INFLUENCE OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION PROGRAM ON CRIMINAL RECIDIVISM

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Parolees from three high security California prisons who had learnt the Transcendental Meditation technique while in prison showed a lower recidivism rate, a higher incidence of clean records, and fewer new convictions than non-meditating controls.—EDITORS

Parole outcomes for California Department of Corrections parolees who had voluntarily learned the Transcendental Meditation (TM) technique while incarcerated at Folsom Prison, Deuel Vocational Institution, and San Quentin Prison in California were compared to parole outcomes for nonmeditating parolees matched for offense, prior commitment record, age, ethnic group, institution, and parole year. In a comparison using eight categories of parole outcome, the TM group had significantly better parole outcomes than their matched control twins over parole periods of six months (p < .0006), one year (p < .0014), and overall (six months to two years) (p < .0014). The TM group also had significantly more clean parole records and less total prison recidivism (defined as parole revocations plus new prison terms). A survey of regularity of TM practice yielded responses from a majority of inmates instructed who were still in prison, and most of these were still practicing the TM technique after up to six years.

These results suggest a real breakthrough in criminal rehabilitation with immense implications for fiscal savings and reduction of human suffering.
INTRODUCTION

California recidivism statistics reveal the ineffectiveness of past rehabilitation programs available in prisons. Prison recidivism by California male felons at the end of the fifth year after release averaged about 37% for the five-year periods following parole years 1969–1975 (California Department of Corrections, 1982). Reviewing studies from across the U.S., the National Research Council (1979) concluded that “the entire body of research appears to justify only the conclusion that we do not know of any program or method of rehabilitation that could be guaranteed to reduce the criminal activity of released offenders.” Recent studies on the Transcendental Meditation (TM) program in prisons, however, suggest a brighter outlook.

The TM technique is a mental procedure practiced twice daily for about 20 minutes, and is said to be simple and easily learned. The goal of TM practice is development of full mental potential, higher consciousness, on the basis of fully normal physical health (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 1972). Maharishi holds that all deviant social behavior is due to psychophysiological weaknesses that can be gradually eliminated by the unique quality of deep rest gained during TM practice (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 1966 and 1972).

The TM technique has been shown to produce a state of restful alertness characterized by reduced oxygen consumption, increased galvanic skin resistance, reduced blood cortisol and arterial lactate, and increased brainwave coherence and alpha wave production (Wallace et al., 1971; Jevning et al., 1978; Levine et al., 1977). Cumulative improvements in physical and mental health outside of meditation have been demonstrated in terms of improved scores on a wide range of physiological and psychological tests, and in greater success in endeavors such as school work, athletic performance, and job productivity and satisfaction. Many of these studies were collected together by Orme-Johnson and Farrow (1977).

The TM program has been taught in over 25 U.S. penal institutions since 1971 (Ellis, 1983). During this timespan psychological studies have been completed indicating improvements in mental health of incarcerated offenders practicing the TM technique (Cunningham and Koch, 1977; Ballou, 1977; Abrams and Siegel, 1978; Orme-Johnson, 1980; Alexander and Marks, in press). After psychological tests showing mental health improvements in Massachusetts prison inmates practicing the TM technique, Alexander et al. (in press) performed a recidivism study. They compared 53 released men who had received TM instruction during incarceration to 192 released participants in Black Muslims, Christian Action, drug rehabilitation, or counseling. Overall recidivism after 6 to 36 months was 32% for the TM group vs. 48% for the pooled other prison self-help groups (p < .025).

Mental patients share with prisoners a history of deviant social behavior. Glueck and Stroebel (1975) found patients who learned the TM technique at the Institute of Living in Hartford, Connecticut to be more improved at the time of release than matched hospital twins (p < .001). Bielefeld (in press) found graduates of the Cleveland VA Hospital Vocational Rehabilitation Unit (a cross-section of mental patients and addicts), who had learned the TM technique while inpatients at the hospital, to be more often presently in out-patient status than controls, rather than resident in a hospital or prison (p < .01). The TM group were also more often employed or between jobs (p < .05).

On the basis of the evidence cited for the psychophysiological benefits produced by TM practice and actual reductions in recidivism reported above for criminal offenders and hospital patients who had learned the TM technique, the major hypothesis of the present study was that California Department of Corrections (CDC) parolees who had learned the TM technique while in prison would have better parole outcomes (less recidivism and more clean parole records) than matched control CDC parolees.

TM studies have specifically shown improvements correlated with regularity of TM practice or with duration of regular practice both in prisons (Orme-Johnson et al., 1977; Alexander and Marks, in press) and among alcohol and drug abusers (Lazar et al., 1977; Shafii et al., 1974, 1975; Schenklunh and Geisler, 1977), a related area. Therefore a second hypothesis of this study was that recidivism within the TM group would be negatively correlated with regularity and continuity of TM practice. Consistent with this hypothesis, at least enough of those instructed in the TM technique should be found to be continuing the practice to account for any overall improvement in parole outcomes.
METHODS

SAMPLE—The TM program has been taught at Folsom Prison (since 1976), Deuel Vocational Institution (DVI, since 1976), and San Quentin Prison (since 1978) in the California Department of Corrections. All three institutions house solely male inmates. For this study men who had been paroled in the years 1976 through 1980 subsequent to voluntarily receiving TM instruction at one of the three institutions were matched by CDC with control parolees according to (a) same or closely similar offense, (b) with or without prior prison commitment, (c) ± four years from year of birth, (d) same ethnic group, (e) same parole year, and (f) paroled from one of the three institutions of TM instruction. The list supplied to CDC of men who had received TM instruction was known to be incomplete. Records for several small groups instructed at San Quentin were missing, and records of groups at Folsom and DVI may also have been lost. However, the loss of records was without any bias as to parole outcome. Out of 203 matches 21 were outside of the age limits and four were mismatched by ethnic group. Parole outcomes were unavailable for 18 released meditators because they were either paroled to the custody of another correctional agency, deported, released without parole, died less than six months after parole, or were instructed in meditation while serving a revocation of parole so that the parole date preceded the TM instruction date.

PAROLE OUTCOMES—Parole outcomes fell into the following categories, ranked from the most favorable to the most unfavorable.

0 = No reported charges.
1 = Technical charges; arrest and release, with or without trial; parolee-at-large for less than six months; fine, misdemeanor probation, bail forfeited, jail under 90 days, or jail all suspended; to Controlled Substance Treatment-Control Unit.
2 = Disposition pending on a felony charge with no previous disposition.
3 = Parolee-at-large over six months, or with a felony warrant out; declared criminally insane on a felony against a person; guilt admitted to felony with restitution provided; death in commission of a crime or from a drug overdose; 90 – 180 days in jail.
4 = Jail over six months; suspended prison; five-year felony probation; committed to California Rehabilitation Center.
5 = Parole revoked by Board of Prison Terms (BPT) plus any of above categories except number 4.
6 = Parole revoked by BPT plus category number 4 above.
7 = Return to any prison with a new court commitment, new term.

CDC looked up parole outcomes at six months, one year, and two years after parole for each TM subject and non-TM twin. Recorded parole outcome was the most serious charge incurred up to the end of each time period. Since the majority of parolees were discharged from parole after only one year or before the two-year limit of the records, the so-called two-year outcomes may represent as little as one year of data. This bias being the same for the controls as for the TM group, two-year outcomes were used for whatever additional information they provide. Parole outcome records were included in the analysis only for periods where data were available for both the TM and non-TM twins.

REGULARITY OF TM PRACTICE—A questionnaire on regularity of TM practice was circulated in autumn 1981 to all those CDC inmates instructed in the TM technique who could be located. Those in a California State prison at the time of the survey received the questionnaire either through the mail with a stamped return envelope, or directly from a TM teacher, institutional staff member, or TM inmate coordinator. Parolee addresses were not available, but a survey of parolees was attempted by sending questionnaires to parolees in care of their parole offices via CDC. Men discharged from parole or serving time in a county jail or non-California prison could not be located.

The questionnaire requested respondents to indicate whether they meditated: (a) regularly—at least half the time, or once a day; (b) irregularly—less than half the time; or (c) not at all. Space was allowed for comments.

RESULTS

PAROLE OUTCOMES—Considering all eight parole outcome categories (table 1), the TM group had significantly better parole outcomes than their matched control twins at six months (N = 203,
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\[ p < 0.0006, \text{two-tailed sign test} \], one year \((N = 201, p < 0.0014)\), and overall (six months to two years) \((N = 203, p < 0.0014)\).

The TM group did not differ significantly from the controls with respect to lesser offenses (parole outcomes 1 through 4). Table 2 shows chi-square values for TM parolees vs. controls for each parole period, with parole outcomes other than clean records, revocations of parole, and new prison convictions lumped. These results are presented graphically in figures 1 and 2. After one year the TM group had 61.7% clean records vs. 47.3% for the controls. This difference represents a relative 31% increase in clean records in the TM group (i.e., the difference between the TM clean records and the control clean records is equal to 31% of the control clean records). Also after one year, the TM group had 19.4% total recidivism including 5.0% new prison convictions, compared to 32.3% total recidivism and 11.4% new convictions for the controls, representing a relative reduction of 40% in total prison recidivism and of 56% in new convictions.

TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAROLE PERIOD</th>
<th>TM BETTER</th>
<th>NO DIFFERENCE</th>
<th>CONTROL BETTER</th>
<th>TOTAL N</th>
<th>SIGNIFICANCE (Two-tailed Sign Test)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 Months</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>(p &lt; 0.0006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>(p &lt; 0.0014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall (6 Months – 2 Years)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>(p &lt; 0.0014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAROLE PERIOD</th>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>CLEAN RECORDS</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
<th>REVOCATIONS OF PAROLE</th>
<th>NEW PRISON CONVICTIONS</th>
<th>TOTAL N</th>
<th>CHI-SQUARE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 Months</td>
<td>TM</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>(X^2 = 23.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>3df, (p &lt; 0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>TM</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>(X^2 = 20.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>3df, (p &lt; 0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall (6 Months – 2 Years)</td>
<td>TM</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>(X^2 = 19.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>3df, (p &lt; 0.001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIG. 1. CLEAN PAROLE RECORDS FOR TM PAROLEES VS. MATCHED CONTROLS, PAROLE YEARS 1976–1980, CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS.

FIG. 2. RECIDIVISM FOR TM PAROLEES VS. MATCHED CONTROLS, PAROLE YEARS 1976–1980, CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS.
The TM group parole outcomes were also compared to the parole outcomes for the state-wide CDC parolee population over parole years 1976 through 1980 (table 3). The information available from CDC (Jaman, 1983) did not allow the TM group to be subtracted from the CDC general population for the purpose of this comparison. The state-wide CDC parole outcomes included data for men paroled from class 1 and 2 minimum and medium security institutions as well as one women's prison, whereas the TM group received instruction at class 3 and 4 medium to maximum security prisons, which have somewhat higher recidivism rates (Jaman, 1981). The TM group had a much higher frequency of clean records and a much lower frequency of new convictions than the state-wide parolee population at six months, one year, and two years. (Although not true two-year data, TM group two-year outcomes are presented here in conformity with the system used for state-wide data.)

REGULARITY OF TM PRACTICE—Only four of the TM group prison recidivists were actually in prison in autumn 1981 to receive the survey. Two of these indicated they were meditating irregularly, one had stopped, and one did not respond. Thus no generalization can be made about TM practice by recidivists.

Only five responses were received from parolees. Possibly many of the 83 questionnaires directed at parolees were not delivered by the parole offices. Of the five respondents, two were meditating regularly and three irregularly.

Table 4 shows the results of the survey for men in a California prison at the time of the survey. The percentages in the regular, irregular, and stopped categories are based on the total number surveyed, including nonrespondents. Of those surveyed who had learned the TM technique three years or less before (about 60%), half were meditating regularly and another 20% irregularly. Of those who had been instructed between three and six years earlier (about 40%), one-third were meditating regularly and another 20% irregularly.

The survey elicited many comments. A few transferred men asked about the possibility of starting a TM program at their new institution of residence. Others indicated that in their new living situation (new institution, dormitory living, or locked-down status) meditation was difficult due to disruptions. A few asked for information on the TM program in the communities to which they expected to be paroled. Many expressed appreciation for the benefits they felt they had derived from TM practice. A few of these comments are quoted here, with some editing for punctuation and spelling.

"... the TM technique learned while at Folsom is the greatest event to enter my life in a long time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAROLE PERIOD</th>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>CLEAN RECORDS</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
<th>REVOCATIONS OF PAROLE</th>
<th>NEW PRISON CONVICTIONS</th>
<th>TOTAL N</th>
<th>CHI-SQUARE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 Months</td>
<td>TM</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>$x^2 = 16.09$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>41,328</td>
<td>3df, $p &lt; .005$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>TM</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>$x^2 = 19.25$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>41,328</td>
<td>3df, $p &lt; .001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>TM</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>$x^2 = 10.68$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>36,356</td>
<td>3df, $p &lt; .025$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data are expressed in percentages for easy comparison. Two-year data include parolees only through June 1980 for the state-wide population, and variably through June 1979 – June 1980 for the TM group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRISON</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>REGULAR</th>
<th>IRREGULAR</th>
<th>STOPPED</th>
<th>TOTAL RESPONDING</th>
<th>NO RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Folsom</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Quentin</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Under the harsh conditions of prison surroundings a person has to stay in touch with his or her inner self. Thank you so much."

"Not only do I have the patience and insight to handle the prison scene, I am better able to listen to what the other guy is saying and communicate more on a one-to-one basis."

"I have been practicing TM for approximately 3½ months. During this time myself and others have noticed an easy-going change. I'm taking a trade and work part time, which lasts about 13 hours a day. Before TM I was always tired. Through TM that has seemed to have gone."

"TM has been very, very good for me. I'm in the hole, and there is no better way for relieving stress than TM. It's kind of hard for me to explain, but sometimes I can relax my mind for ten or fifteen minutes and kind of turn myself inside out and look at myself and find peace within myself."

"TM has helped me. My longest stay on the outside had not been over four months. Now I have been out a little over six months and working. Not bad for a one-time loser."

No comments critical of the TM program were received, although several men declined to answer the questions and one objected to the use of the word "rehabilitation" in the letterhead.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study support the hypothesis that TM practice reduces criminal recidivism. Because this study did not involve random assignment of volunteers to TM practice vs. some other treatment, these results are not unequivocal. However, random assignment would have been regarded by the TM instructors as unethical since it would have prohibited some interested inmates serving long terms from learning the TM technique, and would therefore probably have aroused protest.

The results may be doubted on the grounds that the TM group, consisting of volunteers, could have been self-selected to include nonrecidivists. The fact that both the TM and control groups were matched for prior commitment record, with 58% of both groups having prior prison commitments—as opposed to 36% of the state-wide inmate population (California Department of Corrections, undated)—indicates that self-selection did not operate with respect to prior recidivism. The finding of Alexander et al. (in press) of reduced recidivism in TM parolees vs. graduates of several other prison self-help pro-

grams suggests that self-help groups in general do not necessarily tend to attract nonrecidivists. However, the small size of their TM sample leaves some room for doubt. Further research on California prisons' parolees is under way with the objective of resolving this doubt.

On the other hand the National Research Council's (1979) conclusion, based on earlier research, was that no previous rehabilitation program really worked. Against the background of pessimism created by such earlier research, the 40% reduction in prison recidivism after one year of parole and 56% reduction in new prison convictions reported in this study constitute strong evidence for the effectiveness of TM practice in reducing recidivism, and the findings of Alexander et al. are supportive. Furthermore, the reality of the psychophysiological effects of TM practice which are theorized to mediate improved social behavior (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 1972) has been demonstrated by the prison studies reported by Orme-Johnson et al. (1977), Abrams and Siegel (1978), and Alexander and Marks (in press), as well as by many studies of nonprisoners (Orme-Johnson and Farrow 1977).

If the observed reduction in recidivism by the TM group is indeed due to their TM practice, it follows that insufficient TM practice may help to account for the cases that did recidivate. Some of the recidivists of the TM group may have stopped meditating or become irregular prior or subsequent to parole, and others may not have practiced the technique for long enough prior to release to be sufficiently rehabilitated. These ideas are susceptible to research in the future. The survey on regularity of TM practice unfortunately casts little light on the hypothesis that recidivists are more frequently those who have stopped meditating or become irregular in meditation. The survey did confirm, however, that a large proportion of those instructed in the TM technique were continuing the practice while still in prison. The overall 63% of those surveyed who indicated they still meditate regularly or irregularly certainly speaks well for the program, and a higher percentage of respondents would probably have increased this figure. Sixty-three percent meditating is consistent with the interpretation that the observed reduction in recidivism is due to TM practice. The comments received from many meditators who responded to the survey indicate that these men did perceive a causal relationship between their TM practice and subjective and objective improvements in their lives.
It may be mentioned that the TM teachers in CDC have been paid little or nothing and have worked largely as volunteers. It was not practical to keep in touch with inmates who did not choose or were not able to attend weekly follow-up meetings, so that many or most inmate meditators were largely on their own. Especially after the major transition of parole it would have been desirable to provide follow-up in the community, but because of poor communications very few parolees were even informed of the location of their community TM center. It is possible that a well-funded prison TM program would yield even better results.

In the light of the problems besetting the present-day criminal justice system—overcrowding of the prisons and lack of successful rehabilitation programs—the results of this study suggest a real breakthrough in criminal rehabilitation. The fiscal implications alone of a 40% reduction in recidivism are immense. The potential savings in human suffering are also significant. Unusual and unfamiliar though the TM technique may seem to corrections personnel, the evidence for its efficacy as a rehabilitation tool invites serious consideration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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