REFERENCES


RECOMMENDED READINGS


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should there be more or less oversight/monitoring of U.S. prisons? Assuming that prison oversight is required, should it be done by governmental or private agencies, or both? Should the public be allowed to visit prisons? Explain your answers to each question.

2. What kind of major impacts did the author's experiences in corrections have on her? Imagine that you had the same experiences. How do you think the events and conditions that the author witnessed would have affected you?

3. Think of a significant change that should be made in or to the correctional system. If you had to make it, would you work inside or outside the system, or some combination of both? Describe the actions that you would take.

Learning Corrections

*Linking Experience and Research*

Lucien X. Lombardo

*Editor's Introduction:* Professor Lombardo taught prisoners at New York's historically significant Auburn Prison. Working from 1969 to 1977, he experienced the "pendulum swing" from an emphasis on rehabilitation to punishment during the 1970s. He makes important connections between his experiences and scholarship while offering insights to today's generation of corrections workers, who are also experiencing major social changes. Lombardo found it difficult to educate prisoners against institutional pressure to adopt security as the primary purpose of his position. He believes that a dominant way of thinking among correctional authorities stands in the way of solving important problems. Lombardo recommends using new perspectives in corrections, including those from academia, that maintain human beings as the focus of decision making.
INTRODUCTION

As I approached the front gate for my first day of prison work, readying myself for the winding journey into the prison in which I’d be locked up for eight hours a day, I recalled a former football coach talking about his experiences as a substitute teacher in the prison one summer. He said he could never get used to the doors slamming shut behind him. Being locked in bothered him so much he never went back. How will I react? (Lombardo, 1969)

Like many who entered the field of corrections before the 1970s, my experiences started before there was an academic field called criminal justice. I had absolutely no knowledge of “corrections” when I started work as a teacher in the Osborne School of Auburn Prison. In addition, the prison system at the time provided no training. This was a new world, one I would strive to understand, and I would have to do it on my own. I had an undergraduate degree in Spanish Linguistics, a master’s degree in Latin American Studies, and a provisional teaching license for social studies and languages. My teaching credentials enabled me to get a position teaching high school Spanish and fifth and eighth grade English to prisoners in a correctional institution in my hometown, Auburn, New York, in August 1969. I stayed in this position until 1977.

I started to experience correctional institutions during a time of dynamic changes in the relationships between prisoners and the institutions in which they lived. The late 1960s and 1970s was a period of examination and dramatic change in the criminal justice and correctional institutions. Following years of sometimes not so benign neglect, the 1960s saw the civil rights revolution (including prisoners’ rights), anti-Vietnam War protests, waves of urban violence, and political assassinations. Crime and all aspects of the criminal justice response to it were at the center of societal concern and political life. In the mid-1960s, the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice issued its report The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society and its accompanying Task Force Reports. The experiences described in this essay took place during this time of change.

In 2009, Senator Jim Webb of Virginia introduced legislation (S. 714), the National Criminal Justice Commission Act, “to look at every aspect of our criminal justice system with an eye toward reshaping the process from top to bottom.” Thus, my experiences at Auburn Prison following and during a critical period of criminal justice reform are likely to have relevance as we undergo another period of examining and reforming the criminal justice and correctional system.

In November 1970, Auburn Prison experienced a 1-day riot and takeover of the prison yard. Stemming from reprisals against prisoners stemming from symbolic protests related to Black Solidarity Day, the riot preceded the infamous Attica rebellion by 1 year. These events and the political and legal reactions that surrounded them formed the background for my own institutional experiences. (For a description of my experiences of the Attica Riot, see “Attica Remembered” at http://www.sen.gov/~jwebb/resources/collected_papers/3.pdf.)

As I attempted to understand the prison life of prisoners and staff as well as my own experiences, a chance meeting with Donald J. Newman of the School of Criminal Justice, University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY), led me to return to graduate school to see what I could learn. From 1972 to 1974, I took an educational leave of absence from my prison teaching position to pursue graduate study in Criminal Justice at the School of Criminal Justice at SUNY, Albany. My years at SUNY provided me an opportunity to learn many new perspectives, to engage in discussion and study of proposals to reform many aspects of criminal justice administration especially in the area of sentencing and corrections, and to test much of the informal study of the prison world that I did on my own after I started my prison teaching career. This essay describes my experiences of learning about prison life particularly in the years before I pursued graduate study in criminal justice. It describes my attempts to understand what I was observing, hearing, and experiencing in relation to my students (the prisoners), the world they inhabited (the prison), and the place where I worked (the prison as an organization).

AUBURN CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

The workplace where my understanding of correctional institutions began was Auburn Prison as it was called when I started. Soon afterward, as part of the enormous changes that were taking place in the correctional institutions field, it became Auburn Correctional Facility in 1970. The renaming was part of an emphasis on corrections rather than imprisonment that was taking place in New York and around the country. Auburn Correctional Facility was part of the new Department of Correctional Services, which envisioned an integrated correctional institutions and parole. Auburn was and is a maximum security prison in central New York State.

As I was to learn, Auburn Prison had historic significance. It was the prison where the Auburn, or “congregate,” system had its start in the
early 1800s; it was studied by Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in 1831 as part of their efforts to inform postrevolution France about the prison and democratic experiments taking place in the young United States. (De Tocqueville was also the author of *Democracy in America.*) De Tocqueville and de Beaumont described the Auburn System (separate cells, congregate labor, silent system, use of flogging) as a model prison in their 1833 book, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application in France*, making the Auburn system known throughout Europe. Auburn Prison was the site of the first purposeful electrocution (using the electric chair for the death penalty) in 1890; and it was the prison of Thomas Mott Osborne and the Mutual Welfare League, a form of prisoner participation in decision making, or prisoner democracy. In the late 1920s, it was the site of a major prison riot that was the subject of prize-winning reporting. Housing between 1,500 and 1,600 prisoners in single cells, it was an institution that experienced little turnover in either the prisoner population or correctional staff during the time I worked there.

While Auburn is a prison with a long and storied history, it is also a prison where programming and change were important. Prison industries were complemented with a school program that served over half the institutional population. From Adult Basic Education through high school and college programming, the institution has had from its beginnings an educational mission. Community programs from Junior Chamber of Commerce programs to Dale Carnegie and community groups representing African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans would enter the prison and interact with prisoners on a regular basis. As I was to learn, when the Department of Corrections wanted to institute a new policy, Auburn was the place where it was first tried out. Though it was a maximum security prison, Auburn had a relatively relaxed atmosphere. One of my early prisoner students described it in 1970:

I remember when I was on the bus coming up from New York City: a street wise young black man going to the rural white sticks. I heard so much about the hostility of the white hacks toward us blacks. All the way up I was building up my defenses, preparing myself for the hostility. However, when I get to Auburn and we march from the bus and start going through procedures, this white guard who was with us says: "How ya doin'? Everything OK?" I couldn't believe it. I was ready to fight everything and there was nothing to fight. Auburn really throws you off balance.

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE PRISON WORLD**

Almost as soon as I started working at Auburn Prison, I started my informal study of the prison world. As I encountered this isolated world within a world, this informal study helped me understand my experience and the dynamics of the prison world. We often hear that it is the experience that matters and that academic understanding reflects an ivory tower perspective. However, my experience has taught me that I could not have understood or functioned well within the correctional institutional world without insights from scholars that helped me understand the meanings and dynamics of my correctional experience.

Though the prison world that I entered in 1969 seemed to be one of dramatic change, one of the first principles that I learned concerned the *stability of the prison world.* Weeks after I started as a prison teacher, I visited Auburn’s public library to see what I could learn. One of the first books I encountered was *Report of Gershom Powers, Agent and Keeper of the State Prison, at Auburn: Made to the Legislature, Jan. 7, 1828.* As I read this report I was startled by how little had changed in the 160 years since it was written.

This report described much of what I was seeing: prisoners in uniforms lining up in the yard to march to their various assignments (though it was not the lockstep march of Elam Lynds, one of Auburn’s early keepers, or wardens). On my first day of work, I along with other new employees met with the PK as he was known, the Principle Keeper (in today’s language, Deputy Superintendent for Security). *Keeper* was a term from the early 1800s. There were also descriptions of the new *congregate prison labor* system, which mirrored the prison industries of 1869 where prisoners made license plates and furniture, and packed tobacco, which was shipped to prisoners throughout the state.

This 1828 report also contained discussions of issues that were of importance in 1969. Concern was expressed for prisoners suffering mental breakdowns from isolation cells (the Pennsylvania model); it described prisoners suffering from substance abuse withdrawal from alcohol and even more dramatically from tobacco. It described the low level of education of prisoners and the institution’s attempt to enlist local seminarians as teachers in an informal school program; it provided a discussion of problems related to abuse of force by prison staff and the difficulties of deciding how much force was appropriate in a specific case. It seemed that every prison issue that was being debated
in the late 1960s and early 1970s was present in the nature of the institution and its inhabitants and workers at the time of Auburn’s founding.

A second book that I encountered in my informal study of the prison world was Thomas Mott Osborne’s *Within Prison Walls* (1914). This personal narrative of 1 week’s voluntary confinement in Auburn Prison by one of the leading prison reformers of the early 1900s introduced me to a second principle important in understanding the prison: *Prisoners are people not images and stereotypes.* Just as Osborne described architecture of the prison world, his encounters with unreasonable staff and sympathetic staff, his observations of violence, the routine of prison counts and order, the life in the workshops, so he was describing what I was encountering in discussions with my prisoner students and staff. However, his interactions with and descriptions of the human reactions of prisoners to their separation from their families and communities and attempts to make due in a world of deprivation showed how stereotypical “criminal” images failed to reflect the humanness of the prisoner’s life. The dedication of Osborne’s book captures this spirit:

This little volume is dedicated to OUR BROTHERS IN GRAY and especially those who during my short stay among them in Auburn Prison, won my lasting gratitude and affection by their courtesy, sympathy, and understanding. (p. vi)

This view was reinforced when expressed in August of 1970 (3 months before the 1970 riot at Auburn) by the past president of the local correctional officers’ union in an article in the local newspaper, *Auburn Citizen Advertiser* (August 29, 1970). After reports of increases in the number of officers being assaulted by inmates surfaced, this former union leader stated,

There have been several occasions where I personally have overheard officers talking to an inmate as though he were some kind of animal, and there were just as many occasions where a little less brute force should have, and could have, been used to control a difficult situation.

I feel, as I am sure a great many of my fellow officers do, that a man is a human being whether he be inside or outside of these walls, and that if we expect to be respected and looked up to for guidance, then this respect should be returned.

A man serving a term in prison is being punished for a crime, and to make this time more difficult would be to destroy everything our institutions are meant to stand for. ("Guard Decries Brutality," 1970, p. 2)

After learning about the principles of stability and humanness from the materials available in the community library at Auburn and seeing these concerns mirrored in contemporary (1969–1972) debates about the purposes and processes of corrections, I pursued other perspectives. One lesson that I learned quickly in my workplace was that those who did prison work did not often understand why they were doing what they were doing. After working for a few months I asked a fellow teacher with 25 years’ experience why we did something a certain way. The question seemed to stump him. After 2 minutes of silence, all he could say was “I don’t know!” This baffled me.

As I searched for an answer, I encountered Erving Goffman’s (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates.* As a neophyte to the prison world, I found this book a revelation. In this book, the prison world as it was being described in the prisoner and political rhetoric of the late 1960s and early 1970s found explanation. The concept of prison as a total institution and the ritualistic processes through which total institutions, such as correctional institutions, operate on both inmates and staff became clear. According to Goffman, prisoners (inmates of all types) were dehumanized to fit the roles defined for them by the institutions. The world of the total institution was controlled and regularized and all facets of life were dictated by the institutional regime: the constant counts, the rules, the paper trails of reports of structured behaviors, identities, and interactions of both prisoners and staff within and across their groups.

While the concept of the total institution defined the formal world of prisoner and staff identities and their interactions, Goffman also pointed out that there were informal worlds of both staff and prisoners where individual prisoners and staff would reach accommodations that allowed each to maintain a degree of humanness and autonomy within the total institution. Thus, what I was seeing in my students and the staff of the prison (and in myself) was not unique to us as individuals but was part of the life of correctional institutions of all types. Understanding this allowed me to use this knowledge as I worked with my prisoner students and staff. This insight proved valuable for understanding my own interactions with the prison and those of prisoners and other staff.

Finally, I discovered Donald Cressey’s book *The Prison: Studies in Institutional Organization and Change* (1961). During these early years, I felt that there were many contradictory goals and messages that were part of the corrections. Security demanded that prisoners be seen as potentially dangerous and not trustworthy or indeed worthy of respect. Yet
as a teacher, processes of education demanded that a certain degree of trust and mutual respect be shown if the teacher–student connection was to be enhanced. While these contradictions were confusing, the various studies described in Cressey’s book let me see that what I was experiencing was normal and that these were simply contradictions inherent in the complex nature of correctional organizations and work. These contradictory perspectives (security or custody and treatment) cannot be maximally achieved in the same institution, yet they were both part of the institution in which I worked (a high-programming maximum security institution).

❖ SOME KEY LEARNING EXPERIENCES

As I started my work as a prison teacher, some key experiences led me to reflect certain dimensions of my role and the institution within which I worked.

Visit With the “PK” on First Day of Work

Field notes, August: Even though I had filled out all my forms and had my picture taken (like the prisoners), I had to meet with the man in charge of security, the PK (later I learned this meant Principle Keeper) before I went to the school to start teaching. This visit is mandatory for all new employees. Since I was a teacher and not a guard (whose responsibility was security), I didn’t understand what this had to do with me. Being new to prison life, I had no idea security in prison was such a fragile thing. Six of us who were starting today were sent into the room and stood around a large table.

Two people stood out. One was a rather short fellow about 45 years old dressed in civilian clothes. He looked at me, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed. He said this place was just like the army, hurry-up-and-wait. This turned out to be my boss, the academic supervisor in the school. He was returning to Auburn after an initial period as a new supervisor at another prison. The other was a 6 foot 3 inch tall, and a well-built, 220 pounds in a sergeant’s uniform. No chuckles from him; he appeared to be as cold as an iceberg. He gave the impression that he didn’t want to be here.

As we stood there, the PK came in and sat behind his desk. He looked through us as we stood. After the sergeant, who worked in the PK’s office, introduced him, the PK started his speech. He reminded me of a football coach giving a pep talk. We were welcomed to the team. We were expected to do a proper job, a good job. He emphasized that we were going to be working in a maximum-security prison and that maximum security meant MAXIMUM security. Everyone in the institution is responsible for security. This meant teachers, sergeants, supervisors, clerks, secretaries, everyone. The PK pointed out that the men we would be working with were convicted of crimes. They were convicts. Many were dangerous. He said they would try to use us to gain any advantage they could for themselves. “Never do a favor for a convict,” he emphasized. If we did, we’d be in the criminal’s back pocket forever. He’d have a hold over us. He could and would use us. The PK warned us never to bring anything into the institution or take anything out. (After he said this, I noticed that my new supervisor and the experienced sergeant were both carrying their lunches; they were bringing something in. This is confusing.) Everything and everything “out of the ordinary” was to be reported to his office. But, what, I thought to myself, was ordinary? I’d been in the institution for three and one-half hours as an employee—trying to figure out what was “normal” was going to be fun. The PK told us we’d be tested by everyone in the institution and that we’d better not fail the tests. Failure could mean our jobs. (When he said everyone, did he mean employees as well as inmates? I am not sure.) Finally, the PK lectured us on the use and abuse of sick time. He told us to come to work when sick and not to abuse the “privilege” of sick time. Absence means one place in security may be uncovered. Replacements never know the job as well as the regular man.

How Did I Understand This Experience?

This first experience as a corrections employee left me a bit confused. My feeling at the time was that the PK was speaking to us (the employees starting at Auburn that day) as if we were children. “Do everything I tell you children, or I’ll throw you right out of here,” was what I heard. I started to wonder about the conflicts between my role as teacher and my role in security. My sense of self was somewhat taken aback by all of this. I felt competent enough to be trusted, but I was given no clue that I was. I felt that I wasn’t trusted and that no one in the prison trusted anyone. I felt controlled, or at least, I felt attempts by the system to control me. Their judgment was to be substituted for my judgment. Do what they say, and you are OK. I resented this straight off. I didn’t know what all of these feeling would mean in day-to-day practice, especially in a prison. But I did feel, after only 4 hours, that I
had to somehow “beat the system” if I were to be an effective teacher. I did not know how the system worked or, indeed, if there was a system. I felt that battle lines were being drawn between my own sense of self and the workings of the prison. I had the feeling that this was someplace where I could work. But I knew at this early date that I could never see myself as part of the prison.

Later, I would come to an understanding that my attempts to “study the prison” to learn about the institution and those who lived and worked in it were probably a coping strategy where I continued to study as I had done as a student in school most of my life.

Professional Corrections Conference, September 1970

Field notes, September: I went to a conference sponsored by the New York State Probation and Parole Association. This was my first contact outside of Auburn Prison with correctional professionals. The previous months have seen discussions on the press and political arena of increased violence in prisons around the state, criticisms of judges and parole boards that decided the fate of many with their sentencing and release decisions, delays and excessive bail in court proceedings, lack of caring on the part of governor and legislators, and lack of community support and money for programs. At the conference legislators, members of corrections commissions, judges, and members of the parole board discussed these same problems. At my table were the vocational education supervisor from my school at Auburn and a former Auburn teacher who was now directing an education program at a nearby reform school for girls.

The director of the reform school program says, “It’s as bad here as it is at Auburn. Nobody cares. The state doesn’t care; the commissioners don’t care; nobody does. Just cover yourself, make the time go by and be happy! You can’t do any more. They don’t want you to. If you try, they won’t let you. Books, they’re a joke, 10 to 15 years old, falling apart and not very useful. Supplies are always in short supply no matter what you do. We’ve got a good staff, but what the hell can they do? You know how it is. Right now, I can’t get out of here. They’re starting to pay better and I’m getting stuck. I hate the feeling but it’s true.”

A black woman in the audience rises to make a point. “But senator, you talk about community corrections as if it’s such a great thing. I’ve been trying to run a group home for girls for years, and they won’t give me a license. They say I’ve got to have a licensed counselor on my staff. But to tell you the truth. I don’t have any staff, just me and my husband. We care about these kids and have helped many on our own. But as soon as word gets out that kids are staying with us, your people, I mean the state’s people come around and close us up. You say you want people to care to help out, to let kids and prisoners know the community cares. But you keep saying, ‘Do it by our rules, our way! Why don’t you give us a chance? Why don’t you make it easier for people to get involved?’” (Lombardo, 1970)

How Did I Understand What Happened at This Conference?

I started to see that the problems I had experienced during my first year as a correction’s professional were not unique. Perhaps it was the same all across corrections. Here were people who ran the programs, people in charge, and people with power. All of them were criticizing “the system” for failing, all of them knowing where and why corrections failed, all of them seemingly not powerful enough or not caring enough to change it. But maybe it was not power or caring that made a difference. Maybe it was the way they looked at the problem. These correctional professionals were saying the same things I have heard inmates say over and over again. They all complained about being dehumanized, manipulated, and lied to by others in power who had promised changes.

The black woman who spoke received a huge ovation. A state senator responded, “Licensing regulations are important because they see to it that all homes are run by professionally trained competent people. I’m sure once you can assure the state that your program meets the minimum requirements, your program will be licensed” (Lombardo, 1970). But the senator had missed her point. Caring, not professional training, was her yardstick. She spoke of people. The senator spoke of the “state” wanting to help; she spoke of people. The senator could not speak of people. Knowing his abstractions were failing, he still sought to remedy the situation through abstractions.

Post-Attica Activism (Letter to the Commissioner)

Following the prison experience known as Attica in September of 1971, correctional professionals in the state of New York and around the country were searching for answers to the problems posed by our correctional institutions and the violence that was filling them. In December 1971, the Deputy Commissioner of the New York State Department of Corrections proposed the development of a maximum-security (max-max) facility (the equivalent of individual isolation for people in such a facility is the Solo Cell).
super maximum security prisons). As a member of the correctional profession, I found this proposal took any idea of corrections out of corrections. I could not help it. At this point, I could not help but decide to take a more activist role and express my concerns to Commissioner Russell Oswald, who had become commissioner at the same time that I had started my teaching career in corrections. I believed he would listen. On December 19, I wrote a letter to Commissioner Oswald. Here are some excerpts:

One would think that men occupying authoritative positions in corrections would possess a more in-depth understanding of the problems with which they deal. The issues involved in the legal and correctional mechanism have, for the most part, been complicated by the politicization of prison populations and the racial issue. However, my faith in correctional administrators is severely shaken when I hear such contradictory statements as the following attributed to Deputy Commissioner Butler: "The last decade has brought in a whole new breed of inmates. Frankly we are at a loss to know how to handle them." This is followed by: "What we need is a place that is very, very, very secure. Where so-called political prisoners, inciters, anarchists, and whatever else they are, who don't want to be part of our program, can get involved in a program geared especially to them."

Does Mr. Butler actually expect that a maxi-maxi facility will have maximum security with maximum program? What kind of program can the state have in light of the observation that "we don't know how to handle them"?

Why do correctional personnel refuse to take a new perspective? It appears that the correctional apparatus is permeated with people steeped in the tradition of "let's create a program to help people we don't understand live in a society we don't understand. But while we do this, let's run these programs in a manner that will limit their effectiveness."

We create the expectations of corrections in the inmates. They honestly believe in it. They expect us, corrections professionals, to correct them. We may say to ourselves that only the inmate himself can correct his behavior, while at the same time, we prevent him from doing so. We create the expectation that public interest and support will help. However, I do not believe we can honestly expect people to be that interested. ("Deputy Commissioner Calls for Maxi-Maxi Prison," 1971, p. 1)
REFERENCES


RECOMMENDED READINGS


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which principles and concepts did the author use to “understand the prison world,” and what are the published sources associated with each? How do these principles and concepts help create an understanding of corrections?

2. The author approached his work not just as a person paid to perform tasks but as a person studying the social institution within which he worked and in his essay identifies some “key learning experiences.” Should everyone approach their work this way, kind of like a social scientist? Will you? Why or why not?

3. What was the author’s basic argument in his “Letter to the Commissioner”? Think of a current major law or social policy issue. Regarding this issue, would you like to see changes or things kept the same? If you were to write a letter asking a law or policymaker to consider the issue, what would you consider?

Editor’s Introduction: Professor Barfield-Cottledge was a state parole officer who focused much of her energy on helping ex-prisoners reenter the community. Lengthy incarceration leaves the ex-prisoner with fewer resources and disrupted ties to the community, which makes transitioning back to society difficult. Successful reentry depends on meeting needs such as education, employment, housing, and health care. Failing to successfully integrate into the community can lead to re-offending. Barfield-Cottledge points out some of the particular reentry difficulties faced by women and racial and ethnic minorities due to social inequality. She also discusses the challenges of reintegrating sex offenders. Barfield-Cottledge emphasizes the importance of having resources with which to offset the strain faced by ex-prisoners during reentry.