

Research as reform?

Alison Liebling examines how research may have the potential to shape progressive change.

Sykes, in his classic study of *The society of captives*, argued that 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)

Whilst there have been few contemporary sociologies of the prison conducted in the UK, they have all drawn on Sykes as a key reference, as his study still provides significant insights into the enduring and complex structure and practices of the prison. Sykes' analysis of the compound internal aspects of security, and their relationship with how prison officers go about their work, was available well before the publication of the Woodcock and Learmont reports into the escapes from Whitemoor and Parkhurst. His 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 1994/5 escapes, and may have offset the somewhat unsociological and reactive approach to prison security experienced in the years that followed.

Sykes is not the only available study. 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, e.g., Sparks et al., 1996, and Liebling, 2004) and which challenge unrealistic assumptions about the role and operation of prisons (see Liebling, 2006). Some of these accounts have shaped practice. The 'flow' of learning, however, tends to be directly into prisons, shaping operational practice rather than policy. Findings are often taken up hungrily by senior and not-so-senior practitioners looking for support and advice.

The flow from research into policy is less smooth. I recall examples, where the policy on Incentives and Earned Privileges was revised on paper in the light of a research report showing how difficult it was to ensure that fairness safeguards were followed (a revised instruction was produced). It was not abandoned (as it was when a Swedish prison research group repeated the study and found the same results) but strengthened. Some positive findings from an evaluation of transformed first night and safer custody procedures in six pilot sites confirmed the importance of care provided at the earliest stages of custody. Much of this learning has made its way into practice at other

establishments. But research cannot often compete directly with the other forces shaping penal policy – political anxiety, operational (as opposed to 'utopian') realism, financial constraints and media interest. Its impact is often more organic than direct.

I recently attended a development day for senior officers. I had been asked to talk about my research on the work of prison officers. The session was all about peacekeeping, the role of decision-making, and the use of authority. It drew on the use of Appreciative Inquiry, a method focused on peak experiences and (work or) life at its best. The staff involved were enthusiastic. Several said, 'why haven't we had formal teaching on this subject before?' The concept of legitimacy became a matter of fascination for the 'student' officers. Several said this had been the most valuable aspect of their development training. Understanding the complexity of their work, within a framework, and with new conceptual tools, helped them (they said) to use power more carefully. The links between the moral and practical dimensions of their work became clearer. This feels like a contribution to 'reform'. But is it?

A more systematic link between research and reform can be found in the teaching of research-based courses to senior practitioners, such as the Institute of Criminology's Master of Studies Degree in Applied Criminology.

Our experience shows that students appreciate the learning from evidence-based research projects, and often make extremely good strategic and operational use of it. Of course research can sometimes have unintended effects on practice – learning to measure the 'moral climate' of prisons for reasons of curiosity appealed to people in higher places in ways I could never have anticipated. 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 measuring 'respect', 'fairness' and 'relationships' then this research has made an impact in a positive and important way. But these things are

never straight-forward. There are different stances one can take in research and different conclusions one can draw from results.

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 is 'servile'. Critical sociology has 'moral vision' and is foundational, providing intellectual challenge but often for internal uses. It can provide a critique of existing value assumptions. 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 him, as it happens, but I also have, like others, 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 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. Professional social science should produce 'responsible speech' (Bauman, 1990) and 'communicative knowledge' (Burawoy, 2004). Responsible speech is an 'attribute of science'. It is 'vigilantly self-controlled', 'corroborated by

evidence', self-critical and not grounded solely in emotionally intense beliefs (Bauman, 1990). This kind of work requires time, and security of employment, of course.

There are at least three ways in which research *can* support reform in my experience: the direct reflection on practice it allows – 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, 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 that may be more difficult to answer than many busy practitioners and policy-makers assume.

The implications of criminological research raise questions of penal and moral philosophy, the roles of management and law, and the legitimacy or otherwise of contemporary penal policy and practice. The 'public face' of responsibly grounded criminology is increasingly important in an era of growing imprisonment use, fear of crime, and politically fuelled punitiveness. Instrumental and reflexive knowledge should proceed simultaneously. 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). But this should be done cautiously. 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).

Some of the greatest contributions to penal practice have been driven by the painstaking presentation of empirical evidence that is found to support deeply-held values. But it is important to be open to the possibility that there may be conflicts between 'what works' and 'what (we think) is right'.

Senior managers in NOMS headquarters recognise that 'holding it together' in the face of unprecedented pressures of capacity and resources is extremely challenging. Those working within prisons and criminal justice tend to become rather 'prison-centric'. Organised dialogue about the results of research, with painstakingly gathered empirical evidence and theoretical resources to hand, provides an important challenge to those who make and shape policy without it. Empirical social science supports, and should support, *value discussions* as well as debates about practice. This may be among its most significant contributions to reform. ■

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