Freelisting: Management at a Women’s Federal Prison Camp

In October 1994, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (hereafter, Bureau) opened a new minimum-security prison camp for female offenders at Pekin, Illinois. We were asked by Bureau officials to do research on how these female inmates felt about the quality of life at this new prison, known as the Federal Prison Camp, Pekin.

FPC Pekin does not fit the stereotype of a prison. This one resembles a small college campus. No guard towers overlook drab cellhouses; no concrete wall or anchor fence topped with razor wire keeps inmates on prison grounds. A large grassy central compound is cross-cut with sidewalks that lead to classrooms, recreation buildings, and offices where inmates work. Inmates reside in two dormitory buildings. (Each building is divided into smaller areas that are partitioned by 5’-high cinder block walls into living cubicles.) The visiting room is bright and airy and has an outdoor playground dotted with toys and climbing apparatus for inmates’ children who come to visit (Coyne 1997).

Inmates’ perceptions of quality of life are important for two reasons. First, Bureau staffers are trained to be attentive to the inmates’ needs and then staff are evaluated on performance. Thus, for Bureau staffers to move ahead in their careers, they must be judged capable of creating and sustaining a good quality of life within an institution.

Second, inmates’ adjustment to daily life in a brand new prison has not been studied in either a state or federal prison before this FPC Pekin research. Federal prison facilities must operate by a set of policies that ensure that the prisons conform to legal and ethical guidelines. Among these guidelines are standards for high-level confinement conditions for inmates. It is, therefore, incumbent on Bureau staffers to ensure positive inmate adjustment. The federal prison system has been
opening dozens of new prisons all across the United States. We assumed that inmates' life inside a new prison would be different from daily life in an existing one. Data collection would give us some idea about the nature of inmates' adaptation to a new prison. We use the term "existing prison" for one that has been operating for many years. We invented the term "start-up" to denote the initial period, say, the first 12 months of operation of a new prison.

We collected inmate data using the freelisting technique (Weller and Romney 1988). Freelisting asks informants (inmates, in this case) to list the names of things that compose a category, or domain of cultural knowledge. For example, a researcher might begin exploring a new culture by asking informants to "name all the plants you can think of," "name all the dirty words you can think of," "name all the foods people eat for breakfast." While anthropologists have used freelisting to explore domains of kinship, plants and animals, and foods in many different cultures, freelisting previously had never been used to explore inmates' knowledge of prison life.

We decided to use freelisting for three reasons. First, we needed a simple, inexpensive way to gather from inmates a lot of data about the quality of life at FPC Pekin. We didn't have the time and money to develop, pretest, distribute, and analyze data gathered with a survey instrument.

Second, we wanted a technique that would reduce the time used to collect a lot of data from inmates. Years of experience with inmate interviews has shown that face-to-face interviews between "outside" researchers and prisoners often turn into little more than long-winded gripe sessions that allow inmates to complain about staffs, food quality, sentencing guidelines, and so on (see Fleisher 1989, 1996). We didn't want to be trapped by this type of interview, because we had absolutely no control over anything inside this prison camp and no way of verifying the truthfulness of inmates' complaints. Nevertheless, inmate interviews were important because they would help us understand the general context and meaning of items reported on the freelists.

Third, freelisting in a prison setting was an experiment in data collection. Freelisting with inmates required that informants work alone and write down lists on notepads. We didn't know if inmates would respond well to such a task, given that most of these female inmates had relatively little education and were inexperienced at expressing their ideas in writing.

Background

The Federal Bureau of Prisons became a federal agency in 1930. Today, it houses more than 100,000 inmates in some 90 prisons across the United States. At the Bureau's inception, the population of federal inmates was nearly all male. As a result, federal correctional culture evolved with male inmates in mind. Thus, prison security, medical care, recreation, vocational training, styles of verbal interaction, discipline procedures, shakedowns (searches), and other daily operations and programs are oriented toward male inmates.

The Bureau's male-oriented model of federal corrections began to change as the number of female inmates increased. In 1980, 1,300 (5.4%) of all federal inmates housed in federal prisons were women. By March 1997, the number of female inmates rose to 6,813 (approximately 7.5%) (Federal Bureau of Prisons 1997). The incarceration of thousands of female offenders forced construction of new federal prisons for women (see Butler et al. v. Reno et al. 1984). In March 1997, 65% of female federal inmates were housed in minimum-security prison camps like FPC Pekin. The increased number of female inmates meant that it was important to learn their perspective on the quality of prison life.

Start-up has special significance. In an existing prison, inmates are added one by one to an established social structure and quickly blend into daily life. In a new prison, inmates must learn how to live together while the institution develops its system of daily operations. Start-up is also when prison staff first meet the new inmates; in a real sense, staffs and inmates have to learn how to work together to accomplish the daily tasks expected of them in a federal prison.

Finally, start-up is the initial phase in an institution's organizational maturation. In a sense, start-up may be the infancy and adolescence of an organization. Like infancy and adolescence, organizational growth is sensitive to external factors (funding levels, politically influenced correctional fads) and internal factors, such as a warden's leadership skills, the formal and informal styles of interaction between staffs and inmates, and the proper balance of internal control mechanisms. Researchers may find that the character of a prison's mature organizational culture was influenced by what happened during its infancy and adolescence.

Freelisting as a Method

Freelisting elicits from members of a culture relevant items specific to categories of knowledge. We expected that freelisting questions would yield information about inmates' shared perceptions of their new prison environment. We developed questions along four dimensions of knowledge, or subthemes within the domain of knowledge, that inmates have about life in a new prison camp. These questions and dimensions are a result of Fleisher's 20 years of work, administrative, and research experience inside minimum- to maximum-security state and federal institutions. The four dimensions are: (1) commitment to a new institution; (2) adjustment to a new institution; (3) adjustments to a new population; and (4) relationship to staff. In correctional management vocabulary, commitment doesn't refer to a relationship, nor does it mean how loyal these inmates are to the institution. Commitment refers to an inmate's placement at an institution; we couldn't have used the term...
“admission,” because that word refers to a place in a prison where inmates are photographed and fingerprinted. If we had used the term “admission” instead of commitment, the question would have been ambiguous to inmates. Table 4.1 lists these dimensions and each dimension’s specific freelisting questions, along with the brief designation, or code, we used for each question.

**Pretesting Freelisting Questions**

Freelisting questions were pretested in three phases. The list of freelisting questions had to be long enough to be comprehensive and include key items but short enough to hold an inmate’s interest and be completed within 60-90 minutes, thus limiting disruption in camp activities. A panel of three inmates, selected at random, was asked to discuss the clarity, importance, and content of each question. Inmate panelists were also asked if there were important issues that were not covered in these questions. Using these suggestions, the list of freelisting questions was rewritten. A second panel of three inmates was similarly questioned about the second set of freelisting questions. The freelisting questions were modified a second time. The process was repeated a third time with a new inmate panel. These inmates had no complaints about or suggestions for modifying the freelisting questions. These questions were our final list.

**Sampling Procedure**

FPC Pekin quickly filled with inmates. By October 31, 1994, 76 women were housed there; 60 more arrived in November and another 60 in December. By December 31, 1994, there were 196 inmates. There were 295 inmates by July 1995; that number was then lowered to 268 to reduce overcrowding in the dormitories.

To develop our sampling strategy, we assumed there would be a difference in inmates’ opinions about the camp’s quality of life according to when they arrived. “Early arrivals” entered the camp sometime in the first quarter of operation. These inmates would, we assumed, experience unique advantages in camp life, as well as disadvantages. Early arrivals would have appreciated a relatively empty prison camp and would have had more opportunities to use its facilities. On the other hand, early arrivals would also feel, more so than later arrivals, the pressure of a continuously increasing inmate population. Short food lines would get longer, access to recreation equipment would become more difficult, privacy in dormitories would be somewhat lost, washers and dryers would be used nearly nonstop.

Early arrivals would, we assumed, experience the pressures of start-up more so than later arrivals. In our sampling design, time of commitment to the camp was a key variable. One hundred inmates were selected in a stratified random sample (a simple random sample might have undersampled first-month, or first-quarter, inmates).
arrivals). The stratification variable (see Bernard 1994:84–86) was “arrival month”: 60% were drawn from October 1994, 30% from November–December 1994; and 10% from January–June 1995. Twenty-five women declined to participate. In the end, 75 inmates participated.

**Collecting Freelist Data**

Freelists and semistructured interviews (see below) were collected in May and June 1995. After inmates read and signed an informed consent statement (literacy was not a problem), each was given a notepad and pencil and asked to read the 18 freelist questions and to respond. Respondents spent between 45 minutes and two hours answering. When they were finished, we had a stack of notebook pages, one page of responses for each freelist question. We divided the freelist response pages into 18 freelist question piles, each pile had 75 freelists to one question.

**Coding Freelist Data**

Freelists have to be coded. Why? Coding is the process of building a “dictionary,” or doing a minilinguistic analysis of each question’s freelist. To build this dictionary, responses to each freelist question have to be assigned a common designator, or code. A code is a shorthand that refers to a larger set of items or meanings. For example, word-processing file names are codes for a text. A code is a substitute for the actual responses of the respondents.

Before showing you how we coded data, there are a number of points to keep in mind. First, in this case, coders had to be familiar with federal prisoners’ jargon, and generally speaking, federal correctional jargon, as well. Why? Undergraduate students at Illinois State University talk about being “closed out of classes” and needing an “override.” This is college jargon. Coders of inmate freelists must know the meaning of terms such as “programming,” “AWS,” “closer to home transfers,” “security reduction transfers,” “UNICOR jobs,” and dozens of other terms and expressions unique to federal correctional institutions.

Second, coders must also be aware of synonyms in the jargon. To overlook synonyms would result in lists that are unnecessarily long with many terms that actually refer to the same things. On the other hand, to create too many codes would divide inmates’ speech, or knowledge about the prison camp, adding too much complexity to this category.

Third, coders had to be able to link inmates’ jargon to dominant themes in the culture of a federal prison camp. This point is important for this reason. Our research was designed to offer federal prison officials practical insights into inmates’ perceptions of camp operations and quality of life. We had to ensure that our codes were consistent with not only inmates’ perceptions but also with the management categories federal prison officials use in their interpretation of inmates’ quality of life. Thus, our codes had to bridge the gap between inmates’ and staffers’ view of the prison camp, so we did not get a mixture of “apples” and “oranges.”

**Creating Freelist Codes**

Create codes carefully. Before we built our code book, we read and reread the freelists for each question. When we fully understood the range of freelist responses on each question, we began to create codes. As we already noted, our freelist codes had to be consistent with federal prison managers’ view of the prison environment; if codes were foreign to them, the analysis wouldn’t be useful as a management tool. But coding the data into practical categories was easy, because as we discovered, inmates tend to perceive the prison environment in terms similar to those used by federal prison managers. Table 4.2 shows six inmates’ verbatim responses to the question, “List the best things about a commitment to a new prison camp.”

**Table 4.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inmate</th>
<th>Verbatim Freelist Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“fresh start with staff and inmates on new jobs; food is better; new staff start out friendlier”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“cleanliness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“is cleaner”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“closer to home so it’s easier for your family to visit you and the place is clean”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“there are few inmates, easy access to recreation, and the food is great”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>“clean, able to bring up ideas with staff without getting shot down”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inmates made four references to the cleanliness of the new prison camp (“cleanliness” [inmate 2]; “is cleaner” [inmate 3]; “the place is clean” [inmate 4]; “clean” [inmate 6]); a dominant theme in federal correctional management is maintaining a clean facility. References to the cleanliness of the prison facility were coded FAC (facility).

Food quality appeared on two lists (“food is better” [inmate 1]; “food is great” [inmate 5]). We didn’t code references to food quality as a separate category. Why? We know that in federal correctional culture, food quality is categorized as an “inmate program,” along with other services and activities designed for inmates, such as recreation, commissary, visiting, education, religion, law library, and so on. We chose to lump inmates’ statements about food quality with other freelist items.
relating to inmate programs, such as "easy access to recreation." Freelist items referring to inmate programs were coded QOL (quality of life).

Inmate 4 cited "closer to home" as a benefit of being committed to FPC Pekin. Keeping inmates close to their families is a priority in what federal prison officials call "inmate population management." In fact, all inmates at FPC Pekin were placed there because it put them closer to their home residences. Because we knew that proximity to home is important to inmates and to federal prison officials, we set up the code, HOM, and used it to classify all such references.

Other freelist items were more difficult to code. Consider the responses of inmate 1 ("fresh start with staff and inmates on new jobs"; "new staff start out friendlier"). These comments refer generally to inmates' opinion that in a new prison inmates can establish fresh social ties with inmates and staff. Remember, prisons are closed, confined, social communities, where inmates and staff see one another every day for years or even decades. And when social relations sour, they tend to remain that way. In a new prison, inmates can wipe clean the social slate. A reference to new social ties was coded NST.

We know that constructive communication between staff and inmates is a key management issue in federal prisons (Fleisher 1996). Thus, the reference made by inmate 6 ("able to bring up ideas with staff without getting shot down") is important, and such references were coded with RAP (rapport).

How Data Were Coded

The actual process of coding data took time and patience and required careful organization, because we had a lot of data. If we made mistakes early on in the coding, then we would probably have to go back and recode data again. We didn't begin to code data until we felt familiar with every freelist for each informant and had a sense of the types of information inmates were conveying.

We took the freelists and put them into 18 piles (one for each question). Each pile had 75 freelists (one freelist for each informant). We numbered each freelist, 1-75. Our numbering scheme was consistent from informant to informant, from pile to pile; that is, informant 33 in pile 3 was the same inmate as informant 33 in pile 15. Being so careful about data management ensured that if we or other analysts wanted to do more than freelist analysis later, the data would be clearly arranged.

We read the freelist given by, say, informant I to question I and coded each item on informant I's freelist with a code, such as RAP, QOL, FAC, and so on. We wrote the codes next to each item on the freelist itself, in red pen. We kept a log of codes, what each code meant, verbatim statements that fit that code, and coined a three-letter acronym for each code, which would later be used to create the dataset. As we encountered a new freelist item, we added it to our running code list.

These verbatim descriptions are the equivalent of definitions listed for an entry in a standard dictionary. For example, we used the code DEV (institution development) to include inmates' statements relating to development of the prison campus as an organization that accomplishes its goal of delivering services and maintaining a positive climate for inmates and staffs.

To readers not familiar with federal correctional culture, the DEV code is probably fuzzy, but to us, to federal officials, and to federal inmates, it marks an important category. Inmate statements, such as "inmates helped with changes in camp operations as the institution increased population," "staff cooked for inmates;" "getting to know staff was helpful," "gave inmates an opportunity to help develop their programs," refer to inmates' feelings that staff as well as inmates were contributing to the development of positive rapport and constructive communication.

Statements such as those above are examples of the "voice" of female inmates in a federal prison camp. Researchers who specialize in studying the organizational culture of federal institutions spend years learning how to understand the nuances of inmate and staff speech. And as their understanding of these nuances improves, so will the coding of inmates' freelists. Table 4.3 is a portion of our actual codebook, which shows codes, code explanation, and code content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Code Explanation</th>
<th>Code Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEV</td>
<td>Institution Development</td>
<td>inmates helped with changes as institution increased population; staff cooking for inmates; getting to know staff was helpful; opportunities to develop new programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAM</td>
<td>Separation from Family</td>
<td>leaving family members and friends from home, being away from children, distance from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOM</td>
<td>Close to Home</td>
<td>more visits; see children often</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We kept a running list of these preliminary codes and created new codes when we needed them. Some items, such as those relating to cleanliness, are easy to code; other items are difficult. For example, a number of inmates mentioned that they "aren't permitted to dress up and show off nice clothing." As it turns out, this item has to do with inmates' feeling that they aren't permitted to express themselves as women, but must remain within the role of prison inmate. Thus, we chose to code such references as DWN (deprived of women's needs).

We coded question 1 freelists for all 75 informants before moving on to question 2 freelists and so on. By coding the data in this way, we were forced to review a large corpus of data reported for the same question. This review process let us see the range of responses and cued us about items that appeared repeatedly versus those that were idiosyncratic or reported by a few informants. In the end, we created 109
codes. If you think of each freelist given by each informant for each question as a "chunk" of data, these 109 codes classify 1,350 data chunks (75 informants multiplied by 18 freelists). That's a lot of data to code.

Semistructured Interviews

Some freelist items, DEV codes, were mentioned frequently and deserved attention. But there were also infrequently mentioned but culturally interesting items, such as those coded DWN. We used our close familiarity with the data, and with federal prison camp culture, to develop a series of questions for semistructured interviews (see Bernard 1994:209). These interviews gave us some explanations of freelist items and helped us interpret inmates' freelists.

As we coded freelist data, we kept a running list of potential interview items. On that running list were questions such as, "Discuss the ways that inmates feel deprived of their needs as women," "Discuss how being closer to home has influenced your relationship to your family," and "Discuss the difficult adjustments you made since transferring here."

When we collected freelists we asked each inmate if she would volunteer for an interview. Fifty-two inmates (69.3% of the 75 inmates who gave us freelists) agreed to be interviewed; some even asked us to interview them. About half of the interviews were conducted one-on-one, that is, Fleischer and an inmate, Harrington and an inmate, or Fleisher and Harrington and an inmate. With the other half, Fleisher and Harrington worked together to interview 2 or 3 inmates at a time. Sitting around a conference table, we asked a question and inmates discussed it. Initially, we decided to do small group interviews because one-on-one interviews were so time consuming; we didn't have 80-100 hours to invest in interviewing inmates. To save time, we did small group interviews; only inmates who volunteered for a small group interview participated in these. These interviews were, in fact, especially productive, because inmates fed off each other's comments. One-on-one and small group interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours.

Creating Datasets

We now had codes for each freelist item, for each question, and for each informant. Recall that we wrote the codes in red ink next to each item. This would make the next step—creating a dataset for freelists—simple and straightforward. When each freelist dataset had been prepared, each one would be analyzed with ANTHROPAC (Borgatti 1992).

ANTHROPAC requires that datasets be written in the standard computer language known as ASCII. There are a number of ways to write an ASCII file. You can write the dataset in ANTHROPAC, which will automatically save the data as an ASCII file. If you use WordPerfect or Word, consult your manual for instructions on saving the text you create, that is, the freelist dataset, as an ASCII file. Be careful at this step; if you don't save the datasets correctly, ANTHROPAC can't read them and you won't get your analysis. If you use the hard drive, copy the datasets from the word-processing program into a subfile in ANTHROPAC created to house your freelist data. We created an ANTHROPAC subdirectory called FCPEKIN. If you use a disk to store your freelist datasets, you'll use that disk in conjunction with ANTHROPAC. ANTHROPAC's manuals give you detailed instructions about creating datasets and doing the freelist analysis.

Freelist analysis is based on two ideas: (1) Things most familiar or most important to people will be mentioned before things that are less familiar or less important; and (2) People who know a lot about a subject, in this case, the environment of a prison camp, will have more to say about it than people who know less. "More to say" means that their freelists will be longer.

ANTHROPAC reads a freelist dataset, counts the number of separate codes listed (frequency), determines the percentage of informants who used each code (response percentage), notes the place on each freelist and yields the average rank for each code (rank), and uses the frequency and rank to produce a score called salience. (The formula for salience is given in the ANTHROPAC guidebooks.) Generally, salience is a measure of how much knowledge informants share and how important that knowledge is to them. ANTHROPAC's freelist won't interpret the salience scores. That's left to the anthropologist.

To show you a portion of a freelist analysis, we chose to look at data for the question, "List the best things about a commitment to a new institution" (COMBEST). Table 4.4 shows the highest salience scores on this question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Response Percentage</th>
<th>Average Rank</th>
<th>Salience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FAC</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1.368</td>
<td>0.388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEV</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.952</td>
<td>0.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOM</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.389</td>
<td>0.205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUL</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.750</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Response Percentage</th>
<th>Average Rank</th>
<th>Salience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

There are several interesting things to note about this analysis. We listed the codes by frequency. But note the relationship between frequency and salience: The most frequently cited codes are not always the most salient items. Why? Because the placement of an item on a freelist in the first, second, third position, and so on, influences salience. In Table 4.5, DEV is cited more often than HOM, but HOM has higher salience, because its average rank is 1.389, as compared to DEV at 1.952.
Now you understand why coding raw freelist data is a vital procedure: If the coding of the raw data changes, salience changes too. And if salience changes, the interpretation of data will be affected, as well.

On FAC, the salience score was interpreted to mean a consensus among inmates that the best part of a commitment to this new prison was that it is clean. Interviewees told us that by "clean" they mean not only newness of the physical facility itself but also the newness of clothing issued to them, brand new beds sheets, towels, and so on. We take for granted the freedom to buy new clothes and sheets for our beds, but inmates rarely have the opportunity to wear clothes that aren't hand-me-downs.

HOM (home) is the most salient item. Interview data explain inmates' attitudes about being closer to home: Inmates with children may visit with them more often, and inmates without children may be visited by parents and friends. In the end, we were able to tell federal prison officials that, according to sampled inmates, the material benefits of being in a new facility do not exceed the social benefit of being close to home.

### Interpreting Freelist Data

Our research had a specific purpose: to uncover inmates' perceptions about the quality of life at FPC Pekin. There was one flat, however: The analysis had to be...
CON (conflict) is the final item. A nonviolent criminal history is a prerequisite to a commitment to a federal prison camp, for men or women. This means that FPC Pekin's inmates have not been convicted of a violent act, sex offense, or firearms violation. Interviewees told us that inmates worried about conflict, such as theft from living cubicles, as the inmate population increased over the first six months, but given the low salience of CON, it seems to be a minor worry.

Conclusion

Research is serious business. If you are working with officials of a private corporation, or a government agency as we did with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, be sure that you carefully read that organization's research policy and follow each of its stipulations. If you're collecting data as a student working on a senior paper or a thesis or dissertation, consult your university's research policy on human subjects and be sure to meet with the university research administrator (if you collect data in a state prison, there will be human subjects requirement that must be met). You will undoubtedly be required to secure the approval of your college or university's Institutional Review Board.

Be patient and meticulous in data organization. Good research takes time and relies on careful data management. Think through each step of data collection and data management well before you begin your project. If you work with others, be sure everyone knows what's going on before you start. Work with colleagues who are willing to invest the energy and time necessary to do a meticulous job. Pretest your freelisting questions. Don't be afraid to modify your questions if they don't work well. Study the freelists once you've collected them and lay out possible codes before creating the ANTHROPAC dataset, or you may commit an error as we did. Don't be afraid to say you made a mistake, and correct the mistakes you make.

QUESTIONS

1. How can a researcher use freelisting to better understand the nature of a complex cultural system?
2. What are the pitfalls of coding freelist data?
3. Why must an anthropologist doing collaborative research with a criminal justice agency be mindful of agency needs?
4. How can freelisting help agency officials to better understand the needs of their clients?
5. Research with English speakers can be as challenging as research overseas. In what ways did research at FPC Pekin pose cultural and language difficulties to the researchers?