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Prison quality, moral performance and outcomes

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The prison quality or 'moral performance' survey developed by members of the Cambridge University Prisons Research Centre (known in the English Prison Service as MQPL) over many years, and as a result of several specific research projects, attempts to provide a conceptual and methodological foundation for understanding prison life and quality. Today I will outline its background and purpose, and provide two illustrations of its links with outcomes.

I should say first that it was never intended to become a fixed measurement tool. It was intended as an exploratory methodology for deepening our understanding of the 'hard to measure' aspects of prison performance. Part of its purpose and evolution has been an attempt to conceptualise more precisely important concepts used in official prison policy and practice, like 'humanity', 'staff-prisoner relationships', 'fairness', and 'safety'. We wanted to ground these concepts more carefully in real prison practices, so that they are not misunderstood, or misapplied – something that has happened in the past, for example with the concept of 'justice' in prisons, following the Woolf Report – and also to develop a new terminology for aspects of prison life that matter a great deal, but which are difficult to describe.

The role of 'the concept' in social science is to 'sensitise perception' – to change the perceptual world (Blumer 1969: 152) so that we can describe and understand it more precisely. Blumer describes concepts as 'the gateway to [a] world'; their 'effective functioning … is a matter of decisive importance' (Blumer 1969: 143-4). Put more simply, when prison staff are clear about what the term 'good relationships' means – not lax, but 'right', respectful relationships with power flowing through them – they are more likely to be able to deliver those relationships. Our work is to capture the meaning-in-practice of these terms and then evaluate prisons according to their accomplishment of these 'moral ideals'.

Neither the concepts (dimensions) nor the items in them are intended to be definitive. We are continually revising and improving the survey to reflect with as much precision as possible the social, relational and moral climate of a prison. We are happy, however, that we currently have a satisfactory version or model, that 'works well'.

The 'MQPL' (Measuring the Quality of Prison Life) survey is a 'tick box questionnaire' for prisoners (there is also one for staff) designed and refined over several research projects aimed at improving our understanding of prison life and its effects. Unlike many surveys used to measure prison quality, it has a highly standardised format (a characteristic of any good survey), but has been developed analytically and inductively from extensive, grounded explorations with staff and prisoners about what matters in prison (see Liebling, assisted by Arnold 2004). It has an underlying conceptual framework incorporating notions of legitimacy, 'right relationships' and 'value balance'. More recently, the concepts of 'staff professionalism' and 'use of authority' have emerged as key components of this framework (see, e.g. Liebling 2011; Crewe et al 2011). All attempts to measure prison quality tend to

include at least the three broad dimensions critical to prison life of 'relationships', 'personal development' and 'order and organisation'; these dimensions are broadly related to humanitarian, rehabilitative, and custodial goals respectively (see Liebling et al 2011; Moos 1975; Saylor 1984; Toch 1992; Logan 1992) but they also overlap.

The MQPL survey arose from social scientific rather than policy interests. Its original development was funded by a competitive Home Office *Innovative Research Challenge Award* granted to the author in 2000, although prior to this, the exploration began as a result of a policy-level dispute about the appropriate measurement of a particular prison's (lack of) quality. Its main goal is accurate and authentic description, explanation, and conceptual clarity. Its cumulative development over a thirteen year period (2001-2014) to date means that empirical observations can be used to develop theories or conceptual categories relevant to prison life and experience, and the data might act as a kind of *barometer*, exposing underlying tensions and poor practices (akin to the 'conditions for a revolutionary situation', in prisons, and on some wings in particular). Whilst not strictly predictive, such data, properly interpreted, can warn of such conditions and explain their significance, as well as suggest ameliorative action' (Liebling, in press).

The survey consists of a number of empirical-conceptual dimensions, such as 'respect', 'staff-prisoner relationships', 'humanity', 'fairness', 'staff professionalism', organisation and consistency', 'policing and security', 'personal development' and 'well-being', which reflect aspects of prison life that vary significantly, and that matter most to prisoners (for a detailed account of its recent development and current content, see Liebling et al 2012). This process of identification of relevant dimensions, and their translation into measurable items or statements, is never regarded as 'finished', so that as in science, the research on which the survey is based is:

> A continuous enterprise in which advance is made by successive approximations to 'the truth' and by a never-ending series of small excursions into the unknown' (Lewin 1951).

The most important dimensions, which contribute most to variations in levels of personal development among prisoners, are 'humanity', 'staff professionalism', , 'help and assistance', 'bureaucratic legitimacy' and organisation and consistency'. We are beginning to see indications that better scores on these dimensions are significantly correlated with better reconviction scores at 1 and 2 year follow up periods. They are certainly related to higher well-being or lower suicide rates, and better outcomes on several other measures, including order. These findings are consistent with the theoretical literature on legitimacy and compliance, well-being, and good government.

One significant property of the survey is that it is based on the use of *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI). This is a method originally developed to bring about organisational and economic change (Elliott 1999), which has much in common with the 'positive organisational scholarship' movement, but it has been adapted by us for use in research (see, e.g. Liebling et al 1999). Its values, and effects, are powerful and result in the careful identification of peak experiences, or what is experienced as '*best*', as well as what is lacking: an important supplement to the usual social science preoccupation with 'problem-identification'. It inquires about what gives the research participants life and energy, and often leads to energetic (otherwise silenced) narratives about what 'the best practice', or 'better days or experiences in prison' look like. The methodology and design of the survey (and any supplementary work we do using interviews and observation) has AI as its foundation, in

order to capture aspects of an establishment's life that can be built on: where the energy lies. This methodology, we are convinced, is more likely to lead to change (see Liebling et al 1999; 2001). But this has to date been a somewhat underdeveloped aspect of its potential. Consistent with many organisations undergoing modernisation of their management practices, *measurement* of performance has tended to be prioritised by senior practitioners over *management of better* performance. Translating MQPL results into a 'science of prison management and performance' would require an altogether separate research-practitioner effort.[1]

This social-scientific and conceptual commitment underlying its development is one of its most significant properties and may explain its perceived usefulness to senior practitioners (it was adopted for routine use by the Prison Service's Standards Audit Unit, now Internal Audit and Assurance, in 2004): It is often the case that exploratory, innovative, and curiosity-driven research is, in the end, of most value to policy and practice, precisely because it avoids the narrow limits set by 'working assumptions' or policy needs, and it follows leads originating in 'the real world' (this has also been true of other prison research projects conducted 'off the policy agenda'; e.g. Liebling et al. 2010). The commitment of this kind of research is to 'the phenomena and their nature' (Matza 1969; Liebling 2011) rather than to operational performance. Its in-depth qualitative origins may also explain its 'face validity' (staff and prisoners 'recognise the results'); and its reasonable performance at an explanatory level (the results can be used statistically to explain variations in suicide rates, levels of well-being, experiences of personal development, and the risk of disorder).[2] Meaningful concepts, carefully operationalised from 'the ground up', are more likely to lead to meaningful output (mature quantitative data) than random theories of prison life and quality of interest mainly to policy-makers or less 'prison grounded' scholars. It is a coincidence, but also relevant to its formal adoption by the Prison Service (NOMS), that it captures 'difficult-to-measure', essentially qualitative and moral aspects of prison life known to be missing from existing performance figures. It shows up important differences between prisons, within security and function categories (Liebling, assisted by Arnold 2004), between as well as within and between the public and private sectors (Liebling et al 2011; Crewe et al 2011), and across jurisdictions (e.g. Johnsen 2011). It allows for the identification of 'better' prisons, and facilitates some understanding of the differences between these 'exceptional performers' and average or poor performing establishments.

Some longitudinal studies including MQPL have been conducted, showing significant change (both improvement and deterioration) in particular establishments, sometimes as the result of a deliberate strategy (for example, a carefully implemented safer custody strategy, leading to dramatic improvement at Eastwood Park). This improvement was brought about by the combined effects of an excellent senior management team, a performance improvement strategy, investment in reception and induction processes, staff training, and a benign staff group who were crying out for stronger leadership. Survey results can be compared over time as well as with other establishments, showing direction of travel as well as relative performance. Sometimes the results are so outstanding (that is, outstandingly good (see, for example, survey results for Grendon; Ministry of Justice 2009), or

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[1] There is, however, also a staff survey, the results of which often help to explain prisoner perceptions. See further Liebling et al 2010: 210-17; and Crewe et al 2011).

[2] Whilst the research agenda we began with was far from 'correctional', the current PRC team are, as a result of the emergence of 'personal development' as a key dimension of the prison experience, now curious about the possible links between MQPL scores and post-release survival. Some recent explorations by others have found statistically significant relationships between 'staff-prisoner relationships, 'legitimacy' and post-release outcomes.

outstandingly poor (see, for example, the survey results for Pentonville, Ministry of Justice 2011) that they deserve a separate qualitative study aimed at explaining their outlier status. This can also be true of particular wings. But this type of inquiry is not resourced easily and is time consuming to carry out.

A recent example of an ongoing analysis is a comparison of two high security prisons, where there is concern about the loss of legitimacy in the face of long and complex sentences, new dynamics between prisoners, high rates of conversion to Islam, and the risks of radicalisation. We are testing the hypothesis that keeping the high security prison 'relational', and maintaining a flow of trust between staff ad prisoners, even in conditions of high security, reduces frustration and alienation among prisoners, and allows for more pro-social explorations with faith identities rather than encouraging a variety of 'prison Islam' that is oppositional and linked to violence. We have developed a few new dimensions for this purpose, including measures of the flow of trust, and a measure of 'political charge' or anger and frustration. Our early results suggest some support for our hypothesis, showing that the more relational prison, with its higher scores on respect, humanity and decency, is generating significantly lower levels of political charge, consistent with theorists of radicalisation in so called 'failed states'. Our work overall suggests that this way of thinking about the prison – as a form of state power requiring legitimate form and use – may be a helpful way of synthesising the empirical data and thinking about what makes a prison work better.

The MQPL survey has limits. It is long. It is tempting for senior managers to 'go for the dimension scores' instead of unpicking the detail. It can be conducted (by inexperienced researchers) without qualitative exploration – not consistent with its original spirit, and leading to frustration when interpretation is required. Its results are detailed and complex and not easy to interpret without good working knowledge of prisons, and extensive qualitative exploration of, and familiarity with, the establishment to which the results belong. Its conceptual framework – values-driven and closely related to the concept of legitimacy – is only partially understood 'in the field' and its most recent iteration is under-articulated by its developers.[3] It does not address some important (and continually changing) dimensions of the prisoner experience (like meaning and identity, religious activity, or the nature of relationships with family) and it is, as yet, not integrated with measurement or analysis of attendance on offending behaviour programmes or other constructive activities in prison, although this seems to be underway. It was developed in England and Wales, and yet is appealing to the research and policy community in some highly unexpected places, where cultural translation is extremely tricky. All of these challenges, if faced, are likely to add to the most important goal of the original project: to understand, improve, and find an appropriate language for describing, the prison experience and its effects.

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[3] The results produce knowledge about what *is*, and what '*ought to be*'. The term 'moral performance' was coined at the end of the original study, and has been retained ever since (Liebling, assisted by Arnold 2004). This term reflects the role of the survey in describing how prisoners *feel morally treated* by the institution. That safety and security are as significant in the prisoner experience as respect and humanity suggests that the survey reflects prisoners' 'strong evaluations' of what a legitimate prison looks and feels like, rather than superficial preferences about material goods and freedoms.

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