Transforming the prison:
Romantic optimism or appreciative realism?

ALISON LIEBLING, CHARLES ELLIOTT
AND HELEN ARNOLD
Institute of Criminology, Cambridge, UK

Abstract _____

This article explores the use of appreciative inquiry [AI] in a number of
prisons, with different outcomes. It considers the nature of the AI
process, both as a mode of inquiry and a mode of transformation.
There are some links, in terms of the underlying principles, between
AI and restorative justice and these are explored by the authors. They
conclude that AI constitutes a fair and inclusive research approach
that generates a rich and faithful account of a prison to emerge. It
generates energy among prison staff that can be harnessed in the
direction of better practice. But there are dangers when highly
motivated prison officers are frustrated by a lack of responsiveness by
senior managers in their 'wishes for the prison', however
understandable the reasons for this. The mechanism at work is a
normative process, which seems to engage the research participants
in meaningful, constructive and ethically relevant dialogue about
their practices and experiences. The special and complex moral
environment of the prison makes AI especially relevant.

> . . .[T]he closer we get to conditions of undominated speech,
> the more overwhelmingly it will turn out to be the case that
> evils such as violence will be near-universally condemned.
>   (Habermas, 1996, in Braithwaite, 1999: 50)

Key Words _____

• management • methodology • prison • prison officers
• restorative justice

161

Introduction

This article explores the use of appreciative inquiry [AI] in a number of prisons in England. It lays the foundation for an ongoing empirical evaluation of the method, setting the use of AI in a theoretical framework and illustrating the relative impoverishment of traditional problem-focused approaches to social enquiry.

Limitations of current penal enquiries

Traditional empirical studies of the prison, for example, externally funded policy evaluations, and perhaps especially burgeoning managerial audit, inspection and inquiry practices,[1] take a problem-oriented approach, often seeking the shortfalls and difficulties in practices, and hoping to point to better models (see, for some random UK examples, Home Office, 1995; HMCIP, 1999, 2000; also Carlen, 1983; King and McDermott, 1989; Liebling, 1992; Liebling et al., 1997; Loucks, 1998; Bottomley and Clare, 2001). Less policy-driven sociological studies also tend to start from a critical perspective, frequently stereotyping or omitting staff and senior managers, and typically exploring only prisoners' pains (for example Sykes, 1958; Morris and Morris, 1963; Cohen and Taylor, 1972), or when not being critical, seeing the prison as a neutral form of social laboratory or 'deep freeze' with few obvious normative implications (for example some of the classic studies of prisoner subculture; or Zamble and Porporino, 1988). These characteristics of penal enquiry limit its reach and can set up spirals of negative affect, in the research participants and the researchers. The pains and difficulties of prison life are important (and have been a central concern of one of the authors' research career) but explored in this way, fail to capture the complexity, energy and agency of the prison world. There are 'other truths' about prison life, which may only be permitted to arise when alternative, more 'appreciative' research methods are employed. 'Telling the whole story'—survivals and achievements as well as pains and deprivations—may be a more sensitive and valuable approach that encourages greater openness and a more balanced (and therefore nuanced and instructive) picture of the prison to emerge.

Appreciative inquiry: an introduction

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an approach to organizational change which is based on strengths rather than weaknesses, on visions of what is possible rather than what is not possible (Elliott, 1999; see also Liebling et al., 1999). It identifies achievements and 'best memories', and through this technique, locates 'where the energy is' in an organization. It offers a promising way of looking at an organization which increases participation,

and which can lead to sustainable change in the direction of best practice. It is based on the establishment of familiarity and trust with a workgroup in the first instance, on the discovery of that organization's best practices, memories and achievements, and then on the creation of a short but imaginative protocol (or lightly structured questionnaire), which is used by members of the workgroup with as many of their colleagues as they can manage, in conversations about these best memories (see further, Elliott, 1999). We shall outline this process in practice as we have used it below.

Appreciative inquiry and restorative justice principles

There are some links, at least in terms of underlying principles, between appreciative inquiry and restorative justice.[2] But there are also some differences. AI seeks to locate the sources of life and energy in an organization or community, and to build on them (see further below; and Cooperrider, 1990; Elliott, 1999). It has an application to offending behaviour (see Elliott, 1999: 1). It seeks alternative truths; the expression and validation of feelings; consensus, especially between competing groups; and its ethic and practice involve what Braithwaite shyly characterizes as 'shalom'—or 'peace as the result of doing justice' (Braithwaite, 1999: 25; also Van Ness, 1986: 125). There is a transfer of skills involved in the process as well as a powerful burst of open communication; it takes a 'whole organization' approach; and is focused on establishing a 'dialogue about how to achieve outcomes' rather than how to expose flaws and secure compliance, and on treating people with respect. It seeks to 'restore self-efficacy', using praise and trust rather than blame and condemnation (see Braithwaite, 1999: 34; see also Elliott, 1999; Elliott et al., 2001).[3] It may accentuate the positive, but in doing so, confronts the negative (Braithwaite, 1999: 44). The core theoretical claims are similar: that both approaches achieve positive change because where outcasting and shaming make things worse, limited disapproval, within a framework of respect, forgiveness and trust, works better (Braithwaite, 1989). Both mechanisms depend on generating *positive affect* (Braithwaite, 1999).

However, unlike restorative justice, AI is not primarily interested in compliance, or, at least in this context, in criminal behaviour, or in restoration or shame. AI does seek to be inclusive, to listen, to empower, to facilitate change and to represent people fairly. It also seeks to increase the delivery of fairness and respect in the future.[4]

AI as a mode of inquiry

The authors first used AI in a prison in a tentative and limited manner during 1998. The method resulted in high levels of trust between the research team and their research participants (prisoners, staff and senior

managers), a close account of prison life recognized by all (see Liebling and Price, 1999) and a new way of looking at the work of prison officers (see Liebling et al., 1999). Basically, the method seeks to discover 'best experiences' as well as worst experiences, using *generative questions*, conducted in interview settings, but as conversation. Generative questions are distinct from typical interview questions in many ways. There are very few of them (enabling the interview to proceed in a creative and story-telling way). The questions focus on *values* (what is the *best* day you have experienced as a prison officer?); they include *fact* and *feeling* (tell me about an occasion when . . . how did you feel about that?); they cannot be answered only at the abstract or analytical level (that is, we could not ask, 'how do you get on with management here?'); the questions are specific, and call for an example, an illustration or a story (this reduces simple generalizations and stereotyping); and the questions relate directly to real experience. In HMP Whitemoor, we (a team of three) designed the 'appreciative protocol', carried out the interviews and analysed the data ourselves. The study lasted nine months in all. We found the interviewing experience refreshing and productive. Staff and (sometimes) prisoners emerged from the interviews feeling invigorated by the exchange. They commented that this was unusual—but rewarded us with open and honest (and often critical, but in context) accounts of the prison, its achievements, efforts and failings. They felt 'recognized' in the report arising from the study (*An Exploration of Staff–Prisoner Relationships at HMP Whitemoor*) and engaged in discussions about it with us and with their peers for many months afterwards. We were struck by these results—as well as by the (quite novel) substantive results of the project (Liebling and Price, 1999).

As a mode of inquiry, AI seems to take better care of informants and participants in research, enabling them to dwell on 'the best of what is' *as well as* 'the worst'. It puts problems and struggles into context, allowing a safe space within which to openly discuss strengths, weaknesses and wishes for the future. It generates creativity, drawing on memories and imaginations (and emotion—or positive as well as negative affect). It results in a more rounded version of the participants' world, as they recognize and experience it, and makes critical analysis easier to bear and engage with. It leaves the field potentially more enriched and open to further inquiry. It generates energy and a will to move in the direction of better practice. Or at least it seems to have this potential. There are some considerable dangers here too—some of which we shall discuss below. In the light of our positive experience at Whitemoor, we were invited to take the next step.

AI as a mode of transformation: testing a thesis

One of the tensions in our research in Whitemoor was the use of AI as (simply) a method of research, when theoretically it was originally conceived as a mode of organizational transformation. It is in the process of

inquiry (albeit a fairly specific one) that the energy for and the direction of change is discovered. AI 'stretches the imagination' of an organization to consider what gives it life and energy; what sustains it; and where this can this be found (see Elliott, 1999). It looks at 'what might be', if those influences were generalized. One of the (unintended, but theoretically predictable) effects of the research on those in the prison (especially uniformed staff) was to energize them, or mobilize them in the direction of best practice. They wanted, once engaged, to transform the prison, be better at their work. At Whitemoor, we felt dissatisfied because we had not developed this process, by facilitating a clearer envisioning and translation into practice of this 'better future'. We felt we abandoned the prison at this point, despite several return journeys, conferences with staff and prisoners and a senior management strategy promising to build on what had been achieved. Based on the work we had carried out so far, we were invited to carry out a 'full appreciative inquiry' in two further prisons, with quite different stories to tell.[5]

Case study 1: HMP Wandsworth

The study at Wandsworth was commissioned at short notice following a severely critical Inspectorate visit to the prison in October 1999 (see HMCIP, 2000). There was some dispute about the validity of the Chief Inspector's claims, the reliability of his team's methods and the way in which the visit had been conducted. Staff at all levels were bitter and defensive about the visit, and the feedback they received.[6] They roundly 'condemned the condemners' (Braithwaite, 1999: 47). The Cambridge Institute of Criminology was invited to carry out a survey of prisoners' views, to establish whether the Chief Inspector's findings were replicated in a more systematic study and in particular, to address four key questions: whether prisoners felt safe; whether prisoners felt respected; whether they took part in constructive activities; and whether they were assisted in maintaining contact with their families. The survey was adapted from two previous studies carried out by the research director: the national Incentives and Earned Privileges evaluation (Liebling et al., 1997) and the Appreciative Inquiry exercise carried out at HMP Whitemoor (Liebling and Price, 1999; Liebling et al., 1999). This had the advantage of combining two sets of relevant questions (one well tested and validated), each with a distinct approach (one highly structured and the other much less structured, and with a deliberate emphasis in parts on any best aspects of life and staff–prisoner relationships at HMP Wandsworth). This approach was, in our view, most likely to permit a 'realistic' and balanced picture of prisoners' views to emerge. The results of the study were, very broadly:

- prisoners felt very safe, on the whole, from other prisoners;
- prisoners did not feel respected;

- prisoners took part in a limited number and range of activities for a very limited part of the day;
- prisoners were assisted to a minimal degree to maintain contact with their families.

More important than the figures (or at least, central to their interpretation) were the insights gleaned from the appreciative interviews (conducted mainly with prisoners, but also, more informally, with staff). Perhaps our most difficult task in this brief survey was to untangle a preoccupation with 'discipline' at Wandsworth. There was no doubt that the prison scored highly on delivering 'good order and discipline' (86 per cent of prisoners said 'very' or quite' well). This was significant, and was a feature of life at Wandsworth which staff were proud of and committed to. Many prisoners, however, added that 'the way they do it is unfair' or 'it's over the top'. The commitment to control, and restricted unlocking, was underpinned by an expressed view by officers that staff safety was at stake. We were taken aback by the strength of this belief and by staff investment in maintaining almost total control. A 'stable but sterile regime' was achieved, as one senior manager put it. Staff were (rightly, in many ways) proud of the levels of safety at Wandsworth. There was little actual violence, as far as we could ascertain; but there was an atmosphere of intimidation and an almost complete lack of empathy for prisoners. Staff were grounded in this position, fearing that any 'loosening' of their hold would unleash the very high levels of violence and danger they assumed lay beneath the surface. Some staff had been assaulted, and these incidents were significant in their collective memories.

We concluded that it was almost as if *the normal management of a prison's population was taking place in reverse.* Instead of the ordinary flow of prison life, with staff relating to prisoners and smoothing the flow along, with staff–prisoner relationships providing a bedrock against which tensions were defused, and with staff and middle-management seeking out the 5–8 per cent of troublesome or difficult individuals for special attention, the reverse was the case. The whole regime, and the attitudes and behaviour of staff, seemed geared towards the control of potentially difficult or violent behaviour, with a small minority of prisoners (5–8 per cent) singled out for more liberal and sympathetic treatment. *Staff had all their pride invested in this very high level of security and discipline, and almost none invested in activities or relationships.*

What was the reason for this and could staff be shifted out of this position? Some of the restrictions in regime were due to a physical lack of provision, but some were linked to a staff culture and 'way of seeing', which we tried to describe in our report (Liebling et al., 1999). Our findings were in many respects as negative as those of the Inspectorate. But our methods (and the analysis) made these results more palatable, recognizable and amenable to careful discussion. Instead of defensiveness and denial, we found honest acceptance, and commentary by many staff that they were fed

up with the behaviour of some colleagues (in place of a blanket accusation, as staff read it, of 'a culture of brutality'). The newly appointed Governor invited us to follow up the survey with a full appreciative inquiry, involving much more systematic work with staff. We carried this out in March and April 2000 (for a full account of the process of Appreciative Inquiry and other case studies of its application, see Elliott, 1999).

This exercise involved selecting workgroup members (a cross-section of staff), who could be freed from other duties for the larger part of three working days (allowing them some time in the mornings and late after-noons to 'clear their desks'), and for short periods thereafter, until the exercise was complete. We took over a training room in the prison, and set to work. The Governor, who had clearly grasped the concept and com-municated it effectively to staff, selected the workgroup. He characterized the exercise as important, imaginative and challenging. The workgroup was 'over-subscribed', as the message had penetrated that here was a pro-cess that would try to take the prison forward, and the new Governor had quickly won the commitment of a staff group eager for change. In this sense, the conditions in which we carried out this first full appreciative inquiry could not have been better. We ended up with a workgroup of 14, consisting of an inspired collection of key, highly motivated individuals in the prison.[7] They felt 'chosen', both as an establishment, for some 'special attention' and as individuals with a valuable role to play.

The work began with some introductory 'ice-breaking' exercises—aimed at establishing trust, the ability to 'play' and to communicate (for further detail, see Elliott et al., 2001). There was some introduction to the AI process and its principles, and the first exercise related to the prison: members of the group were asked to plot a history of the prison, its achievements, difficulties, high spots and low points, on a flip chart, in small groups. This exercise generated considerable discussion, helped us to understand the prison's 'sensitivities' and raised some themes around which the remainder of the work would develop. We looked in particular at strengths and accomplishments. We learned about awards made to indi-vidual members of staff for outstanding work, the relief brought about by a refurbishment programme, pride in certain prisoner-related activities, and so on. We also learned that staff saw their recent Inspectorate visit as 'an all-time low point', which left them feeling devastated and angry. They each identified the current phase as a turning point, with support coming from many directions: 'We're on the up, at last'. One enormous resource they identified in their favour was 'the way that staff can pull together'.

The workgoup members were introduced to their main task, once the preparatory work was complete: they were to interview about 10 of their colleagues, using an 'appreciative protocol' devised together over the next few days. These interviews had several special features:

• They depended on active listening—that is, a non-judgemental engagement with the person being interviewed; with lots of eye contact.

- It was acceptable to have gaps or lag time in the interviews; it was not a mechanical process, but they should 'let a conversation develop'.
- Notes should be kept to a minimum, to allow maximum participation in the interview. Headings would suffice, with occasionally fuller notes when something very important arose. Interview notes should be written up more fully immediately after the interview. These notes should still be kept fairly brief.
- There should be a time contract between interviewer and interviewee: 'tell me how much time you can give me', with that contract being honoured, or explicit agreement sought if the interview continues beyond the agreed time.
- An assurance of confidentiality, promising that nothing that is said can be traceable to them.
- When negativity surfaces, the interviewer should acknowledge what is being said, but gently reframe: 'what I hear you saying is that . . . management time is important to you', etc. in order to encourage expression of ideals towards which the interviewee might wish to work.

These techniques were practised, with each other, with short demonstration interviews, and finally with some pilot interviews around the prison, using 'practice protocols'. The workgroup was fully debriefed afterwards. The three facilitators (the authors of this article) also participated in the inter-viewing around the prison, and we shared our own thoughts and experi-ences on this process and the stories produced along with the workgroup. Certain themes were generated (the importance of affirmation and recogni-tion, the honour of being invited to perform specific tasks, having oppor-tunities to use one's skills, 'life-changing' interactions with specific senior members of staff, the power of interest, and best days, when 'you are not fighting a culture, when all the staff are working positively', and so on).

The exploratory interviews were used, along with the material generated already in the workgroup, to create the key themes and develop them into 'questions that are fully alive, that tap into the real material you are hear-ing out there'. This took a day, and lots of energetic group work. These generative questions (as above) were 'signposts to the kind of conversation you want to have'. Where is the energy and creativity in the prison? What are people yearning for? What gives people meaning, fulfilment, strength, job satisfaction? Each small group could 'torpedo' the themes and ideas expressed by the other—so that through a process of refinement, discussion and playful disagreement, a final list was crafted. The relevance of the questions was confirmed when the first staff member formally interviewed (by one of the current authors) declared, 'have you been watching this wing?!', as she felt the interview was so closely tailored to her experience.

The workgroup members set out to conduct as many interviews as they could. We left them to it, returning to conduct some more ourselves and to troubleshoot, offer support and discuss the emerging results. Some difficul-ties were experienced—staff were not good at 'singing their own praises',

they were much more responsive to invitations to tell positive stories about their colleagues; staff had difficulty 'naming' some practices and emotions —'it just is', they would say; finding sufficient time to conduct the interviews was a challenge; some interviewees 'stayed in negative mode', whatever. But on the other hand, the workgroup members were staggered by their own underestimation of others, the hidden talents they unearthed, their enjoyment of the process, the insights they gleaned, how honest and open people were, how much people wanted the place to change. People liked being listened to. The 'fixed visions' expected from some quarters did not materialize. The workgroup members were 'amazed at the flexibility, genuine concern for Wandsworth, the will to "give this Governor a chance", the willingness to contribute'. Some handed us typed notes (in one case, typed up by a partner at home).

The material generated by the 88 interviews carried out was analysed by us, but also separately by the workgroup, in a small group setting. Participants were invited to draw out the main themes, from their memories rather than from our collective interview notes (which we used). We then discussed and compared these themes, refined them and identified the most important between us. One of the participants noted that in his view, if we had 'concentrated on the negative', the same issues would have emerged, but in a very different (and more disheartening) way. They were expressed as (for example): the importance of accessible and visible management in one area of the prison (the Vulnerable Prisoner Unit); flexible and positive career management for staff; a sense of purpose and direction for individual areas of the prison; the importance of offending behaviour courses; the need to cater for the needs of all the population; the physically limited nature of staff horizons (to their own working area); the problem of inconsistencies; the importance of good senior management (where good meant cohesion, focus and leadership); the balance between visible management and trust of staff (the need for support as well as monitoring); the importance of communication, horizontally and vertically; the different cultures identifiable in the prison; (one of the most important) the distinction between a 'maximizing' and 'minimizing' spirit regarding prison work; the quality of life and activities in prison; the importance of developing latent skills among staff; and the finding that 'people are willing to do something for this prison just now—it just needs someone to point it in the right direction'.

The staff involved began to see the power of their own vision, in four or five carefully crafted sentences, for example:

> An end to collusion with a lack of respect and fair play, towards a culture where individuals are free to challenge.

> Inject a sense of purpose into all aspects of the job—from basic duties to 'extra curricular' activities.

> A clear, visual role for senior management, involving rapport and teamwork.

They had identified a culture in (areas of) the establishment to mock those who 'do the maximum'—this translated into: . . .

> Maximum performance must be encouraged and rewarded; poor performance must be challenged.

These themes were arranged in groups around the walls. Then the serious work began. The workgroup members were asked to translate each of their statements into a number of 'provocative proposals': statements worded in the present, that represented their best vision of the prison, and which were grounded in all of this real experience, but which seemed just out of reach. The statements were 'wishes', but are written as though these wishes have already been achieved. After much discussion (and a lot of laughter, debate, engagement and some anxiety about 'asking for so much'), the proposals looked something like this:

- At Wandsworth, all levels of management are competent,[8] visible, supportive and participate in routine and key activities.
- At Wandsworth, maximum performance is encouraged and rewarded; poor performance is challenged.
- At Wandsworth, staff feel valued as part of a team (whether in their own group or on another) and are encouraged to use and develop new skills in all areas of the prison.
- Wandsworth's success is founded on positive and imaginative team work and team building.

Each small group (by this stage, the small groups had developed a momentum and energy of their own, with individuals thriving in their roles: the action planner, the scribe, the thinker, and so on) had to identify what action was needed in order to bring to life these 'best visions' and make them real. This was in many ways the most powerful stage in the process. Once in action-planning mode, the groups came up with creative, realistic and credible proposals for change. They discussed each other's contributions, refined the detail, debated the feasibility of one idea over another and eventually formulated a detailed, comprehensive action plan. They then presented this plan to the Governor, and discussed it collectively in some detail. He was impressed. It was, if anything, not as 'radical' as he had expected—but was extremely realistic.[9] He committed himself to incorporating the action plan into his strategic planning, holding himself accountable to the workgroup members for its delivery and involving them in translating specific proposals into practice. He congratulated the group on conducting a fine piece of work.

Three features of the AI method are important here and worthy of further exploration: the process (what is the mechanism at work here?), the outcome (what happened?) and the personal and group experience (how did individuals experience all this?). We shall return to these questions at the end.

Case study 2: HMP Manchester

The process took on a slightly different dynamic at Manchester, despite being conducted in a similar fashion. Although our process was the same (it 'worked so well' at Wandsworth), the context was entirely different. From the outset, it was clear that we were meeting with a different climate. Our workgroup was smaller, our liaison officer less involved and our early discussions taken up almost exclusively with those who had been selected[10] trying to describe to us 'where the prison was at'. The invitation to conduct the appreciative inquiry had arisen out of a conversation between the Governor and one of the present authors about how to intervene in a rising suicide rate at the prison. Our discussion led to a picture of staff at the establishment as demoralized, and at the end of their tether. Somehow, they needed 'validating', rather than further investigating. The Governor came to Cambridge to discuss ways forward, and he agreed that AI sounded promising. There was some direct talk about 'the suicide problem' and we agreed to visit the prison with this in mind, and to talk to staff directly about it, as well as to discuss the process of an appreciative inquiry.

By the time we had arranged to conduct the AI exercise, staff at the prison had received the devastating (and completely unexpected) news that they were to be market tested.[11] Our first day was spent hearing the pain of this (they were shattered), and listening to their feeling that 'there is nothing we can do'. We heard the refrain we had heard so many times before, that 'staff just don't matter', only at a deeply troubling time and in a particularly acute form. After this lengthy discussion, we talked a little about the AI process, acknowledged the difficulties of timing, and suggested to the group that we leave them for a few moments, to discuss among themselves whether the time was right for an AI. We could see their frustration, and would have been quite willing to abandon our plans in the light of their story—and to reconvene at another time—were the in-house team to win the bid.

We were called back within 10 minutes. The group wanted to participate. 'It'll be better than nothing', 'it might keep us going', 'it'll have a relevance for whoever wins the bid'. We were a little surprised, yet we set to work. Because the group was smaller, the dynamics were different. On the one hand, the group was initially reluctant to 'tell secrets' or disclose details about themselves. On the other hand, their need for laughter, relief and relationships with colleagues was intense and they quickly gelled, with each other and with us. The process was as energizing as it had been at Wandsworth. We encountered more 'operational difficulties' (losing workgroup members, experiencing resistance to their involvement by line managers, changes of location, early finishes, and so on). But we persisted (and succeeded in winning a key player back!). The same process was followed: what were the 'headwinds' and 'tailwinds' currently around? What other issues seem to be important?

A different set of themes emerged (some overlapped slightly with those identified at Wandsworth, like the identification and rewarding of good performance, but in their final form and expression, they became 'unique' to Manchester). The same process of the apparent flourishing of individuals took place, and some contributors we had thought might be 'quiet' became full and imaginative participants with a distinct contribution to make. The themes that 'came to life' were:

- Staff were crying out to be managed; they wanted high standards to be set, by demanding, supportive and effective governors.
- There was a need for a reconceptualization of the key role of staff working on wings. A higher priority and recognition should be afforded to that role.
- A common sense of identity and purpose was needed for Manchester prison, with a clear sense that each person makes a difference.

The 'motto' created for the provocative proposals was 'Manchester: Making a Difference'.

The provocative proposals (aimed at 'capturing the essence') read as follows:

- At Manchester prison, a strong, committed, directive, supportive and effective senior management team demand, and receive, the highest standards of work from staff.
- At Manchester prison, at its best, there is a lively culture of praise, appreciation, commendation and communication. Staff are fully involved in decision making.
- Staff are at the heart of Manchester prison. First-class performance depends on all staff having a confident and professional role which is clearly recognized and supported.[12]

The action plan was formulated, and this time we discussed—again during preparations for the presentation to the Governor—some of the reservations and anxieties staff had (e.g. 'what should the timing be for implementation, given the all-consuming nature of the bidding process, now swamping the prison?' And so on). The document was much more 'provocative', staff-centred and creative than we had anticipated.[13] The workgroup members were proud of what they had produced, and looked forward to their meeting with the Governor with eager anticipation.

The meeting was a disaster. The Governor was late. He arrived with an apology—he only had half an hour to offer them (the process had been booked for many weeks in his diary and was expected to last two or three hours; we had travelled from Cambridge for the day; the workgroup had moved heaven and earth to be there). The planned delivery process (a division of labour, where several of the workgroup members led on one or two main points each, and we led on one or two of the more contentious points) was impossible and the workgroup 'crashed' and became barely articulate. Very little was communicated. The Governor did not ask for any

elaboration, but 'asked for the names' of those members of his senior management team the group had hinted were 'not supporting the prison'. This was wholly in opposition to the spirit and practice of the AI process. One of the group expressed his deeply felt anger and disappointment. He was in the prison on a rest day for the fourth time—this scenario was precisely the problem the workgroup had identified. The Governor had to leave—for a reason he could not give.[14] Could we not arrange another meeting, some other time, and with the whole senior management group? He left. Others in the group were relieved and grateful that their bitter disappointment had been expressed by one member, and they thanked and encouraged him, when afterwards, he apologized to the group for 'losing his cool'. We were dumbfounded.

So, what happened next? A planned 'day out in Cambridge', to meet once again with the Governor and attempt the delivery again, was offered by us as compensation. It was planned and booked, but cancelled by the Governor. We wrote, exchanged a few supportive gestures, and one of us visited the prison at a later date, for a resurrected, first step at reconstructing a dialogue between the workgroup and the Governor. The energy of the group was sapped and then rekindled, then sapped again. We were in need of some of Braithwaite's patience and persistence, as we witnessed the life of a prison in a difficult, modern managerialist and 'failing' moment (Braithwaite, 1999: 59).

In the end, the process came back together—only once the 'bid' had been submitted and the Governor was able to return his attention to the other issues on his desk. It was not until three months after the date originally planned that the workgroup members were finally able to sit down with the Governor and six of his most senior colleagues, to discuss their wishes for the prison. The Governor was aware of the impact of this unsteady period and he had prepared a careful agenda for the day. He gave a detailed and honest account of the preparation of the bid, from the basic philosophy on which it rested to some detailed revelations about future staffing levels, work practices and remuneration. This openness laid the ghost of the distrust of the workgroup and it became clear that there was a deep common purpose between senior management and staff at the prison. The power of this 'coming together' was remarkable and resulted in a very positive reception and discussion of the AI proposals, despite our early fears and those of the workgroup (see Elliott et al., 2001). By the end of the day, 12 major actions to be taken had been identified. The people responsible for implementation had been named; and dates by which implementation (sometimes phased) was to be completed had been agreed. Small groups had been established to tackle some of the longer-running issues and a monitoring process had been set up. The Governor asked the whole group to reconvene in three months to assess progress—by which time the results of the bid would be known and, it was hoped, the rebirth of HMP Manchester would be well under way. There was some 'dovetailing' of the shape of Manchester's bid and the provocative proposals identified by the

workgroup: these processes had different purposes and principles (and timings), but were not *necessarily* in tension. Just before going to press. we learned that the in-house bid had been successful.

Conclusions

We have carried out full appreciative inquiries in two prisons, with very different climates, strengths and difficulties. We have learned a great deal— about the untapped potential laying dormant in staff, the energizing nature of this process, the complex ways in which prisons differ and might be changed, the susceptibility of penal cultures to negative and 'appreciative' direction, the importance of the role of the governor in shaping a prison and the difficult climate within which prisons (and therefore their senior managers) operate. The outcomes look promising in Wandsworth, and after considerable uncertainty, in Manchester.

We *are* collecting data. We hope to repeat our quality-of-life survey in Wandsworth in May 2001,[15] at which stage we may be able to draw some conclusions about AI as a mode of transformation. We are keeping a careful eye on how the work plan is developing, and what other significant changes are taking place. It may be possible in future research to follow up the outcomes more systematically both at Wandsworth and Manchester and in another four establishments involved in an 'Innovative Research Challenge Fund' research project on 'Measuring the Quality of Prison Life' being conducted by the authors.[16] From our work to date, we can identify a number of hypotheses about the AI process:

AI as inquiry

- AI as a mode of inquiry constitutes a fair and inclusive research approach which generates a richer and more faithful account of a prison than traditional problem-oriented inquiries.
- An AI approach engages the research participants in a meaningful process they understand and develop a commitment to.
- AI as a mode of inquiry generates energy in the direction of better practice.

AI as transformation

- AI locates the key sources of energy and satisfaction in an organization; it can bring out hidden skills, enthusiasms and creativity in staff (and to some extent, in prisoners).
- The use of AI can assist in the process of cultural change in a prison. It succeeds in strengthening 'micro-communities' and in sending well-motivated ambassadors into all levels of the organization, mobilizing effort and helping to reframe the 'macro-community' (Braithwaite, 1999: 38), and to reformulate group identity (Braithwaite, 1999: 46).

- The use of AI can assist in the process of transformation of practices, leading to a better quality of life for staff and prisoners. It may serve as an alternative to privatization and market testing, and an alternative to 'management by head-butt'.[17]
- Using AI involves taking risks. The biggest risk is the alienation and frustration of energized staff, if senior managers cannot be receptive to and build on their work. It may play in to a staff-centred vision of the future.

So, how do we account for AI as a sociological process?—what is the mechanism at work here? The apparent 'magic' of the process is linked, we would argue, to its normative nature (see Bottoms, 2000). We found ourselves participating in a more respectful and ethically relevant dialogue with our research participants than we have been able to achieve using other methods (again, see Bottoms, 2000, on these dimensions of restorative justice).[18] The data generated are just as amenable to quantification as any other interview-based study. The process seemed to *increase* the willingness of staff to dig around for other quantifiable data about the prison that we can use to supplement our account. But the process generates energy because it engages with individuals as members of a normative community —precisely what other inquiry methods fail to do (for example, the Learmont Report; Home Office, 1995; but also audit, and to some extent, inspection methods).

There are, of course, some important limitations, and we have already discovered that much can go wrong at the level of the establishment, perhaps especially at a senior management level. Governors are severely (increasingly) constrained by their environment—they cannot govern their way round a market test or savage staffing cuts. There may be a lack of fit between staff, management and prisoners' 'wishes for the prison', and there are problems to be faced when enthusiastic and/or cynical staff are confronted with inevitable critique of their practices. There are broader difficulties: these include the sometimes punitive, and always performance-oriented and managerialist context in which prisons operate; the tensions between the punishment function of prison and its other contested and unclear purposes. This article does not constitute a case for prison. We would advocate radically lower, more careful and self-conscious use of it. We are all too aware that prisons are 'already heavy with punishment' (see Braithwaite, 1999: 83)—and we have observed that there is a relationship between punitive over-use of prison and punitive practices arising within them. Prisons that claim to 'address offending behaviour' need to be in an 'appreciative' mind-set to even begin to make this kind of difference to the individuals within it. At the very least, they should seek to do least harm. Those plentiful penal cultures which stigmatize, brutalize and disempower contribute to the misery of crime: 'disrespect begets disrespect' (Zehr, 1995; Braithwaite, 1999: 45). We are also aware that prison staff long for a decent purpose.

Why is AI particularly relevant to the prison? Because most current theoretical models of the prison are partial. We have argued before that the prison is a special and complex moral environment. Prisons and their multiple populations are *subject to* immoral practices as well as authors of them. The terms 'humanity' and 'respect' should apply to staff, individually and collectively, as well as to prisoners. Those who approach prisons too 'robustly' and critically are taking risks with those who inhabit the prison. AI has the potential to enrich our understanding of these multiple populations, and even briefly, to encourage resistance to immorality, to challenge hostile visions of prison officers, prisoners and managers and to reduce the frequency and indignity of antagonistic and indifferent practices—a reasonable short-term aide, with some important long-term implications.

Notes

1. The English Prison Service has been the subject of 14 major reviews and inquiries since 1967 (Prison Service, 1997). Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons—an independent body with the power to regularly inspect establishments, conduct thematic reviews and investigate major incidents—was established in 1981 following a recommendation by the May Committee (see Maguire et al., 1987; also Vagg, 1994). An internal Prison Service standards audit process, which reviews performance and efficiency and whose reports form the basis for management action plans has been in place (and evolved considerably) since 1995. Together, these reviewing bodies contribute hugely to improved prison 'performance', but they do so in a very particular manner.
2. For our understanding of restorative justice, we have relied heavily on a recent review article by Braithwaite (1999); as the title of our article suggests, however, we are also informed by Braithwaite (1989); Tyler (1990); Zehr (1990); Pepinski and Quinney (1991); Sherman (1992); Retzinger and Scheff (1996); and Paternoster et al. (1997).
3. In this sense, there are also links with feminist methodologies and praxis (see Harding, 1987; and Gelsthorpe and Morris, 1990).
4. There are also resonances with other value-based practices, such as Dialogue (see Liebling and Price, 1999: 32; also Garrett, 1997), where respect is a *primary and orienting value* rather than a key performance indicator.
5. So far, we have used AI in prisons accommodating adult men only. We hope to develop our work in other types of establishments, including prisons for women, in the future.
6. Interestingly (in the light of earlier remarks) some recent research shows that people who feel unfairly treated are more likely to react in defiant and

angry ways to punitive measures (Braithwaite, 1999). In fairness to the Inspectorate, their role is intended to be critical, and to enhance account-ability. It is quite distinct from the role of research.

7. Several officers of all grades, including two key members of the POA, an industrial manager, a probation officer, a PEI and an administrator. It was important that staff with 'high credibility' and independence of mind were selected, and that a mixture of long-serving and short-serving, and 'old-school' and 'new-generation' staff were picked. All the individuals involved developed their individual roles in unpredictable and valuable ways.

8. During discussions in a small group, the workgroup participants agonized over whether this word, as applied to senior management, was too radical—'too much', 'too provocative'. After considerable hesitation, we gently encouraged them to keep it in—'this is your vision. Make it honest. Reach for something'.

9. He did note that there was little direct mention of prisoners—a comment staff accepted. It was evident from the discussion, and the stages along the way, that the vision of the better prison incorporated a better and more purposeful quality of life for prisoners as well as a better working climate for staff.

10. This is tricky. We did not choose the workgroup members, nor were they in any true sense volunteers. They were normally selected by the Governor. We could influence this process by discussing what 'the ideal group' might look like. In this sense, the selection process may not be fair and inclusive, even if as we argue, the overall AI process aims to be.

11. A process whereby competitor private companies are invited to bid for the management function of an existing establishment. The home team (in this case, the Prison Service) are also able to place a bid, but must introduce cost-cutting changes to existing practices, and show expected improve-ments to performance. The results of the competition are based on 'best value' (rather than cost alone). The major fears generated are job losses, and new (private sector) management.

12. This statement has clear echoes with the Control Review Committee statement that:

> At the end of the day, nothing else that we can say will be as important as the general proposition that relations between staff and prisoners are at the heart of the whole prison system and that control and security flow from getting that relationship right.
>
> (Home Office, 1984: 6)

13. It had even less mention of prisoners than the Wandsworth document: a sign of the unmet needs experienced by staff—and a modest warning to us about the nature of the process.

14. Something to do with the bidding process. Throughout the AI exercise, the Governor and others from the prison had been working outside the prison, in a specially convened 'bid team' workstation. Important visitors, con-sultants and others came and went.

15. This will involve, *inter alia*, a detailed survey of 100 prisoners and 30 staff, using both highly structured and AI-style questionnaires. The study seeks

to develop measures of 20 key dimensions of prison life, including safety, order, respect, decency, humanity and authority.

16. This project seeks to develop a more refined way of measuring values in prison life, building on the research outlined here and incorporating more quantifiable data. We hope, at least in some of these establishments, to conduct full appreciative inquiries after the baseline measures have been taken, and to follow up the outcomes in a future project.

17. The modern 'robust' approach to changing organizations is often perceived as bullying and critical. While many of the changes being sought may be desirable, the methods can be disrespectful and may be potentially counterproductive.

18. As one of our reviewers pointed out, there is arguably a need for researchers to make more explicit the normative ideals and assumptions they hold (as feminists have argued for decades). How far does (should) contemporary criminology engage in utopian debates about 'the good society'? On this important point, see Cohen (1998). If utopian ideas are important frames through which we come to understand the prison, then 'romantic optimism' and 'appreciative realism' are not alternatives at all but different elements of the same process.

References

Bottomley, A.K. and E. Clare (2001) *Evaluation of Close Supervision Centres.* London: Home Office.

Bottoms, A. (2000) 'Restorative Justice in Sociological Perspective', paper given at Restorative Justice Symposium, Cambridge, 7–8 October.

Braithwaite, J. (1989) *Crime, Shame and Reintegration.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Braithwaite, J. (1999) 'Restorative Justice: Assessing Optimistic and Pessimistic Accounts', in M. Tonry and J. Petersilia (eds) *Crime and Justice*, pp. 1–127. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

Carlen, P. (1983) *Women's Imprisonment.* London: Routledge.

Cohen, S. (1998) 'Intellectual Scepticism and Political Commitment: The Case of Radical Criminology', in P. Walton and J. Young (eds) *The New Criminology Revisited*, pp. 98–129. Basingstoke: MacMillan.

Cohen, S. and L. Taylor (1972) *Psychological Survival.* London: Penguin.

Cooperrider, D.L. (1990) 'Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organising', in S. Suresh, D. Cooperrider and Associates *Appreciative Management of Leadership: A Power of Positive Thought and Action in Organisations.* San Francisco, CA: Jocey-Bass.

Elliott, C.M. (1999) *Locating the Energy for Change: A Practitioner's Guide to Appreciative Inquiry.* Winnipeg: IISD.

Elliott, C.M., A. Liebling and H. Arnold (2001) 'Locating the Energy for Change: Appreciative Inquiry in Two Local Prisons', *Prison Service Journal*, forthcoming.

Garrett, P. (1997) 'Dialogue and the Transformation of Memory', in *From*

Learning Organisations to Learning Communities, proceedings of a conference on Systems Thinking in Action. Waltham: Pegasus.

Gelsthorpe, L. and A. Morris (eds) (1990) *Feminist Perspectives in Criminology*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Habermas, J. (1996) *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. London: Polity.

Harding, S. (1987) *Feminism and Methodology*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

HMCIP (1999) *Report by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales of Wormwood Scrubs Prison*. London: HMSO.

HMCIP (2000) *Report by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales of Wandsworth Prison*. London: HMSO.

Home Office (1984) *Managing the Long-term Prison System: The Report of the Control Review Committee*. London: Home Office.

Home Office (1995) *Review of Prison Service Security in England and Wales and the Escape from Parkhurst Prison on Tuesday 3rd January 1995* (The Learmont Report). London: HMSO, Cm. 3020.

King, R. and K. McDermott (1989) 'British Prisons 1970–1987: The Ever Deepening Crisis', *British Journal of Criminology* 29(2): 107–28.

Liebling, A. (1992) *Suicides in Prison*. London: Routledge.

Liebling, A. and D. Price (1999) *An Exploration of Staff–Prisoner Relationships at HMP Whitemoor*. London: Prison Service.

Liebling, A., C. Elliott and D. Price (1999) 'Appreciative Inquiry and Relationships in Prison', *Punishment and Society: The International Journal of Penology* 1(1): 71–98.

Liebling, A., G. Muir, G. Rose and A.E. Bottoms (1997) *Incentives and Earned Privileges in Prison*. Final Report submitted to the Home Office. London: Home Office.

Loucks, N. (1998) *HMPI Cornton Vale: Research into Drugs and Alcohol, Violence and Bullying, Suicides and Self-injury; and Backgrounds of Abuse*. Edinburgh: Scottish Prison Service Occasional Papers 1/98

Maguire, M., J. Vagg and R. Morgan (eds) (1987) *Accountability and Prisons*. London: Tavistock.

Morris, T. and P. Morris (1963) *Pentonville*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Paternoster, R., R. Brame, R. Bachman and L. Sherman (1997) 'Do Fair Procedures Matter? The Effects of Procedural Justice on Spouse Assault', *Law and Society Review* 31(1): 163–204.

Pepinski, H.E. and R. Quinney (eds) (1991) *Criminology as Peacemaking*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Prison Service (1997) *The Prison Service Review*. London: Prison Service.

Retzinger, S. and T.J. Scheff (1996) 'Strategy for Community Conferences: Emotions and Social Bonds', in B. Galaway and J. Hudson (eds) *Restorative Justice: International Perspectives*. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.

Sherman, L.W. (1992) *Policing Domestic Violence*. New York: Free Press.

Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tyler, T. (1990) *Why People Obey the Law*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Vagg, J. (1994) *Prison Systems: A Comparative Study of Accountability in England, France, Germany and the Netherlands*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Van Ness, D. (1986) *Crime and its Victims: What Can We Do?* Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.

Zamble, E. and F.J. Porporino (1988) *Coping, Behaviour and Adaptation in Prison Inmates*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Zehr, H. (1990) *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Criminal Justice*. Scottsdale: Herald Press.

Zehr, H. (1995) 'Rethinking Criminal Justice: Restorative Justice', unpublished conference paper, Auckland.

ALISON LIEBLING is the Director of the Prisons Research Centre at the Cambridge Institute of Criminology.
CHARLES ELLIOTT is the author of the only authoritative book on Appreciative Inquiry and is an Associate of the Prisons Research Centre.
HELEN ARNOLD is a Research Assistant at the Prisons Research Centre.