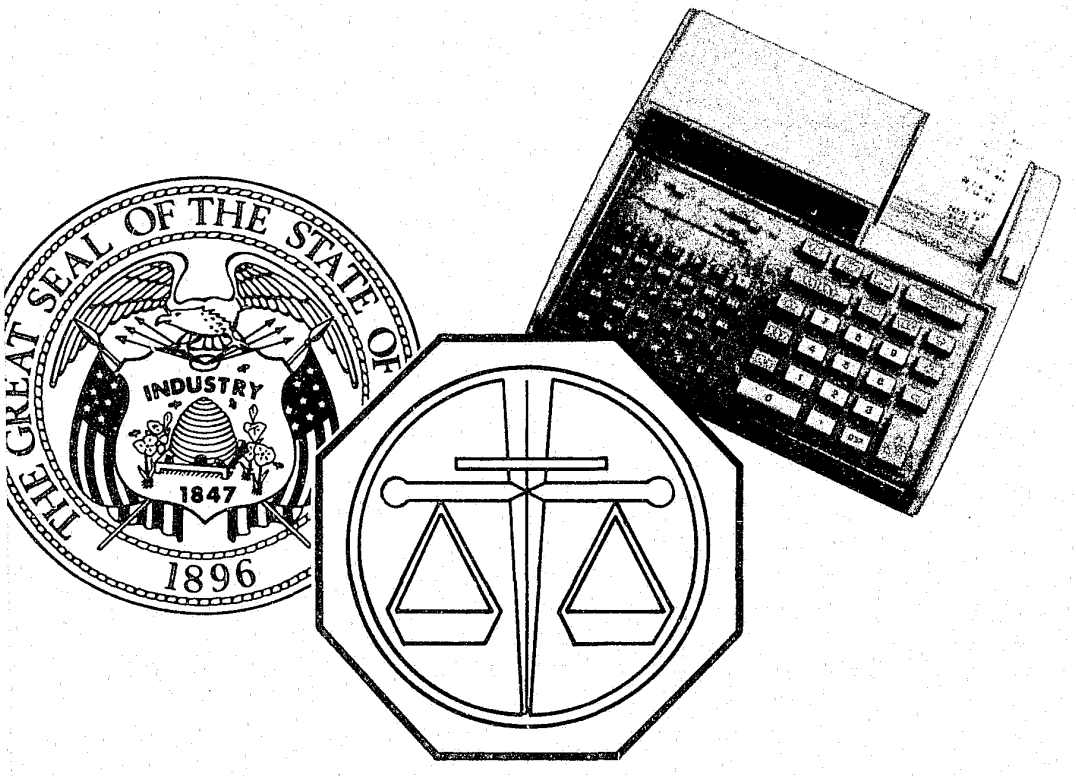
UTAH STATE DIVISION OF CORRECTIONS



RESEARCH & STATISTICS

RESEARCH REPORT NO. 2

THE GARY GILMORE LETTERS

JUNE, 1978

Diane Ratcliff

Robert J. Howell, Ph.D.

The Gary Gilmore Letters: A Study of People Who Wrote a Condemned Killer[a]

by

Diane Ratcliff Robert J. Howell

Brigham Young University

Running Head: The Gary Gilmore Letters

Abstract

On January 17, 1977, Gary Mark Gilmore was the first person executed in the United States in 11 years. Prior to his execution, he received and read 1,497 letters, the result of worldwide public response to the Gilmore saga. Questions of who would write to a condemned killer and what purposes and motivations led people to write were answered by means of an objective rating on a sample of 404 of the letters and by data obtained from questionnaires sent to these letter writers.

The people who wrote to Gary Gilmore represented a typical sampling of the population, and had no more severe mental disorder than what has been estimated in the general population (approximately 10 percent). Although an overwhelming majority of people wrote concerning religious themes, other motivating influences centered around: death concerns, conflict with regard to attitudes concerning capital punishment; the charismatic and heroic aspects of Gary's personality and behavior; and expression of compassion and concern toward Gary as an individual.

Introduction

On January 17, 1977, Gary Mark Gilmore was the first person executed in the United States in 11 years. Gary's sentencing, his insistence on being executed, and his death turned the nation's attention to his life and character, the state of Utah, and the constitutionality of capital punishment.

In April, 1976, Gary was released on parole from the federal prison in Marion, Illinois, after having spent 19 years of his 35 years in prison. Gary found it difficult to adjust to the life outside of prison, and he became involved in what has been called a "sudden, passionate, and sporadically violent" romance with a girl named Nicole. On July 18, 1976, Nicole drew a gun on Gary, in an effort to break up the relationship and get away from him. Gary had never been emotionally upset over a girl before, and on the following two nights (July 19 and 20), Gary robbed two men (ages 24 and 25) and shot each of them in the head. It took a Utah jury only three days to judge Gary guilty of one man's murder, and he was sentenced to die. Gilmore, like 38 of the 44 men who have been executed in Utah's history, chose the firing squad as a means of death.

Although, at the time, there were 418 men and 5 women who were also on death row in prisons across the country, unique aspects of this case held the country spellbound as the "Gilmore saga" continued to develop. Gary refused to appeal his conviction, "You sentenced me to die. Unless it's a joke or something, I want to go ahead and do it." Despite Gary's desire to be executed, a total of three different stays of execution were issued by the Utah Supreme Court, the Governor of Utah, and finally from the U.S. Supreme Court. Frustrated in his

efforts to be executed, Gary twice tried suicide by means of drug overdoses. Adding to the dramatics of the first overdose was a coinciding suicide attempt by Nicole. Frustration over unsuccessful efforts to see Nicole, who had been committed to the Utah State Hospital after her participation in this "suicide pact," resulted in Gary's 24-day hunger strike in retaliation of prison rules that forbid him from speaking to Nicole. Meanwhile, groups opposed to capital punishment held Christmas Eve vigils and protest rallies across the country.

As the Gilmore saga continued to attract the attention of the press, hundreds of letters poured into the Utah State Prison. People from around the world were making efforts to communicate with Gary by letter, telegram, or telephone.

Although four of the five gunshots fired on January 17 brought to fruition Gary's fight to die, the "perpetual controversy" over the value of a man's life and the practice of capital punishment continues, and questions raised over the dramatic worldwide effect Gary's execution had on the public remain to be answered. Who were these people who were trying to communicate with a condemned killer? Why did they write Gary? What messages were they trying to communicate?

Basic Data and Procedures

Although it was reported in popular magazines that Gary received over 40,000 letters while awaiting execution at Utah State Prison, we have estimated a more accurate total number of letters received to be four to five thousand, and of this total number Gary willed 1,497 letters (the ones he actually looked at) to his uncle. Although we received the letters after his death, we are sure that these letters are the ones that were actually read by Gary. Within the group of 1,497 willed letters (originating from over 20 countries), 933 had legible return addresses. Initial review of the letters revealed an obvious grouping of the

letters with regard to their basic purpose and message. Eighty-one percent of the letters were judged to be religious in theme, whereas the remaining 19 percent dealt with basically non-religious themes. This division into religious vs. non-religious content was found to be highly reliable, as two independent raters reached complete agreement in a reliability sample as to the presence vs. absence of religious themes.

In an effort to pick up as much idiographic information as possible, a sample was chosen by selecting the total group of non-religious letters which had addresses (202) and matching this number with a random sampling of the religious letters (202). A questionnaire was then developed and sent out to the 404 correspondents in our sample.

The questionnaire dealt with such basic areas as: demographic information, purpose for writing Gary, capital punishment issues, the effect Gary had on the correspondents and the effect their letters may have had on him, etc. The response to our questionnaire was high, even though it was initially sent out over six months after Gary's death. The majority of the correspondents took the time to add additional comments concerning their interest in Gary. Our questionnaire response rate was 66 percent returned in the religious group and 62 percent returned in the non-religious group.

A rating scale was then composed, in order to evaluate the 404 sample letters with regard to the following areas: ideological content, identification with Gary, emotional content, capital punishment issue, author's knowledge of the Gilmore Saga, impressions of mental health of the author, and main purpose of the letter. Independent ratings were then made by three raters, all psychologists. The ratings of the letters were immediately reviewed item by item and a discussion-consensus method for final evaluation was used. A test re-test reliability done on 30 of the rated letters yielded an average correlation of .91 while an inter-rater

reliability study done with an independent group of three raters yielded an average correlation of .90.

Who Wrote the Letters

One wonders what type of people would write to a condemned man awaiting his execution. Are these correspondents "weird and unhealthy" people who were attracted to Gary simply because of his desire to die, or do they represent a fairly normal sampling of the population, simply trying to communicate some message to Gary? From the demographic data collected by our questionnaire, we can conclude that the people who wrote letters to Gary represented a typical sampling of the population. For example, their age, area of residence, and education level conformed to U.S. census data.

Overall, as compared to our non-religious sample, the group writing letters in our religious sample were older (22.4 percent over age 65), were more frequently retired (15.9 percent), and included more people of Protestant faiths (77.3 percent). The higher percentage of Protestants in the religious group can be explained by the large group of "Born-Again Christians" within the religious sample.

The non-religious letter writers were younger (19 percent under age 21), were almost exclusively Caucasian, came fairly evenly from every geographic area in this country but frequently came from other countries (12.8 percent), were more frequently Catholic (25 percent) or claimed no religion, were more frequently single (38.8 percent), and more frequently were attending school (21 percent).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Psychopathology

When initially reading through the Gilmore letters, it is easy to become attracted by the bizarre and abnormal. Objective ratings of the letters and questionnaires reveal the letter writers to have no more severe mental disorder than what has been estimated in the general population (approximately 10 percent). Frequently people identified with Gary's suicidal attempts (29.2 percent non-religious, 19.8 percent religious) and with his need for love, trust, and friendship. Although severe mental disturbance was more frequently rated in the non-religious letters (11.4 vs. 7.8 percent), mental disorder may have been more difficult to identify in the religious letters. For example, the religious writers frequently reported that God spoke to them (6.8 percent). "This morning about 3 a.m. I was woke up from my sleep and it was God speaking to me telling me to write this to you."

Some writers, both religious and non-religious, openly spoke of previous or present mental illness, and one woman appeared to identify with what she felt was Gary's insanity. In her letter, she spoke of becoming so "vehement" for Gary's cause that she was committed to the State Hospital. She wrote, "Gary, I have been fighting it out with God to save your life!!! To make circumstances occur that you will be saved. You need psychiatric help now and there are drugs that help you and me who do bizarre things such as you and I!"

Alienation

Did the correspondents identify with Gary's alienation from society? In general, more of the non-religious writers felt alienated from society and identified with Gary's challenging attitude toward authority (non-religious 26 percent, religious 6.9 percent). Non-religious writers also responded with more anger

toward society as a result of Gary's execution. One respondent wrote that Gary's execution made him temporarily lose "confidence in man's ability to remedy his social problems."

Gilmore--A Public Personality

Will these people write again to another public personality, or were some responding to the uniqueness of Gary Gilmore and his circumstances? Though three writers had known Gary previously, none of the writers were related to him. Most people wrote only one letter and had never written another prison inmate before. Of those people who had previously written another inmate, the religious sample was more likely to have written someone of no relationship to themselves (65.0 percent religious vs. 48.9 percent non-religious). The religious writer was also more likely to write a public figure such as Gary Gilmore with less knowledge of the person or his circumstances. Thus, rating of the letters indicates that 48 percent of the non-religious writers had considerable knowledge concerning the Gilmore saga, while only 16.3 percent of the religious letters appeared that knowledgeable.

The majority of the letter writers felt sympathetic towards Gary (72.4 percent religious and 68.3 percent non-religious). Although more of our religious sample reported that either they or their relatives have been in prison (22 percent religious vs. 13 percent non-religious), slightly more non-religious writers felt they were like Gary in some way (53 percent non-religious vs. 48.5 percent religious). Although we are unable to answer the question of whether our sample would write another public personality in the future, our data would suggest that the majority of those who wrote to Gary do not frequently write letters to inmates and a good percentage felt a particular identification with Gary, which led them to write.

What Motivated People to Write

Death Concerns

One person wrote Gary Gilmore:

> I'm writing this letter not to comment on your decision to face a firing squad, but rather about what will happen to you after you die. I'm a civil engineer that works for the State of New Jersey. I'm nobody special and I've never been in prison, so the only common ground that we have is that we're both human beings with the same dilemma of having to face death.

One of the largest motivating factors among both religious and non-religious letter writers was a concern over death (84 percent religious, 44 percent non-religious). Many of the writers hoped that their letters helped Gary face death. Others felt that the experience of writing Gary helped them to face their own life and death. While one 88-year-old woman wrote that writing Gary convinced her to "continue until God takes me," another person commented that Gary's execution made her feel "full of awe for the darkness of death."

Over 22 percent of our religious writers and 5.6 percent of our non-religious writers were over the age of 65, and the oldest letter writer in both groups was 90 years old. Ernest Becker (1973) wrote that "Of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death. ... . When we see a man bravely facing his own extinction we rehearse the greatest victory we can imagine" (pp. 11-12).

Many of these concerns over death were expressed by discussing the afterlife, heaven, hell, reincarnation, or nothingness. The vast majority of the letters sent to Gary were religious in nature, and of these, most dealt with the subject of death. Freud (1928) has written that religion is a key cultural tool:

> The Gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcise the terrors of nature, they must reconcile one to the cruelty of fate, particularly as shown in death,

> and they must make amends for the sufferings and privations that the communal life of culture has imposed on man. (p. 30)

Within the religious sample, the letters were rated along a continuum of religiosity ranging from "fire and brimstone" (35 percent) to conversion (58.4 percent) to the use of a religious tone only (6.4 percent). One woman commented on the questionnaire:

> I wrote to Gary Gilmore because I am a Christian . . . and I wanted him to know the Christ I know and be saved, he had to die, but he had a choice to make, to go to heaven or hell, and I wanted to point this out to him. . . . Whear [sic] is Gary Gilmore now?

Ernest Becker (1975) has suggested that what man fears most is not so much extinction, but "extinction with insignificance" (p. 4). One young child wrote and asked Gary, "I am interested why you want to die? It's hard to wonder why someone would want to die. When I think about being dead, my mind goes blank. So this is my main question and thought. How could someone ever want to be killed and be nothing?" It seems that Gary had a desire to be significant before his death. Shneidman (1973) lists five ways in which an individual can continue to "live on" after his death: in memories of others; through art, music, or literature; in the bodies of others, through organ transplantation; in the genes of one's children; and philosophically, in the cosmos. Gary certainly made his death such that he will be remembered, and his living on in this world seemed important. One 90-year-old blind man wrote Gary to ask him for his eyes. Gary responded saying that he decided to will his eyes to a man in his 20's. "I trust you understand the reason I decided to give my eyes to a younger man."

It seems that the main effect the Gilmore letters had upon Gary was to give Gary a feeling of significance in the face of death. "To cease as though one had never been, to exit life with no hope of living on in the memory of another, to be

obliterated, to be expunged from history's record--that is a fate literally far worse than death" (Shneidman, 1973, p. 52).

Capital Punishment: Our Ambivalence

In 1972, by a five to four vote, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that capital punishment, as then imposed, violated the "cruel and unusual punishment" clause of the constitution. As a result, many states responded to the court's decision by rewriting their laws, in an effort to satisfy the constitutional requirements implied by the 1972 decision. Over the years, as measured by the Gallup Poll, the American people have fluctuated in their opinion concerning capital punishment. Whereas in 1966, 42 percent of our citizens supported the death penalty, in 1974, 64 percent took a stand in favor of capital punishment. Despite this increase in public support, according to figures released by the American Civil Liberties Union, the actual number of executions carried out annually declined between 1935 and 1967 from 199 to two.

One week before the Gilmore execution, a Harris Poll reported that "by an overwhelming 71 to 19 percent, the American people believe that convicted murderer Gary Mark Gilmore should die by the firing squad" (Harris, 1977, p. 3). In contrast to this finding, an 86 to 11 percent majority was reported to be opposed to putting Gilmore's execution on television. Clearly Americans wanted to be shielded from actually viewing Gary's death. Does this represent a conflict about execution or a shying away from death itself? Conflict and caution over the actual carrying out of Gary's execution was also exhibited by the federal and state judicial systems. Stays of execution were repeatedly granted, despite Gary's desire to die, and when Gary twice attempted suicide, the state engaged in elaborate and costly efforts to keep him alive and restore him to physical health.

Where do the people who wrote to Gary Gilmore stand on the issue of capital punishment and publicizing executions? Based on the response to the questionnaire, a much smaller proportion of these people as compared to the Harris poll, were in favor of capital punishment (33 percent) and a larger proportion favored highly publicized executions (27 percent).

In the actual letters written to Gary, we judged the most prevalent attitude to be one of ambivalence or indeciveness concerning capital punishment. One man wrote to ask Gary if he would let him witness the execution. He felt that the experience of seeing a man die in real life might help him to clarify his feelings concerning capital punishment. In another case, a social studies teacher wanted to have his class "exposed to the personal aspects of capital punishment, as opposed to studying capital punishment in the abstract." The students wrote letters to Gary, and Gary sent back the students' letters with comments on all of the letters. Before writing the letters, a vote on capital punishment revealed the teacher's five classes were "overwhelmingly for capital punishment." Although the students in the classes were "very impressed with the humor, intelligence, and courage" shown in Gary's remarks on their letters, a re-vote showed that the students' opinions remained "virtually the same."

Only a very few people wrote letters stating that they felt Gary should die--that he deserved capital punishment. Some appeared to recognize not only their own ambivalence over the death penalty, but also the ambivalence and uncertainty being shown within our court system. Frequently views were expressed similar to that of Thomas Szasz (1976), "I believe that resuscitating a person after a suicide attempt in order to execute him is a worse brutality than granting him the right to kill himself" (p. 9). One woman from Switzerland wrote, "I think Gilmore made many people feel confused and unsure in their thinking and feeling, even his judges."

A study reported in Psychology Today (Sarat and Vidmar, 1976) concluded that people who were aware of the uncertain impact that capital punishment has on society would have opinions which "differ significantly from a public unaware of the consequences and effects of the death penalty" (p. 17). People who became informed as to the questionable effect of capital punishment became less enthused about its use. This study also concluded that "even an informed public opinion might not reject the death penalty to the extent that initial support for it is grounded in a desire for vengenance and retribution" (p. 17). It is interesting to note that, as compared to the Sarat and Vidmar sample population, our sample of letter writers appeared to be much less convinced as to the effectiveness of the death penalty, and, in general, were less concerned about revenge and retribution. Many of the religious writers felt that judgment should be left in God's hands. "If God wants to end the life of a murderer, why not let him take that person in his own way?" Many religious writers avoided the issue of capital punishment or Gary's death altogether. As Earl Shorris (1977) wrote in an article entitled "Gilmore's Victory," "Christian executioners commend the condemned man's soul to God, who will be the ultimate judge of his destiny. . . . Earthly death is not destiny, the final decision is made by gods or angels; heaven has its uses" (p. 17).

A large proportion of our writers were opposed to capital punishment, and some expressed concern over the future of our society. One man wrote:

> Having covered 4 wars, I find my most searing memory was witnessing the execution of 3 enemy, even though the press billet was bombed afterwards and a correspondent and civilians were killed. Seems to me a person or state can be valued by the value they place on a human's life. Execution to me is the deepest political consideration of man--Lincoln Steffens, in his autobiography when he covered the first Soviet ever convened during the revolution--not that

the USSR ever lived up to it--wrote that, "The first law passed was against capital punishment, and the second against war and empire."

Charisma and the Heroic

As Ernest Becker (1973) wrote in The Denial of Death:

> We are living a crisis of heroism that reaches into every aspect of our social life: the dropouts of university heroism, of business and career heroism, of political-action heroism, the rise of anti-heroes, those who would be heroic each in his own way . . . those whose tormented heroics lash out at the system that itself has ceased to represent agreed heroism. (p. 6)

Whatever else, Gary Gilmore was heroic and charismatic in his death.

According to letter writers in our sample, the major quality contributing to this charismatic phenomenon surrounding Gary Gilmore was his strength of conviction, resoluteness, and seemingly inner strength in the face of death. Gary asked:

> Do the people of Utah have the courage of their conviction? You sentenced a man to die--me--and when I accept this most extreme punishment with grace and dignity; the people of Utah want to back down and argue with me about it. You're silly, I've been sentenced to die, I accepted that. Let's do it.

Some of our writers agreed with Gary's stand. "You give a man a death sentence, stick to it and carry it out, don't drag it on and postpone it." One letter consisted only of the quote, "The bravest sight in all this world is a man fighting against odds."

Other personal qualities besides his courage in the face of death, which were pointed out as exceptional by our letter writers include his: intelligence, art and poetry, sensitivity, and his physical appearance. A few religious writers felt Gary was demon or devil controlled. Some of the letters, especially within the non-religious sample, expressed considerable romantic attraction towards Gary.

Frequently people, primarily in our non-religious sample, spoke of the basic goodness of Gary as a person and they praised his admirable qualities (18.5 percent). Some, however, attributed this admiration of Gilmore to the attempts by the press to "glamorize him." Others blamed society for attempting to "cloak murder in delusions of goodness" by making a "Christ of the victim of the raging state, as in the movies of the 1930's showing the hero criminal dying on the steps of a church or at the feet of his sainted mother" (Shorris, 1977, p. 16).

Gary had many faces. He was known as "the enforcer" and "hammerhead" in one prison, and was known to mistreat Nicole's children. On the other hand, he sent thoughtful and sensitive poems to several of our letter writers and expressed loving and warm advice to mothers seeking help in rearing their children. Perhaps complexity added to his mystique.

Though he was "born to lose" and did so most of his life, Gary Gilmore found success and importance in his last days. One man commented on our questionnaire:

> I believe he had a personal strength and manner akin to the outlaws of the 1800's in the American West who, in spite of any foul crimes and misdeeds, have become folk heroes to us because of their rebellion against standards and authority. Whereas, in our present age, there are few rebels with convictions . . . Mr. Gilmore belonged in another time, if he had been a Viking pioneer, centurion, or mountain man he would most likely be a historical hero. Fear was the main element in the opposition to his desire to die, fear of the underlying old self, which he let come to the surface. We are all potentially him, it is a matter of circumstance and restraint.

Compassion and Concern

When asked the main purpose of his letter to Gary, one 17 year old wrote, "I wanted him to know that some of us on the outside still had compassion and concern for him as a human being, although he had done wrong."

Although both groups of letters contained expressions of compassion, sympathy, and caring, the non-religious letter writers most frequently wrote primarily for the purpose of communicating their feelings of caring and sympathy (30.7 percent non-religious, 2.5 percent religious). While the non-religious letter writers appeared to be involved with Gary as a person, the religious writers were involved with Gary in a more vague and abstract sense. They were concerned mainly for Gary's soul, and on the questionnaire many people asked us for information as to whether Gary turned over his life to God in the end. Thus, while the religious writers identified with his "imperfections," "evilness," the idea that "we have all sinned," and the universal "need for spiritual guidance," the non-religious writers identified with Gary's personality or specific circumstances (his feelings, needs, beliefs, and creativity).

Because of this different kind of involvement with Gary, the non-religious writers being involved in an individual and direct way and the religious writers experiencing Gary on a more abstract and universal level, the emotions expressed by the religious and non-religious groups differed both in type and strength.

The non-religious letter writers expressed more varied emotions, and these emotions were more frequently expressed with a higher degree of intensity. Many non-religious writers remembered experiencing such emotions as love, pity, sympathy, closeness, respect, and admiration when writing their letters. Feelings such as alienation from others; alienation from society; sympathy for Gary; hope for Gary; grief, worry, or anxiety; brotherly or romantic love for Gary; and loneliness were expressed more frequently and with more intensity in the non-religious letters. Possibly because of this emotional involvement, after writing their letters, the non-religious authors were more likely to report that their impression of Gary had changed in a positive direction, and that they felt like Gary was more of a "real"

person. Increased involvement with Gary was also contributed to by the fact that Gary usually responded to the non-religious letters. Gary responded to 58 percent of our non-religious sample and to only 6.7 percent of our religious sample.

Why did Gary choose to respond so infrequently to the religious letters? To the raters, many of the religious letters appeared "cold" and basically uncaring. The religious writers were more frequently apt to report feeling "pity" toward Gary, rather than closeness, respect, or admiration.

While 17.7 percent of the non-religious letters reported that Gary may have "realized that someone loves and cares" from their letters, only 7.6 percent of the religious writers believed this to be true. In general, the religious writers felt "more Christian-like" and expressed feelings of relief that they had responded to "promptings from God" (12 percent). One person wrote, "His blood is not on my hands, I have done what was in my power to do."

Gary responded most often to letters (religious and non-religious) expressing sympathy and concern. One eight year old boy named Michael wrote:

> I'm sorry about your trouble. I pray for you. Try to pray to God. I love you. I think about you. I hope you go to heven [sic]. Jesus will take you there if you love him and except [sic] him as your savior. My Daddy is in heven. Other people love us when we are good. God love us even when we are Bad. Jesus died for us. Let's meet in heven.

Gary wrote back that maybe he would see Michael's father in heaven. Michael's father had been dead four years.

Spotlight on Gary Gilmore

Letters came to Gary from North America, South America, Africa, Europe, Asia, and Australia. Articles about Gary appeared in magazines ranging from the National Review to Playboy from the Rolling Stone to the Vatican newspaper Osservatore Romano.

Our letter writers reported hearing about Gary mostly by means of television and newspaper, but a good percentage heard his story by means of radio and magazines. Some letter writers responded with the opinion that publicity encourages crimes by creating a hero image. A few others felt Gary had been exploited by journalists and special interest groups.

In response to the wide media coverage and rush to obtain literary rights over the Gilmore story, a New York Times editorial suggested that a rider

> be added to the Miranda Rule, lest criminals be deprived of their literary rights. In the future, interrogators should advise as follows: "You have a right to remain silent. You have a right to a lawyer. You have a right to retain a writer and confess to the highest bidder." (p. 41)

The press reported stories likening Gary and Nicole to Romeo and Juliet and emphasized information such as the fact that Gary "didn't flinch when the hood was placed over his head." Did the press glamorize Gary Gilmore? Of the letters in our sample, 47.5 percent of the non-religious letters (as opposed to 10.4 percent of the religious letters) expressed praise and admiration for aspects of Gary's behavior or character. At least among the non-religious writers, Gary was frequently seen as an admirable and sometimes heroic individual, and they expressed this admiration and respect in their letters to Gary. Although we cannot be sure of the effect such publicity and subsequent public response had upon Gary, it is interesting that Charles Dickens, in an 1845 letter to a friend, argued among other grounds for opposing capital punishment: "I believe it to have a horrible fascination for many of those persons who render themselves liable to it, impelling them onward to the acquisition of a frightful notoriety" (Lewis, 1977, p. 35).

What about the Victims?

Of the 404 letters and 260 returned questionnaires, only four people (three non-religious and one religious) spontaneously expressed any concern or sympathy for the victims or the families of the victims of Gary's murder spree. Overall, there was a general lack of hatred or anger expressed towards Gary (1 percent of the religious and 3.5 percent of the non-religious letters). Concern and sympathy was more frequently expressed toward Gary's mother (5.4 percent religious, 9.4 percent non-religious). Only one person expressed concern for potential murders and victims if Gary were to be released. Apparently, the people who wrote to Gary became so involved in his fight to die that they frequently forgot, overlooked, or thought it inappropriate to write about the victims of his crimes. In fact, one woman commented on the questionnaire that she "felt guilty" for feeling badly for Gary--"more badly than for his victims."

Aftermath

Gary Gilmore was not a simple man, and the people who wrote letters to him prior to his execution did not write for simple reasons. Basic issues involved in the Gilmore execution revolved around fear of death, desire for immortality, capital punishment, frailties in our society, and the value of one man's life to society. The people who wrote Gary Gilmore had many messages to communicate, each expressed in a manner meaningful both to his own life and to Gary's. One 20-year-old girl from Connecticut caught the feeling of many respondents toward Gary Gilmore in a poem to us:

He walked along
into the darkness
though death would
soon be near.
And did not try
to run or hide
as they strapped him
in the chair.

He whispered words
which meant good-bye
and said a last farewell

Yet knew that he
had already died
for earth was
a living hell.

He sat so calmly
without a move
as the hood slipped
over his head

Darkness grew close
his body went numb
for he knew he'd
soon be dead.

I know it's not right
to pity the man
in fairness to
those he had killed.

But I can't shut my eyes
and pretend not to see
the blood which
has been spilled.

For not just me
but many more
will end up
the same way

And the people will cry,
"The mans got to die"
as the sun lights another day.

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Footnotes

[a]Appreciation is expressed to Robert L. Moody and Ronald R. Stanger, Gary Gilmore's last lawyers, for telling us of the existence of the letters and making arrangements with Gary for us to study them. Vern Damico, Gary's uncle, faithfully followed Gary's promise to let us use the letters.

TABLE 1

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF LETTER WRITERS

Age	Religious (%)	Non-Religious (%)
0 - 21	9.7	19.0
22-34	23.9	25.4
35-44	18.6	19.0
45-54	7.5	14.3
55-64	11.2	8.0
65 and over	22.4	5.6
Deceased at time of questionnaire	1.5	0.0
Not given	5.2	8.7
Sex		
Male	31.3	37.0
Female	68.7	60.0
Not given	0.0	3.0
Race		
Caucasian	86.6	89.7
Black	4.5	0.8
Other	2.2	0.8
Not given	6.7	8.7
Home Region		
New England & Middle Atlantic	17.8	20.7
Midwest	27.8	22.0
West	19.8	19.3
South	23.7	14.8
S.W. & Mountain States	7.9	10.4
Other countries	0.3	12.8
Religious Preference		
Catholic	10.6	25.0
Jewish	1.5	2.4
Protestant	77.3	50.0
None	0.0	10.5
Other	0.3	3.2
Not given	7.6	8.9

Assessing Attitudes and Personality Traits of Letter Writers: The Gary Gilmore Example

by

Diane Ratcliff Robert J. Howell

Brigham Young University

Running Head: Assessing Attitudes and Personality Traits

TABLE 1
continued

Marital Status	Religious (%)	Non-Religious (%)
Single	22.4	38.8
Married	52.2	37.3
Widowed	5.2	4.0
Divorced	12.0	13.5
Not given	5.2	6.4
Education		
0-4	2.2	0.0
5-7	6.0	3.2
8	4.5	4.8
Highschool:		
1-3	15.7	21.0
4	19.4	23.4
College:		
1-3	20.1	13.7
4 or more	20.1	13.7
Not given	7.5	8.1
Occupation		
Working	40.9	39.0
Looking for Work	5.3	8.9
Going to School	9.8	21.0
Retired	15.9	8.0
Other	23.5	20.2

Assessing Attitudes and Personality Traits of Letter Writers: The Gary Gilmore Example

Psychologists are frequently faced with explaining a social or intrapsychic phenomenon which is unstructured and not replicable within a controlled laboratory setting. Because such phenomena may be spontaneous, historically unique occurrences, and are seen as unwieldly to conceptualize, hard to define, and uncontrolled, they all too often remain unexplored territory within the realm of objective investigation.

After the fact examination of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions is a particularly challenging task. A good source of data, however, can be found within the previously written material of those individuals under investigation. There are two major ways of analyzing hand written data. The first type of investigation revolves around the actual handwriting of the writer, as illustrated by the retroactive analysis of the history and character of Lee Harvey Oswald by a graphologist (Epstein, 1978). Hand written material may also be analyzed with regard to its content, a technique used by Schneidman and Farberow (1957) and Tuckman, Kleiner, and Lavell (1959) in their analyses of suicide notes. The significance of the suicide note in the Schneidman and Farberrow and Tuckman studies is based on the premise that its content represents the thoughts and affect of the suicide at the time of note writing and death" (Tuckman et al., 1959, p. 59). The studies of suicide notes resemble the Oswald study in that they revolve around a basic data base of handwritten material, a basically unstructured and uncontrolled situation, and the analysis of thoughts, emotions, and/or character traits of the individuals studied was necessarily retroactive in nature.

In the study, "The Gary Gilmore Letters: A Study of People Who Wrote a Condemned Killer" (1978), we were faced with an analysis of information resembling these previous investigations relying upon handwritten material as a source of data, particularly with regard to the fact that questions were raised and an investigation begun after the actual phenomenon occurred.

Background to the Gilmore Letter Study

On January 17, 1977, Gary Mark Gilmore was the first person executed in the United States in 11 years. Gilmore's sentencing, his insistence on being executed, and his death turned the nation's attention to his life and character and the constitutionality of capital punishment. For five consecutive months, Gary Gilmore's story held the attention of the media, and as the execution date approached, hundreds of letters poured into the Utah State Prison. People from around the world were making efforts to communicate with Gary by letter, telegram, or telephone. This worldwide response to Gilmore, the man and his dilemma, provided the stimulus for the questions dealt with in our previous study: Who would try to communicate with a condemned killer? Why did people write to Gary and what messages were they trying to communicate?

The receipt of 1,497 of the letters written to and actually read by Gilmore prior to his execution offered not only the opportunity to study a unique historical phenomenon, but to experiment with methodological procedures in an effort to expand psychology's search for objective data when studying the "ongoing living laboratory" provided us by society. This article will deal with the basic methodology used in the Gilmore letter study and some critical philosophical decisions made when choosing this methodology.

Methodology: A Philosophical Issue

When first confronted with a massive amount of material, one's first tendency is to categorize this information into manageable units which can then

be compared, seeking trends and patterns. Working with 1,497 letters, there was a strong temptation to select out and analyze a small sample of letters. The analysis of this sample could then be generalized to the entire sample in order to decifer some meaningful pattern(s).

Gordon Allport was the first to discuss the significance of recognizing the basic issues behind nomothetic versus idiographic types of empirical study within the field of psychology. Allport (1961) wrote:

> It is easy . . . to see that a quandary confronts us. The individual, whatever else he may be, is an internally consistent and unique organization of bodily and mental processes. But since he is unique, science finds him an embarrassment. Science, it is said, deals only with broad, perferably universal laws. Thus, science is a nomothetic discipline. Individuality cannot be studied by science, but only by history, art, or biography whose methods are not nomothetic (seeking universal laws), but idiographic. Even the medieval scholastics perceived the issue, and declared scientia non est individuorum. (p. 8-9)

From the onset of the study of the Gilmore letters, a decision was made to create a procedure and methodology which would attempt to follow a middle road between the nomothetic and idiographic approaches. While we categorized and averaged the information derived from our data, we made every effort to retain, evaluate, and report the individual or unique response. As with Allport (1961) we are of the opinion that new methods will be required to resolve the dilemma of uniqueness which

> haunts the house of clinical psychology. . . . I agree with the French psychiatrist Azan, who many years ago wrote that the science of character cannot proceed by generalities, as does psychology, nor by individualities, as does art. It occupies an intermediate position." (p. 21, 12).

Decisions

Basic decisions which need to be dealt with before any data can be analyzed have to do with how much information will be used, in what form, and whether the gathering of new and/or additional information is feasible or desirable. The decisions made in the Gilmore letter study were a result of an underlying effort to develop our procedures in such a way that they would fit the existing data.

What Letters To Use

An overview of the Gilmore letters revealed two ways of reducing the sample size. Only 933 of the letters had return addresses. With such a large proportion of letters having return addresses, the decision to gather additional information by means of sending questionnaires to the letter writers was made. This reduced the working number of letters from 1,497 to 933. A preliminary content analysis also revealed the possibility of dividing the letters into religious theme versus non-religious theme categories. This division was made with two independent raters reaching complete agreement on the presence or absence of religious theme in a reliability sample of 30 letters. Although only 202 of the 933 letters were judged to be non-religious in theme, these letters appeared to vary widely in content. In an effort to retain and evaluate as idiographic information as possible, while at the same time continuing to reduce our sample size, a final sample of 404 letters was chosen by selecting the total group of non-religious letters with addresses (202) and matching this number with a random sampling of the religious letters (202).

Gathering Additional Information

Our information differed from that of the studies quoted previously in that it could be assumed that the majority of the letter writers in our sample

were still living--only two of our sample were deceased at the time of the study. Because of this, a questionnaire was developed and sent out to the 404 letter writers in our sample. The questionnaires were used to gather additional information not provided by the letters themselves, such as demographic information, and to further verify our findings against the direct responses of the letter writers.

Controlled Variables

With the decision to focus on content, it became important to control variables such as the type of paper used and the type and quality of penmanship. Therefore, all the letters in our sample were typed (double-spaced). The typing of the letters had the additional benefit of reducing the time spent by the letter raters and eliminating possible variations in interpreting poor or barely legible handwriting.

Letter Ratings

In order to evaluate the content contained in written material, some sort of rating procedure is needed. Schneidman and Farberow (1957) used the Dollard and Mowrer Discomfort-Relief Word Quotient (1947) for evaluating the affect expressed in suicide notes. Truax and Carkhuff (1967) developed rating scales in order to estimate the level of interpersonal skills demonstrated by therapists during psychotherapentic transactions. The Truax and Carkhuff (1967) studies and the Tuckman et al. (1959) study on suicide notes developed rating procedures by adjusting the design and content of the rating scale to fit the study's data. An event as unique as "letters to a condemned killer" demands a rating scale which is molded to fit the available data.

Building a Rating Scale

The rating scale was developed after a preliminary content analysis of the letters. It included seven major categories of evaluation: ideological content; the presence of identification with Gary Gilmore or identification with his circumstances; the expression of emotional content; capital punishment opinions; the author's knowledge of the Gilmore saga; impressions of the mental health of the author; and the main purpose of the letter. Evaluation within each of the categories varied. In some areas, such as ideological content, it was necessary that the rater mark all items that apply. The main purpose, however, required one answer only, and the emotional content categories required an evaluation on a 0-10 scale as to the strength of the emotion. This numerical rating scale was later found to be highly useful, as the two major groups of letters (religious in theme versus non-religious in theme) were found to differ not only in type and number of emotions expressed, but also in the intensity of emotional expression.

Criteria for Rating

Following sufficient practice and acquaintance with the data, the development of criteria for the evaluation of each element of the rating scale was found to be crucial. Three raters (all psychologists) evaluated the letters using a consensus-discussion method for the final rating of each letter.

Pressures to conform to individual and group fluctuations were reduced significantly through the use of the rating criteria. In addition to reducing the overall discrepancy between the initial three raters, the rating criteria served as an invaluable training device for the independent group of three raters used for determining inter-rater reliability. These procedures for reducing discrepancy through the use of a consensus-discussion method of evaluation and the development of specific rating criteria contributed significantly to our high level of inter-rater and test-retest agreement (inter-rater reliability = .90

and a test-retest reliability = .91). The inter-rater reliability was derived by comparing the ratings of a sample of 30 letters by the original three raters with the ratings of an independent group of three raters who were trained to evaluate the letters according to the rating criteria. The test-retest reliability was derived from the comparison of the original rating of a sample of 30 letters which occurred early in the rating process to the re-rating of these same letters at the conclusion of the rating of the 404 letters (some four months later).

Consensus-Discussion

Klein and Cleary (1967) reported four major sources of discrepancy between raters when a rating scale is composed of one dichotomous item (the scale notes the presence or absence of a phenomenon):

1. the items were not understood in an identical fashion by the raters;
2. the anchors for estimation of magnitude differed between raters;
3. the item scores depended on inferential rules that differed between raters . . .
4. both raters had observed a phenomenon but one had had a lapse of memory either for the behavior displayed by the patient or for the application of previously agreed-upon evaluative rules. (p. 79)

Klein and Cleary (1967) concluded that a consensus-discussion method, with reference to the criteria for the resolution of disagreements, is a method of evaluation which not only addresses itself to the degree of interrater agreement, but to the real issue of "whether the population parameter is now more accurately estimated." (p. 80)

In the Gilmore letter study, each of the three raters individually read and recorded ratings for each letter. A discussion of each element of the rating scale directly followed these individual ratings, and a consensus rating was then recorded. Klein and Cleary's (1967) four sources of discrepancy were

frequently noted and corrected for by using this consensus-discussion technique. When a discrepancy occurred, a discussion of the source of disagreement encouraged the raters to return to the rating criteria in order to objectively verify their evaluation, rather than basing a rating judgment on a subjective impression of the tone or style of the letter, or the individual bias of the rater.

Questionnaires

If, as in the case of the Gilmore letter study, the authors of the written material under investigation can be located, a questionnaire is a useful technique for accumulating information not otherwise provided by content analysis.

New Information

A questionnaire return rate of 64 percent in the Gilmore letter study made it possible to get a fairly accurate picture of the demographic characteristics of our total sample of letter writers. We were also able to compare our final content ratings with the letter writers' own expression of their main purpose, main message, emotional involvement when writing the letter, etc. In addition to this comparison, the letter writers' responses were examined with regard to the writers' feelings and thoughts concerning such areas as to what effect their letters may have had upon Gary Gilmore and what effect Gilmore's execution had on them.

Classification

In an effort to increase the amount of unique information received from the questionnaire responses, many of the questions were open-ended and a comment section was included at the end.

When tabulating the questionnaire responses, categories were derived by reviewing the responses received. In addition to the developed categories,

idiographic responses were noted, and when these unique responses added new insights, they were reported along with the more frequently made responses. This procedure enabled us to reduce the total amount of information into manageable units while retaining many exceptional individual responses which might otherwise have been excluded. An example of such responses adding insight occurred in reference to a question concerning Gilmore's charisma. Many respondents thought this charisma came from Gary's strength and courage in the face of death. A few, however, added the unique idea that his charisma resulted from his being a demon or devil controlled individual.

Assessment of Psychopathology

Both the letters and the questionnaires were assessed as to the presence or absence of severe mental disturbance. Rating of the mental health of the letter writers was evaluated as follows:

Impressions of mental health of the author (mark all that apply)

A. Author indicates current mental disorder

B. Author indicates previous mental disorder

C. Severe mental disorder judged to be present

1) Disturbances in form or content of thought

a) Delusions

b) Perseveration

c) Trends or overdetermined ideas

d) Incoherence and tangentiality

2) Disturbances of affect

a) Depression

b) Anxiety

c) Ambivalence

3) Pathological religious ideas

a) God controlling the acts of others or of the writer

b) Demons or Satan controlling the acts of others or of the writer

D. No mental disorder judged to be present

In general, when judging the presence or absence of severe mental disorder in the Gilmore letters, disturbances in the form or content of thought were observed most frequently (delusions, trends and overdetermined ideas, and incoherence and tangentiality). Assessment of severe mental disorder within the Gilmore letters resulted in a figure of 10 percent which approximates an average of the figures generally reported in epidemiological studies (Hollingshead and Redlich, 1958; Lemkau, Tietze, and Cooper, 1942; Roth and Luton, 1943; and Srole, Michael, Opler, and Rennie, 1962).

An interesting discrepancy was found between the mental health ratings of the letters and the questionnaires corresponding to the letters. In general, these discrepancies occurred when mental disorder was rated due to comments made on the questionnaire, but no evidence of mental disorder could be found in the corresponding letter. Possibly because of the fact that the questionnaire came from the clinical training director at a university department of psychology and the fact that many of the questions were directed at the individual's thoughts and feelings more pathological responses were evoked than otherwise would have been when writing on one's own terms (as in a letter to Gary Gilmore). Of course there were some, but a fewer number of discrepancies because of insufficient responses on the questionnaire.

Dilemma: Religion vs. Psychopathology

If a letter describes a situation in which the author was awakened at 2 a.m. by a voice from God, can the author of this letter be said to be mentally

ill? Spilka and Werme (1971), in an article describing four possible relationships between religion and mental disorder, ask the question of whether religion fostors, attracts, gives an expressive outlet for, suppresses, heals, or otherwise modifies mental disorder.

> It is, of course commonplace for disturbed persons to use religious ideology and symbols in expression and perhaps projection of their inner disturbance. Whether recognized or not, relevantly deviant religious behavior--as a mystic's, fanatic's, Pentecostal's, isolate's--reflects personality characteristics that might clinically be described as disordered. This, of course, is a classical matter for debate. (Spilka and Werme, 1971, p. 470).

In order to overcome the dilemma concerning the relationship between psychopathology and religious behavior and beliefs, each letter was rated as an entity in the Gilmore letter study. Thus, if some seemingly bizarre religious idea was discussed within a letter devoid of other signs of psychopathology, the letter was not rated as pathological. Possibly as a result of this reluctance to identify religious ideas with psychopathology, however, a greater number of the nonreligious letter writers in the Gilmore letter sample were rated to have severe mental disorder (11.4 percent non-religious versus 7.8 percent religious).

Looking Back

Initially, the study of the letters written to Gary Gilmore was conceived of as an attempt to objectively analyze a social phenomenon: a study of the people who wrote to a condemned killer. No formal hypotheses were developed, and the methods used were adapted to the available data. As a result, the findings reported in the Gilmore letter study were largely unpredicted. For example, the finding of severe mental disturbance in approximately 10 percent of our sample, although not hypothesized, is a valuable supplement to previous

epidemiological studies reporting similar figures. Further findings in the Gilmore study were supportive of traditional theory, such as Freud's (1928) evaluation of religion as a key cultural tool in reconciling man to "the cruelty of fate, particularly as shown in death" (p. 30). Other findings raised questions which might well merit further investigation. Examples of questions raised from the Gilmore letter study include: What role does one's strength of convictions play in making a person charismatic? Does one's religious beliefs function in such a manner as to shield or insulate one from certain emotions or personal involvement?

In looking back upon our efforts to mix the nomothetic and idiographic approaches, the preservation of the unique, individual response appears to have paid off. Many of the individual responses produced insights into areas such as death, capital punishment, and charisma that may not have been obtained or reported otherwise.

Although no formal hypotheses were developed or stated, some initial guesses and beliefs concerning the letters sent to Gary Gilmore, such as the stereotypical guesses that these letter writers must be "crazy," "fanatical," lonely, etc., proved to be false. Perhaps one of the most basic and valuable contributions of the Gilmore letter study is to re-assert the importance of objective data gathering and analysis when dealing with a social situation or event. Too often the explanations for and evaluations of ongoing societal phenomena are left to speculation. If carefully done, research into society as a living laboratory can provide a variety of exciting, valuable, and unexpected insights into human behavior.

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STATE OF UTAH
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
DIVISION OF CORRECTIONS
150 West North Temple
Salt Lake City, Utah 84103

END