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CONTROL UNIT PRISONS

by Frank J. Atwood, MA

knowing and intentional psychological torture, performed in control unit prisons, and the devastating consequences. God help us all.

The author of this article is on death row in Arizona. You may write to thank him for this major source of information at:

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Control units are supermax prisons that have been designed by government and prison authorities to control the thinking of prisoners, to determine what the prisoners will think about, through carefully contrived sensory deprivation tactics and by focusing the attention of prisoners on immediate concerns. These strategies disable prisoners through psychological, physical, and spiritual breakdown in order to compel mindless compliance by humiliation, intimidation, and demoralization.

In addition to such unconscionable treatment of prisoners, the government and prison officials disingenuously attempt to justify these abhorrent conditions by claiming the “worst of the worst” prisoners require such brutal treatment. However, it is always the political prisoner, the jailhouse lawyer, the resisters of government brainwashing – rather than the violent and dangerous prisoner – who end up in the control unit. Case in point, on September 3, 1997, all death row prisoners in Arizona were moved to the supermax control unit. Such a move may appear justified until learning that the vast majority of Arizona’s death row prisoners have the lowest possible institutional risk score; that is, they pose the least risk to prison security, even when considering minimum security prisoners.

In addition to deceiving the public into believing control units are necessary and house only the “worst of the worst,” prison authorities are master manipulators of prison conditions – an environment that provides absolute control over the lives of prisoners living assignments, files, medical treatment, food, mail, recreation, and a host of other prisoner activities. Within this atmosphere, prison officials relegate prisoners to a self-imposed state of inferiority. There exists no doubt; the ultimate goal of a control unit prison is to crush the human spirit. Prior to detailing the methods employed by control units to crush the human spirit, as well as to reveal the devastation resulting from such methods, let’s take a brief look at the history of control unit prisons.

History

The concept of using isolation and sensory deprivation in prisons – the main tool used by modern day control units – began in the 1820s with the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (also known as the “Pennsylvania Model” prison). The prevailing belief in the 1820s was that solitary confinement would lead to remorse and rehabilitation, reform through isolation and sensory deprivation. However, it soon became evident that solitary confinement, isolation, and sensory deprivation caused mental breakdown and insanity in prisoners.

Soon after the establishment of the “Pennsylvania Model” prison, in the 1830s, Charles Darwin was given a tour and observed that the prisoners seemed “dead to everything but the torturing anxiety and horrible despair.” Subsequently, in the 1840s, Charles Dickens toured the Eastern State Penitentiary and remarked that; “I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any physical torture of the body.” Furthermore, German literature between 1854-1909 reveals that results of solitary confinement included hallucinations (visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory in nature), disassociation, hysteria, agitation, motor excitement with aimless violence, persecutory delusions, and psychosis (see: J. Ganser, *Arch Psychiatry Nervenkr* 1898). Finally, in 1890 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that sensory deprivation and solitary confinement caused violent insanity and condemned the practice.

Therefore, isolation prisons were harshly criticized throughout the 1800s, as a consequence of causing rampant mental illness in prisoners, and in 1913 solitary confinement was officially abolished.

The story does not end there. In 1962 a professor of psychology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Edgar Schein, suggested that physical, psychological, and chemical techniques could be used on prisoners to deliberately alter behavior and attitude. Schein was a world renowned expert on psychological coercion, having done extensive studies of torture and brainwashing techniques used on American prisoners of war, during the Korean War, by North Koreans and the Chinese. Schein also proposed isolation, sensory deprivation, to destroy socialization among prisoners as well as to sever the links prisoners had to the outside world. Because humans validate their existence, their personality, through contact with others, isolation has a significant impact on the human psyche. This form of psychological disorientation, the removal of others for validation of self, came to be known as the “Muttink Principle” (so named by psychologist Nathaniel Braden) and was also called the “Psychology of Invisibility.”

Building on Schein’s lead, other psychologists suggested using psychotropic medication to mentally, rather than physically, isolate prisoners. University of Michigan psychologist James V. McConnell followed up on this suggestion with an article entitled Criminals can be Brainwashed (Psychology Today, April 1970). Then Harvard psychologist B.F. Skinner authored a book in 1971, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, in which he discussed manipulating the mind like clay.

Continuing along the same path, former U.S. Bureau of Prisons director, James V. Bennett, suggested that the federal prison system was the perfect place for human experimentation with brainwashing techniques. That suggestion led to federal prison psychologist Martin Groder transferring prison agitators, suspected militants, jailhouse lawyers, and other nonviolent prisoners to remote prisons to be housed in solitary confinement. If prisoners became compliant then privileges were granted, otherwise, the psychological torture continued.

These tactics mirrored Schein’s proposal of using sensory feedback reduction to create predictable cracks in the mental defense system of prisoners that could then be filled with government propaganda. In fact, Jessica Mitford wrote an article, *The Torture Cure: In Some American Prisons it is already 1984* (Harper’s, August 1973), which detailed results of a laboratory experiment that was designed to test the effects of sensory deprivation on the human mind:

Sensory deprivation, as a behavior modifier, was the subject of an experiment in which students were paid twenty dollars to live in tiny solitary cubicles with nothing to do. The experiment was to last at least six weeks, but none of the students could last for more than a few days. Many experienced vivid hallucinations ... while in this condition, the students were fed propaganda messages. No matter how poorly the messages were presented, or how illogical the messages sounded, the propaganda had a marked effect on the attitudes of all students – an effect that lasted for at least one year after they came out of the experiment. The first federal control unit was in Marion, Illinois, and opened in 1972. Marion was an experimental project, intended for developing a program to mentally break prisoners. It was totally locked down in 1983 and has remained on lock down ever since – prisoners average 22½ hours daily in their cells.

Cutting and self-mutilation, fear of insanity, hypersensitivity to external stimuli (i.e., lighting becoming very uncomfortable, smells appearing to be quite strong, noises causing much irritation), perceptual distortions and illusions, hallucinations, de-realization, massive free-floating anxieties (leading to panic, fear, and difficulty in breathing), acute confusion states, partial amnesia, difficulty with concentration and memory, disassociation, disorientation, fantasy of aggressive revenge (torture and mutilation against guards), persecutory fear, suspiciousness, paranoia, random violence, and lack of impulse control.

As an expert witness in the mid-1990s civil lawsuit case *Madrid v. Gomez*, Dr. Grassian conducted another study involving prisoners in isolation. This study included fifty prisoners in the control unit in Pelican Bay, California. At the conclusion of this study, Dr. Grassian discovered that forty of the fifty prisoners (80%) had either massively exacerbated a previous psychiatric illness or had developed psychiatric symptoms associated with reduced environmental stimulation (RES) as a result of solitary confinement. RES is a psychiatric condition characterized by perceptual distortion, hallucinations, hypersensitivity to external stimuli, aggressive fantasies, paranoia, inability to concentrate, and poor impulse control.

Insofar as results of solitary confinement, a report by the American Journal of Psychiatry confirmed that sensory deprivation leads to hallucinations, anxiety attacks, problems with impulse control, and self-mutilation. Additionally, as a consequence of personal experience with sensory deprivation in control unit prisons, the author of this paper has also experienced depression, delusion, headaches, hypertension, hypersensitivity, and anti-social behavior and attitude. Finally, in regards to effects of solitary confinement, current literature (Dr. Grassian, et. al.) reports that sensory deprivation actually alters the chemical balance in the brain and undoubtedly causes significant personality changes.

Consequently, by reviewing this author’s personal experience, Dr. Grassian’s studies, and reports by the American Journal of Psychiatry, we can see that nothing has changed since solitary confinement was known to cause mental illness and insanity in the 1800s. Current studies and reports are virtually identical to the reports from Germany between 1854-1909 (remember, the German literature reported psychosis, hysteria, hallucinations, agitation, motor excitement, disassociation, random violence, and delusions as results of confinement in isolation).

Conclusion

This article has clearly demonstrated that the use of control unit prisons causes mental breakdown in prisoners. In and of itself, such devastating results are most tragic, however, even more horrifying is government’s full knowledge of the destruction they are causing to humans. In the mid-1990s Dr. Grassian disclosed the results of his comprehensive studies, involving the fifty control unit prisoners at Pelican Bay, to both federal and state governments. Rather than take corrective action, to immediately cease the commission of such atrocities against human beings, the federal government enacted the Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA) in 1996. The PLRA effectively precludes prisoners from suing for “emotional or mental harm unless they can also prove physical injury.” That’s right, the government enacted the PLRA to specifically exclude lawsuits, to fully absolve both government and prisons from any liability, which results from the

Variants: Preventing personal hygiene, promoting a filthy environment, invoking demeaning punishment, giving insults and taunts, and precluding privacy.

SMU: Preventing personal hygiene occurs through restricting the items sold in the commissary as well as by not keeping soap, shampoo, and other items on the store list in stock. Forcing prisoners to keep rotting trash in their cells and allowing the cleaning of cells weekly, at best, and then not providing such essential tools, like cleanser, creates a filthy environment. Guards, counselors, and even tours often walk by prisoner's cells, including when the toilet is being used – there is no privacy. Insults and taunts occur through verbal harassment. As for demeaning punishment, this involves many of the aforementioned tactics such as being strapped down while naked, forcibly extracted from a cell, body and cell searches, being escorted while in restraints by guards wearing flak jackets and eye goggles, being subjected to fabricated disciplinary reports and the consequent penalties, and so forth.

Section VIII: Enforcing Trivial Demands

Purpose: To develop the habit of compliance.

Variants: Enforcement of petty rules.

SMU: Trumped up disciplinary charges along with arbitrary enforcement of rules and/or violating established policies is among the main strategies. Also, the use of cell searches to seize authorized property. It must be noted that cell searches involve leaving the prisoner handcuffed in the shower, clad in only underpants, while a team of guards ransack the cell, leaving property on the floor or damaged – cell destruction rather than cell searches.

Results

Having learned the methods employed by control unit prisons to brainwash prisoners, for the purported purpose of compelling compliance, let's look at the actual results of sensory deprivation:

The devastation, on human beings, caused by control unit prisons is horrifying! One of the foremost experts on the results of solitary confinement – Dr. Stuart Grassian, faculty member at Harvard Medical School – authored an article in 1983 (Psychopathological Effects of Solitary Confinement) in which he linked both the brainwashing of prisoner of war soldiers in Korea and the prisoners in American control units with the devastating effects of sensory deprivation. In general, Dr. Grassian described these effects as causing restlessness, banging on walls, yelling, assaultiveness, incoherent confessional states, hallucinations, regression, disassociation, and a withdrawn hyponym state.

As part of his research for the article, Dr. Grassian studied fourteen prisoners who had been in solitary confinement for an average of two months at the prison in Walpole, Massachusetts. When reporting the results of this particular study, in the same 1983 article, Dr. Grassian initially pointed to the intense effort by each prisoner to minimize the effects of isolation. However, after diligent digging, Dr. Grassian found that the following symptoms were common results:

Subsequent to Marion being opened, various states across America built control unit prisons and by the early 1980s supermax sensory deprivation prisons began to flourish. By 1996 there were over forty control unit prisons housing some 15,000 prisoners. Even the federal prison system reentered the scene when opening another control unit prison (Administrative Maximum ADX) in Florence, Colorado, in November 1994. Prisoners in ADX are given nine hours of outside recreation weekly, three hours, three times a week, with one other prisoner. Additionally, ADX has four stages: (1) isolation cells, (2) getting out of the cell to mingle with a few other prisoners, (3) going from the cell to recreation unhandcuffed, and (4) getting a job and better food.

Conditions in Arizona's supermax control unit are far worse. There will never be commingling with other prisoners, movement while unhandcuffed, better food, or a job. Recreation occurs three times a week but only in one hour periods and alone. That is, prisoners in Arizona's Special Management Unit (SMU) are locked up for 165 out of 168 hours, over 98% of the time, each and every week.

Such is the history of sensory deprivation control unit prisons. We will now turn to methods utilized by control units and the devastating consequences

Methods

Control units attempt to brainwash and mentally debilitate prisoners through systematic programs of oppression such as isolation, physical abuse, psychological torture, medical neglect, and other sinister forms of behavior modification. In the section on control unit prison history, we learned that many of the current solitary confinement tactics developed from brainwashing techniques used during the Korean War. There are also reports that confirm that brainwashing and torture tactics employed by both the CIA and the KGB have been adopted for use in America's control units.

Insofar as these tactics, one of the most comprehensive overviews resides in Biderman's Chart on Penal Coercion (reprinted in 1983 by Amnesty International in the Report on Torture). The chart is broken into eight sections, with each section having two subsections (one on Purpose and one on Variants). These sections and subsections will be presented here along with an additional subsection (SMU) which details strategies used in Arizona's control unit.

Section I: Isolation

Purpose: To deprive prisoners of social support from both other prisoners and the outside world, to obstruct the ability to resist, to develop an intense concern with self, and to create dependence on captors.

Variants: Use of solitary confinement through isolation, partial isolation, or group isolation.

SMU: Group isolation occurs through collective punishment, one prisoner acts up and all prisoners are punished or rules, affecting all prisoners, are altered. The isolation of prisoners from outside sources occurs by mail tampering (censorship, delayed delivery, arbitrarily returning let-

ters to sender, and lost mail), weekly 5-minute monitored and recorded phone calls, non-contact visits through glass and without a phone (both prisoners and visitors must stand throughout each two hour weekly visit in order to barely be able to hear), and routinely harassing and threatening visitors. Finally, isolation from other prisoners occurs when prisoners are locked in cells for an average of over 23½ hours a day, never touching or being touched by another person (unless begin beaten by prison guards), no access to services (education, religion, or vocation), and forced idleness.

Section II: Monopolization of Perception

Purpose: To fix attention on one's immediate predicament, to eliminate any stimuli competing with stimuli controlled by captors, and to obstruct all actions not consistent with compliance.

Variants: Isolation, bright light, barren environment, restricted movement, and monotonous food.

SMU: As far as isolation, see preceding section. Florescent lighting remains on for 17½ hours daily which provides a bright environment (even during the night a "dim" light remains on). Bland food, no sweet desserts, small portions, and daily sack lunches constitutes monotonous food. Restricted movement exists when prisoners are handcuffed behind the back and escorted by a guard whenever leaving the cell. Finally, a barren environment is provided by the piece de resistance of control units, sensory deprivation. This includes unpainted walls as well as no plant or animal life, fresh air, sun, sky, windows, or hobby craft. The tactics discussed previously – isolation, forced idleness, and no access to services – also play a role in producing the barren environment.

Section III: Induced Debility and Exhaustion

Purpose: To weaken both the physical and the mental ability to resist.

Variants: Semi-starvation, induced illness and exploration of pre-existing injury, sleep deprivation, and prolonged constraint.

SMU: In addition to monotonous food tactics, semi-starvation occurs from severe restrictions on commissary purchases (only junk food and sweets, no wholesome foods offered), inability to obtain adequate nutrition from prison meals, and an extremely sedentary lifestyle. The failure to provide cold weather clothing during outdoor exercise in winter or when freezing coolers are on indoors, refusal to treat illness or provide prescribed treatment, and other medical neglect all promote physical weakness and mental fatigue. Sleep deprivation occurs when guards purposely make excessive noise all night (stomping up and down stairs, randomly opening and closing pod doors, yelling, loud laughing, and blaring walkie-talkies) and arbitrarily wake prisoners throughout the night with excuses such as supposed problems with outgoing mail, not enough skin showing (completely under the covers) or too much skin showing (sleeping naked), and so forth. Prolonged constraint involves year after year of isolation, escorted everywhere in restraints, being hog-tied or strapped down, and being placed in the hole.

Section IV: Threats

Purpose: To cultivate anxiety and despair.

Variants: Threatening death or harm and providing reward for partial compliance.

SMU: Threatening death or harm may occur verbally and often actually occurs physically. All too frequently prisoners are gassed, forcibly removed from a cell, physically beaten, and then strapped down for hours, even days. Additionally, violence, whether between prisoners or against guards, is constantly provoked by disclosing confidential information, starting rumors, or housing prisoners arbitrarily and, occasionally, around known enemies. There are also strip searches, cell searches, urine analysis tests, and other forms of harassment. The use of these tactics against prisoners who maintain any shred of individuality provides an implied threat to other prisoners in order to force compliance. Furthermore, to openly refrain from imposing such harassment, in return for compliance, also sends a message. Such arbitrary use of power is a key weapon.

Section V: Occasional Indulgence

Purpose: To motivate compliance and hinder adjustment.

Variants: Occasional favors and fluctuating attitudes.

SMU: The motivation of compliance via favors includes suspending some policies intermittently upon compliance by a prisoner. For instance, a compliant prisoner may not be strip-searched, any cell search would be cursory, or longer and preferred recreation times are provided. This can also include cessation of verbal harassment and even congenial small talk. Of course, such arbitrary use of power generates a fluctuating environment that makes it impossible to know what to expect, impossible to adjust.

Section VI: Demonstrating Omnipotence

Purpose: To show the futility of resistance.

Variants: Confrontation and displays of absolute control.

SMU: The unending demonstrations of who has the power involve gassing, beatings, and time in the hole. Other demonstrations of control include not following rules, issuing trumped up or even totally false disciplinary charges, video surveillance, and the absence of an exit strategy – for most prisoners, the only way out of the control unit is to snitch, parole, or die. Of course, for death row the only way out is to die (after 16 years, average).

Section VII: Degradation

Purpose: To show that the cost of resistance is far more damaging to self-esteem than capitulation and to reduce prisoners to animal level concerns.