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## What is Good Prison Research?

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I had the pleasure of attending the International Correctional Research Symposium that was held in the beautiful city of Prague in the Czech Republic from May 9-10, 2018. As a junior academic I was first attracted to the symposium because of the topic, “What is Good Prison Research?” This question not only jived with my personal research interests, but the symposium also presented the invaluable opportunity to engage with both practitioners working within prison systems, and the researchers who study them. The dialogue that was stimulated during this forum unpacked vital themes that focused on the need for collaboration, trust, and ethics, whilst also identifying the need (and sometimes pressure in the organisation) for good prison research to be “quick, cheap, and clear.” The two seemingly opposing needs are a testament to the importance of having events that aim to bring together both academics and practitioners to discuss the best way forward. Below are few things that I will take away from my experience at this year’s conference:

First off, why are we engaging with prison research in the first place? Is it to inform practise, increase safety, support rehabilitation, or to reduce operational costs? During the symposium it was mentioned that there are three components to good prison research: (1) a good approach, (2) good logistics, and (3) the intent to ensure good outcomes. Conducting research within the prison system requires a significant amount of collaboration between the research team, institution, practitioners, and prisoners – which of course is of no easy task. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, it was noted that prison research requires authenticity, respect and humility.

But how can research shape the future of corrections? Should the focus be on outstanding or struggling prisons? And, how do we identify and combine the needs of academics, prison administrators, and prisoners? We need to ask ourselves what prison research is good for – policy, theories, challenging assumptions? A significant challenge for the researcher is getting the questions and descriptions right in order to truly grasp the issues at hand. Good research is said to be both time and morally consuming, and often expensive, but yet, there is constant pressure for prison research to be responsive, timely and credible.

This year’s International Correctional Research Symposium provided opportunities for researchers, experts and practitioners to meet and exchange ideas about the present and future state of prisons research. Presentations considered how applied prison research is a growing field with limited budgets and resources, and many of the participants echoed how important it is to ensure that research is carried out in ethical and meaningful ways. It is true that the diversity and competing needs of prisoners have, over the years, began to make things more difficult not only for prison administrators, but also for researchers as well. Good research must consider the wholeness of the prison as an honest intellectual inquiry. In other words, the prisoner should not be viewed as an object, but rather a human being deserving of his/her dignity and respect, and this approach should also be extended to the practitioners that work in these environments.



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The questions matter. If the idea of risk dominates the study, without consideration of trust, we will never fully be able to understand the underlying contributing factors to our inquiry. Should research begin with the person and then move towards measurement? Is it ever okay to explore without a question or agenda? Perhaps a person-centered approach can better measure impact? For example, this methodology may be better able to explore a research query that begins with a question such as “what makes some prisons more survivable?” The framework of ‘appreciative inquiry’ was introduced as a tool for social science researchers as it was noted that it can have profound effects not only on the research itself, but it can also support to validate a prisoner’s dignity and humanity.

A few of the presenters spoke of the need for longitudinal research to better understand the life-course of the effects of imprisonment as opposed to studying just a ‘snapshot’ or ‘glimpse’ into prison life at a specific moment in time. That is, a life-course perspective seeks to better understand life before, during, and after imprisonment and allows researchers to consider and ask about what matters most in different contexts, as the power dynamics often change during the post-prison stage when research is conducted outside of the institution.

Assessing the performance of institutions has tended to dominate the field of prison research, and successes and failures have historically been linked to recidivism rates, but how can these types of research findings also challenge current policy and practises? Recidivism rates are important, but what happens inside the prison is of equal importance. There was some discussion given to the idea of having research centers located inside organisations as this could provide rich, timely, and context-specific data. However, it was also mentioned that this approach could inadvertently create a power imbalance. That is, in-house research teams could end up having too much control and ability to influence policy. For example, is the research peer reviewed? Who has oversight of the findings and/or the dissemination of such findings? Who benefits from the research? And who is the audience?

There is a need within prison research to sift through truths and assumptions (i.e., prison as an effective form of deterrence) and these truths then need to be spoken to power. Relationships with politicians are important, but not just the ‘government-of-the-day’, rather, in order to achieve sustainable progress, academics, practitioners, and politicians must form collaborative approaches to truly be positioned to identify, implement, and evaluate transformative change through a sense of shared authority to better inform practise. Before prison research can have an impact, it must be tailored and shared with key stakeholders, while also remaining transparent and accessible for review by all. Good prison research is a commitment, not a ‘hit-and-run.’

Perhaps it is time for researchers to reframe their approach and move away from ideas that are saturated with normative ideologies that are based on notions of law and order, and instead begin to see prison research as falling under the ‘health related’ umbrella. Could this approach increase societal and political interest, and then expand, or create bridging funding opportunities? And when all else fails, and it seems like no one is listening, one participant suggested that a good strategy for researchers would be to create a discourse, like writing editorials or engaging more with media outlets. If your ideas and findings carry value, somebody will eventually begin to listen.



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In the end, there is a need for increased collaboration between academics and prison administrators that focuses on trust and ethics; and of equal importance for the practitioner, is the need for prison research to be “quick, cheap, and clear”. It would appear that the optimal solution to this dilemma rests within the abstract notion that is ‘balance’. Therefore, the closing question should perhaps be “what good is prison research?” not “what is good prison research?”

As a junior academic I left the symposium with more questions than answers – which is exactly where I feel I need to be. For it is within intellectual inquiry that one can begin to see the way forward. I leave you with some of the questions that arose, and that I will continue to ask myself as I endeavour to begin my research on mothering, mental illness, and the criminal justice system.

1. What happens to the research findings following the study?
2. Did the work make a difference?
3. Are prisoners and practitioners benefiting from the study?
4. Should there be a follow-up study conducted?
5. Where does the research end and who is evaluating the process?
6. How is the community included in the research design, implementation, and evaluation?

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