

TRANSFORMING CORRECTIONS

Humanistic Approaches to Corrections and Offender Treatment

SECOND EDITION

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FOREWORD BY HANS TOCH



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of
Mike Arons and Richard Asarian.*

CONTENTS

Foreword	xiii
<i>Hans Toch</i>	
Chapter One · Introduction	3
<i>David Polizzi and Michael Braswell</i>	
Corrections and Offender Treatment: An Alternative Voice	4
Humanistic Psychology and Phenomenology: A Reformulation of the Problem	5
What is Transforming Corrections?	7
Rationale	8
Layout of the Book	9
References	12
Section I	
Theoretical Reflections	
Chapter Two · A Phenomenological Approach to Criminology	17
<i>Christopher M. Aanstoos</i>	
A Phenomenological Philosophy for the Human Sciences	17
A Phenomenological Basis for Research in the Human Sciences	21
The Development of Human Science Methodology	22
A Sketch of a Phenomenological Methodology	27
Data Collection	27
Data Analysis	27
The Researcher's Attitude	28
The Analysis of the Particular Experience	29
Analysis of the Phenomenon in General	31
Conclusion	34
Endnote	34
References	35
Chapter Three · Phenomenological and Existential Approaches to Crime and Corrections	41
<i>Hayden Smith and Kenneth Adams</i>	

Phenomenology	42
Phenomenological Research	43
Existential Phenomenology	44
Albert Camus	45
<i>The Stranger: A Synopsis</i>	46
Existential Phenomenology and Correctional Management	48
Conclusion	53
References	55
Chapter Four · Offender Objectification: Implications for Social Change	57
<i>John S. Ryals, Jr.</i>	
Introduction	57
Historical Perspectives of Objectification of Offenders	61
Current Perspectives of Offenders	63
Social Construction of Offender Characteristics	66
Functional Criminality	68
Separate and Not Equal	70
Social Importance of Offenders	72
Offenders' Self-Definition as Reinforcement for Illegal Behaviors	74
From Objectification to Inclusion	75
Conclusion	77
References	78
Chapter Five · Theorizing Criminalized Subjectivities: Narrating Silenced Identities	83
<i>Dawn Moore</i>	
Introduction	83
Jenna and Tyler	84
Drug Treatment Court	87
Theorizing Conflicting Subjectivities	88
The Juridogenic Differend	92
Conclusion	96
References	97
Chapter Six · Dialogue: A Unique Perspective for Correctional Counseling	99
<i>Matthew R. Draper, Mark S. Green, and Ginger Faulkner</i>	
Review of the Theoretical Perspective	100
Brief Theory Summary	109
Implications for Therapy within a Correctional Institution	110
Conclusion	113

References	113
Chapter Seven · The Good Lives Model: A Strength Based Approach to Offender Rehabilitation	115
<i>Tony Ward and Clare-Ann Fortune</i>	
Introduction	115
Theories of Offender Rehabilitation	117
The Good Lives Model	119
General Concepts	120
Etiological Aspects of the GLM	122
Intervention	124
Case Vignette	126
Conclusions	128
References	128
Chapter Eight · Transforming Corrections through Psychological Jurisprudence Redux: Towards a Radical Philosophical and Cultural Critique	131
<i>Bruce A. Arrigo</i>	
Introduction	131
Psychological Jurisprudence, the Criminological Stranger, and the Trans-Desistance Model	134
On the Deficit and Desistance Correctional Models: A Brief Review	135
The Trans-Desistance Correctional Model: An Overview	137
Transforming Corrections: A Preliminary Critique of Theory	146
Existential Phenomenology and Psychological Jurisprudence	146
Social Constructivism, Dialogical Humanism, and Psychological Jurisprudence	148
The Good Lives Model, Technologies of the Self and Psychological Jurisprudence	150
Conclusion	151
References	151
Section II	
Humanistic Perspectives in Corrections	
Chapter Nine · Mutual Respect and Effective Prison Management	159
<i>Terry A. Kupers</i>	
Respect and Agency	160
Deprivation of Respect and Agency in Prison	162
Restoration of Respect and Agency as Rehabilitation	165
Conclusion	169
References	170

Chapter Ten · Civility in Prisons: A Radical Proposal	173
<i>Catherine A. Jenks and John Randolph Fuller</i>	
The Job of the Correctional Officer	177
Civility in Prisons	182
Limitations and Qualifications	185
References	186
Chapter Eleven · Varieties of Restorative Justice: Therapeutic Interventions in Context	189
<i>Lana A. McDowell and John T. Whitehead</i>	
Needs of the Offender, Victim, and Community	190
The Restorative Justice Therapeutic Invention Process	191
Peacemaking Circles	192
Group Conferencing	194
Reparative Boards	195
Victim Offender Mediation/Reconciliation Programs	198
Victim Offender Panels	199
Social Justice Initiatives	200
Community Justice	203
Results of Restorative Justice	205
Conclusion	206
References	207
Chapter Twelve · Ambiguous Loss, Concrete Hope: Examining the Prison Experience for Mothers from an Ambiguous Loss Framework	211
<i>Beth Easterling</i>	
Introduction	211
Double Jeopardy	212
Incarcerated Mothers' Ambiguous Loss of Roles and Identity	214
Evidence of Ambiguous Loss	216
Ambiguous Loss, Roles and Identity: Implications from the Evidence	220
The Power of Ambiguous Loss: Research and Treatment	221
Policy Implications: Prison Programming	222
The Bigger Picture: Sociological Implications	224
Conclusion	225
References	226
Chapter Thirteen · How the “Positive” Can Influence Criminal Behavior: Growing Out of Criminal Spin by Positive Criminology Approaches	229
<i>Natti Ronel and Dana Segev</i>	

Introduction: The Criminal Spin and the Justice System	229
Positive Criminology: Challenging the Mainstream Approach	232
A Practical Model for Positive Criminology	234
Subsiding Criminality with Positive Criminology: The Ideology Behind It	235
Conclusion	239
References	240

Section III Client-Centered Themes in Offender Treatment

Chapter Fourteen · Correctional Treatment and The Human Spirit: The Context of Relationship	247
<i>Michael Braswell and Kristin Wells</i>	
The Lost Art of Relationships	252
Discipline and Obedience	254
PACTS: An Existential Model for Change	256
Paradox	257
Absurdity	258
Choosing	260
Transcending	263
Significant Emerging	267
Conclusion	267
References	269
Chapter Fifteen · Psycho-Spiritual Roots of Adolescent Violence: The Importance of Rites of Passage	271
<i>Drake Spaeth</i>	
References	283
Chapter Sixteen · Transforming Meaning: The Nexus Between the Utilization of the Rogerian Framework and the Social Construction of Pedophilic Sex Offenders	285
<i>Roger Schaefer</i>	
The Client/Offender-Centered Approach	287
Socially Constructed Meanings: The True Barrier to the Utilization of the Humanistic Approach	294
Anything But Human: The Social Construction of the Sexually Based Offender	295
Conclusion	297
References	298

Chapter Seventeen · Developing Therapeutic Trust with Court-Ordered Clients	303
<i>David Polizzi</i>	
Introduction	303
The Building of Therapeutic Trust in Offender Psychotherapy: Is It Possible?	304
Therapeutic Trust and the Role of Resistance in Offender Psychotherapy	306
How to Understand the Client's Resistance to Coercive Treatment	308
How Does Resistance to Coercive Treatment Differ from the Traditional Understanding of Resistance?	309
How to Overcome the Client's Initial Resistance to Coercive Treatment and Create the Possibility for Success in Therapy	310
Problems with Trust: Socially Constructed Barriers to Working with the Criminal Justice Client	311
The Client's Inability to Trust: The Social Construction of the Therapist in Offender Psychotherapy	312
The Limitations of Trust in Offender Psychotherapy	313
Trust and the Therapeutic Frame: A Re-conceptualization of the RNR Model from a Client-Centred Phenomenological Perspective	315
The Theory of the Psychology of Criminal Conduct	315
Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR)	320
Responsivity (Risk/Need) Profile: Toward a Phenomenology of Forensic Psychotherapy	323
Building the Therapeutic Relationship: The Case of D	326
Postscript	329
Conclusion	329
References	329
Chapter Eighteen · Epilogue: Toward a More Humanistic Future in Corrections	335
<i>David Polizzi</i>	
References	338
About the Authors	339
Index	343

FOREWORD

One of the most convincing testimonials to human obduracy is the care most of us take to preserve our repertoire of off-putting stereotypes—our conscious and unconscious assumptions about persons and groups who we have concluded ought to be condemned, shunned, rejected, or repudiated. Unfortunately, unflattering preconceptions have a way of being reciprocated by their targets. The result in the aggregate is a world divided into factious enclaves from which we warily scrutinize each others' camp fires in the twilight separated by protective moats.

Few human borders are more assiduously patrolled than that between incarcerated offenders and their keepers. Among the best-selling offerings of the American Correctional Association (ACA)—proudly listed under their *Management Resources*—are a “Con Games Inmates Play (Second edition)” video, a “Working with Manipulative Inmates” course, and assorted books with titles such as “Games Criminals Play,” “The Art of the Con,” and “Strategies for Redirecting Inmate Deception.” The ACA as a rule does not market managerial books or videos by inmates, but if it did, these would no doubt bear titles such as “Initiating Prison Litigation (in Five Easy Lessons),” “Coping with Guard Sadism, Corruption, and Brutality,” and “Why You Can Never Trust a Screw.”

A sure-fire prescription for engendering reciprocal mistrust is to avoid disconfirming information by refraining from human contacts by preventing their occurrence. The consummate application of this strategy happens to be imprisonment, and its crowning achievement is that of “special housing” or segregation units (up to and including the “supermaxes” described in chapter nine) with regimes that completely isolate prisoners and separate them from prison staff members. These contemporary high-tech dungeons are environments designed to ensure the perpetuation of prisoner-staff estrangement. The inmates who survive such settings emerge seething with righteous resentment, while the guards who have been monitoring the prisoners feel confirmed in the view (which they volubly assert) that incarcerated men or women are the lowermost scum of the earth.

The perpetuation of offender stereotyping in prisons must not be considered the domain of correctional officers. Despite predictable disclaimers to the contrary, mental health workers can function as prime sources of rejection for prison inmates. In fact, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, or nurses who work in detention facilities are particularly well situated to act as agents of dehumanization. “Therapeutic” encounters with inmates can be experiences almost calculated to reinforce the denunciatory message of confinement or to accentuate the deprivations of imprisonment. As a case in point, delivering “mental health services” through the door of an isolation cell can nicely convey indifference to pain and suffering. As an example of an even less ambiguous communication, I know of no more effective way to advertise paranoia than to demand that some inmate be shackled while one builds “rapport” with him across a solid bullet-proof plastic partition.

For clinicians to pay homage to the demands of custody while they engage in custodial overkill may be a deception that adds insult to injury. The evidence suggests that most professionals in prisons are accorded a measure of respect and authority in their domain—if nothing else, to preempt litigation—and thus have more discretion in doing their work than they elect to exercise. The hesitance to take ameliorative initiatives is often a matter of choice or policy, and the mantra “custody made me do it” can be an alibi. Assigning blame to custody or the administration becomes a convenient way to preserve self-respect while one colludes to keep anxiety-provoking offenders at a distance. The avoidance behavior is apt to be transparent and it can cement the cynicism of the offenders one has avoided. Rejection happens to be the response offenders mostly expect and they have learned to react in kind. This response of the offenders can be self-servingly deemed to be “ingratitude,” and one can of course point to their resistance as evidence of their imperviousness to treatment (chapter seventeen). The offenders thus conveniently become the bad guys in the transaction, and this adds buttressing to one’s anxieties in dealing with them. Along the way, correctional staff has made sure that no change could possibly occur: no reappraisals will have been called for, either on the staff member’s own part, or on the part of the offenders the staff has taken exquisite care not to engage.

Psychological reappraisal in general becomes an issue in human intercourse where encounters with previously stereotyped “others” provide intimations of the shared humanity we have been schooled to ignore or suppress. At such serendipitous (and discomfiting) junctures, there are potential opportunities for discovery, growth, and development. Unsurprisingly, in real life (unlike in some fiction), such opportunities are rarely utilized. What mostly takes place

is a salvaging operation in which miniscule adjustments are enacted to preserve one's endangered world view. In other words, challenges to stereotypes tend to be responded to with exercises in remedial tweaking.

The need for remedial tweaking is particularly acute where the "other"—e.g., the offender who looks to be human—also appears to be an impressive, congenial, or likable human being. To deal with this eventuality the safest course of action is to invoke the principle of exceptionality. A staff person admits that the offender is an interesting and attractive person, and further credits him with the fact that he is interesting and attractive despite the fact that he is an offender. The fact that the offender is a distinctive offender can then be used to argue that he is an obvious exception to the rule.

If a correctional staff member wishes to relate to an offender as a gesture of humanistic good will, the safest candidate for adoption is one who stands out in some non-offense-related fashion, which facilitates his differentiation from other offenders. If the staff member then needs to defend against the charge that it is elitist to single out an offender-novelist, inmate-poet, or prisoner-playwright for sponsorship, it is helpful if one's protégé has a long prison sentence, and has thus been certified by authorities as an offender of substance. To be sure, hybrids are wildly unrepresentative in both their worlds, but being exceptions they are safe to adopt—at least, until they re-offend.

Humanism is a broadly encompassing category—the approach comprises a great deal of activity, as a reading of the ensuing chapters demonstrates. It, at a minimum, connotes the effort (and capacity) to fully understand others in the sense of intuiting the world as others perceive it. The skill is one that Carl Rogers consistently prized and labeled as the capacity for accurate empathy. The capacity is not a tool designed to serve one's predilections or convenience. To know a person in this sense means to know the whole person rather than select congenial attributes. Accurate empathy is in fact best deployed where it is most difficult to exercise, where the distance to be bridged is greatest. It is of least consequence where the experience of knowing others is most inviting, where we deal with the amenable or familiar, as in caseloads of hand-picked clients.

It is preliminarily enticing to suggest that one should distinguish between the offender and his or her offense; however, an offense-less offender is fiction and an offense committed by others becomes a different offense. Lastly, the offender's offense-related dispositions must be the subject of our professional concern, and they must certainly be a subject of concern for the offender. In some (restorative) paradigms, the offender's motives are also of interest to those who have been victimized (chapter eleven).

Humanistic approaches ideally are open minded and ecumenical. What should matter is the achievement of consequential relationships (chapter ten), not the technology whereby they are achieved. To accentuate or belabor sectarian distinctions strikes me as unhelpful. For me, for example, the embodiment of a humanistic approach happened to have been that of Fritz Redl, who was a Freudian psychoanalyst. Redl had a regulation Viennese accent, with which he colloquially described the doings and perspectives of Detroit juvenile gang members. No one I know worked with institutionalized delinquents more skillfully and authoritatively, and with more insight and love.

For my money, Redl was the Complete Humanist. He may or may not have imbibed the requisite philosophical sources (he did have a doctorate in philosophy), but Fritz Redl walked the walk. And what Redl had in spades is Rogers' third desideratum, which is that of genuineness. It is difficult to precisely define genuineness—it was so even for Rogers—but we know it when we see it. More to the point, the offenders with whom we propose to deal know genuineness when they see it. This matters, because when we approach an offender—no matter how highly we may rate the nobility of our intentions—we embark on an act of intrusion. To earn access we must gain trust, and we earn trust by making ourselves genuinely accessible and having the offender respect what he sees.

A book subtitled *Humanistic Approaches to Corrections and Offender Treatment* manifestly does not mirror prevailing practices in corrections, nor reflect the dominant ethos of the times. Such a book instead gives some of us heady sustenance and support in the goals that we secretly aspire to—it gives us a sense of what might be achieved in the distant future, and what might already have been accomplished. The book is an invitation for us to “hang in there” and persevere. “If you are not quite burned out, have not given up, and are still fighting the odds,” the message of these chapters is, “you are not nearly as alone as you sometimes feel out there on your limb.” The reassuring fact is that there are enclaves of humanistic activity in correctional settings, and as these experiments demonstrate their effectiveness, they are bound to ensure the long-term survival of the approach.

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