

Prisons of the mind with recidivism



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Research-Based Analysis: Recidivism

The intention of prisons is to punish and remove criminals from society. Preventing future crime and rehabilitating criminals into law abiding citizens is supposed to be the other side of a prisons purpose. However, the emphasis on rehabilitation is not at all equal to the emphasis on punishment, creating an imbalance within the prison system that leads to a strong probability of recidivism, relapse into criminal behavior that typically leads people back into prison. Imprisonment, both physical and mental, creates a cycle that few people are able to break. The cycle is based on obedience, which seems contradictory considering the entire reason people go to prison is because they are going against societal and authoritative rules. However, authority and situational pressures within the prison, the prison system, and the environment that those create, expose inmates to psychological damage. The psychological damage created by unknowing obedience to an authority is especially exemplified within the prison system. Unknowing obedience comes in many forms, commonly, prisons of one's own mind and obedience to situational and societal pressures. In Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, the results brought to light how assigned roles can trap people into prisons in their minds created by themselves. Stanley Milgram, using his Shock Experiment, analyzed how far people will go to please authority and how they do this without thought. The research conducted by Philip Zimbardo and Stanley Milgram help explain the high rates of recidivism. The unknowing following of an authority is not only an integrated part of everyday people, but also an obedience pattern that comes forward in pressure-filled situations and creates psychological prisons. These ideas

discovered in both experiments are shown throughout the pattern of recidivism.

This essay will firstly explore what recidivism is and how it has taken affect in the United States. Included within the history of recidivism will be a personal story of a woman who broke the cycle of recidivism and uses her experience to keep other women from going back to prison. Using the ideas gathered in Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, I will explore how physical imprisonment creates mind prisons and how the effects may be combated. Next, I will dive into an explanation of Stanley Milgram's shock experiment and how mindless obedience is taught within prisons and how such a mindset can be retaught. Finally, I will explain how the ideas from the experiments come together to explain why recidivism is based on the psychological effects of imprisonment.

History of Recidivism

The growth of recidivism has increased within the United States dramatically in the past two decades alone, with a study from the Bureau of Justice Statistics finding that within five years of release, about 76.6 percent of prisoners are rearrested, more than half being rearrested within the first year of their release (Durose). A majority of crimes that send people back to jail are nonviolent, crimes such as theft and drug use which are majorly considered to be side effects of not being properly reentered back into society. When unable to reestablish a role in society, such as getting a job, people often feel as though they have no choice but to steal because they have no way of acquiring cash or they have no choice but to get involved

with drugs, so as to release themselves from having to deal with their situation, they get high. These crimes obviously get them in trouble and break their parole and they get sent right back to prison. The justice and prison systems are flawed and create an environment that psychologically damages people to the point that they do not believe they can get out and they become stuck in the cycle of continued imprisonment without proper reliable access to helpful rehabilitation.

A woman by the name of Susan Burton, who served six separate prison sentences, works today to get women out of prison and integrated back into society. She bases her re-entry program called A New Way of Life on what she views as the systematic failings of the prison and justice systems. Burton explores why she went back to prison so many times and what resources could have kept her out. After her sixth time being released from prison, she found a rehabilitation center that actually kept her sober because it focused on the root of her behaviors and not just on her behaviors alone. This is what Burton based her program on, giving therapy and rehabilitation opportunities that target the reason behind bad behaviors. Burton claims that many people commit crimes because of abuse, trauma, and loss, which are all damaging factors that are also present within prisons. The constant revisited exposure only deepens psychological problems. Burton uses many tools to teach women how to escape both their physical and mental prisons.

Prisons of the Mind with Recidivism

Philip Zimbardo, a psychologist and professor at Stanford University, created a mock prison in his infamous Stanford Prison Experiment. The point of the

experiment was to understand the “ effects of imprisonment” on a population of average, volunteer, college males (Zimbardo 2). The volunteers were randomly split into two groups, guards and prisoners. The only instruction from the psychologists in charge of running the experiment were that the guards were to “ maintain “ law and order”” within the prison (Zimbardo 3). The guards achieved their goal through a multitude of dehumanizing tactics that forced the prisoners into roles that were created externally and then internalized as prisons within their own minds.

The obedience to their own mind prisons stemmed from the treatment received from not only the guards and other prisoners but also from the environment of the mock prison itself. The prisoners were immediately stripped of their individual identities by process of giving them all the same uniform and by being referred to only by their ID numbers. A portion of the dehumanization of the prisoners was established through the prisoners having to seek permission for basic and everyday activities such as going to the bathroom. The seeking of permission created a “ childlike dependency” among the prisoners which helped them fit into their assigned role (Zimbardo 3). The passivity with which the prisoners began to behave by gave way to the guard’s justification of their treatment. The prisoners gave up control and acted by the strategy, “ Act not, want not, feel not” so as to not be singled out and get into extra trouble while imprisoned (Zimbardo 7).

The guards in Zimbardo’s experiment were not real guards and only had their gained power to base their abusive ways on, however, the treatment of the prisoners within Zimbardo’s experiment does not differ significantly from experience that released prisoners have shared. A large majority of people

who are put back into prison multiple times have drug problems that only worsen while incarcerated. Behavior is not fixed in prison as it is intended to be. Daniel S. Nagin, a criminologist and professor at Carnegie Mellon University, states that the intention of incarceration is both to incapacitate and to deter (Nagin 115). While that may have been the intention, it is clear that the main focus is solely to incapacitate. The inability to assist in the correction of behaviors and main goal of putting criminals away from the rest of society creates the conformation for criminals that they are undeserving of help. The lack of resources that people need are what create the prisons within their own minds that make them incapable of breaking the recidivism cycle.

Susan Burton, who was released from prison six separate times, discussed how she was “treated without dignity or respect” and that led to the mental block that told her she was undeserving of these things (Carrigan 30). The only reason Burton was able to escape the cycle of recidivism is because she was introduced to addiction treatment and counseling that had not been available to her the multitude of other times she had needed it. Research has proven that “correctional education programming...offers the greatest reduction outcome”, according to Lori L. Hall, a professor of criminal law at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Only with the proper counseling and resources has Burton ever seen people truly escape the cycle of recidivism as prisons of the mind control how incarcerated individuals see their situation and options.

Obedience without Awareness within Recidivism

Stanley Milgram, an American social psychologist and former teacher at Yale University, wrote "The Perils of Obedience" to summarize his shock experiment, a study of how far people will go to please authority. The subjects of the experiment are referred to as the teacher and the teacher is in charge of giving the learner, who sits in another room, questions that if the learner answers incorrectly will earn them a shock that the teacher administers. The shocks are not real and the learner is an actor, unbeknownst to the teacher. Throughout the experiment, as the learner gets more answers incorrect, the teacher is told to deliver higher and higher voltage shocks. The teacher's reaction to hearing the learner's protests and what they do when told to keep going by an authority is what is truly being observed. The conflict between the immorality of knowing that they are subjecting the learner to pain and the underlying need to please authority is displayed in nearly every test subject, but over half of all the subjects go to the highest voltage shock when instructed to do so.

The predictions Milgram gathered from a variety of people before performing the experiments overwhelmingly stated that people would not follow the authority if it meant that they had to harm another. These predictions were clearly wrong as around 60 percent of the test subjects in the first round of experiments went all the way to the highest voltage (Milgram 64). These findings were not an indication that people are naturally aggressive and eager to harm others because in the variation of the experiment that Milgram performed where the teacher was allowed to choose the shock levels instead of being told which levels to use, a vast majority used the lowest levels of voltage throughout the experiment (Milgram 75). Milgram observes that the

willingness to cause harm to another human being is due to the presence of the authority figure. The subjects even tell Milgram that they no longer felt responsible when the authority figure was the one instructing them to cause harm to the learner because it was not their idea.

The feeling of accountability vastly decreases within a prison setting. Being stripped of individuality by being dressed and treated the same as other inmates creates within prisoners a sense of not being responsible for their actions based on being, as Milgram describes, "only an intermediate link in a chain of action" (77). They blame their bad behavior and inability to change once released on the flawed system, which holds some weight as Philip W. Harris, a professor at Temple University, states that one's environment "shapes behavior patterns, attitudes and preferences" (Harris 46). However, not everyone in prison conforms to the bad behaviors of other inmates and not everyone bends to the expectations that they are bad people. Society provides another type of authority that inmates tend to be unknowingly obedient to as society typically dictates that once someone has been convicted of a crime, they no longer have a purpose or place in society. This makes getting jobs incredibly difficult for released prisoners and if they are unable to get a job they tend to commit another crime in order to be sent back to the prison, where they do not have to make decisions for themselves as it is easier to submit to what society dictates they will be then to create their own lives that they are responsible for sustaining.

Susan Burton, founder of A New Way of Life, understands the importance of having purpose and accountability and adjusted her mission to state, "We envision a world where every person can make decisions for their own life, is

accountable for these decisions and is valued as a contributing member of the community” (Carrigan 27). Burton gives tasks to the women that come to her in order to give them a sense of purpose and the task typically involves a way to make the person responsible for completing it a sense that they are solely accountable and that if they fail to complete the task, the group suffers as a whole. Tasks involve taking care of everyday life things like getting groceries or taking care of household chores. Burton has found these tasks to increase the women’s ability to overcome the submission to what they have been told their futures will hold.

Conclusion

The cycle of recidivism is a consequence of unknowing obedience to authority, both within the mind and within societal standards. Zimbardo and Milgram show different sides to unknowing authority while maintaining the idea that people are unable to figure out ways around their ingrained obedience because of mental blockages that fool their perception of thinking freely. Zimbardo shows with his experiment that it altered reality in such a way that the subjects unthinkingly submitted to their roles. Milgram, on the other hand brought to light that obedience to an authority is so ingrained that it takes more conscious effort to ignore and resist what goes against someone’s beliefs than it is to just submit to what is asked of them. The inability to recognize obedience within one’s own mind explains how the cycle of recidivism is so common among prisoners. A lack of ability to think based on personal beliefs versus beliefs that are placed in one’s head unknowingly creates an inability to escape repeated negative actions.

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