

Research on crowding in prisons: Methodological problems and ethical concerns

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A recent paper by Paulus et al in *The Bulletin* has suggested that prisons are excellent milieus in which to study social phenomena such as crowding and its effects on behavior. We believe that such a suggestion is fraught with methodological and ethical pitfalls which are not discussed by Paulus et al. We believe that a short discussion of these pitfalls is necessary as a supplement to the Paulus et al paper.

In a recent article published in the *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, Paulus, McCain, and Cox (1973) suggested that prisons provide an excellent milieu for the study of the effects of crowding in "realistically crowded conditions" with a population which is "reasonably heterogeneous." It is our contention that these assertions are likely misleading. We are further concerned that some important variables are confounded in research on captive populations, and finally, we are concerned that the next "logical" step in the study of crowding, that of experimental manipulation (a procedure that Paulus et al do *not* advocate), risks running afoul of the basic ethical tenants of our discipline. It is not our contention that research on prisoners is always unethical, but rather, each project must be carefully examined from both the scientific and ethical standpoint.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Paulus et al state that, "Opportunities are available for long-term observation and testing in a population that is reasonably heterogeneous with regard to a number of personality and biographical characteristics." While the populations of prisons may be heterogeneous on *some* biographical and personality variables, there are several variables which can not be considered heterogeneous in these populations. Miscarriages of justice notwithstanding, prisoners are incarcerated for illegal and antisocial behavior, and a large proportion of the crimes involve some degree of violence. Insofar as a positive relationship between crowding and aggression in same-sex groups has been demonstrated by Freedman et al (1972), and insofar as American prisons are almost universally unisexual and crowded, it is to be expected that enhanced aggressiveness will be found in prison studies where crowding is manipulated (either by E design or prison requirement) relative to that occurring in nonprison populations. This fact combined with the previously mentioned violent proclivities of many inmates would surely result in a distorted relationship

between crowding and aggression. It would be unsound to consider these results as representative of the general population.

Another variable which distinguishes prison populations from the general population is the skewed racial proportions found in most prisons. Statistics provided by the California Department of Corrections (1973) indicate that 32% of the inmates are black, whereas blacks constitute only 11% of the general population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972). It may well be that there are racial differences in the social response to crowding as suggested by the studies which examine the differential utility of space by members of differing races and subcultures (e.g., Willis, 1966; Baxter, 1970; Watson & Graves, 1966; Aiello & Jones, 1971).

Another methodological consideration is the effect on behavior of captivity itself. Heidiger (1950) and Scott (1958), among others, have noted vast differences in nonhuman behavior as a function of captivity. This research reveals that dominance hierarchies, suicidal behavior, and fights to the death emerge in species where this behavior had not been previously observed. In addition to the literature describing nonhuman behavior as a function of captivity, many sociologically oriented authors have suggested that captivity of humans results in an entirely distinct subculture, one which has its own values, roles, and traditions quite distinct from the general population (e.g., Clemmer, 1940, 1950; Sykes, 1956, 1958; Sykes & Messinger, 1958; Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Garabedian, 1964; Messinger, 1969). These authors suggest that some assimilation of the values of the prison subculture into the individual's own value system is inevitable; the effects include (1) adaptation to violence and enhanced usage of violence, (2) sexually abnormal behavior, and (3) extremely altered value systems.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The ethical considerations with which we are particularly concerned, exist at two levels: (A) manipulation of crowding densities and compositions of groups, and (B) assumptions of the ability of prisoners to truly volunteer for research

*Thanks are also due to Shirley Peeke of the Langley Porter Institute for constructive criticisms of the draft of this paper. Reprint requests should be sent to the second author.

studies. Clearly, manipulation of densities and composition of the groups of prisoners must be attempted to obtain data which is not confounded by such variables as violence of the crime committed and in-prison social behavior. That is, it is common practice for the prison system to assign individuals who engage in different degrees of violent behavior to cells of differing densities, i.e., "trouble makers" would be in solitary confinement with no freedom of movement, while prisoners assigned to the honor wing would be at higher densities but with much greater freedom of movement around the penitentiary. Thus, manipulation of the densities and composition of groups is mandatory in order to produce data which is unconfounded. Any psychologist would, however, question the ethics of manipulating individuals who are already known to be violent, in situations which would seem to enhance violent behavior as indicated by the Freedman et al (1972) study. Since it seems likely that the differing social and spatial densities which Paulus et al found to exist in their survey of 10 jails and prisons quite possibly reflect differing propensities for violent and/or sexually aberrant behavior, then manipulation of these differing social and spatial densities could very likely result in beating, homosexual rape, or other physically aggressive behavior.

One final concern that must be dealt with is the question of volunteerism in a prison setting. There currently exists a great deal of discussion regarding the ethics of using prisoners as research Ss insofar as they are usually held in prison against their will. The use of Ss whose rights have been taken away by society and whose primary motive for participation is the hope that cooperation will result in early release, and, the fear that refusal to cooperate will lead to punishment (regardless whether such hopes and fears are realistic) casts considerable doubt on the possibility for prisoners to truly volunteer or abstain from such experimentation.¹

The American Psychological Association's publication "Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants" (1973) clearly takes the stand that the investigator must protect his Ss from physical and/or mental discomfort, harm, and danger. We believe that manipulation of any densities or compositions of living groups in a prison setting would certainly risk physical and mental discomfort, harm and danger. The same APA publication also states that, "Ethical research practice requires the investigator to respect the individual's freedom to decline to participate in research or to discontinue participation at any time." Thus, if prisoners volunteer for research projects on the basis of fear or coercion, no matter how subtle, this is a violation of the ethical standards of our discipline. There are also scientific concerns in the use of Ss who are not "disinterested" volunteers. For example, prisoners may

be overly "cooperative" by attempting to make their behavior support the supposed experimental hypothesis expecting to curry favor with the authorities by being such "good" Ss.

In summary, given the risks of unethical procedures by E and the likelihood of distorted and ungeneralizable data which is likely to be obtained from prison settings, one must approach prison research with the utmost caution.

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NOTE

1. The authors wish to thank Willie Holder, president of the National Prisoners Union, 1316 18th Street, San Francisco, who early in our research projects on prison violence (cf. Veno et al, 1973) took the time to detail the forces exerted on inmates in subtle and not so subtle ways to provide "volunteers" for research. He and his group must be credited with providing the basis for a renewed examination of the ethical questions regarding research on prison populations presently having influence in our area.

(Received for publication December 10, 1973.)