A Cross-Cultural Comparison of 
Prison Guards’ Beliefs Regarding 
the Rehabilitation Potential 
of the Prisoners, the Rehabilitative 
Potential of the Prison 
and their own Supportive Role

BOAS SHAMIR
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

and

AMOS DRORY
Ben-Gurion University, Beer-Sheba, Israel

PRISON GUARDS’ ATTITUDES and beliefs are claimed to be an important variable in the penitentiary equation. They have been shown to reflect the goals and policies of correctional institutions (Street & al., 1966; Duffee, 1975), and have been claimed to affect inmates’ attitudes and behavior while within the prison, and even to contribute to major attitude and behavior changes in inmates that are carried on after their release (Glaser, 1964; Hawkins, 1976). Several authors (e.g. Motivans, 1963; Jacobs & Retsky, 1975; Hawkins, 1976) have argued against the common stereotypical image of prison guards and against attributing to prison guards’ uniform, hostile attitudes toward the prisoners and punitive beliefs as to the best way of treating inmates in the prison. These authors stressed the importance of studying the variation in guards’ attitudes and beliefs.

One potential source of variation guards’ attitudes and beliefs could be their background, and in particular their cultural background. The present study compares two groups of Israeli prison guards who differ markedly in

their cultural background. The first group are Druze prison guards. The Druze are a cultural and religious sect dispersed in three Middle Eastern countries. In Israel they constitute a very small minority (just over one percent of the population). Almost all of them live in Druze or half-Druze villages, where they preserve their traditional ways of life and sectoral institutions. Most of them have large families and belong to 'Hamulas' or enlarged families that are run along traditional, patriarchal lines. Their language is the Arabic language, and they also resemble the Arab villagers in many ways of life, but their religion is different and they maintain a separate identity. They study the Hebrew language in their schools and their youth serve in the Israeli army, but apart from that they have only weak relations with the Jewish majority. (Makarem, 1974; Dana, 1974). Relatively many Druze are employed in the Israeli prison service for reasons that cannot be dealt with here.

The second group of prison guards consists of Jewish guards. This is a much more heterogeneous group and is much more difficult to characterize. In general the Jewish society in Israel is more open, more pluralistic, more democratic and more Western-orientated than the Druze society.

In a previous analysis of prison guards' attitudes the authors factor analyzed guards' responses to attitude statements and revealed three independent factors: belief in the rehabilitative potential of the prisoners, belief in the rehabilitative potential of the prison and belief in the supportive role of the prison guard. Several hypotheses can be derived from the brief characterizations of the two cultures concerning these three dimensions of guards' attitudes. The first hypothesis is that Druze prison guards who have been socialized in a more autocratic, traditional and orthodox religious society are expected to have stronger punitive attitudes toward the prisoners. Secondly, they can also be expected to have a stronger belief in a 'strong hand' treatment of inmates than the Jewish prison guards. 'Modern' theories of criminality that attribute criminality to poverty or other deprivations are more likely to have infiltrated the Jewish society than the Druze society, where moral or religion-based views of crime are assumed to be more prevalent. Jewish prison guards are therefore expected to be more tolerant, more understanding and more supportive in their attitudes. These two hypotheses can also be derived without reference to cultural differences, but simply to the fact that most prisoners are Jews or Arabs, but not Druze. The Druze guard is therefore less likely to feel empathy with the prisoner than his Jewish counterpart.

On the other hand we can expect Druze prison guards to have a stronger belief in the role of the prison. Coming from a traditional society they are expected to have more belief in formal authorities or formal institutions like the prison, and are less likely to view such institutions with disbelief or cynicism. This is our third hypothesis.

The fourth hypothesis concerns the variation in attitudes and beliefs about the prison, the prisoners and the role of the guard. Our knowledge about the relatively open and pluralistic Jewish society in comparison with the homogenous and closed Druze society can lead us to expect the variance in