# Freedom in a correctional institution: Relationships between personal variables, expectations, and behavioral freedoms.

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Probably the most salient aspect of a prison environment is the loss of freedom. Freedom, and the loss of it, has received increasing attention in psychological research and theorizing in the immediate past: reactance theory (Brehm, 1966; Wicklund, 1974), learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972; Wortman & Brehm, 1975), loss of control (Glass & Singer, 1972), personal causation (deCharms, 1968) are some of the headings of research concerned with questions on the effect of loss of freedom. The expectation of behavioral choices and the expectation to influence actively one's life are crucial independent variables in such research. Loss of the freedom to choose or to influence can result in cognitive changes, in behavioral reaction, and in detrimental physiological changes.

This research was executed in a Federal Correctional Institution to assess the relationships between cognitive and behavioral variables which are closely related to the above-named theoretical approaches. Specifically, information was obtained from residents at the institution in order to relate:

a) personal variables such as age, sex, employability, and education,

b) expectations and perceptions about life in the institution and the freedoms which are granted or should be granted within the institution,

c) actively persued behavioral freedoms such as furloughs, friendships, and deviant behavior leading to incidents.

Within these three groups many different kind of data were obtained which will be described in more detail.

Among the personal data were sex, age, marital status, number of dependents, race, religion, and IQ. More closely related to incarceration are variables such as division within the institution, whether the participants in the study had a history of prior incarceration, and whether they had been transferred from another institution. The latter two variables were seen as especially interesting vis a vis adaptation to such an institution, where adaptation is assessed by expectations about the institutional life and by coping with it through the active use of options to participate in programs such as furloughs. But also deviant or rebellious behaviors, as one form of establishing a behavioral freedom, were expected to be related to these variables.

Expectations and perceptions about life in the institution were assessed by a questionnaire consisting of twelve items. Each item was worded: "Should you have a choice about...?", and could be answered on a five-point scale, from "I should have complete choice" to "I should have no choice". The items addressed topics such as furloughs, relations to the opposite sex, education within and outside the institution, leisure related activities, and the handling of money. Not only were all items analyzed individually, but a total 'Freedom score', resulting from the addition of all individual freedom-related items, was also computed. Other questions were also related to such expectations, e.g. "How long do you think you should be allowed to stay away on each furlough?". "Who should be allowed to visit you?", "Which people can you trust here?", and others.

Behavioral variables included number, date, and kind of furloughs

(i.e. day or night furloughs), outside trips with a member of the staff, whether the participants had a friend of the opposite sex ( a so-called 'walking partner'), job performance, and the number of incidents inside the institution.

The data analysis included descriptive statistics for all variables, and, more important, analyses were computed to find relationships among the theoretically relevant variables. Analyses of covariance were performed, using covariates such as age, time since incarceration, and others that could be potentially confounding variables.

Specific attention was paid to the temporal course of the sentence. This included analyses comparing the first few months of the sentence with time periods in the middle and with the time immediately before release. Of particular interest here was an additional independent variable, namely whether or not a specific release date was given and known to the resident. This happens usually a few months before the actual release date.

The sample consisted of 59 female and 75 male residents of a Federal Correctional Institution which is designed for 550 residents. Of this sample, 49% were white, 27% black, 22% Mexican-Americans, and 2% American Indians. They had spent a mean of 7.3 months in the institution, ranging from new orientees to 27 months (SD= 5.7). They had an average of 27 months left in their sentence, which ranged from one months to six years and seven months (SD= 17.5). 40% of the sample had a history of prior incarceration. The mean age was 33 years (md= 30), ranging from 19 to 70 (SD= 10.3). The majority (52%) had no dependents, others usually one to three, but up to seven dependents. 51% of the sample had not completed high school, 31% had completed high school without further education, and 18% had some further

education. The IQ was nearly normally distributed ($\bar{X}$ = 105.2; SD= 11.1).

Education and IQ, which were closely related (r=.48; p=.001), each showed close relationships with a number of other variables. More highly educated people expect a higher number of furloughs for the future (r=.19; p=.03). That could mean that the highly educated, who in the past have received more benefits, also expect more benefits during the institutional life. However, they are more realistic about the number of days they think they should be allowed for a furlough (r=-.32; p=.001). Some of the less educated residents expected furloughs to last up to one month. This same phenomenon can also be tested using a furlough related item from the freedom scale: "Should you have a choice about picking the destination where you go on a furlough?", and found marginal support (r=-.14; p=.09).[1]

Interestingly, higher educated residents were less likely to have a history of prior incarceration (p=.02), and less likely to have pleaded guilty (p=.03). This gives some further weight to the interpretation that the higher educated expect more positive outcomes in their favor.

The same, probably more realistic, approach toward expecting fewer days on a furlough was found for residents with a higher IQ (r=-.24; p=.04). Neither education nor IQ were related to the number of staff trips, day furloughs, and night furloughs granted. Therefore, the higher expectations in regard to future furloughs are not a function of past experience.

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1. For all freedom scores, a low score stands for high choice, and a high score stands for low choice; a negative correlation coefficient has to be interpreted as a positive relationship.

Just as with highly educated people, those with a higher IQ were somewhat less likely to have pleaded guilty ($p=.06$). They were also somewhat less likely to plead guilty if they had an incident in the institution ($r=-.29$; $p=.09$).

Both education and IQ were, as can be expected, closely related to employability ($p=.003$ and $p=.02$, resp.). Despite a strong a priori assumption one could make, which is that the highly educated and highly intelligent prisoners would be more favored, a close relationship between what seems to make a good resident (education, IQ, employability), on one hand and granted freedoms, i.e. staff trips or furloughs, on the other hand, could not be found.

People who have prior reason to expect more on the basis of education and intelligence seem to demand more of the prison, e.g. a higher number of furloughs. There is some reason to believe that the lower number of guilty pleas, both before and during serving their term, could also be an expression of the expectation for better treatment. Certainly, since the relationships obtained are only correlational, an interpretation can also assume a feeling of being underprivileg for those having less education and a lower IQ.

Age was a further variable of interest. The expectation for freedom, as expressed on the overall freedom score, diminished with increasing age ($r=.20$; $p=.02$). Although the effect seems partially to be due to 'youth related' items such as choice of recreational activities (e.g. sports and dance), the pattern of results for other items remains similar (e.g. choice of food, freedom in handling money). Older people expect fewer fur-

loughs for the future (r=.21; p=02), and had fewer incidents in the institution. Age was related neither to the number of staff trips nor the number of day furloughs, however, older people had some more overnight furloughs (r=.16; p=.05). Their first overnight furlough occured generally at an earlier time of the prison term (r=-.49; p=.001). This can be related to the fact that older people had a higher number of dependents.

The older residents had a somewhat lower number of incidents (r=-.28; p=.05), they were also less likely to have a walking partner. The close relationship between age and prior incarceration (p=.007) could mean that the general and consistent low demand for freedom, expressed in the freedom items, expectations for furloughs, and the low number of incidents could be due to one of two factors: 'sedation' by age or experiences in the penal system, most of which would have been environments much stricter than the low security institution where they were now serving.

Residents with a history of prior incarceration show a similar pattern in regard to the freedom items, but, except for two items, it does not reach significance (overall freedom score: p=.10). Those residents have more staff trips (p=.03), but this variable does not play a role for furloughs. Prior incarceration and age lead to different effects, as can be seen by the result that residents with prior incarceration are more likely to have their first incident earlier (p.01). The total number of incidents, however, is not related to this variable. An early attempt to try out the liberal atmosphere of the place is followed by a quick adaptation.

The different patterns of results for the variables 'prior in-

carceration' and 'age' shows that age has unique effects for perceptions, expectations, and 'trouble making'. The only variable interpretable as active use of granted freedoms by older residents, namely the number of night furloughs, can most likely be explained by the higher number of dependents. Older inmates are indeed quieter and less active, and probably less interested in opportunities for activities.

None of the interesting variables ( and of special interest here are the granted freedoms and the reported incidents) showed significant relationships with sex, race, or division within the institution. Although not related to the underlying theme of freedom, this lack of relationship indicates that no evidence for discrimination on the basis of either of these variables could be found.

Some of the variables were analyzed as independent variables in analyses of variance. In the case of continuous variables, a median split was obtained to classify the variables. In a few cases, this led to small N's per cell, so some of the analyses have to be interpreted cautiously, while others are supported by closely related similar analyses.

One of the approaches of the interpretation has been to relate granted freedoms, such as trips and furloughs, to behavioral activities. Behavioral activities can generally be seen as an attempt on the part of the resident to expand and to test the boundaries of his or her freedom. The question there is whether a person who takes advantage of several of the available institutional freedoms will be more likely to push the boundaries of his freedom to the limit.

For example, the combination of a granted freedom (which also has

to be actively asked for), namely staff trips, and behavioral activity, namely having a walking partner or not, influenced the number of incidents.

Table 1:

| | | Staff trip | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | yes | no |
| Walking partner | yes | 2.5 | .3 |
| | no | 1.1 | .3 |

DV: Number of incidents

The interaction was highly significant, even with time since imprisonment and age as covariates ($F= 6.2$; $p=.01$). Those who most actively used 'positive' freedoms also were more likely to be active in regard to incidents. This, of course, establishes no causal relationship, but points toward a general higher level of arousal. Additionally, subjects with a walking partner were less likely to plead guilty in case of an incident in the institution. It remains open whether many of these incidents are connected to the partner, e.g. are of a sexual nature.

Of the analyses concerned with the temporal course of the sentence only those using the most potent independent variable shall be reported. This variable was the awareness of the release date, usually a few months before the actual release date. This variable proved to be of more interest than the actual number of months left before release. The effect of this variable was most clearly expressed in interactions with the variable 'prior incarceration'. The awareness of the release

date had in some cases no effect on residents with the experience of prior incarceration, while others changed their expectations and behaviors markedly. In other cases a known release date led to effects opposite to those of residents with no prior incarceration.

With these two independent variables, three fourlough variables showed a clear interaction, one of which proved to be significant, another one marginally significant, and a third one not significant, although the pattern of results was the same.

Table 2:

| | | Known release date: no | Known release date: yes | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prior incarc. | no | 1.2 | 1.7 | DV: Number of day furloughs |
| | yes | 1.3 | 1.3 | Interaction: F= 2.9; p=.08 |

Table 3:

| | | Known release date: no | Known release date: yes | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prior incarc. | no | 1.2 | 1.7 | DV: Number of night furloughs |
| | yes | 1.3 | 1.3 | Interaction: F=3.6; p=.05 |

Table 4:

| | | Known release date: no | Known release date: yes | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prior incarc. | no | 1.4 | 1.6 | DV: Number of staff trips |
| | yes | 1.5 | 1.4 | Interaction: non significant |

For the interpretation of these results one has to be aware that these are granted freedoms, but they are granted usually only on the initiative and request of the resident. Residents who serve for the first time change their behavior pattern and thus prepare seemingly themselves by more contact to the outside world for the upcoming release. Residents with prior incarceration went through this experience before. Not only do they not change in their requests for furloughs, but, since the total number of furloughs is a accumulated variable, they request and are granted even less furloughs and staff trips then before they knew their release date.

The same pattern of results occured again for items expressing the demand for more freedom, namely the items "Who should be allowed to visit you?" ( on a scale from 0 to 4), and "For which reasons should you be allowed furloughs?" ( on a scale from 0 to 14 ). The interactions between the variables 'release-date known' and 'prior incarceration' were significant in both cases (p=.01 and p=.03 resp.).

Table 5:

| | | Known release date | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | no | yes | |
| Prior incarc. | no | 3.8 | 4.0 | DV: "Who should be allowed to visit you?" |
| | yes | 3.8 | 3.3 | Interaction: F=5.6; p=.01 |

Table 6:

| | | Known release date: no | Known release date: yes | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prior incarc. | no | 7.3 | 9.4 | DV: " For which reasons should you be allowed furloughs?" |
| | yes | 7.2 | 6.6 | Interaction: F=4.4; p=.03 |

Finally, the overall freedom score showed the same interaction (p=.01).

Table 7:

| | | Known release date: no | Known release date: yes | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prior incarc. | no | 22.6 | 18.9 | DV: Overall freedom (0-36) |
| | yes | 23.3 | 28.5 | Interaction: F=6.2; p=.01 |

Note: A high score means low expectation of freedom.

The interpretation of this reoccuring pattern is difficult. It is certainly the most consistent pattern of the results, evident in active, behavioral freedoms, namely furloughs, and in specific expectations. Certainly, the perception of the significant change in life which is expected (i.e. to be released) has a significant impact on both groups of residents. One could interpret this impact as a more positive one for those serving a term for the first time. They become more active, demand more freedom in the prison and more contact with the outside world, both in the form of visitors and visits to the outside world. Residents who had served in penal institutions before are giving up on those freedoms

and on attempts to obtain them. On one hand, they could feel more familiar with the institutional environment, thus avoiding the confrontation with the fact of the upcoming release. On the other hand, they might feel helpless or uninterested when confronted with the prospect of leaving the prison environment. Both arguments are closely related, one emphasizing the familiarity with the prison environment, somewhat regulated and safe, the other empasizing the fear of the more complicated outside world, something they have not been successful in coping with in the past. Most likely, both effects will occur together. In any case, this question is worth further investigation. If theirs is a helplessness phenomenon, it deserves special attention through pre-release counseling. An alternative interpretation could be that theirs is the more realistic and successful approach. Higher expectations and more activities of the 'inexperienced' group could lead to disappointment at the actual time of release.

A number of variables have been shown to lead in different ways to changes in the active use of program activities which have been interpreted as behavioral freedom. Higher education, higher intelligence, and no history of prior incarceration if one knows his release date have led to a more active use of these freedoms as well as to higher expectations toward privileges or freedoms which should be granted by the institution. Higher age and a history of prior incarceration if the release date is known led to generally lower activity and less expectations, which, in some cases, might be evidence of a phenomenon of helplessness or the feeling of giving up.

The data and results as presented here are only some of many and complex analyses which do not always fit so neatly together. Further analyses will involve follow-up data, hopefully allowing for a longitudinal test of some of these hypotheses.

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