Prison research: appreciative or critical inquiry?

David Scott argues about 'value commitment' and 'taking sides' in fieldwork

When undertaking fieldwork in conflictual environments, such as the prison, 'taking sides' is an inevitable part of the research process and this moral and political dilemma is often phrased in terms of 'whose side are you on?'. Significantly there appears to be a tendency in some recent prison officer studies to sidestep this moral quandary and present value commitments as unproblematic.

Appreciative inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is defined by its advocates as a fair and inclusive research method that tells the 'whole story' (Liebling et al., 2001). It is claimed AI provides a faithful account of the respondents' positive achievements, survival strategies and success stories. Through delivering a more sensitive, nuanced and instructive picture of the prison, it claims to provide a more valuable approach than traditional problem-orientated studies. The researcher does not look to expose flaws but rather to accentuate the positive and have an open dialogue about how to achieve good outcomes, secure compliance and treat people with respect. A key outcome is that the respondents will feel more valued through finding new meanings, fulfilment, energy, strength and job satisfaction, thus leading to better practice. It is an approach to organisational transformation that is:

> ...based on strengths rather than weakness, on visions of what is possible rather than what is not possible. It identifies achievements and best memories, and through this technique, locates 'where energy is' in an organisation … It is based on the establishment of familiarity and trust with a workgroup in the first instance, on the discovery of that organisation's best practices, memories and achievements.
> (Liebling et al., 2001)

No new resources or widespread structural changes are necessarily required, for this approach is about transforming the individual and collective prison officers' private troubles through boosting morale, transforming penal values, and by discovering and then achieving, attainable positive goals. Such an approach is understandably very attractive and useful to the Prison Service and its managers.

As a methodology and qualitative piece of research, the principles of listening, respect and fairness are of course welcomed. Yet whilst AI may have benefits when exploring the lives of powerless and marginalised, these principles are not unique to AI and as a potential method for independent prison research of prison staff it has a number of serious drawbacks. Any kind of AI research would require massive access to be granted from prison authorities, considerable funding and a large amount of time and other resources. It would also require explicit cooperation. This can lead to problems. Perhaps most damningly the research can be used merely to support and justify the interests of the powerful. C W Mills (1959) puts it well when he argues:

> ...[t]o appeal to the powerful, on the basis of any knowledge we now have, is utopian in the foolish sense of the term. Our relations with them are more likely to be only such relations as they find useful, which is to say we become technicians accepting their problems and aims, or ideologies promoting their prestige and authority.

Raising questions

AI then could be reduced to merely a human resources exercise. Questions can also be raised about its status as a method. It is both more and less than research: *more* because it looks to not just observe and discover, but also to change; and *less* because the reality may have to be distorted into a mythical positive construct in order to achieve this.

A major claim of AI is that it provides a fuller account of the prison experience than critical research. Such a claim to *truth* though is compromised by both the approach and aims of the 'method'. In AI the reality of the situation is replaced by a projection of what could be, not what is: the mythical rather than the real. This is not the whole story, but rather a reality that has been repackaged and reinvented. By necessary implication, AI cannot focus on the negative, for if it does so, future practice could be distorted so that worst practice is achieved. Yet research must always aim to uncover the real, whatever this looks like. Indeed, as a 'metaphysical choice' (Mills, 1959), it seems more appropriate to allow the respondents to detail their stories, whether positive or negative, so that their construction of events can be outlined and critically interrogated.

AI seems more useful as a therapeutic and individualised means of building self-esteem and morale. The aim is to ameliorate the negative and inherently dehumanising reality of imprisonment, without making any connections with the equally important transformations of inequitable power relations in the prison or in wider society. AI looks to achieve consensual

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relationships so morally performing prisons can pertain. But it must be questioned if this is really possible.

Whose side are we on?

For Howard Becker (1967) it was impossible to undertake neutral, objective and value free research and therefore the researcher must choose a standpoint. It is claimed, however, by one of the leading AI advocates that:

> ...in my experience it is possible to take more than one side seriously, to find merit in more than one perspective, and to do this without causing outrage on the side of officials or prisoners … why is it less acceptable to offer the same degree of appreciative understanding to those who manage prisons. Is it because they wield power? [Because] their voices are already legitimated?
> (Liebling, 2001)

Rather than identifying with the underdog we should have empathy for the subject, whoever it is. Yet to accept such a position unproblematically is a *political* decision, inevitably reflecting certain values and sympathies. For Alvin Gouldner (1967) it is not just concern over the differential power relations and legitimated knowledge that shape concern for the underdog. Rather it is their suffering:

> The essential point about the underdog is that he [sic] suffers, and this suffering is naked and visible. It is this that makes and should make a compelling demand upon us. What makes his standpoint deserving of special consideration, what makes him particularly worthy of sympathy, is that he suffers…

In prison it is not only the prisoner who suffers. It would be unfair to deny the suffering of prison staff, but the key issue is that through the hierarchy of power relations the reality of prisoners suffering is *denied*:

> [The] dominant conceptions of reality sustained and fostered by the managers of society have one common defect: they fail to grasp a very special type of reality, specifically the reality of the suffering of those beneath them. In failing to see this, what they also fail to see is that those beneath them are indeed very much like themselves, in their suffering as in other ways.

In response to the question why is it less acceptable to have political and empathetic allegiances with prison officers and prison managers, the answer is not just that the prison staff have greater power, or that their voices are deemed more legitimate than prisoners. It is that they do not suffer the same extent as prisoners, and that they fail to *acknowledge* the greater suffering of those below them. The question is not one of *more or less deserving*, but of *more suffering*.

Yet though Gouldner had solidarity with sufferers, he questioned an uncritical acceptance of this position, arguing that a 'commitment made on the basis of an unexamined ideology may allow us to feel a manly righteousness, but it leaves us blind'. Prisoners are not unproblematically bearers of truth (Sim, 2003). To be sure racist, homophobic and sexist beliefs should not be accepted or legitimated and a mere uncritical adoption of the prisoner standpoint fails to solve all ethical and political dilemmas. Critical researchers must not abdicate their responsibility to provide a normative critical judgement.

Critical inquiry

Thus, though when 'taking sides' the researcher has a responsibility to facilitate acknowledgement of human suffering, the prison research process remains an ethical minefield where the researcher is likely to be confronted with a number of situationally specific moral dilemmas. Within such contested terrain the commitments of the critical researcher must be reflexive and rooted in principles and values which promote honesty, integrity and accuracy. Critical Inquiry must be an attempt to uncover real experiences, whatever the shape or form. Research should not be a process of reconciliation or aim to justify the practices of the penal apparatus of the capitalist state, improve human resources management or some further utilitarian goal. Nor must it be to uncritically reproduce or condone exploitative power relations or naturalise their position.

Critical Inquiry must in some way be relevant to the lived experiences of sufferers here and now, engage in an independent dialogue with the powerful and be used to uncover exploitation. The researcher must engage in a manner in which the findings and processes adopted can be used as a valuable tool in the political struggle to change social structures, or to provide the platform for critical reflections, new meanings and interpretive frames for subjugated groups. The reasons for undertaking the research will be diverse, but the values that underscore fieldwork should remain the same: an honest attempt to provide an accurate reflection of reality, and a commitment to expose inhumanity and acknowledge the suffering of the powerless.

Dr David Scott is Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Liverpool John Moores University

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