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# What is 'MQPL'?

## Solving puzzles about the prison

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**In empirical science everything depends on how fruitfully and faithfully thinking intertwines with the empirical world of study ... and since concepts are the gateway to that world, the effective functioning of concepts is a matter of decisive importance.<sup>1</sup>**

Blumer argues that the role of 'the concept' in social science is to 'sensitise perception' — to change the perceptual world<sup>2</sup> so that we can describe and understand it more precisely. The prison quality or 'moral performance' survey developed by members of the Cambridge University Prisons Research Centre (known in the Service as MQPL) attempts to do just this: to provide a conceptual and methodological foundation for understanding prison life. It is always important in social science research to be self-critical and cautious about how well social scientific variables indicate the complex abstract categories they are designed to measure, and this developmental exercise is no exception. Neither the concepts nor the items in them are intended to be definitive. The projects underlying the development and use of the survey represent a series of attempts to reflect with some precision the social, relational and moral climate of a prison. This places us in a better position to solve analytic puzzles about the nature, quality, management and effects of prisons.

The 'MQPL' (Measuring the Quality of Prison Life) survey is a 'tick box questionnaire' for prisoners 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<sup>3</sup>. 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 in this framework<sup>4</sup>, confirming the centrality of the complex work of prison officers to the quality of life in prison. 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<sup>5</sup>.

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 (with Charles Elliott and Helen Arnold) in 2000-2001, 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, into which the author was drawn<sup>6</sup>. Its origins are in 'research-for-knowledge', and its main goal is therefore accurate and authentic description, explanation, and conceptual clarity. Its cumulative or recursive development over a ten year period (2001-2011) to date means that empirical observations can be used to develop theories or conceptual categories relevant to prison life and experience, which can in turn lead to better observations.

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<sup>7</sup>.

1. Blumer, H (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, N.J.: Prentice-Hall p.143-4.

2. Ibid p.152.

3. Liebling, A; assisted by Arnold, H (2004) *Prisons and their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

4. See Liebling, A (2011) *Being a Criminologist: Investigation as a Lifestyle and Living* in M. Bosworth and C. Hoyle (eds) *What is Criminology?* London: Sage and Crewe, B, Liebling, A. and Hulley, S. (2011) *Staff culture, the use of authority, and prisoner outcomes in public and private prisons* in Australia and New Zealand *Journal of Criminology*.

5. See Liebling, A., Hulley, S. and Crewe, B. (2011), *Conceptualising and Measuring the Quality of Prison Life* in Gadd, D., Karstedt, S. and Messner, S. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*. London: Sage p358-72, Moos, R H (1975) *Evaluating correctional and community settings* New York: Wiley, Saylor, W. G. (1984) *Surveying Prison Environments* Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Prisons, Toch, H (1992) *Living in Prison* (Revised edition). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, APA Books, Logan, C.H. (1992) 'Well Kept: Comparing Quality of Confinement in Private and Public Prisons', *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 83(3): 577-613.

6. see further, Liebling, assisted by Arnold 2004: 141-4 see n.3.

7. For a detailed account of its recent development and current content, see Liebling et al (2011) see n.5.

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*<sup>8</sup>.

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 Audit and Corporate Assurance Unit, 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', and it follows leads originating in 'the real world' (this has also been true of other prison research projects conducted 'off the policy agenda'<sup>9</sup>). The commitment of this kind of research is to 'the phenomena and their nature'<sup>10</sup>. 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).<sup>11</sup> 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

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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<sup>12</sup>, between as well as within and between the public and private sectors<sup>13</sup>, and across jurisdictions<sup>14</sup>. 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.

The other 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<sup>15</sup>, which has much in common with the 'positive organisational scholarship' movement, but it has been adapted by the author and colleagues for use in research<sup>16</sup>. Its values, and effects, are powerful and result in the careful identification of 'what is', and 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. It can in this way be used, as can MQPL results (where the methodology and design of the questionnaire has AI as its foundation), to lead to change<sup>17</sup>. But this has to date been a somewhat underdeveloped aspect of its

8. Lewin, K (1951/1977) *Field theory in social science: selected theoretical papers by Kurt Lewin*, ed Cartwright, D. London : Tavistock.

9. For example Liebling, A, Price, D and Shefer, G (2010) *The Prison Officer (second edition)*. Cullompton: Willan.

10. Matza, D (1969) *Becoming Deviant*, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Liebling (2011) see n. 5.

11. 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. This is another complex research agenda, but we hope to make some tentative explorations soon.

12. Liebling, assisted by Arnold 2004 see n.3.

13. Liebling et al (2011) see n.5, Crewe et al 2011 see n.4.

14. For example Johnsen, B, Granheim, P K, and Helgesen, J (2011) *Exceptional prison conditions and the quality of prison life: Prison size and prison culture in Norwegian closed prisons* in *European Journal of Criminology*, 8(6), 515-29.

15. Elliott, C. (1999) *Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg.

16. For example Liebling, A; Elliot, C and Price, D (1999) *Appreciative Inquiry and Relationships in Prison* in *Punishment and Society: The International Journal of Penology* 1(1) pp 71-98.

17. Liebling, A; Elliott, C and Arnold, A (2001) *Transforming the Prison: Romantic Optimism or Appreciative Realism?* in *Criminal Justice* 1(2) pp 161-180.

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.<sup>18</sup>

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) but sometimes for reasons that are not easy to explain without further information. Surveys conducted routinely by the Prison Service's Audit and Assurance Team are reported on with historical as well as comparative data, so it is easy to see prisons and their quality of life compared to themselves over time, as well as against their comparator group. Sometimes the results are so outstanding (that is, outstandingly good (see, for example, survey results for Grendon 2009 and 2012<sup>19</sup>), or outstandingly poor (see, for example, the recent survey results for Pentonville<sup>20</sup>) they deserve a separate study aimed at explaining their outlier status. But this type of inquiry is not resourced (it might be in the future) and would inevitably be time consuming to carry out. Members of the Prisons Research Centre team sometimes attempt such tentative 'further explorations', out of interest, but are often too committed to other specific research projects to divert time and attention in this way.

The MQPL survey has limits. It is too long. It is too tempting to 'go for the dimension scores' instead of unpicking the detail. It can be conducted (for example, 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, in the survey's most recent iteration, is under-articulated by its developers).<sup>21</sup> It does not address some important (and continually changing) dimensions of the prisoner experience (like meaning and identity, religious feeling and 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. 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, and find an appropriate language for describing, the prison experience and its effects. Its results help us to remain properly critical about the uses and purposes of the prison, and its varied manifestations.

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18. 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 see n.9; and Crewe et al 2011 see n.4).

19. Ministry of Justice (2009) *Results from an MQPL Survey at HMP Grendon*. Audit and Assurance: NOMS and Ministry of Justice (2012) *Results from an MQPL Survey at HMP Grendon*. Audit and Assurance: NOMS.

20. Ministry of Justice (2011) *Results from an MQPL Survey at HMP Pentonville*. Audit and Assurance: NOMS.

21. 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 see n.3). 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.