

The Mental Torture of American Prisoners Cheaper Than Lab Rats, Part II

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The use of prisoners in medical experiments didn't begin or end with the radiation experiments conducted on them from the 1940's to the 1970's. [See: Part I - *Can Prisoner's Glow in the Dark?*, PLN, March 1999]. As thinly disguised psychological laboratories, supermax prisons and other forms of isolating prisoners from the outside world continue the tradition of using prisoners as "lab rats."

Psychological experimentation on prisoners raises serious cultural, legal, political, and ethical questions for the same reasons that human radiation and biochemical experiments on them did. Also, just as the radiation experiments conducted on prisoners was for the purpose of understanding the effects of radiation on military personnel and the general population, psychological experiments conducted on prisoners have a larger purpose than finding more effective ways to torment them. One of those purposes is to determine how political authorities can affect, manipulate, and/or control the behavior and responses of people in the general population under various conditions.

One of the fathers of today's mental experimentation on prisoners is M.I.T. psychology professor Dr. Edgar Schein. He became one of the western world's foremost authorities on psychological coercion by studying the methods used by the Communist Chinese and North Koreans on American prisoners during the Korean War.

At a 1962 M.I.T. seminar attended by psychologists and prison wardens from around the country, Dr. Schein explained how physical, psychological, and chemical techniques of coercion inflicted on American *prisoners of war*, could be used on *prisoners of law* in American prisons. Dr. Schein told his audience that they shouldn't be squeamish about using mind control techniques on American prisoners perfected by the Russians and Communist Chinese because:

"These same techniques in the service of different goals may be quite acceptable to us. ... I would like to have you think of brainwashing not in terms of politics, ethics, and morals, but in terms of the deliberate changing of human behavior and attitudes by a group of men who have relatively complete control over the environment in which the captive population lives."

The centerpiece of Dr. Schein's techniques of coercive manipulation is the psychological isolation of prisoners by the fraying or outright destruction of social bonds and their emotional support structure. This includes relationships between prisoners on the inside, as well as their family and friends on the outside. The reason he keyed on this as a powerful coercive mechanism, is that to varying degrees we all perceive our existence as human beings from what is reflected back to us by those living beings we come into contact with. Psychologist Nathaniel Branden named this phenomenon the Mutt-Principle. In the 1960's he realized from his response to his dog Mutt, that all living beings contribute to our mental

health who make us feel real by accurately reflecting our treatment of them back to us.

Dr. Schein learned from studying the successful techniques of totalitarian regimes, that isolation and other forms of sensory deprivation, psychological disorientation, and pervasive surveillance have a significantly negative effect on the human psyche. By reducing the sensory feedback that Dr. Branden identified as vital to someone's well-being, they can be used as a weapon to induce cracks in that person's mental defense system. Dr. Schein believed this predictable human response to sensory deprivation could be utilized for purposes of affecting the behavior of men and women in American prisons. He thought these mental cracks could be filled with ideas of the government's choosing.

Some of Dr. Schein's colleagues went beyond him by identifying the use of powerful psychoactive drugs as a practical way to biochemically isolate prisoners from their normal influences, without the expense of physically isolating them.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Dr. Schein's ideas on human experimentation were put into action and overseen by federal prison psychiatrist Dr. Martin Groder. He was instrumental in the transfer of "agitators, suspected militants, writ-writers, and other troublemakers" to remote prisons in an effort to sever family ties by making visits difficult. After being moved, these prisoners were put in isolation and deprived of mail and other sensory stimulations. Every effort was made to weaken their internal defenses and heighten their susceptibility to influences controlled by prison authorities. If a prisoner responded by abandoning his attitude of individuality, he was granted privileges. If not, his psychological torture continued indefinitely.

University of Michigan psychologist Dr. James V McConnell was an enthusiastic supporter of Dr. Groder's work. In an April 1970 Psychology Today article entitled: Criminals Can Be Brainwashed - Now, Dr. McConnell favorably compared the human psyche to that of rats and flatworms. He even thought people could be manipulated with behavioral techniques he perfected while training flatworms to navigate a maze.

Harvard psychologist B. F. Skinner tried to resolve the ethical concerns that arose from the scientific treatment of the human mind like a pliable blob of Play-Doh in his 1971 book -Beyond Freedom and Dignity. However, he chose to do so in a book with a title that neatly sums up the twisted Orwellian attitude of everyone involved in experimenting on prisoners and other human beings.

Make no mistake about it, the *millions* of prisoners who have been subject in various ways to sensory deprivation and isolation techniques are viewed by the scientific and correctional community as human guinea pigs. They are "lab rats" who only differ in the type of experiments they are subjected to, from the inmates poked, prodded, and zapped during the radiation and hormone experiments that occurred from the 1940's until the 1970's.

Dr. James V Bennett, who was then the director of the U. S. Bureau of Prisons, made this crystal clear at the same 1962 conference where Dr. Schein made his presentation. He made the observation that the federal prison system presented "a tremendous opportunity to carry on some of the experimenting to which the various panelists have alluded." He wasn't idly talking. In July 1972, prisoners at Marion Federal Penitentiary smuggled out details to U. N. emissaries of

psychological experiments that were being conducted on them. The use of psychological torture techniques in prisons was already widespread enough in the early 1970's, that Jessica Mitford wrote about them in a remarkable August 1973, Harper's magazine article entitled: *The Torture Cure: In Some American Prisons, It Is Already 1984*. Among other things, the revelations in that article are credited with contributing to the end of the radiation and hormone experiments on prisoners in Oregon. However, Ms. Mitford's main thrust was exposing the use of prisoners as "lab rats" testing the effectiveness of sophisticated forms of mental coercion and powerful psychoactive drugs. In her article she wrote about the results of a laboratory experiment designed to test the effects of isolation on the human mind:

"The exciting potential of sensory deprivation as a behavior modifier was revealed through an experiment in which students were paid \$20 a day to live in tiny, solitary cubicles with nothing to do. The experiment was supposed to last at least six weeks, but none of the students could take it for more than a few days: Many experienced vivid hallucinations - one student in particular insisted that a tiny spaceship had got into the chamber and was buzzing around shooting pellets at him. While they were in this condition, the experimenter fed the students propaganda messages: No matter how poorly it was presented or how illogical it sounded, the propaganda had a marked effect on the students' attitudes - *an effect that lasted for at least a year after they came out of the deprivation chambers.*"

Ms. Mitford expanded on her Harper's article in *Kind and Usual Punishment: the Prison Business* (1973). In the chapter detailing psychological experiments on prisoners, she quotes a 1970 prophecy Dr. Bennett made about prisons in the year 2000 AD: "In my judgment the prison system will increasingly be valued, and used, as a laboratory and workshop of social change."

Supermax prisons and other experimental forms of mind control exercised on prisoners are a part of today's reality that Dr. Bennett envisioned almost thirty years ago.

Remarkably, authorities in the federal government recently let the cat out of the bag they are aware of their potential liability for conducting psychological experiments on prisoners. This was revealed in The Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA) enacted in 1996. Its provisions contribute to the legal disenfranchisement of prisoners by effectively limiting their ability to redress wrongs and grievances through the federal court system. One of its provisions specifically prevents prisoners from successfully suing prison officials for "mental or emotional harm unless they can also prove physical injury." Almost diabolical in its design, this provision of the PLRA effectively prohibits lawsuits stemming from the psychological torture rampant in America's prisons.

It is significant that isolation experiments involving prisoners at Dachau were among the vivisection experiments conducted by Nazi doctors. Needless to say, the work of these discredited Nazi doctors is being continued daily in the laboratories of physical and mental torture masquerading as American prisons.

Non-consenting prisoners are experimented on in many dehumanizing ways. Yet their systematic mistreatment is openly condoned by political, judicial, and bureaucratic authorities in the United States who view them in the same way the Nazis viewed the inmates at Dachau and Auschwitz. They don't believe they are really people.