture is a composite of projected estimates. (251)

In another study focusing on alienation and job enrichment among correctional officers Toch and Klofas (1982) write (again contradicting Crouch and Marquart)

> We have confirmed the conclusions of prior research suggesting that officers over time arrive at a comfortable definition of appropriate social distance and constructive levels of relatedness. There is no evidence of "role conflict" among officers, of unendurable strain, cognitive dissonance or experienced pressure of conflicting goals. Nor is there evidence of "hack" definition of the officer's role in opposition to a "reintegrative" stance of his superiors.

In addition to finding that most officers were interested in expanding their human services roles, the Toch and Klofas studies also found the presence of "pluralistic ignorance" among the prison guards surveyed. This means that those guards who held progressive views felt themselves to be in the minority (though in fact they were the majority). Those who held non-progressive views (reflecting the traditional guard subculture tenents) felt themselves to be in the majority (though in fact they were in the minority). Based on these findings Toch and Klofas term the non-progressive guard subculture a myth.

Klofas and Toch did, however, find that the subcultural custodians do exist. These officers expressed anti-intimate and non-progressive attitudes and felt that others shared their views. This group was the smallest of the three types identified, the others being "Lonely Braves"—hold professional attitudes and feel others are non-professional; and "Supported Majority" held professional attitudes and accurately estimates professionalism in other officers. Pure Subcultural Custodians are the most vocal and most likely to spread their influence. As Klofas and Toch (1982) write:

> Ideally, respectable subcultures socialize, and contain members who disseminate their norms. Our CO portrait differs, in that (1) younger, "newer" officers come closest to subcultural presumptions; (2) normative enclaves are imports of alienation rather than work-oriented (custody-related) subcultural collectivities; and (3) subcultural assumptions are encapsulated among autonomous incestuous subgroups of insulated free believers.

Differences in the findings between Crouch and Marquart with those of Klofas and Toch, may reflect differences in research methods: (1) participant observation and formal and informal interviews vs. opinion surveys; (2) differences in research locations (Southern and Southwestern prisons vs. prisons in the Northeast) and (3) differences in conceptual starting points (assuming that a subculture exists and seeking to describe it vs. trying to establish the existence of the subculture). Whatever the sources, these conflicting findings point to the central concern of discussions of prison guard subcultures: that is, to what extent are the attitudes and behaviors of individuals occupying occupational roles related to their membership in the occupational group called "correctional officers"?

II. Position of this Article

This article explores the correctional officer subculture by measuring the "reality" of prison guard work behavior and attitudes against the yard stick of the social psychology of group dynamics. Here, the existence of a subculture, a group reality and peer pressure are not taken for granted. Rather, findings from studies of correctional officers are integrated with concepts from "group dynamics" to aid in clarifying the group processes operating within this occupational group.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

1. The Concept of Group as Applied to Correction Officers:

Correctional officers are by definition members of the same occupational group. This is true in a descriptive sense regardless of where the individual officer is employed. Correctional officers have essentially the same job title and during their careers they perform essentially the same tasks. What is much less certain, however, is the degree to which "correctional officers" exist as a *group phenomenon* apart from this occupational identification.

Literature which refers to prison guards as an occupational group almost always contains the implicit and untested assumption that prison guards are a group in the *dynamic sense of* the word. Prison guards are usually treated as a collective unit whether this unit is called the "Regime of the Custodians" (Sykes, 1958); the "a Patriarchical Regime" (Mathiesen, 1965; The "Regime of the Correctors" (Shover, 1978); or the "Correctional Officer or Prison Guard Subculture" (Duffee, 1974; Webb and Morris, 1978). This assumption of group identity and cohesiveness is easily maintained because correctional officers are most often viewed in opposition to other groups: inmates (Sykes, 1958; Mathiesen, 1965) and more recently in opposition to the prison administration (Duffee, 1974; Jacobs and Retsky, 1975; Lombardo, 1981). Only recently, however, has any attention been paid to the dynamics of guard group behavior (Lombardo, 1981: 145-149; Klofas and Toch, 1982).

Except Toch and Klofas' studies discussed above, only Duffee (1974) attempts to deal with the threshold problem of establishing the existence of a "guard subculture." Duffee attempts to do this by demonstrating that correctional officers *as a group* possess attitudes and values different from those of correctional administrators *as a group*. However, using aggregate data to demonstrate that two groups evaluate correctional policies and practices differently fails to provide any information concerning the degree to which any individual within those groups feels or experiences psychological relatedness to the "others" with which he has been lumped. This psychological relatedness manifests itself in two distinct ways: in the form of (1) *group cohesion:* the degree to which members desire to remain in the group (Cartwright, 1968:91) and (2) *reference groups behavior:* relating oneself or *aspiring* to relate oneself psychologically to some social unit (Sherif, 1967:228). Though not addressing these questions directly, studies of correction officer attitudes and behaviors do provide some evidence concerning the existence of group cohesion and reference group behavior among prison guards during normal day-to-day conditions. This qualifier ("normal day to day conditions") is necessary because group processes are known to differ under "Extreme Circumstances" e.g., the period of time before, during, and after riots (Janis, 1968; Lombardo, 1982).

2. Group Cohesion:

In discussing the dynamics of group cohesion, Cartwright (1968) proposes four interacting sets of variables which when explored in detail provide a basis for determining the degree to which individual group members desire to remain within the group "...to contribute to its welfare, to advance its objectives, and to participate in its activities (Cartwright, 1968:91). These variables include: (1) the group members *motivations* for joining the group; (2) the *incentives* the group offers for continued participation; (3) the *expectancy,* i.e., the likelihood that group membership will have positive or negative consequences; and (4) a *"comparison level,"* i.e., the level of satisfaction the individual expects group membership will provide (Cartwright, 1968:96). To reach somewhat tentative (but hopefully suggestive) conclusions concerning the likelihood of strong group cohesion among correctional officer literature related to the first two of these variables (motivations for joining and incentives for staying) will be explored.

3. Motive Basis for Attraction:

As motivations for joining a particular group, Cartwright (1968) includes such factors as the person's need for affiliation, recognition, money, security or some other need the group can help satisfy. In reviewing studies of prison guards which contain material dealing with prison guard recruitment one finds that the persons who enter this occupation generally do so for job security, pay or simply to have a job (Jacobs and Retsky, 1975; Crouch and Marquart, 1980; Lombardo, 1982). What is apparent here is that an individual's decision to apply for entrance into the occupational group "prison guard" is in reality an application for multiple group membership. At the same time one becomes a guard, one also becomes a civil servant, a member of a department of corrections and an employee of the Criminal Justice System. The salience of each membership may be different for different individuals and may vary for the same individual over time and situation. Looking at these motivations, it is

obvious that the "civil servant" category has the highest salience in the decision, and that membership in the guard fraternity is of little importance. This interpretation is supported by evidence which finds the occupation, prison guard, is often an acceptable alternative to police work (another civil service job) and to factory work (a non-civil service occupation with frequently uncertain tenure). From this perspective, then, the variables included in the motive basis for attraction would not be condusive to fostering group cohesion among correctional officers. If the nature of the work (the group task) or if the group (a correctional officer is a high status occupation or "correctional officers are people I like to be around") were incentives for individuals, then "group" cohesion among correctional officers might be expected. When such conditions are obviously absent, correctional officers must still be considered individuals.

4. Incentives for Group Participation:

In this collection of variables Cartwright (1968) includes group goals, cooperative interdependence, leadership, decision-making patterns, structural characteristics and the group atmosphere. To the extent that these characteristics of the organization are compatible with individual motivations these group characteristics tend to foster group cohesion. Examining each of these variables in the context of correctional officer work, however, impediments to the development of correctional officer group cohesion again emerge.

Except for *goals* put forward by correctional officer union organizations (Jacobs and Crotty, 1980), the goals traditionally associated with correctional officer work do not derive from correctional officers themselves. Rather, the goals of correctional work are those of the correctional agency for which he or she works, or goals of the Criminal Justice System, or generally goals of the public at large. Retribution, restraint, rehabilitation and deterrence may be the goals of correctional agencies and institutions but they may have little relevance for the guard as he goes about his daily tasks (Lombardo, 1981: 38-55). For the guard group, goals tend to be irrelevant as individuals pursue their own individual needs for "activity," "autonomy" and "privacy" (Lombardo, 1981: 45-47). In performing their assigned tasks, the degree of *cooperative interdependence* necessary for group cohesion is also low. Though correctional officers are often dependent on each other in times of crisis, the reality of guard work fosters independence. Officers working in different job locations (cell blocks, towers, yards, prison industries) have little functional relationship to one another (Lombardo, 1981; Jacobs and Retsky, 1975; Carroll, 1980). Guards working different shifts also work independently. I am not suggesting that failure to integrate tasks across shift or job assignment boundaries does not result in difficulties for prison administrators. I am suggesting, however, that built in task interdependence

necessary to maintain strong group cohesion does not normally exist. In fact, what does seem to characterize prison guards in any one institution is a lack of cooperation among officers and at times outright conflict (Carroll, 1980: 313-316; Lombardo, 1981: 122-126).

With regard to *leadership and decision-making,* Cartwright (1968) cites evidence which suggests that "...A democratic form of organization that encourages widespread participation in decision-making appears generally to induce more attraction to the group than one in which decisions are centralized." Research on correctional officers consistently shows these two conditions (democratic organization and widespred participation in decision-making) to be lacking in correctional work. (Cheek and Miller, 1979; Jacobs and Retsky, 1975; Carroll, 1980; Lombardo, 1981). Guards consistently feel that they have little opportunity to provide input into decisions which affect their work, and that they are treated as children or incompetent by prison administrators. Such perceptions are unlikely to promote attraction to the correctional officer group.

Structurally, Cartwright (1968) suggests that decentralized communications networks, central positions in communications, and secure high-status positions and/or the availability of low status positions with the possibility for advancement all enhance the likelihood of group cohesion. Correction officers, however, generally express dissatisfaction with prison communications and their peripheral location in prison communications networks (Lombardo, 1981; Cheek, 1979; Jacobs and Crotty (1980). In addition, guards perceive their status to be low with few opportunities for advancement.

Finally, Cartwright (1968) indicates that the *general atmosphere* within which a group operates can have an effect on its attractiveness to group members. The atmosphere of correction officer work is generally one of suspicion and mistrust. Mistrust of inmates, administrators and even fellow officers (Guenther and Guenther, 1980: 105-168; Lombardo, 1981. Such conditions tend to drive group members into isolated behaviors rather than toward developing cohesive group attachments.

If correctional officers were a close-knit group, it might be expected that exposing an officer's indiscretions to supervision personnel would be frowned upon—that a "code of silence" would be enforced as a group norm. There is, however, little evidence to support this normative behavior. At Auburn Prison, Lombardo (1981) discovered the acceptability of informing behavior under certain circumstances. In addition, the perception that promotional opportunities and job assignments often hinge on politics creates an atmosphere of competition rather than cooperation among officers and provides incentives for informing. In this context the cynicism and suspicion identified by Crouch and Marquart (1980) serve to inhibit dynamic group development rather than fostering strong group cohesion.

5. Reference Group Behavior and External Threats:

What group solidarity officers do experience appears to arise as a response to perceived threats from either inmates or correctional administers. Group solidarity may quickly form from a top of a general dissension of opinions this might be partially explained by the existence of "'pluralistic' ignorance" among correctional officers see discussion Klofas and Toch, 1982 above. In response to a threat assumed "group" beliefs (held by the "subcultural custodians" of Klofas and Toch's study) may form the basis of a group identity with which each feels the others agree. This group identity manifests itself as the "subculture" described by Crouch and Marquart (1980). Anti-inmate and anti-reform views of the "subcultural custodians" tend to dominate the views of correctional officers when fears of impending violence (possible riot), fears of administrative changes (a new reform warden enters the scene), fears of court intervention (court decisions granting inmates some "new right," or fears engendered by investigative commissions (from legislatives or the public).

Under threat from these perceived antagonists, correctional officers may begin to communicate among each other. Janis (1968) asserts that "...external threats foster increased reliance on the group.." In this communication guards are engaging in "the work of worrying"—i.e., sharing their fears about the potential impact of new and potentially dangerous conditions.

This communication process, produced by external threats, is necessary for the formation of strong group identification, for the use of "guard group" as a reference group by individual guards. In discussing the process of communication in social groups Festinger (1968) describes situations in which individuals depend on "social reality" to determine the validity of their attitudes, opinions, and beliefs when they are unable to depend on experiences of "physical reality" to test these beliefs. Depending on "physical reality" denotes that the meaning individuals derive from their experiences is tested against the reality that they as individuals experience to be true. The "social reality" is that determined by and tested against the experiences of others gathered during a process of communication. Where "social reality" dominates an individual's thinking, the individual is using his group context as a reference group. "A psychological relatedness" between the individual and his group develops. From Klofas and Toch's study of pluralistic ignorance it would seem likely that the oppositional character of the guard subculture would gain its character from the disproportionate impact of the "subcultural custodians" in the development of "social reality" among guards. As Toch and Klofas (1982) observe:

The strongest purveyors of "hard-nosed" pro-custodial imagery are those who hold the view most strongly themselves, project it onto their peers, and are immune to the influence of others. These men, as Schanch (1932) suggests play a disproportionate role in trying to influence others through their unrepresentative, self appointed role as spokesmen.

Studies of job dissatisfaction and work related stress among correctional officers identify a number of conditions existing in correctional work environments which are also salient to the formation of group identity under conditions of extreme danger. Cheek and Miller (1979), Lombardo (1981) and others have identified administrative practices and job conditions as important factors. Lack of clear guidelines, poor communication, not being treated as a professional, doing things against one's better judgment constantly appear as stress inducers.

These conditions are similar to those outlined by Janis (1968) for the development of an informal group code (the guard subcultural tenents) which opposes the goals and code of the larger organization (a prison system or administration desiring to induce change). These conditions include:

> (a) most men in the unit have specific grievances against the super ordinate organization, and feel resentful toward the top leadership for neglecting their needs, for inflicting unnecessary deprivations or for imposing extraordinarily harsh demands which menace their personal welfare; (b) the members perceive their group as having no channel open for communicating their grievances to the top levels of the hierarchy or are convinced that such communications would be wholly ineffective in inducing any favorable changes, (c) the organization is perceived as having little or no opportunity for detecting the deviant behavior in question; and (d) one or more central persons in the local unit communicates disaffiliate sentiments to the others and sets an example, either by personally acting in a way that is contrary to the organization's norms or by failing to use their power to prevent someone else in the same group from doing so.

III. Conclusions

By relating concepts from the social psychology of group behavior to the literature on correctional officers it would appear, at least tentatively, that there is little reason to believe that a guard subculture capable of influencing the attitudes and behaviors of individual guards exists under normal prison conditions. Factors which appear to foster group cohesion and group identification appear to be relatively weak or absent. Evidence of poor communication, competition, and lack of normative consensus would appear to support this conclusion.

However, under conditions of stress of "external danger" created by threats to the *status quo,* the subcultural values and group solidarity

around these anti-inmate and anti-administration values are capable of mobilization. Guards emerge as a group in response to threats from the outside, while they act as isolated individuals under normal circumstances.

Finally, from this perspective the seemingly contradictory findings of Crouch and Marquart and Klofas and Toch seem to make sense. Crouch and Marquart's findings concerning the "Tenents of the Guard Subculture" may represent the feelings of the "Subcultural Custodians" identified by Klofas and Toch. Relying on participant observation and interviews (sampling technique not described) it is possible that those most forthcoming with strong opinions concerning prison activities were the "Subcultural Custodians." Klofas and Toch, using survey data from a much larger sample were thus more likely to obtain a wider variety of opinions. Lombardo's (1981) study of guards at Auburn (again with a "represent-ative" sample) finds diversity of opinion and little "group" consensus or cohesion. In general, then it would seem that those seeking to understand "subcultural" characteristics of the prison guard group would benefit from paying attention to the group dynamics of prison guard behaviors.

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