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### Description at the Edge? *I-It/I-Thou* Relations and Action in Prisons Research

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#### Abstract

I argue in this article that, far from being ‘policy advisors’, our main moral purpose in research is ‘getting the description right’. Doing this takes time, effort and energy. Good description constitutes what Ferrell and Hamm (1998) called ‘edgework’. It requires courage and skill, and an *I-Thou* orientation toward our participants. The paradox, as Paul Rock (2014) suggests, is that whilst ‘policy change’ should not be the primary aim of criminological research, research done well can make poor policy choices, or ‘facile gestures’, less defensible, and can have impact on the world of practice in indirect as well as direct ways.

#### Keywords

Prison research; public criminology; policy; moral purpose; authentic description.

#### Introduction

To get the description *right* [emphasis in original] — to accurately grasp the nature of the motivations at play, to see the relevant individuals in their wholeness and particularity, and to see what, morally speaking, is at stake — is to grasp the ‘shape’ of the situation ... (Dancy, in Jollimore 2013: para. 17)

Few criminologists have ever managed completely to free themselves from the perfectly honourable impulse to change the world rather than simply to interpret it, whether it is to protect, radicalize, repress, restrain, reform or rehabilitate the law-breaker. After all, we engage directly with serious matters of social harm and social control and it is difficult to remain disinterested. (Rock 2014: 413)

What is the purpose of prisons research? Why do scholars do it? What is the nature of our ‘involvement in society’? I argue in this article that our main *moral* purpose is ‘getting the description right’, and that doing this alone takes most of our time, effort and energy. Good description constitutes what Ferrell and Hamm (1998) so aptly called ‘edgework’. It requires courage and skill, and requires *I-Thou* relations with our participants: that is, an orientation towards an experiencing subject, not an experienced object (Buber 2010: vii). This approach stands in methodological and theoretical opposition to existing frameworks. It is humanistic,

not 'scientific'; and creative and intimate, not objectifying and distant. It assumes a kind of 'theology of the person' that not only poses risks but also respects the human dignity of the researched. The argument I present here develops the broader dialogue about the role and value of public criminology (following, among others, Loader and Sparks 2011; and for a recent critical review, see Bell 2014). The paradox, as Paul Rock suggests, is that, whilst 'policy change' should not be the primary aim of criminological research, research done well can make poor policy choices, or 'facile gestures', less defensible, and can have impact on the world of practice in indirect as well as direct ways (Rock 2014).

Of course almost everything we do in research is political. Ferrell and Hamm argue that (even) 'methodological choices inevitably intertwine with theoretical stances [and] political choices' (Ferrell and Hamm 1998: 25). I agree with this point. These relationships are complex and subtle. We might choose theories, perspectives or a language that is more or less politically charged but we are all engaged in some form of political positioning. I address the question of what it might mean to have 'civic courage' in our work (Misztal 2007) proposing that we should both lower our sights and raise our standards of research integrity in order to be effective 'democratic under-labourers' (Loader and Sparks 2011).

I acknowledge a gradual shift from my original position which was 'purist' or based on a principle of discovery: I distinguished between the art of research (finding out and describing 'what is') and the art of policy and politics (the 'shoulds' arising from 'what is'). My strongly held original stance was that my responsibility was to produce good research. If the results seemed relevant, I would bring them to the attention of my growing number of colleagues in high places and within campaigning organisations (for example, the Prison Reform Trust; INQUEST) and they would draw on these results in their dialogues with policy-makers. That model worked when there was harmony of tone and priorities between campaigning organisations, and a 'liberal consensus' in penal politics. Those 'clubbable' days (Ryan 2003) now seem to be over. I argue that our priority as scholars is not only to provide good description but also to show how this can operate as a powerful mechanism in reform.

I was stimulated to work out where I stand professionally when I experienced a powerful reaction to being *wrongly* labelled as a 'policy-advisor' in Loader and Sparks' otherwise promising *Public Criminology*?<sup>22</sup> The 'appeal of criminology' to the policy advisor is, according to Loader and Sparks (2011: 31), 'its proximity to public problems and the contribution it can make to tackling them'. This category is described (in a somewhat different typology) by Burawoy (2004) as 'servile'. Burawoy argues that there are four types or divisions of labour in sociology: professional, policy, critical and public. Professional sociology is theoretical and empirical, and adheres to scientific norms. Policy sociology is instrumental ('in the service of a goal'), looks mainly at the effectiveness of policies, and in this sense, is 'servile'. Critical sociology has 'moral vision' and is foundational, providing intellectual challenge, but is often for internal or academic uses. It can provide a critique of existing value assumptions but it 'can also be blinkered, allowing politics to drive the answers' (Rock 2014, pers. comm., 25 August 2014). Public sociology is aimed at enriching public debate about moral and political issues, by infusing public dialogue with theory and empirical research in a reciprocal manner. Each of these four 'ideal type' approaches involves entering into relations of domination and subordination but in distinct ways. His case 'against' professional sociology, or empirical social science, is that it can end up being self-referential and self-interested. I agree with this but I also have some concerns about his case for sociology's direct engagement in public work. Professional social science should *inform* value discussions but this often happens organically. It should, amongst other things, promote discussions of what 'the good society' might look like. But it is not always easy to work out what the direct policy implications of research might be.

It is crucial to distinguish between high quality and poor quality research, to place high standards above political influence, and to show how complex the 'real world' is, however

disappointing policy-makers find this. If scholars 'communicate beyond the academy on issues that are politically important' (Ryan 2003: vii) then they should do so with 'research integrity'. Better quality research should be accorded more value in the world of policy and practice than research below a high standard. So whilst the attempt to set a 'gold standard' is controversial and the operations of a peer review process imperfect, an ongoing dialogue about establishing standards in research is important. It matters that the research community articulate, uphold and argue about professional standards. Good research is 'vigilantly self-controlled', 'corroborated by evidence', self-critical, and not grounded solely in emotionally intense beliefs (Bauman 1990: 12). This kind of work requires time, considerable effort, and outstanding research skills. These skills are not the same as, or reducible to, good statistical skills: as Howard Becker and others have said, the best research tools are 'a notebook and a pencil' (see Becker 1998), and 'full use of yourself' (see Liebling 1999). Security of employment can be a relevant factor in organising time and directing efforts. But if we can aspire to the best standards, then such a professional social science should produce 'responsible speech' (Bauman 1990: 12), itself an 'attribute of science'. Good social science requires competence in our methods and sometimes our admitting to being wrong about strongly-held assumptions (see Rock 2014: 418). Our key obligation is to 'honest intellectual inquiry' (Rock 2014, pers. comm., 25 August 2014).

In this article, I outline the aims and purposes of prisons research as I see them.<sup>3</sup> I draw on some examples of the research-policy relationship that I have experienced. First, I describe the kind of research I do, increasingly with others.

### **The empirical project: Prisons, values and human survival**

The kind of prisons research I do is *sociological*, *systematic*, and *cumulative*. It is also *humanistic* and, as I shall explain below, *intimate*. It usually combines qualitative with quantitative analysis, in different proportions according to the topic, and is often conducted by a team, allowing for differences of expertise and perspective to be integrated or synthesised. What matters to me about the kind of research I do is that it has worked away at many different topics over many years: for example, young offender throughcare; suicide and its prevention; the management of difficult prisoners in small units; staff-prisoner relationships; incentives; the work of prison officers; privatisation; conceptualising and measuring prison quality; and the problem of trust. Most topics have arisen more than once during the overall research programme but underlying them all has been a concern with *social order*, *human survival* and the *kinds of environments human beings need* in order to flourish. Specific 'golden thread' questions fundamental to the various projects are: What kinds of prisons are more survivable than others? What kinds of prison regimes or practices damage or repair lives, character, or morale? Does how we currently punish support or disrupt social order, via its effects on the character and relationships of those we imprison? What kind of society do we value and want to live in? These underlying questions have not been explicit from the start but have come into view through my experiences and reflections, writings, deliberations as a team, and dialogue with others. As Leon Radzinowicz argued when the Cambridge Institute of Criminology was established, 'systematically planned research on problems of limited scope' ... 'in time build up a body of information on more fundamental issues' (in Rock 2014: 414).

If I had to summarise the findings of this body of research, I would say that its fundamental message is that human beings need certain virtues: justice, reason and love (Liebling assisted by Arnold 2004). This concept has been proposed as well as investigated before (see, for example, MacIntyre 1999) but of importance to me has been to find the claim supported by empirical research in prisons, where varying conditions (and suicide rates) bring the relationship between 'environment' and 'survival' into stark view. In relation to prisons in particular, I have found that they differ significantly in a number of ways that matter to prisoners. In particular, prisons with more legitimate moral and emotional climates – that is, where prisoners feel they

are treated fairly and with respect, where staff use their authority and professional skills competently, and where prisoners feel recognised and supported – do less harm, or lead to better outcomes, including survival rates. These legitimate climates would be easier to achieve if we used prisons less.

The most important dimensions of prison quality according to our research are: ‘staff professionalism’ (‘staff confidence and competence in the use of authority’); ‘humanity’ (‘an environment characterized by kind regard and concern for the person, which recognizes the value and humanity of the individual’); ‘help and assistance’ (‘support and encouragement given to prisoners for problems including drugs, healthcare and progression’); ‘bureaucratic legitimacy’ (‘the transparency and responsiveness of the prison/prison system and its moral recognition of the individual’); and ‘organisation and consistency’ (‘the clarity, predictability and reliability of the prison’) (see Liebling with Arnold 2004; Liebling et al. 2011: 366-70). A team with varying members based at the Prisons Research Centre in Cambridge has evaluated these dimensions in many prisons over time using a specially designed prison quality survey (see, for example, Crewe et al. 2014; Liebling et al. 2011; Liebling assisted by Arnold 2004). The dimensions tend to score poorly, but they vary, suggesting that they are difficult to achieve, but prisons of the same type do so to very different degrees. These differences impact significantly on outcomes, including levels of distress, suicide rates, disorder, and to some extent, reconviction rates. Therefore we should be sociologically interested in differences between prisons as well as sceptical about how much prisons can achieve, socially.

In a model of prison quality arising from this work, we have found that, in order to feel able to develop their potential and prepare for their release, prisoners need to feel that they are safe; that they are treated with humanity; that they understand the way the prison system, including release procedures, work; and that they are in a well organised and professional prison where staff have enough experience and expertise to deal with the issues that matter to them, and where staff use both the formal and informal means of authority including relationships with prisoners at their disposal to maintain order. This is not a ‘heavy’ version of authority. Staff in better prisons use talk, modelling, and supportive limit-setting in order to cajole or persuade prisoners into activities and behaviours that are (usually, in these prisons) in their interests. In other words, the staff are fair, competent, clear and responsive. Not many prisons reach these standards.

In various extensions of this work, we have found that prisons with more legitimate climates tend to lead to lower levels of distress and fewer suicides, fewer threats to order, better prospects on release, and better orientations towards faith (that is, there are fewer attractions presented by faith identities linked to ‘political charge’ or violent extremism: Liebling 2013; Liebling et al. 2011). Members of a small research team are currently exploring the role of trust in high security settings in an Economic and Social Research Council ‘Transforming Social Science’ project, where a preoccupation with risk in some high security prisons in particular has generated precisely the kind of anger and alienation among prisoners that the Government aims to avoid.<sup>4</sup> I say more on this below.

I described the kind of research I do as systematic but it is also *intimate*, emotionally engaging, challenging and, sometimes, creative: that is, we use unusual methods (for example, Appreciative Inquiry, Dialogue groups, the shadowing of staff and the hosting of educational classes as well as more standard methods such as observation, interviews and surveys; see Liebling, in press). I have described some of what we do in research as a kind of emotional ‘edgework’ (after Ferrell and Hamm 1998; see Liebling 2014) by which I mean that it is organised but deep, vivid, and ‘intrusive’ on us, the researchers. It is emotionally demanding. Ferrell and Hamm suggest that ‘our goal should be the integration and full use of ourselves as, simultaneously, complex human beings with unique individual biographies and trained and dedicated researchers’ (Ferrell and Hamm 1998: 18). I agree with this model. By ‘edgework’,

however, I mean something more than its emotional intensity. I mean it challenges existing frameworks, takes risks (it is 'yielding', not controlling, Kramer 2003: 18), and is determined to relate to prisoners as 'Thou', not 'It' (for example, as a person and not a Muslim; as an experiencing subject, not an experienced object (Buber 2010: vii; and Kramer 2003). I 'meet the Other', and 'in this meeting, no reduction of the I or of the Thou' takes place. We 'sit where they sit', as living, whole 'persons in mutual relation' (Buber 2010: ix; Liebling 1992). This is difficult in a research environment 'hardened into a world of It' (Buber 2010: 54). It is what we mean by humanistic: 'one becomes human only in I-Thou relationships, for only these call a person into unique wholeness' (Kramer 2003: 16).

Unusually, in the relatively long history of prisons research, our work is rarely exclusively 'prisoner-focused' but tries to understand the prison experience in the light of what others in the environment (particularly staff and senior managers) are doing, saying and thinking. This is not easy, as these 'players' on the criminal justice stage often have quite different values and assumptions about what is going on. This balancing of prisoner, staff and senior manager perspectives has been a distinctive characteristic of research conducted at the Prisons Research Centre. I defend it (despite all its difficulties) and I am sure that it has enabled us to develop a meaningful dialogue with some of those at the top, as well as to understand how this world emerges and functions. There is an undeniable link between the effort made to work with and reflect complexity, the forming of an understandable and plausible account, and the capacity to influence change via improved understanding. Via these methods the cumulative nature of the research agenda, the forming of long-term relationships within the field, and our attempts at good (critical but recognisable) description, the Prisons Research Centre team have established a voice in the world of operational practice. We are often invited in to explore and provide an account of current 'problem areas'. This does not make any of us 'policy advisors'. How, then, would I describe my relationship with policy and practice?

### **The establishment and growth of engagement with the penal field**

When I began my research career in 1986, I worked as an assistant at the University of Hull on a project led by Professor Keith Bottomley which explored the 'throughcare' experiences of young offenders in custody. That experience was formative. Having just completed my Masters degree in Criminology at Hull, I was surprised to find the probation service unwilling to engage with young prisoners whilst in custody for ideological reasons (imprisonment was wrong and the probation service should not collude with it), whilst some of the prison staff who facilitated the research were, unlike the accounts I had read in criminology books, supportive and considerate towards their 'trainees'. This surprise (and the anger I felt about the neglect of vulnerable young prisoners whose lives were in chaos) led to my first published article, as I drew out the implications of my observations (Liebling 1989).<sup>5</sup> The world was not as I expected to find it. We must trust our empirical observations, and not our ideologies.

I went on to study suicides and suicide attempts, first in young offenders in custody as my PhD topic and then among adults, gradually moving away from my original interest in differences between vulnerable and less vulnerable individuals, towards an exploration of differences in the prison environment. The 'throughcare' project had been Home Office funded, so I had made the regular journeys from Hull to Cleland House, London with my supervisor to meet with the Research Steering Group. In those days (1986-7) the Home Office Research Unit was full of research literate, sociologically inclined, would-be academics (many of them later became academics) who steered a manageable path between 'serving Ministers', checking methods, and supporting our more liberal inclinations. Those largely positive experiences of doing 'policy-relevant research' shaped my approach to working with civil servants and, of course, forged trust and built relationships. I found I could almost always 'smuggle in' my broad questions alongside the more narrowly conceived research agenda established 'in-house'. This habit of 'broadening the research brief' was welcomed, as the research community's questions were



often (as the policy leads happily acknowledged) better informed than theirs. A gradually acquired ability to pose better questions and propose suitable methods led to the establishment of the Prisons Research Centre in 2000, with a small budget of £18,000 a year, to 'grow a new generation of prison researchers' (see Prisons Research Centre Annual Reports 2000-2014). Home Office funding was not as constraining as critics suggested, especially if research council and other funding sources were secured in addition, and a dialogue was established. It made access more likely, and kept research teams in tune with the policy agenda. The edge between official interest and free scholarship was mostly a productive and illuminating place to be.

I have directed the Prisons Research Centre for 14 years. Our Ministry of Justice funding has grown – for the time being – as well as diversified, so we maintain a balance between official and research council grants. Our programme of work is mainly self-directed but requires engagement with senior practitioners so as to reach agreement on the scope and content of projects directly funded by the Home Office, to understand the policy context, and to set the timeframe for publishing findings. This is time-consuming and sometimes frustrating, but the comments we receive are almost always methodological ('how reliable is this finding?' and 'have we represented or qualified this point accurately?'). We have maintained high levels of trust with senior members of the prison service organisation, in part by producing useful research findings over the years. Accordingly, and despite some very unwelcome reports, the level of access and lack of 'control' or restriction that Prisons Research Centre members experience in the field remains, for the time being, unusually low. This is a kind of 'earned autonomy' and I don't imagine that it will last forever as the political climate becomes more sceptical of liberal humanitarian virtues.

### **The trickier question of engagement with policy and practice**

It is not my intention in this article to deny that work I have done has had some impact on policy formation. In my experience there are at least three ways in which research *can* support policy development and reform: in the direct reflection on practice it allows through challenging assumptions and placing action in the context of macro-level characteristics of criminal justice institutions; in the direct presentation of evidence to senior managers, policy-makers and campaigning organisations, who can use the research in strategic ways; and, in a more recent interview-based study on values and practices among senior managers being conducted with my colleague Ben Crewe, in allowing reflective space in a frantic climate to ask and answer questions about assumptions and frameworks, which makes 'going on uncritically' less possible than before. *Being researched* involves being asked questions which may be more difficult to answer than many busy practitioners and policy-makers assume. Governors tell us that our long interviews with them about their professional values and identities are useful and thought-provoking, and encourage them to think differently about their work.

My research has been used to introduce changes to policy in many areas: perhaps, especially, in suicide prevention; in the training of prison officers and senior managers; in the measurement of 'what matters' in assessments of prison performance; in a tightening up of the policy instruction on earned privileges for prisoners to increase the fairness of procedures; in the management of difficult prisoners; and in the thinking about regimes in the high security estate more generally. Some positive findings from an evaluation of a suicide prevention strategy, including transformed first night procedures in six pilot sites, confirmed the importance of care provided at the earliest stages of custody, leading to a significant reduction in suicide rates from 2005 onwards (although this is now in reverse; see below). This suicide prevention strategy, launched by the Prison Service in 2001, was one of the most successful policy developments I have witnessed, leading as it did to an energetic and effective response to suicide risk early in custody over the years to follow (see Liebling 2008a; Liebling and Tait 2006). Much of this learning made its way into practice at other establishments via workshops, seminars and between site visits.

There are other ways in which the Prisons Research Centre's collective research effort has impacted on practice: in raising questions or making troubling practices visible; or in creating a kind of reflexivity within the organisation simply by being present. Some campaigning organisations still find our data and analyses helpful, although some of these groups may be less influential now than they once were. Within the Prison Service organisation, it is often the development of new language (new ways of seeing and talking) that brings about the most obvious change: terms like 'moral performance', 'human flourishing', 'legitimacy', and 'political charge' make their way into official discourse (sometimes via other officially owned words, like 'decency', or 'dynamic security').

My argument is about the concept (and label) of the 'policy-advisor'. This denotes a kind of servility, as well as a conviction that I might know best. This position is in conflict with the approach to research I advocate which is driven by curiosity, proper methods, and appropriate humility. What I aim to describe is a kind of honest intellectual inquiry and 'thinking together' that places the carefully gathered and digested results of research on the table and then asks, 'what, then, do we do now?' To go much further is to exceed our expertise.

In the real world relationship between research and policy, the flow from research into policy is sometimes indirect, or counter to our judgment. The policy on Incentives and Earned Privileges, for example, was revised (that is, a new version of the Prison Service Instruction was developed) in the light of a research report showing how difficult it was to ensure that fairness safeguards were followed. The policy was not abandoned (as it was when a Swedish prison research group repeated the study and found the same results) but was strengthened, with better justice safeguards added (see Bottoms 2003; Liebling 2008b).

The process we do *not* influence is the politics of criminal justice or penal policy-making. The occasions in which we are in dialogue with political advisors or masters are rare. At best, at present, we supply the defence (the Chief Executive of the National Offender Management service and his team) with ammunition when policies and decent practices come under threat. The latter are well disposed to prisons research, and remain mostly morally-driven, despite the best efforts of current politicians to squeeze humanitarian values out of penal practice in the name of punishment and austerity. This means that, despite making our concerns about lengthening sentences and rising prison populations clear to senior leaders in the organisation, their acceptance of such 'realities' (political choices) prevents these topics from being addressed directly either in research or in discussions arising from it. This has its limits and frustrations. We can describe some of the 'moral blindness' we detect back to the organisation where the message is welcomed by some and rejected by others. Sometimes there are 'allies' already at work in the organisation, and our discussions and findings encourage them. If we strengthen humanitarian voices in this way, we feel we are contributing to a kind of enrichment of the penal field in difficult times. Is this enough?

Research often cannot compete directly with the other forces shaping penal policy: political anxiety; operational (as opposed to 'utopian') realism; financial constraints; growing prison populations; and media interest. Its impact is more often organic than direct. Sometimes positive effects 'wear off' over time, and a change in climate means a 'gain' in policy reform is subsequently lost (for example, in the prevention of suicides mentioned above, where a clear policy gain was subsequently reversed following prison population growth and a programme of major funding cuts; see Laville et al. (2014) in *The Guardian*).

There are other limitations. One of the frustrations of the enduring research life is the realisation that, although often research evidence and helpful theorisation already exists, practitioners and policy-makers are not aware of this, and that institutional amnesia is rife. Systematic reviews of the existing literature are undervalued (although there has been a tendency for more to be commissioned in recent years). Often the knowledge-base is not

straightforward to access and summarise. Useful insights lie in unexpected places. Take the problem of security and escapes, for example. Conscientious students of prison sociology would know that Sykes (1958) argued in his classic ethnographic study of a maximum security prison in New Jersey that day-to-day prison staff practices were crucial to prison security. He gave numerous examples of preparations for escape which should be noted by staff: 'a ladder constructed of dental floss which can be hidden in the palm of one hand; a fight in another part of the prison to serve as a diversion; the prisoner waiting in the exercise yard for the cover of darkness. These are the preparations for escape which must be detected long before the final dash for freedom occurs. To the prison officials, then, the guards on the wall form the last line of the institution's defences, not the first, and they fight their battle at the centre of their position rather than at its perimeter' (Sykes 1958: 19).

His analysis of the internal aspects of security and their relationship with how prison officers go about their work was available well before the high profile publication of the Woodcock and Learmont reports into the escapes from Whitemoor and Parkhurst (Home Office 1994, 1995). These reports had an enormous (and, some argued, deeply detrimental) impact on policy and practice, largely as a result of their lurid revelations of prison staff relying on perimeter security, and 'playing scrabble' while a successful escape plan from a special security unit was executed. The policy response to these reports changed the face of high security prisons in England and Wales (King 1995; Morgan 1997). Sykes' intelligent and well grounded insights relating to the flow of power in prison, the structure of social relationships, the problems of balance and equilibrium, and the role of dynamic security, may have been of use to the Prison Service well before the escapes, and before the Cambridge Prisons Research Centre began to enter into dialogue with senior managers about our own emerging research findings on these themes. An earlier understanding of Sykes' analysis may have offset the unsociological and reactive approach to prison security experienced in the years that followed the 1994/95 escapes.

There are other classic sociological studies that help to inform an understanding of how, under what circumstances, or whether, prisons function. There are increasing volumes of theoretical and empirical resources which shed light on the processes and outcomes of different approaches to order, moral performance, and safety in prison (see, for example, Liebling assisted by Arnold 2004; Sparks et al. 1996) and which challenge unrealistic assumptions about the role and operation of prisons (see, for example, Liebling 2006). Some of these accounts have shaped practice. The 'flow' of learning, however, tends to be directly into prisons, shaping operational practices via Governors rather than shaping policy (although there have been exceptions). Findings are often taken up eagerly by senior and not-so-senior practitioners looking for support.

Since the establishment of the Institute of Criminology's Master of Studies Degree in 'Applied Criminology, Penology and Management' (in 1998 under the Directorship of Nicky Padfield), our efforts to make the Prison Service more 'research literate' have been well received. Our aim was to make the Prison Service better 'consumers' and commissioners of research. Senior managers who have attended the course have said:

I found the course tremendously useful: It provided me with a greater understanding of the Criminal Justice System and the place of imprisonment against the background of a radically changing landscape of 'managerialism' and culture change in 'Public Service'. (Senior manager, pers. comm.)

I really appreciate being introduced to the work of Garland and Bauman which has had a profound influence on how I view punishment/imprisonment and in the potential dangers of 'processes' without checks and balances. (Senior manager, pers. comm.)



Practitioner-students appreciate the learning from evidence-based research projects and often make good strategic and operational use of it. Research can sometimes have unintended effects on practice: learning to measure the 'moral climate' of prisons for reasons of curiosity and scholarship appealed to people in higher places in ways I could never have anticipated. It was never intended that it should become a 'measurement tool' used by the National Offender Management Service in all prisons. There is a risk that its main appeal is that it is potentially legitimating, and amenable to quantification. On balance, I am satisfied that if the Prison Service is systematically measuring prisoner evaluations of 'respect', 'fairness' and 'relationships' in all of its prisons, then this research has made an impact in a positive way by focusing on these important aspects of prison quality. But these effects are never straightforward. Practitioners may misunderstand its spirit. If a prison is improving, does that mean it is 'doing well'? There are different conclusions one can draw from research results and we sometimes hear distortions of a picture painted by our own data. All we can do on those occasions is ask questions, publish our own accounts, and provide our own interpretations in dialogue with the field.

There are many other ways in which research might have an impact on practitioners. I am often invited to speak at development days – usually for senior managers – but also for prison officers, for example, on their peacekeeping work, the role of decision-making, and the use of authority. The staff are always enthusiastic, asking, 'why haven't we had formal teaching on this subject before?' The concept of legitimacy becomes meaningful for the 'student' officers in discussions. Understanding the complexity of their work, within a framework and with new conceptual tools, helps them (they say) to use power more carefully. This is satisfying and feels like a contribution to 'practice reform'. But is it? Should we aim higher?

### **Description at the edge and the vagaries of penal reform: Whitemoor and beyond**

My main argument that accurate description is difficult is based mainly on a study carried out between 2009 and 2010 for the Home Office. I have found research difficult before but this study took me and a small research team to the edge. I shall attempt to recount the short version of the story here.

My 'return to Whitemoor' – with Helen Arnold and Christina Straub - was precipitated by official and Inspectorate concern about the apparently declining state of staff-prisoner relationships in a prison in which relationships had once been good (Liebling and Price 2001). The aim of the repeat study was to re-investigate the nature and quality of staff-prisoner relationships at Whitemoor in a 'post-9/11 context', exploring how life for prisoners, the work of prison officers, and the nature of staff-prisoner relationships had changed, using the original study as a baseline and taking into account the imprisonment of a number of high-profile offenders convicted of offences against the Terrorism Act. The context had changed in three significant ways. The population in 2009 consisted of 40 per cent Muslim prisoners (compared to 12 per cent in 1998), some of whom had converted to Islam whilst in prison. Many of these prisoners felt they were under constant scrutiny. There were major concerns, both inside the prison and externally, about the behaviour, power base and intentions of apparently or potentially extremist prisoners, as well as about the growing influence of so-called 'Muslim gangs' in the high-security estate. The original invitation for the research had arisen in response to 'growing concerns about radicalisation in prison'. I had said, during negotiations, that I was not prepared to study radicalisation. The word was too loaded. I was prepared to explore 'what was going on' at Whitemoor. That was the deal: a broader and less politicised look at an establishment I knew well, with relationships at the forefront of the investigation. We spent a full year conducting the fieldwork.

It was emotionally arduous. The sentences being served by all prisoners were significantly longer than they had been twelve years earlier, and they were more likely to be indeterminate,

resulting in complex and lengthy routes out via successful access to and completion of accredited offending behaviour courses. These new sentences were disproportionately for 'joint enterprise' charges, where accountability was disputed, or indirect, causing disbelief and anger about the very long tariffs imposed. There was considerably more emphasis on risk and risk assessment. Prisoners were deeply frustrated.

Lower levels of trust, uncertainties of role and identity, a perception of time spent in prison as more punishing than rehabilitative, and a reorganisation of the information flow about prisoners off the wings or prison landings and into Security Information Reports, had left both prisoners and staff feeling uncomfortable. Divisions and conflicts between prisoners, and some distancing from staff, had a negative impact on perceptions of safety as well as on the 'presentation of self'. Prisoners were guarded and inauthentic around each other and around staff. Access to courses and activities, especially those regarded as 'creative' or (worse) 'entertaining', had been severely curtailed, in a changing political climate. Complex and changing dynamics between prisoners had undermined the traditional prisoner hierarchy, and faith identities (which were not always related to religious belief) were now shaping prisoners' social lives and cultures in new, and sometimes dangerous, ways (Liebling and Arnold 2012). Anxieties about extremism and radicalisation were altering both the flow of power and the perception of risk in prison. Prisoners could play on the anxieties of staff, such that formerly powerful organised criminals joked that they were 'thinking of becoming Muslim, just to wind the staff up'. Conditions in the prison made participation in Islamic practices the most 'available' option for those looking for belonging, meaning, 'brotherhood', trust and friendship. The reasons for attendance at Friday prayers, or conversion to Islam, were many and complex.

The 'problem of faith', including the proper policing of faith-based claims, was a new concern for all, as faith now posed a risk, acted as a temptation, offered a source of power, and presented a source of meaning for prisoners in an otherwise bleak environment. There were strong, single narratives about who Muslim prisoners were and what it meant to convert to Islam in prison, both in policy circles and in the prison. These strong assumptions constituted what philosopher John Dunn refers to as a 'failure in comprehension' in individual cases (Dunn 2012, pers. comm., 10 March 2013): for example, where devout Muslim prisoners 'talked theology' with their more fundamentalist peers. Strong narratives about where danger lay made 'diagnosing the situation' (and therefore cultivating peaceful encounters) harder to accomplish. In this context, staff tended to back off, or to favour the kinds of prisoners they were used to. This created conflict and accusations of discrimination. We found ourselves 'carrying risk thinking' into the prison with us, in ways that were disorienting and uncomfortable. Meeting people, in their wholeness, was more difficult than at any other time.

This interruption to 'relationships of recognition' on the wings, and in the prison more generally, was destructive. The 'risk experts' were specialists, not chaplains, education staff, workshop instructors or staff on the wing. Yet prisoners often trusted chaplains more than they trusted psychologists. If they were undergoing some kind of personal change process, it was often the chaplains who were told first, in a process of seeking clarification, or affirmation. Chaplains and Imams (and other less security-oriented specialists) had a different 'theology of the person' that prioritised 'being human together'. The 'professionalisation' or 'bureaucratisation of risk' created knowledge gaps and ultimately left those who had to manage risk out of the picture.

This was not an easy state of affairs to understand or describe. At first prisoners 'held back' in interviews and in informal exchanges because the consequences of speaking out were feared. It took longer than usual to penetrate the wings, and to build trust. Only as we finished our extended period of fieldwork did some of the more knowledgeable prisoners open up to us. There were times when we were uncomfortable on wings. None of us were confident that we fully understood the prison at the time we had to leave.

Writing the report took considerable time. We agonised about the tone, content and effects of our writing, describing the staff as 'losing their professional confidence', and as holding negative views about Muslim prisoners:

Staff sometimes viewed any outward appearance of Islam as evidence of radicalisation, rather than a manifestation of faith, and these 'signs' were written up in security reports. Staff perceived Islam as a radical religion; they over-estimated extremism; this 'pushed prisoners together', reinforced their views and gave them more power. (Liebling et al. 2011)

We discussed our feelings of betraying those who had confided in us, as we exposed the new difficulties and shortcomings at the prison. Ministry of Justice sponsors wanted us to 'find evidence of radicalisation' and continually pressed us to ask about it directly. We resisted but the issue kept returning to centre stage in steering group meetings and correspondence. National Offender Management Service sponsors wanted 'a prison-sociological study', in context.

In the end, the report of our research findings had a long and turbulent route into the public domain. It was challenged, 'disowned', and tortuously edited but eventually accepted, lauded and endorsed by peer reviewers and key players in National Offender Management Service (though not by all). The report was described as 'courageous' by an experienced senior National Offender Management Service employee, because it described, for the first time, what was going on. One reviewer said:

This is a genuine *tour de force*, a carefully crafted and sophisticated academic analysis of relationships within a high security dispersal prison. It is based on a large amount of painstaking fieldwork, including in-depth interviews, group discussions, observation and surveys. The overall feel of the report is one of authenticity, created most of all by the richness of the abundant interview material. The qualitative research methodology is robust, and the conclusions are well supported by evidence. The report is extremely well written and highly readable ... I have reviewed numerous Home Office funded research reports, but this is quite different to anything I have seen for at least twenty years. It seems the researchers have been given license to explore the topic in their own way, without space restrictions or narrow policy focus, and the result is a report which rewards the reader with a vivid picture of life in the prison and a clear understanding of the social, political, policy and organisational changes that have combined to change profoundly staff-prisoner and prisoner-prisoner relationships within the institution within little over a decade ... I congratulate the authors on a fine piece of work. (Anonymous peer reviewer 2011)

Once through this helpful peer review process, and a challenging high level meeting in the Ministry of Justice, the report led to a Working Party, high level seminars, a review of the categorisation process, a new emphasis on the quality of regimes in high security prisons, and a linked research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The process of getting from first draft to public domain was just short of traumatic. The dialogue with operational leads in National Offender Management Service was, in the end, encouraging and enlightened.

None of this would have been possible if we had set out to conduct the research in a way that would 'lead to policy advice'. We were not expert enough. Getting the description *right* — grasping the 'shape' of the situation — was 'all' we had to do in order to stimulate dialogue, and some change. But this was extraordinarily difficult at a time when simply describing existing

dynamics ('naming the elephants in the room') was in itself 'an act of courage', and a serious professional challenge.

### **The role of research and the art of description**

The way I think about my research and its impact, then, is that via painstaking research, reflection and writing, we arrive at an account that shows what is 'morally at stake'. We don't so much offer advice as *show things as they are*. If we manage this, then our work gets read (it often makes some people angry, at first), and we get invited to talk about it, at meetings, training events, and policy discussions. Some challenging of the account might go on but usually there is a basic acceptance of the content, which leads to efforts to address those problems (if they are in scope politically). We have to take the long view: writing carefully, checking our interpretations, seeking best as well as poor practices, and trying to understand, analyse and explain the contexts in which bad practices develop, rather than simply offering 'critique'.

Arriving at an authentic, balanced and 'generative' account (Liebling in press) is harder than it sounds. Building and maintaining trust and honesty over extensive periods of time can be precarious. Unfounded rumours or false moves (for example, failures of diplomacy) can create havoc. Fieldwork notes have to be full, and observations thorough. Triangulation is a must. Well crafted surveys help, because silenced voices show up in random samples. Interview transcripts are valuable – but sometimes the original recording may contain reminders, or emotional cues that are missing from the transcript. There are no shortcuts in the journey from fieldwork to the account. Reflecting, reading and talking with informed others help to formulate ideas and interpretations. Systematic re-reading of notes and transcripts grounds the work empirically, in a way that builds confidence. In the end, we have to trust ourselves, and our relationship with the data. Writing first drafts serves as a means of developing and shaping thoughts and feelings about a project and its core themes. Jonathan Steinberg argues that when we know our work is 'right', the ordering of ideas flows from that sense or conviction (Steinberg, pers. comm., 20 May 2014). This takes time and considerable reflection. Others recognise and can affirm an account we are developing that 'resonates' or speaks deeply to them (Rogers 2004: 26). We should follow rules but accept that social science deals with, and has to make sense of, subjective data. Working in a team can make all this easier and can sharpen analytic instincts, if the team works well together, but this can also be testing at times (see Erickson and Stull 1998).

We operate as sociological detectives. There is never a single 'culprit' or perspective. Often simply finding a language in which to describe the world we are studying serves to bring it into relief. If we are to 'expand the democratic imagination', as Misztal suggest that we might (Misztal 2007: 4), then we can only do this with outstanding and accurate accounts. This involves both attention to detail and grasping the whole, or the 'shape of the situation', more clearly than before, like a fine painting. Getting this right is time-consuming, and morally complex. As Jollison argued:

For Murdoch, the most crucial moral virtue was a kind of attentiveness to detail, a wise, trained capacity for vision, which could see what was really going on in a situation and respond accordingly ... For Murdoch, what so often keeps us from acting morally is not that we fail to follow the moral rules that tell us how to act; rather, it is that we *misunderstand the situation before us* [emphasis added]. When we describe the situation to ourselves, we simply get it wrong. (Jollimore 2013: paras 16, 17)

The task of 'getting the description right' is getting harder as competing ideologies and moralities struggle for supremacy (Walzer 1994).

### **Conclusion: Creativity, and the courage of ‘good description’**

As Misztal argues, sometimes we need both ‘creativity and courage’ to ‘speak out on broad issues of public concern’ (Misztal 2007). Good description requires courage, insight, effort, and exceptional degrees of access. The product (which can take years to get right) can become an important source of policy discussion but this does not constitute ‘policy advice’. Policy implications flow out of the conversation we have with experienced operators and others about what the description has revealed. I might have been happier with the more coveted label of ‘democratic under-labourer’ (a label which was awarded, quite deservedly, to Tony Bottoms).

The collective aim of prison scholarship is ‘to make the prison world “intelligible”; to make moral blindness less likely or possible’ ... and ‘to enlarge sympathies in ways that can reshape human consciousness and with it the structures of society’ (Liebling 2014: 481; also Liebling 1999). I would distinguish this type of influence from the kind of ‘impact’ that Government and Social Science Research Councils now require (short-sightedly, within a four-year timeline). Instead of compiling narrowly defined examples of ‘impact’ for our research guardians, we should be asking, how might our research ‘enrich democracy’?

Criminological research raises questions of penal and moral philosophy, social justice, and the legitimacy or otherwise of contemporary penal policy and practice. We need to develop and defend a ‘critical social science’ which is ‘responsive to public issues while at the same time committed to professional excellence’ (Burawoy 2004: 1616). The arguments against ‘public criminology’ are the lack of ideological consensus among criminologists and an over emphasis on applied criminology. There are risks of working to ‘the market’ (Chancer and McLaughlin 2007). The greatest contribution to penal practice I might aspire to is to achieve the painstaking presentation of empirical evidence which is also found to support deeply-held values. Then it is up to all of us to work out what to do.

We change the world by ‘right description’. We achieve this through outstanding and humanistic methods, generative theory, and the determination to encounter, in an I-Thou manner, whole people as they are, via attentiveness to detail. We often have to work against what others seem determined to misunderstand, including what questions to ask. This overall task takes both humility and courage. My vision of what we do is to carefully describe and therefore articulate ‘what is morally at stake’. We can only do this if we meet whole beings with our whole being.

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<sup>2</sup> For the record, Richard Sparks and Ian Loader are both long standing friends/colleagues, and will remain so. I am grateful for the nudge.

<sup>3</sup> I have written about my prisons research role and experiences elsewhere (for example, Liebling 1999, 2001, 2014) but without addressing this question of the research-policy relationship so directly.

<sup>4</sup> Alison Liebling, Ruth Armstrong, Richard Bramwell and Ryan Williams.

<sup>5</sup> As Jock Young said, ‘For me humour and anger are most important ingredients of a good piece of academic work’ (Young, in van Swaaningen 2014: 354).



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