

Social Atom:
An Alternative to Imprisonment

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Each time I enter the prison gates, I am struck by the quietness of the place. It feels akin to the silence of a tomb where life meets death. I remember when I began consulting how frightened, enraged, and saddened I was at seeing this place. I was overwhelmed and frightened at the harshness and desolation of prison life; and, now, after spending four weeks a year for the past three years working with the male inmates in psychodramas, I am amazed how I no longer allow myself to fully experience the "place." In order for me to continue working with the men, I have to "control" what I feel, see, and experience; and I believe that is what is required of most people inside the prison walls. It is necessary to deny the reality of the moment to continue existing there. To me, being in prison is experiencing living death. It is an institution so conserved and controlled that to survive one must live in the past or future. The present has no room for relationships, spontaneity nor creativity. Time takes on new dimensions, and the notion that "each man does his own time" although relevant to every human being is a stark reality in prison.

It pains me to experience the aseptic environment and to be with men who exist with so few "rights" that we in a democratic society have learned to take for granted. I see people looking and acting like robots, and I feel helpless and angry. Although I have grown to understand and appreciate the dilemma of the penal system, I still experience it as one of the most dehumanizing, degrading and destructive institutions I have ever experienced.

Inside the prison walls exists a delicate and subtle balance of power between the inmate and prison officials. It exists for the purpose of controlling feelings, maintaining order, and, thus, surviving. The inmate and prison officials live in a caste system, each with their ascribed roles, i.e., the keeper

and the kept, the violator and violated, the punisher and the punished. They have a symbiotic relationship that has been in process for generations. To ask who has the power or who is the keeper is an academic polemic. The entire system is isolated from and closed to the rest of society.

It is a lonely place for inmates and staff. When 1400 men are engaged, feelings must be controlled, and nothingness is felt to excess, men go through the motions of living. As Carl E. Hollander expressed, "Men become human-doings, not human-beings." Sexual feelings must be ignored, rage suppressed, anger channeled, love feelings controlled and intense sadness dismissed. It is as if everyone knows that if feelings are made conscious, the entire system is in jeopardy and someone will end up dead. The issue is survival! The emptiness of prison life is camouflaged by the men. What at first appears to be quite spontaneous and creative interactions are later discovered to be conserved behavior that has been passed down for generations within the prison walls. The men experience most of their life through memories, daydreams and fantasies of the future. They rehearse their expectations of life over and over. Intimacy, learning, and growth, all by-products of creativity, cannot exist in this environment. In order for this to exist, inmates and officials would have to cross caste lines and re-establish a new social order.

My husband and colleague, Carl E. Hollander, and I have been contracting with the Federal Bureau of Prisons to provide sociatric services to inmates at "Prisonville," a central United States prison. We met with an average of seventy-five inmates for two consecutive weeks two times a year for the past three years. The men with whom we met were inmates assigned to the prison's Drug Abuse Treatment Program. Although each man had been convicted and incarcerated for a variety of offenses, they all had been involved with drugs, e.g. through possession, transportation, sales, and/or addition. We worked for a day and a half with a group averaging 12 men.

Initiating a relationship with the men would have required twice the time it actually involved were it not for the Drug Abuse Treatment Program Director, whom I shall call George. George had established so much respect among his staff and the inmates that based upon his word we were allowed optimal entry rites into the caste system of "Prisonville." George was the key to the program and a sociometric leader. Subsequent to the first and second groups with whom we met, the communication networks carried the word throughout the dormitories that we were "out front," "square-business" people. In fairly rapid time we were seen as non-caste members. We were not part of them nor part of the staff, but rather, visitors, friends, and people from "off front-street" beyond "the bricks" who had something different and powerful to offer without any conditions or hidden games that might render them impotent or vulnerable to the penal system. The following is an example of prison life

We returned to "Prisonville" six months after our initial visit. There had been racial unrest and rioting over the summer interim, new men were added to the program, others had made parole, and the familiar faces had paved the way for our visit. The majority of people in our first group had entered into psychodrama sessions during our last visit and had tacitly begun to identify those group members who "needed a psychodrama." Very little orientation was required upon our return. The process of warming up preceded us, their ambience was warm and welcoming. There was a large volume of interest in the "outside" world, our clothes, and our lives in general. They shared with us the changes that had occurred within the prison as a result of the riots, how they were feeling about themselves, and how much time they each had before appearing before the parole board.

As the warming up proceeded, the men suggested themes and people who might work as a protagonist in a psychodrama. Anxiety began to rise, particularly among the

Appendix A.

1. **Psychodrama:** an action instrument that provides an individual and group with a structure to experience their own process of learning. Through the enactment of life situations, an individual is provided the opportunity to fully experience his or her individual process intrapersonally, and sociometrically. The structure allows for a warm-up, an enactment, and integration. Psychodrama is a process within which an individual can spontaneously experience a catharsis and find creative alternatives in her or his life.
2. **Sociometry:** science and art of human relations; the systematic measurement of interpersonal relationships; the greatest umbrella of group dynamics; the system of assessing interpersonal networks and linkages; the process through which socialization occurs. (Hollander, C., 1974).
3. **Sociostasis:** social equilibrium, i.e., an individual's social atomic system is in equilibrium, complete. An individual is "driven" to complete his or her social atom to feel in balance. An individual experiences a viable position within his or her sociometric networks.
4. **Tele:** term coined by J.L. Moreno to describe a process through which individuals form relationships with each other at an intuitive level rather than using concrete data. The feelings for people may be positive, negative, or indifferent. It describes a process whereby an individual is experienced honestly, not as someone needs to experience him or her. The process is reciprocated.

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