

A STUDY OF INMATE PERCEPTION OF THE
WALPOLE-NORFOLK CLASSIFICATION PROGRAM

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When the Classification system that serves Walpole and Norfolk assumed its present form in February 1967 it was agreed that after a reasonable length of time its effectiveness in the Institutions would be reviewed. A study recently completed by the Central Office reviewed a sample of men seen by the Classification Committee and evaluated the response to recommendations made for them. It was, in effect, a quantitative look at the Classification process. The present study is a continuation of the Classification review, with the questions asked being more of a qualitative than a quantitative nature. The data for the study were gathered through use of a questionnaire administered to a group of inmates who have been through the Classification process. The questions asked covered three general areas: inmate knowledge of the purpose and functioning of the system, its effect on the inmates prison experience and a subjective analysis of the systems effectiveness.

Data Collection

The data were collected through individual interview with a pre-selected group of inmates both at Walpole and Norfolk. Each inmate was asked a series of thirteen questions and then given an opportunity to add information which he thought relevant to Classification. The interviews took place in the Counseling sections of Walpole and Norfolk, generally in one of the rooms used for individual counseling. Each inmate was told in advance how he came to be part of the random sample as well as being assured that his name would not be put on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered by the same researcher in all cases.

Sample

The men interviewed represented a random sample derived from the cases reviewed in the first Classification study. These men had been seen by the Classification Committee in the period between February and October of 1967.

It was felt unnecessary to interview the entire 159 used in the first study, consequently, 25% of those at Walpole and 25% of those still at Norfolk were taken. The method of selection was simply to take every fourth man alphabetically from each of the two groups. The result was a list of 16 men at Walpole and 24 men at Norfolk to be interviewed. One of the inmates at Walpole refused the interview and two at Norfolk were unavailable for medical reasons, thus the data are based on a final group of 15 from Walpole and 22 from Norfolk.

Data Presentation

The data will be presented in the order of topics discussed above; inmate knowledge of the purpose and functioning of the system, actual involvement in the system and subjective analysis of its functioning. In condensing the data to meaningful proportions, it was necessary to arbitrarily place answers in various categories. In general where the answers ran from negative to positive or no knowledge or opinion to complete knowledge or strong opinion, the answer was scored in the category it fit most readily.

Purpose and Functioning of the System

The first area that the questionnaire was concerned with was inmate knowledge of the purpose and functioning of the Classification system. The questions asked relative to this area concerned familiarity with the system, ideas as to the purpose of the system, actual interaction with the social workers and inmate perceptions of the social workers' job. The data indicate that more than 80% of the inmates in the sample didn't feel they had a clear understanding of what Classification was or the areas it encompassed. Further probing revealed that only slightly over half of them connected it to the development of rehabilitation programs. The remainder either had no idea as to its function or thought that it was primarily concerned with transfer.

Understanding of who the Social Workers were and the nature of their job was also somewhat limited. Approximately 60% connected the position with some type of helping role while the rest either had no idea or were vague in their understanding. Only 30% of those interviewed reported they knew their Social Worker by name, but an additional 40% felt they could recognize him despite not knowing his name.

Involvement with the Program

In considering actual involvement with the Classification program, approximately 70% of the inmates remembered at least one of the Committee's recommendations accurately. However, of all the recommendations that the Committee did make for the men, only 30% were actually recalled. This means, in effect, the average inmate remembers only one out of every three recommendations. The involvement rate in programs that the inmates remembered accurately was about 70% and it is interesting to note that involvement rate in activities inaccurately "remembered" as recommendations was just slightly higher. This supports the contention of the first Classification study that involvement in the various programs is more the result of individual enterprise than decisive action on the part of Classification personnel with cooperation of the inmate. These data indicate that the inmate has a tendency to remember as "recommendations" those activities he is or has been involved in rather than those actually made during the Classification interview.

Part of this phenomenon may result from a breakdown in the communication system that is supposed to aid the inmate. Only 40% of the inmates remembered any interaction with the Social Worker following Classification and of these only about 25% reported receiving specific recommendations as to areas where they might get involved. The remainder reported they talked in general terms about possible programs or, as was more often the case, only about the possibilities of transfer.

In considering those inmates transferred to Norfolk, 65% reported they found out about the transfer either by asking the Deputy at Walpole or by being called the day they were to leave. Only 35% reported that the Social Worker informed them of their transfer.

In the guidelines established for the Social Workers in classifying inmates, it states that they are responsible for discussing the Committee recommendations with the inmate following the Classification interview. The inmates reported that in a majority of cases this is not being done and, when it is done, the specifics of the Committee recommendations are not discussed. In addition to seeing the inmate immediately following the interview, the Social Worker is charged with the responsibility of periodically checking the inmates progress. The Walpole data indicated that only about 25% of the men remembered any contact with the Social Worker after Classification and in most of these cases the inmate saw the Social Worker an average of once in six months. The 75% of the sample who reported no contact with the Social Worker have gone a minimum of eight months without any Classification supervision.

There are no Social Workers at Norfolk who are incorporated into the Classification Program, however, the original plan in setting up the system was to have the House Officers check periodically on inmate progress. It would appear that if this is to be done, there are several problems to be overcome. Most of the 22 interviewed expressed a distrust of the House Officers and only one reported having a good relationship with the Officer in his unit. If the Officers are to assume the "Social Worker" position, it would appear that they must make special effort to gain inmate trust and respect and establish workable lines of communication with the inmate population.

Presently at Norfolk the Director of Treatment and the Social Service (DLM) are the only personnel who in any way act as Social Workers and it is clearly not their primary responsibility to do follow up work for the Classification System.

Analysis of the System's Functioning

The third area that the questionnaire dealt with was the inmates subjective analysis of the systems functioning. The questions asked were designed to have the inmate evaluate the system as it affected him and as he felt it affected others. When asked if the Classification system serves any useful purpose, about 60% felt that it had some merit, another 20% felt it was worthless and the remaining 20% were unable to judge. In response to questioning about the System's influence in getting men to participate in programs, about half were non-committal in that they felt participation was the result of individual motivation. Thirty-five percent felt that the System had a definite impact on participation in the various programs while 10% stated that it had no effect and the remainder simply couldn't judge.

As a further analysis, the inmates were asked to evaluate the effects of discontinuing the program on an inmate's preparations for release. Almost half of those interviewed felt that discontinuing the Program would have adverse effect on an inmate's being prepared for release. About a quarter of the sample felt that preparedness was the result of individual initiative, not the result of the Committee's recommendations. Twenty percent felt that the System had no effect on the inmate and the remainder felt unable to evaluate the Program.

The final question asked the inmate to judge whether the Classification System had been of personal use to him. About 25% of them said they felt it had been of some benefit, over half responded with a negative answer, about 20% side-stepped the question by saying it was of no use to them, but was of benefit to some inmates and the remaining few didn't care to judge.

Subjective Commentary

The final data gathered were commentaries presented in open discussion with those interviewed after the questioning was completed. The criticisms of the System and suggestions on improvement were far reaching in scope. Nearly a third of those offering criticism observed that the Correctional Officers are generally either apathetic toward the functioning of the Classification Program or openly hostile towards it. Some went on to add that the industrial personnel often show much the same attitude. In discussing the Classification Board itself, several remarked that they felt the Classification personnel had no sincere interest in the individual and one went so far as to label it "a joke". Another of the inmates stated that as he left his Classification interview he felt he had intruded on a social gathering.

The remaining criticism centered around the administration of the Classification Program. One inmate felt that the Committee didn't present a realistic picture of institutional facilities and several felt that the facilities that are available are too limited. In the recommendation making process, some of the inmates felt that the Committee had too little influence in the prison system to make its decisions binding. Along this line, several indicated that in spite of the Committee's decisions placement in some jobs and in some programs is the result of bargaining with influential inmates and Officers rather than because of the Committee's decision. The final complaint was that very often in the Classification process the inmate is not sure who he is talking to or in what capacity the person relates to the Classification System.

Suggestions for improvement in the system were almost as numerous as complaints.

The suggestions followed the general areas in which the complaints had been voiced; need for a better initial orientation to the System, need for "new blood" (interested people) to serve on the Committee, need for more personnel to initiate, assist in and follow up in program development, need for more facilities within the institution and the resolution of the antagonism between custodial and rehabilitation personnel. One inmate suggested that Classification undertake a public relations program and a second proposed that an inmate give the initial orientation to incoming men under the guidance of one of the Directors of Treatment.

Conclusion

The interpretation of data in a report of this kind is perhaps best left to the personnel who work intimately with the Classification System. However, if the data presented can be viewed as a true representation of the present situation at Walpole and Norfolk, then several reasonably objective conclusions can be drawn from the study. It would appear that in this sample the inmates have only a partial understanding of the various parts and underlying philosophies of the Classification process. The data indicate that this is most likely the result of poor communication with the inmate as he goes through the process and marginal attempts at follow up once the Classification interview is completed. Improvements in this situation might be brought about through implementation of several suggestions. The Director of Treatment at Norfolk has suggested that each inmate be given a copy of the recommendations made for him following the interview so that there is no confusion as to what the Committee recommends. The second suggestion is that the inmate be given a written outline of the Classification System on entering Walpole, in which the process and philosophies behind it are clearly spelled out for him. In this way, the inmate would know how the various people who interview him relate to the system and he would better understand his role in the process. The problem that encompasses all phases of the Classification process is communication of methods and goals to all the prison personnel as well as the inmate population. It is likely that the system will continue to run inefficiently and ineffectively until it does receive the interest and cooperation of all those involved.

1. Are you familiar with the Classification System here at Walpole (Norfolk)?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Yes	4 (27%)	3 (14%)	7 (19%)
Not too - Somewhat	6 (40%)	8 (36%)	14 (38%)
No	5 (33%)	11 (50%)	16 (43%)

2. What is the purpose of the Classification System?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Transfer and job placement	1 (7%)	7 (32%)	8 (22%)
Rehabilitation	9 (60%)	12 (54%)	21 (56%)
No Idea	5 (33%)	3 (14%)	8 (22%)

5. Do you know who your Social Worker is?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Would Recognize	4 (27%)	12 (54%)	16 (43%)
Knew him by name	7 (46%)	4 (18%)	11 (30%)
Saw several		3 (14%)	3 (8%)
No	4 (27%)	3 (14%)	7 (19%)

6. Do you know what a social worker is supposed to do?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Helping role	10 (67%)	11 (50%)	21 (57%)
Mechanical role (data collector)	3 (20%)	6 (27%)	9 (24%)
No Idea	2 (13%)	5 (23%)	7 (19%)

7. Did your Social Worker explain the Committee's recommendations to you following the Classification interview?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Yes	7 (46%)	7 (32%)	14 (38%)
No	8 (54%)	15 (68%)	23 (62%)

7a. Were you given specific recommendations or suggestions as to areas you might get involved in?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Specific recommendations		3 (43%)	3 (23%)
General recommendations	2 (33%)	2 (28.5%)	4 (31%)
Talked only about transfer	4 (67%)	2 (28.5%)	6 (46%)*

8. Have you seen your Social Worker since he told you of the Committee's recommendations (or if #7 is "no" ... since your Classification interview)?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Yes	4 (27%)		4 (11%)
No	11 (73%)	4 (18%)	15 (41%)
No, but some other person** (DLM, Director of Treatment, etc.)		18 (82%)	18 (48%)

10. Do you believe that the Classification System serves any useful purpose?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Yes	3 (20%)	11 (50%)	14 (38%)
No	4 (27%)	4 (18%)	8 (22%)
In some cases	6 (40%)	2 (9%)	8 (22%)
Don't Know	2 (13%)	5 (23%)	7 (19%)

11. Do you think that the Classification System encourages participation in programs that men might otherwise ignore?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Helps	5 (33%)	9 (41%)	14 (38%)
Up to individual	7 (47%)	11 (50%)	18 (49%)
No effect	2 (13%)	1 (4.5%)	3 (8%)
Don't know	1 (7%)	1 (4.5%)	2 (5%)

*One man didn't recall what was said and is therefore not included

**This category applies only to Norfolk as there are no social workers there

12. If the Classification Program were discontinued, would this have adverse effects on the men in terms of their being prepared for release (job skills, counseling, education, AA., etc.)?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Yes	9 (60%)	9 (41%)	18 (49%)
No effect	4 (27%)	4 (18%)	8 (22%)
Up to individual	2 (13%)	7 (32%)	9 (24%)
Don't know	0	2 (9%)	2 (5%)

13. Has the Classification System been of any use to you?

	Walpole	Norfolk	Total
Yes	1 (7%)	8 (36%)	9 (24%)
No	10 (67%)	9 (41%)	19 (51%)
No, but*	3 (20%)	4 (18%)	7 (19%)
Don't know	1 (7%)	1 (5%)	2 (5%)

*In these cases the men essentially said no, but they were careful not to condemn the system ex. "It was of no use to me but others have benefitted from it."