

The Late Modern Prison and the Question of Values

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Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience (Isaiah Berlin 1969:125).

Philosophy is both an endless discussion and a source of clarification and understanding (Charles Taylor 1968:402).

Introduction

This paper was originally delivered at the Australia and New Zealand Criminology Conference at Sydney in 2003. It is concerned with the meaning of words, and the practices and values to which they become linked. I have become troubled, in particular, by the shifting meaning and relevance of certain key words and values in the UK penal context over recent years. The prison should be of greater interest to criminologists (and to criminal justice research agencies) than is often the case. Exploring the prison, what matters in it, and what goes on in it closely can inform us about broader problems of a social and political nature. This paper has four main themes: action, values, evaluation and the late modern, managerialist world in which action and evaluation take place, and in which certain relational values seem threatened.

Action, Values and Prison Evaluation

[T]he face-to-face relationship is ... the most central dimension of the social world (Schutz 1962:318).

Some time ago Erving Goffman suggested that 'the action' in social life is to be found in interaction rituals, in the daily pleasantries, insults, disclosures and defences, and 'forms of talk' between socially complex individuals pursuing multiple goals (Goffman 1967a). The character of this world of interaction is essentially moral (Drew & Wootton 1996:7). We are locked into socially meaningful rituals, relationships, interests, investments in our own integrity and sense of worth, and into judgements we continually make about others. Individuals engage in struggles for power and personal dignity, deploying defensive strategies to achieve goals, or 'to gain control over the meaning of a situation' (McDermott & King 1988:360). The smooth conduct of social life depends upon individuals forming

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complex understandings, of situated action. Goffman was the champion of microevents, and of appearances. 'Every person' he said, 'lives in a world of social encounters' (Goffman 1967b:5). There are verbal and nonverbal acts which express each person's 'view of the situation' and her 'evaluation of the participants'. There are typifications of people and situations, based on what counts as relevant (Schutz 1964).¹ It is in this micro-level place, that social life goes on, as McDermott and King argued in relation to the prison many years ago (McDermott & King 1988; see also Ben-David 1992).

There have been other great sociologists of everyday social life and social interaction (e.g. Whyte 1943; Garfinkle 1967; Becker 1983; Berger & Luckmann 1966), and many who have famously studied the prison (e.g. Clemmer 1940; Sykes 1958; Jacobs 1977). It is significant, as Jonathan Simon has argued, that close ethnographies of the prison have been few and far between during the 'era of hyperincarceration' (Simon 2000:286). Interest in the nature of interactions has fallen 'into a dark zone of knowledge and power' (p 285). There has been a 'transformation in the forms of expert knowledge associated with the prison' (Simon 2000:287) so that unprecedented quantities of managerial knowledge, interdependent with technology, have usurped sociological knowledge. Many of the early sociologists of the prison drew on quantitative as well as qualitative sources — but now the qualitative and the theoretical have been largely (although not exclusively) left behind in the new governance project (Simon 2000:296–302; see also Garland 1997). 'What goes on' in prison, 'where the action is', and what this signifies, is of less interest to senior managers, to criminal justice agencies, and perhaps even to criminologists, than has formerly been the case.

Outside the prison, recent social theory has become preoccupied with the problem of values, for example, the concept of trust (Gambetta 1988; Hollis 1998; Mizralski 1999; Uslaner 2002; van Deth & Scarbrough 1998). In our late modern societies, individuals are increasingly dependent on abstract and disembodied transactions with unknown others, on whom their livelihood might depend. We have become short-term, characterless agents seeking instant satisfactions and lacking a concept of the public good (Seligman 1997; Sennett 1998). We are not happy in this state, and we find the aggregate, instrumental, future-oriented leanings of modern managerialism, and 'turbo-charged capitalism', wanting in several respects.

This paper concentrates on these two preoccupations: *actions* and *values*. One is old, and much neglected, and the other has strong historical roots, but is also of much recent theoretical interest. Analysis of the role of values has not been empirically applied to the prison.² I try to show how much of the dissatisfaction experienced by practitioners and recipients of our rapidly modernising institutions, including the prison, can be understood as dissatisfactions with their lack of attention to the complexity of actions and the significance of values. I will use the past decade or so of prison development in England and Wales, and research in five contemporary prisons, as a case study. The prison is of course a rather special moral place, with some very particular characteristics, and there are distinctive reasons why a consideration of actions and values matter there in particular (see further, Liebling 2004).

1 Heeren points out that this process involves 'ignoring what makes a particular object unique and placing that object in the same class with others that share the same trait or quality' (Heeren 1971:51).

2 Theoretical analysis of the role and significance of penal values and sensibilities is, by contrast, well developed (e.g. Garland 1990, 2001). See also Brown and Wilkie 2002 for a challenging application of the concept to citizenship to contemporary Australian prisons.

Justice and the Demise of the Liberal Penal Project

In 1990, England and Wales had a declining prison population, a shambolic penal system and a widely welcomed Woolf Report. The Woolf Report pointed out that justice mattered, and that certain procedural changes would come to transform the way prisoners regarded their custodians (Home Office 1991a). Regimes were poor, staff attitudes were often antagonistic, and life was especially unpleasant in local prisons, where the majority of prisoners spent most, if not all, of their time. Massive management changes were made, not many of which had anything to do with Woolf, but which together provided a ministerial and senior management reach into prison life that was unimaginable twenty years earlier. Agency status, privatisation, performance indicators and targets, new prisons, and a managerialist revolution finally made real, formed the background to what was to follow during the remainder of the decade. The effects of this future oriented reorganisation of institutional life were 'existentially troubling' for individuals (Giddens 1991:21).

Three problems arose. First, Woolf's notion of justice, undefined in practice, became laxity in some prisons. 'Justice', like the words, 'respect' and 'humanity', is open-textured: it can have many meanings to many people (Hart 1961). In the translation of Woolf's careful concept of justice into policy (Home Office 1991b), and then from policy into practice, slippery words like 'care' and 'relationships' came to inhabit prison landings and hallways. Typical of policies in practice, these words and practices represented complex ideas applied in an over-simplified and distorted manner. Prison officers do not, on the whole, read the Woolf report, White Papers or even policy instructions (Liebling 2000). Few prison governors do — there is not enough time in a day. Both major reports and policy initiatives are 'conceptions': that is, they begin as tentative ideas constructed out of competing agendas, a version on paper emerges, and then they become interpreted and understood — refashioned in shorthand — by newcomers and practitioners who have none of this contextual knowledge (see Rock 1995).³ They interact with 'ways of seeing'. Parts of the original conception survive, wither, grow, or become adapted. This fact — that policies are reshaped to fit 'the larger common sense and practices of the organisation' for which they are intended (Rock *ibid*:3) has important implications (for an example, see Liebling 2001). It accounts, amongst other things, for the power of ideas and sensibilities to shape prison life.

Justice became laxity, in some important places, for many reasons, including lack of clarity about its meaning in practice.⁴ It was, in any case, deployed instrumentally: do justice and you will see order. Both of these eventualities were fundamental moral mistakes. If justice is only valued because it secures order, then it is easy to see how it came to be abandoned when it didn't 'work'.⁵ The introduction of 'model regimes' with longer hours out of cell (Prison Service 1992) was accompanied by rising assault rates, increasing escapes and increasing drug use (Prison Service 1994). If this was justice, the Prison Service quickly became wary of it. The Service was operating with a limited (and distorted) notion of justice in mind.

3 To add to this complexity, the version on paper is often structured by a 'spin' intended for the public.

4 Fear of disorder and violence may have been another reason. Senior manager ideology or staff avoidance of detail in particular prisons may have been others (see Home Office 1995; Liebling & Price 1999).

5 Justice (or in the literature, legitimacy), including respectful treatment, may increase the likelihood of compliance (Bottoms 2003; Tyler & Blader 2000) but it does not guarantee it, especially in the prison, where its accomplishment is inherently limited and where prisoners may have special concerns.

The third problem was the reactionary turn from 1993 onwards in politics and criminal justice generally. The 'rediscovery of the criminal' characteristic of the mid-1990s, coincided with the 'rediscovery of the prisoner' characteristic of the inner life of prisons, after the escapes from Whitemoor and Parkhurst. Prison life became 'deeper and heavier' (King & McDermott 1995) throughout the years to follow, and new forms of governance helped to ensure that this 'reassertion of penal authority' was largely successful (Simon 2000; Liebling 2002). A new form of penal authority was applied to the deliverers of punishment as well as to prisoners. A New Labour government in England and Wales in 1997 continued the public sector modernisation project, in ways experienced by many working people as harsh. The new senior management of the Prison Service was described by members as 'robust'. A war on failing prisons was declared. But a new language of moral reflection started to appear, in political and penal dialogue: the third way (e.g. Giddens 1998), citizenship (e.g. Blunkett 2003), communitarianism (Etzioni 1995; see also Sacks 2000) and in the prison, the decency agenda (Liebling 2004). This was neo-liberalism with a guilty conscience. Or as others have noted, there has been an 'ethical turn' in both social theory and political discourse (Honneth 1995:289). This ethical turn has been reflected in official constructions of prison life: it is not surprising that the senior Prison Service regime in England and Wales during 1999–2003 has been described as 'very New Labour' (senior manager, pers. comm.).⁶

In this series of events, the vexed question of prison quality arose. The issue arose in part, because prisons that were meeting their performance targets were being accused of violence and brutality against prisoners. If they were not meeting their performance targets, no action was being taken. Performance measurement was an end in itself, the 'Emperor with no clothes' (HMCIP 2003). The entrepreneurial management of prisons (along with the rest of the public sector; du Gay 2000) was creating alienation and distortion, and seemed to be replacing old concerns with justice and individuality, with the new practices and values of efficiency, targets and competition, along with the vague new concept of performance.⁷ Critics began to point out that the official Statement of Purpose made claims about 'treating prisoners with humanity' and yet none of the Key Performance Indicators (most of which focused on security and order) reflected anything like this core idea. As Simon and Feeley put it, the 'new penology ... has trouble with the concept of humanity' (Simon & Feeley 1995:173).

The moral economy in prison, in the workplace, in social life was obvious,⁸ but the language of morality was struggling uneasily under a technicist approach to modernisation (Clarke et al 2000:23). One of the unintended consequences of the excessive checking brought about by the audit and performance measurement explosion, as many critics have observed, is a decline in levels of *trust* in institutions (O'Neill 2002; Braithwaite & Levi 1998). It was in this context — of moral confusion and dissatisfaction with performance measurement — that we embarked on our study of how one might evaluate what matters in prison, without the inevitable distortions and limitations of managerialism driving the agenda.

6 For detailed accounts of many of these developments, see Downes & Morgan 2002:295–318; and applied to the prison, Liebling 2004.

7 The literature here is vast. My preferred sources include Power 2001; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000; Pollitt et al 2001; Sennett 1998; and Clarke et al 2000.

8 That is, the distribution of power, the nature and flow of authority, and the extent, forms and structures of moral regulation, differ between institutions and social groups.

Approaches to Prison Evaluation

Much of the recent prison evaluation literature arises from two sources: public-private sector comparisons, and evaluations of the effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes. Both sources lament the lack of studies of the quality of prison life and regimes: that is, of what prisons are really like beyond official measures, and of the context in which courses are undertaken. There is a rich literature on these matters dating back to the 1950s and 60s, but these studies were conducted in a very different era, and within an explicitly treatment-oriented framework. It was a taken-for-granted assumption during this period that different kinds of prison environments would lead to different outcomes. Variables of interest among authors such as Moos and Wright included things like 'whether the residents were proud of their unit', 'whether staff are interested in following residents up once they leave' and 'whether this unit is well organised' (Moos 1975). These kinds of studies of the quality of prison regimes more or less ceased with the demise of the rehabilitative ideal and the arrival of managerialist concepts of service delivery. The emphasis switched from 'correctional' to 'custodial' goals. Logan was able to assert in 1992 that 'there is no established methodology for measuring or comparing prison quality' (Logan 1992:528). Despite the information revolution in public services, which masquerades as a quality revolution (Power 2001), this remains the case today. Rawls' concept of the just or trustworthy institution might be a more helpful starting point than the underdeveloped notion of quality (Rawls 1980). This may be a particularly relevant idea to apply to the prison. Prisoners certainly seemed to think so, as I shall show below.

Appreciative Inquiry and the Question of Quality

The study described briefly below was, in part, a study of what staff and prisoners felt was meaningful, or mattered, when evaluating the quality of prison life. The research grant was one of the Home Office's first Innovative Research Challenge Awards, aimed at exploratory and methodologically innovative studies. The original aim was to emerge, after a year, with a reliable survey questionnaire that might reflect, better than official measures, meaningful aspects of prison quality. This unexpectedly led to political theory. The five prisons in the study were: Belmarsh (a large modern London local), Wandsworth (a large, Victorian London local), Holme House (a modern, apparently 'high performing' local), Risley (a 1960s local prison, recently converted to a Category C Training Prison), and Doncaster (a new generation, private prison). Four of the five, then, were local prisons (short stay, serving the courts), and the fifth was trying to shake off its 'local prison culture'.

We spent a considerable amount of time talking, in an unusually intense way.⁹ We held workshops in each of five prisons, during which prison staff in particular, but in more limited ways also prisoners, were invited to devote themselves exclusively to this task with us for a full three days, to participate in imaginative games, and some hard work. Specific exercises were organized, aimed at encouraging some lively conversations about each establishment: where had it come from; what were its sensitivities; what values were underlying staff and prisoner visions of where the prison would move to, if all its best experiences began to dominate? We used 'appreciative inquiry' — a method aimed at the articulation of peak experiences — and we trained staff and some prisoners in appreciative interviewing techniques, so they could interview each other, and come back to discuss the findings (see Liebling et al 2001). We held discussion groups with prisoners, during which

9 'We' refers here and in the subsequent paragraph to myself and others working on the project at the time: Helen Arnold and Charles Elliott, in particular.

some similar exercises took place, and careful discussions about what mattered, went on. What would they measure, if they were sent as a working party to a nearby prison, to compare it with this one? By a process of dialogue, deliberation and refinement, a set of dimensions were agreed.¹⁰ This was our starting point, and an important stage in the process: what were the ‘things that mattered most’ in prison, that should be included in judgements about a prison’s quality?

What was remarkable about the process (we took this very much for granted until it was remarked upon by colleagues), was the degree of consensus generated, between staff and prisoners, and between prisons. We had not set out to compare prisons from the beginning, but to develop a survey throughout the life of the project, as carefully as we could, combining the ideas and suggestions to emerge from five establishments. In the event, there was so much agreement about ‘what mattered’ that we were able to proceed with few refinements to the dimensions or to the questionnaire as we moved from the first prison to the next.

‘What Matters’ in Prison?

I wish staff would be more polite and genuine (Prisoner).

When I first came in, I had no pillow. I approached two officers — they were chatting, so I waited. Eventually, one of them asked me what I wanted. He said, ‘You’re not entitled to a pillow’ and carried on chatting. They were not concerned about me. That seems minor, but it’s crucial. It can turn you into a different person (Prisoner).

The dimensions to arise from these discussions are shown in Table 1, organised into conceptual groups. Respect and humanity almost always emerged first in the discussions.

Table 1. Dimensions that matter in prison quality

A. RELATIONSHIP DIMENSIONS	B. REGIME DIMENSIONS	C. SOCIAL STRUCTURE DIMENSIONS	D. INDIVIDUAL ITEMS
RESPECT. HUMANITY.	FAIRNESS. ORDER.	POWER/AUTHORITY. SOCIAL LIFE.	MEANING. QUALITY OF LIFE.
STAFF-PRISONER RELATIONSHIPS.	SAFETY. WELL-BEING.		
TRUST. SUPPORT.	PERSONAL DEVELOP- MENT.		
	FAMILY CONTACT. DECENCY.		

We discussed what each concept meant, in some cases using scenarios and group discussions, and eventually agreed on a set of questions felt to reflect each dimension. The wording was refined, or new questions were added as the research progressed. We developed a detailed questionnaire for prisoners and for staff, using this technique. This section of the paper concentrates mainly on the results to emerge from the prisoner questionnaire.

10 Our methods were supplemented by observations and informal discussions. We discovered that the three day workshops were an effective technique for learning a great deal, at a deep level, about each prison.

The method took essentially qualitative concepts, and attempted, via dialogue, to operationalise them as they applied in the prison. We are not suggesting that their meanings are eternally fixed. The intention was to generate dialogue, to arrive at satisfactory 'for the moment' questions, some of which may be useful in longitudinal studies, and to contribute to a process of continuous questioning and revision. We found considerable consensus about what these concepts were, and their meaning in the penal setting.¹¹ So we were assured that respect, for example, acknowledged the dignity of the individual and the possibility of difference. It placed limits on what could be done 'in one's interests'. It was a form of recognition. It placed obligations on others to explain their actions, and to treat individuals as who they are and not as a representative of a 'type'. It was, according to prisoners, 'more than civility' and it was closely linked to fairness:

Respect, right? It's something about what I was saying with that cup of tea. An officer got me a cup of water at lock up so I could make myself one. Someone wanted to recognise that I'm a person. Do you know what I mean? (Prisoner)

Respect shown by staff in order to achieve something (like compliance) was not respect.

We were guided by factor analysis as we refined the dimensions. Each question appeared randomly in the questionnaire as a statement, with which prisoners strongly agreed, agreed, and so on, on a five-point scale. A mean score was calculated for each item, and each dimension, based on completed questionnaires by a random sample of at least 100 prisoners in each prison. We conducted this exercise as part of an 'appreciative interview' with each individual, so that we were able to seek elaboration and refinement throughout. The account below arose from questionnaires completed during these individual interviews. The dimension 'well-being' for example, consisted of seven items:

1. [Statement 70] I feel tense in this prison [.831]¹²
2. [Statement 77] My experience in this prison is painful [.818]
3. [Statement 51] My experience of imprisonment in this particular prison has been stressful [.781]
4. [Statement 86] Generally I fear for my psychological safety [.717]
5. [Statement 69] I can be myself in this prison [.655]
6. [Statement 13] The atmosphere in this prison is relaxed and friendly [.621]
7. [Statement 78] Morale amongst prisoners here is high [.577]

We explored what prisoners (and staff) had to say about each dimension — what is it to trust in prison? How much trust is there, between whom? When they say that they trust staff, what is it that prisoners trust them to do? Sykes and Messinger argued that prisoners have 'lost the privilege of being trusted' (Sykes & Messinger 1960:14). We found this statement to be an over-simplification and in need of much further elaboration, despite the working personalities of prison officers and a cultural inclination to censure those who extend trust for naivety. The limits to trust in the prison were not unqualified. Prisoners found they could

11 Berlin argues that certain highly esteemed values may conflict ('Great Goods can collide', Berlin 1990:17) and that there is therefore no great harmonious system whereby 'all values are reconciled' (2002:47). He also suggests that there may be more consensus about certain basic values than others and proposes that what is meant by these concepts is a quasi-empirical question (2002:45). We stayed deliberately attuned to the Kantian meaning of respect, about which there was considerable consensus, rather than meanings relating to relative status (awe), for this work.

12 The number in square brackets denotes the strength of the correlation of each item with the dimension. The overall reliability of the dimension 'well-being' was 0.84.

not function without some trust of staff. In two of the prisons in our study, staff reported, to their own astonishment, that they trusted prisoners slightly more than they trusted their senior managers. This finding has sociological (as well as managerial) implications. Prison is 'a situation marked by contradictions' (Sparks et al 1996:196).

What prisoners and staff said about trust, or respect, or humanity (and so on) applied in the prison, was systematically compared to the available literature. So was it the case that trust encouraged cooperation and well-being? We found, for example, that perceived safety was linked to trust in the environment rather than to actual levels of assault, as theorists of order suggest (e.g. Wrong 1994). Respect was more socially and psychologically complex to accomplish in the prison even than in the community (see e.g. Sennett 2003). If respect for the other as a person required the avoidance of stereotypes, fears, suspicions and discrimination (Zehr 1991), as well as the avoidance of condescension (Gaita 1998) then how was this possible, in the prison? Prisoners were clear about what respect was:

The Governor on this wing has treated me with respect ... although the answer was not what I wanted, I did speak to her and she showed me respect. She spoke to me as a normal person, not a thug. She listened and considered what I had to say and went out of her way to explain everything so I understood (Prisoner, Risley).

The term 'humanity' could have a weak meaning (relating to material conditions) and a stronger meaning (reflecting the deeper, more relational concept of being treated as a person of value). These stronger tests of the concept of humanity were much more difficult to pass. How did contemporary policies of risk assessment, offending behaviour courses, incentives and earned privileges and parole look when evaluated against these criteria? It was analytically useful, even in the prison, to study these concepts for what they were, as well as what they were not. They are asymmetric in several ways: it was easier to identify what they were not, than what they were. They could be built in one way, and lost in another.

We used the data to reflect on the prison in general, most of whose structural features conflict with these principles. It came as no surprise that order and safety attracted much higher ratings than respect or personal development. Prisons are high regulation, low trust environments, with deep power differentials and little constructive activity. How does this fit with modern aspirations to simultaneously punish and mend or improve damaged lives?

Much was learned from exploring the relationship of each dimension to the others. We found, for example, that fairness and relationships were empirically related to order, as Sparks, Bottoms and Hay would have predicted (Sparks et al 1996). Respect was crucial to fairness -- fairness expresses, after all, the 'value of persons' (Raphael 2001:248). We also found that fairness and relationships were empirically related to well-being. Perceived safety was also closely correlated with well-being. We knew that these concepts were potentially analytically significant. Our empirical data allowed a closer exploration of the relationships between them. The data generated provided evidence that 'what matters in prison' matters at a very deep level (that is, these values are more than preferences). Psychological well-being was empirically related to one's treatment in prison and to the psychological conditions of the environment. As MacIntyre has argued, human beings 'need the virtues' (MacIntyre 1999).¹³ This is a strong claim, but it was at this point, as we compared the relationships in the data to the literature, that we noticed the surprisingly close fit between our findings and the theoretical literature in these areas. There are obviously special conditions in the prison that make it more likely that respect and fairness matter to this degree.

13 He is referring, after Aristotle, to the virtues within social practices and relationships, communities and the lives of individuals, such as: justice, love, reason, courage, honesty, generosity, and according to MacIntyre, acknowledged dependence.

We explored differences over time in levels of fairness, safety and order, in particular prisons, following some specific interventions (for example, the performance improvement and testing process). In one before-after study, we found considerable improvement to relational areas of prison life following a damning Inspectorate Report, the provision of additional resources, and the arrival of a 'new wave' Governor (see Liebling & Arnold 2002; Robinson & McNeill 2004).

We used the results mainly to explore differences between the five main prisons in the study. These prisons differed most on dimensions like the distribution of power and authority, personal development, order, contact with families, and well-being. The considerable variation between prisons on well-being was clearly analytically important. These differences included the distribution of scores on the items within the dimension so that, for example, the proportion of prisoners agreeing that 'my experience in this prison is painful' ranged from 15.8 per cent at one prison, to 50.6 per cent at another. Two of five prisons were experienced as much less painful and punishing than the other three. One stood out as significantly more painful than the others. Prisons clearly inflict pain and the feeling of punishment. They do this unevenly. The data demonstrate 'how the punishment hurts', in the words of Nils Christie (Christie 1981).¹⁴ We began to understand more about just what it was that felt painful. Prisoners described feeling anxious and tense, a sense of aggression in the atmosphere, and a strategy of 'wearing psychological armour'. Research has generated these findings before, but what we were seeking to add was to assess with some accuracy the extent to which these experiences differed between prisons, and why. The composition of each dimension score varied between prisons, so that we found a very different form of 'safety' at Doncaster prison (based on trust in the environment, and high levels of activity), than we found at Wandsworth (which operated with a version of safety based on situational control and very low levels of activity). Prisoners reported a different form of personal development between prisons, with one prison rated as high on 'being helped to lead a law abiding life in prison' and another high on 'being helped to lead a law abiding life on release': two very different objectives. These scores made sense in the light of other information we had gleaned about each establishment.

Prisons differed slightly less on respect and relations among prisoners. There seemed to be some cultural or intrinsic characteristics of these prisons which were dominant. Staff attitudes towards prisoners, particularly in the four public sector prisons in our study; and prisoner views about each other, differed less than other areas of prison life and quality (although they did still differ in ways that were meaningful and measurable). Other characteristics, like fairness and order, differed more.

We drew on the work of Suzanne Karstedt and others, to explore the value cultures of each establishment (Karstedt 2001). We looked at which dimensions were scored positively in each prison. In Wandsworth (an ancient London local), the only dimensions positively rated by prisoners were safety and order. In Belmarsh, a modern London local with a high security function, the only dimensions positively rated by prisoners were safety and support. By contrast, two of the culturally more modern prisons in the study scored positively on a much wider range of dimensions (except, in one case, respect — an intriguing finding that we discuss in more detail elsewhere). These explorations helped us to clarify our feeling about each establishment and its dominant cultural pattern.

14 'How the punishment hurts, how it feels, the suffering and the sorrow, these are elements most often completely lacking in the texts' (p. 15).

Risley, struggling and slightly aged, with no clear identity, had an impoverished, but not hostile regime. Staff-prisoner relationships were easy-going, but there was little order to the prison. Belmarsh and Wandsworth were poorly related on most dimensions, and each had a recognisable but distinguishable negative culture. Wandsworth was over concerned with discipline, whereas Belmarsh was over concerned with security. Holme House and Doncaster, on the other hand, were modern prisons, striving to provide a constructive regime. Doncaster had a more explicitly 'respectful' culture, but staff were not fully in charge. In Holme House, where staff were very much more in control, prisoners felt treated fairly, 'but it's not respect'.

This study led to reflections on the concept of value balance. It seemed that prisoners were 'moral dualists' in Valerie Braithwaite's language (Braithwaite 1994, 1998a). They valued a demanding combination of freedom and safety, or harmony and security, which was extremely difficult to accomplish in a prison. Security here meant not just security practices but the use of authority and the following of rules. It was not the lax or accommodating officer who prisoners chose as role models, but the 'professional' officer who was prepared to use authority when it is required, and who (therefore) did not over-use it (Gilbert 1997; Liebling & Price 2001). The line between 'permissive' and 'without condescension' was very narrow (Glaser 1964). This was illustrated dramatically in the case of Doncaster prison, one of the better performers in our study, but which shortly after our research went on to experience two escapes. These were linked, in the Director General's view (and in the light of other research on private prisons), to levels of trust that may have exceeded a moral framework, or at least to other important security values being too low (at the time of our research). Likewise, one of the other prisons in our study (Holme House) that was rated very highly by prisoners, except on respect, went on to have a major disturbance in the year following our fieldwork. Holme House was out of balance in its 'security orientation': rule enforcement mattered to the detriment of respectful attitudes. Doncaster was out of balance in its 'harmony orientation': cooperative and democratic relations mattered to the detriment of rule enforcement. This delicate value balancing act is the primary problem of prison life for prison officers (and their managers).¹⁵ We underestimated the importance of security values in our original scheme, for reasons that are related to our methodology, and the obvious irritations of certain security values and practices in prisons. We have learned that they matter as much as 'harmony values', particularly when the term security is broadly rather than narrowly interpreted (to indicate the 'rule of law', and what Wachtel and McCold call 'supportive limit setting', rather than specific security procedures; Wachtel & McCold 2001). Finding the 'right place' on many of these dimensions was an extraordinarily complex task. Penal practices and prison management involved a complex form of moral decision-making which required much greater clarity about what it is for and what it is intended to signify (see Garland 1990).

Finally, from our observational work, we identified an emotional climate in each prison, which was clearly linked to its culture, and its values, and to what went on there. Sometimes staff and prisoners seemed to inhabit a similar emotional climate (for example the negative climate of powerlessness at Belmarsh). In other prisons they inhabited very different

15 We were struck by the observation made by one of our colleagues that Aristotle defined virtue as 'a mean between excess and deficit'. This notion of a mean between extremes is of major relevance to prison life. Aristotle was not the first to articulate this principle. Euripides and Theoginis gave similar counsel 100 and 200 years earlier, respectively: 'I have much praise for excess than for moderation. The wise will bear me out' and 'Don't strive too hard. Proper measure is best in all men's actions' (Austin, personal communication. 2003).

emotional climates (for example, at Holme House staff and prisoners were poorly attuned: staff were confident and prisoners felt controlled and disrespected; see further Liebling 2004).

Deliberation and Evaluation

We became persuaded that there is something important about this kind of methodology, despite some obvious limitations once we moved from the conceptual and qualitative to the quantitative and technical stage in the process. What we have accomplished so far is an articulation of certain values. This part of the work seems right, although our methods of operationalisation could improve. These values are practices: the 'action' in prison is social interaction — an essentially moral province. Our work explores the moral economy, or moral order, of the prison — and finds some important similarities as well as some important differences between prisons.

The form of deliberation involved was guided, but in other ways unusually unconstrained. We are persuaded that discussion, dialogue, and deliberation, constitute both a form of and a route towards the clarification of moral practice (see Taylor 1985). As we returned to the prison quality literature, we found that significant results on outcomes, or on differences, are rare. Prior surveys may be conceptually limited, largely because they are management-driven, or they reflect the concepts of interest to the researcher rather than to those who live and work in prison.

Staff and prisoners are capable of engaging in complex moral reasoning about their condition to a degree that is reminiscent of what we think Taylor meant by his term 'strong evaluation' (Taylor 1985; 1992). Charles Taylor suggests that as human agents we have a deep, and often inarticulate sense of what is important, and that it is possible to bring this deep sense of what matters to definition (Taylor 1985:41). These kinds of evaluations engage the whole self. They take concentration, for we have to bypass the distortions, compulsions and deceptions of our shallow evaluations.¹⁶ Some would argue that the very act of articulation leaves things different to how they were before (Elliott 1999; Taylor 1985). We evaluate our own evaluations, against a standard that is linked to what we value most highly. This strong form of evaluation is what was missing from official measures of performance. It links the concept of quality to the concepts of goals and purposes, and to the central role of interactions with persons in any moral scheme (Ties 2000:315). Prisoners have a sense of justice, and this sense is made all the more acutely sensitive by their experiences of prison life.

Conclusion: The Prison as a 'Site for General Sociological Analysis'

There are several additional applications of this kind of work. One is the question of public-private sector comparisons, the results of which look quite different from those generated by superficial and technical studies of performance. The second application is in prison suicide prevention research. We are currently engaged in a 30-month evaluation of new suicide prevention efforts in twelve prisons, using a variation on this methodology as part of the before-after component of the study. We have established, albeit tentatively, that these quality of life measures account for a significant proportion of the variation in levels

16 Taylor does not suggest that there will necessarily be consensus, but there is likely to be some, over core matters.

of prisoner distress (which may in turn be significantly related to institutional suicide rates, Liebling et al., forthcoming). The data we have from staff are more developed in this study. We are seeking to establish which aspects of the moral quality of life for prisoners, and for staff, are linked to low suicide rates and low levels of prisoner distress. This work is on going, and I hope to have more to say about these results and their implications in the future.

Prisons are special, fragile, moral environments, in which how people are treated has serious consequences, for what happens in them, but also for the claims that can be made about them. The social practices of the prison may tell us much about the values and ideologies actually in place under the beguiling aura of the performance framework. It is important to consider *how morality works* in such an extreme situation, and the extent to which, despite the conditions of the prison, it mirrors ordinary social organisation.¹⁷ The underlying moral economy of the prison's inner life is, as I have suggested elsewhere, inextricably linked to the underlying moral economy of its exterior life. A fully social analysis of penalty demands attention to this interior life, and to the complexity of institutional or interior differences (see Liebling 2004; Garland & Young 1983; McAra 2003). Our understanding of contemporary penalty should, as Richard Sparks has recently suggested, pay as much attention to the sentiments of reconciliation and collaboration that are present 'when people talk' as it does to punitive and ostracising sentiments (Sparks 2003).

We have returned to the study of the prison as a 'site for general sociological analysis' (see also Sparks et al 1996:29; Garland & Young 1983), a project Simon proposes emerged during the 1950s as sociology became associated with the governance of society as a whole. It is possible to humanise the prisoner, and the prison officer, without romanticising either, whilst paying attention to the broader social implications of what they have to say. There is also (we hope) a respectable empirical project emerging, which persuasively suggests that there are some realities we can grasp about the kind of imprisonment human beings can stand, and the kind they cannot endure. The work is developmental. It was originally intended to help us to think about what prison life is like, and to reflect on our current uses of the prison. Our account illustrates some of the conflicts between principles of utility or instrumentalism — characteristics of our age, and increasingly of our public services — and principles of justice. There are clearly dangers in our work, as we have inadvertently provided yet another instrument of governance for those who seek to legitimate the prison.¹⁸ We may have contributed to the acceptable face of punishment, and the further concealment of indignity, in keeping with the civilised demands of modern society. But that risk is inherent in all, especially state sponsored research, and in fact the data suggest the opposite. What this project has taught us, is that prisons are especially morally dangerous places. that policy-makers and practitioners have made some alarming mistakes in their careless use of important ideas, and that as vulnerable human beings, we need to be in environments that acknowledge our dignity and permit our development. That is an argument about what goes on *outside* the prison.

17 As Berlin puts it, 'principles shine forth most clearly in the darkness and the void' (2002:64).

18 Although, as critics suggest, performance measures might measure 'progress through the jungle', but contrary to the declared ethos of managerialism, they do not necessarily indicate whether this is 'taking [us] further into or out of the jungle' (Sinclair 2002:11).

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