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'My best day will be my last day!': appreciating appreciative inquiry in police research

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ABSTRACT

Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology originating from organisational psychology, though it has since been used in criminal justice research including police studies. It is used to identify the actual and potential strengths of an individual or an institution, with a view to building on these strengths in the future. The primary purpose of this paper is to assess the value of Appreciative Inquiry for police research, where its use is potentially confounded by aspects of police culture. Drawing on an ESRC-funded study, the 'good' police custody study, we critically examine the role of Appreciative Inquiry in enabling access and data collection through appreciatively-informed interviews, examining this from the perspective of the police, the policed and police researchers. We also illustrate how Appreciative Inquiry contributed to the theorisation process and to the development of theoretically-informed recommendations and organisational reforms, matters that are neglected in other police and criminal justice research. We conclude that certain aspects of police culture hinder its use, for example, the cynicism of frontline police officers, whilst the storytelling features of police culture and growing collaboration between police and researchers help overcome these barriers. Appreciative Inquiry must still be used reflexively in police research, recognising for example the tendency towards naïve optimism and its impacts on vulnerable participants. Nonetheless, in light of Appreciative Inquiry dovetailing with growing expectations that the police and academics should work more closely together, there are grounds for appreciating Appreciative Inquiry as an important part of a diverse police research agenda in the future.

Introduction

> When the staff and I were chatting about the study and I explained the appreciative inquiry approach e.g. the focus on best days, Drew, a custody officer's response was 'my best day will be my last day!' in a jokey way – his colleague laughed and agreed. CV_Obs_26.4.14.

In simple terms, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a social research methodology employed to identify the actual and potential strengths of an individual or an institution, with a view to building on these strengths in the future. It aims to develop a 'glass half-full rather than half empty' view of the world (Drew and Wallis 2014, p. 5). Rather than organisations or individuals being evaluated by identifying inadequacies, AI attempts to uncover their strengths, exploring when participants are at their

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best. Rather than improving things by solving problems, AI aims to affect positive change based on what is working. The intention is to unpack how successes were made possible and recreate them (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999, Ludema *et al.* 2001, Coghlan *et al.* 2003). At the heart of AI, is a sense of 'reverence for life' including in its mystery and wonder (Cooperrider and Srivastva 2017, pp. 85–89), which brings with it a different way of experiencing and understanding the world. However, putting these methodological principles into practice can be a challenge, including in research with the police.

The quotation above illustrates the bemusement of staff when responding to the use of AI in the 'good' police custody study (GPCS) on which this paper is based. They were cynical about the research but also about police custody work itself, indicating that, for them, police custody work could never be 'good'. Detainees also expressed bafflement and sometimes outright dislike of AI and some were as cynical as the police about the notion of police custody at its 'best'. Similarly, members of the research team struggled with operationalising AI, particularly as one of them was collecting data in a run-down custody block, which was soon replaced. More generally, the notion that police work is 'dirty work' with harmful repercussions for police and citizens, including violence, brutality, and erosion of their dignity (Hughes 1951, p. 319, Hughes 1958, p. 122, Ashforth and Kreiner 1999), challenges the very idea that it can ever be appreciated (Sheptycki 2016). The power of the police relative to most citizens adds further difficulty to making an ethical defence of using AI in police research (Sheptycki 2016).

Therefore, the overall purpose of the paper is to examine the utility and value of AI for studies of police custody and of the police more generally. We consider its value at different stages of the research process, including when accessing police organisations and collecting data, and when impacting on police policies and practices. Across these different stages, we consider the extent to which AI adds value to police research over and above other methodologies and any caveats to this. By police research, we mean any kind of research which examines different dimensions of the police institution, including the role the police play in police custody, from the perspective of the police, citizens or any other relevant practitioners. We also explore the utility and value of AI from the vantage points of the police, the policed and police researchers. In so doing we make two further contributions. First, we add to existing debates about the use of AI in police and prisons research, situating our findings in the existing literature. Second, we move beyond these existing debates by examining the role of theory derived from AI-informed research in contributing to recommendations and organisational reform, which are matters that have been little discussed in the existing research (Cooperrider and Srivastva 2017, p. 83).

We argue that the storytelling dynamics of police culture are a useful resource, which can be harnessed by the AI methodology. We also note the potential of theory derived from AI-informed research to provide opportunities for organisational reform, particularly given the strengthening of police-academic collaborations over the last twenty years (Canter 2004, Marks *et al.* 2010, Engel and Henderson 2013, Rojek *et al.* 2015, Bacon *et al.* 2020). Though concerns have recently arisen about the merits of police-academic collaboration (e.g. Jameela 2021), at least for the time being, we envisage AI as an important part of such collaborative research. Next, we briefly review the literature on AI and AI in police studies, and relevant parts of the police culture literature. We also set out the methodology of the research on which this paper is based.

Appreciative inquiry

The AI approach originates from Cooperrider and Srivastva's (1987) *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life*, which was reprinted in 2017 including reflections on what has been learned over the last 30 years. AI is a strand of action research in organisational psychology, but also a critique of it and of positivism, emerging during a period of debate about the incompatibility of positivism and interpretivism (Maruna 2011).[1] Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) sought to reconfigure action research which they saw as being too focused on action and not theory (the centrality of theory

to their account is something we return to shortly), on problems not solutions, and on objectivity and neutrality not multiple social meanings.

Within the 1987 paper, there are no prescriptive instructions on how to operationalise AI. Indeed, in the 2017 paper they say that there is 'only one paragraph in the entire early paper' which hints at 'what today we call the 4-D method' (Cooperrider and Srivastva 2017, p. 132). This 4-D method appeared nearly ten years later (Bushe 2012, p. 13). It includes, first, the *Discovery Phase* in which researchers search for what is currently best in the organisation. This is achieved by posing positive questions about when things have gone right, about their best moments or when they have valued colleagues' work (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999). Second, the *Dream Phase* encourages participants to connect their best experiences to an image of what the organisation could look like in a better future (Robinson *et al.* 2013), thereby exposing underlying aspects that are of most value to them. The *Design Phase* thirdly facilitates discussion about and amendment of the previous phase, leading to consensus about what the 'positive core' of the institution is. It is a more practical step, in which actions uncovered in the dream phase are implemented (Bushe 2012). Fourthly and finally, the *Destiny Phase* refers to sustaining positive change within an organisation, through reaching out to increasing numbers of participants within organisations (including managers) who can then put into practice the most workable actions from previous phases (Ludema *et al.* 2001, Bushe 2012).

Also of note is that AI is intended to generate theory with the power to transform organisations and individuals. For example, Cooperrider and Srivastva note that 'there is nothing so practical as good theory', with theory having a future oriented or 'proleptic' quality to it, meaning that AI should be judged not on whether hypotheses are proven or not, rather on whether it provokes 'new possibilities for social action' (Cooperrider and Srivastva 2017, p. 98). However, the power of theory 'has been glossed over in the rush to take the power of AI into the applied world of practice' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 2017, p. 83). For the most part, this rings true for the application of AI to the criminal justice arena, which we explore shortly.

A further concern about AI is that negative experiences within organisations may be overlooked. At best, this could produce a partial image of reality and, at worst, it could actively and unethically ignore the views of the least powerful. The AI process however, does not claim to identify a single truth, nor does it naïvely believe that all experiences are positive, instead it aims to challenge assumptions that we hold about how to improve, and to reconsider knowledge that has been taken for granted (Liebling 2015). Furthermore, by asking about 'the best', information about what is problematic is also inevitably collected (Cowburn and Lavis 2013). This is said to yield a more nuanced understanding of both the positive and the negative (Michael 2005, p. 223).

Indeed this is what Alison Liebling sought to do with her pioneering use of AI in research in prisons. Even those experiencing extreme forms of punishment involving the deprivation of liberty have been found to be receptive to AI-influenced questions about prison life (Liebling *et al.* 1999, Liebling *et al.* 2001, Cowburn and Lavis 2013, Liebling 2015, Leeson *et al.* 2016). Prisoners are able to articulate their experiences of good days and what was good about them, as well as their experiences of bad days (Liebling *et al.* 2001). The result is a more rounded picture of prison life. Given that police custody can be conceptualised as a 'miniature prison' (Skinns 2011), it was hypothesised during the planning and designing of the GPCS that AI may have similar benefits for research in this setting.

Aside from being used in prisons research it also been used in probation research (Robinson *et al.* 2013), and now increasingly in police studies. It has been used to guide data collection in focus group research on LGBTQ female police officers in the US (Couto 2018); in focus group research assessing public values-focused performance measurement in Canada (Caputo *et al.* 2018); as a methodological approach in research on intelligence-led policing to combat gun crime in Canada (Sheptycki 2016); as a framework used post-hoc to examine the pros and cons of a strengths-based approach to police culture research in Vietnam (Jardine 2020). Research based on AI has also been highlighted as a way of developing a more robust evidence base for sexual assault

liaison officer training in England and Wales, enabling victims to be placed at the heart of investigations (Stanko and Hohl 2018). It has also been used as a tool for developing the leadership potential of female officers in Zimbabwe (Kudakwashe 2017). Of these publications, only Jardine (2020), Sheptycki (2016) and Liebling *et al.* (2001), grapple with the complexities of AI in practice, and assess its value for criminal justice research. In sum, this literature shows that AI may enable:

- A fuller picture, encompassing positives and more nuanced views of the negatives, including when participants include criminal justice populations (Liebling *et al.* 2001);[2]
- Greater access to police organisations, both formally and informally (Sheptycki 2016, Jardine 2020);
- A fairer and more inclusive approach to police research, which democratises the research process, particularly where power differentials exist between researchers and participants (Jardine 2020);
- Research that is more grounded and thus socially useful (Sheptycki 2016);
- Research that humanises research participants, including police officers and in spite of their powerful position and the 'dirty' nature of their work (Sheptycki 2016).

We build on this existing picture by arguing that, for the most part, AI was also critical to securing formal access for the GPCS from senior gatekeepers, thereby also paving the way for informal access later in the study. Overall, it was also a useful data collection tool when conducting interviews with staff and detainees. However, we also go beyond this existing literature, by illustrating the value of AI at other points in the research process, including when developing theoretically-informed recommendations and organisational reforms. Here, we draw on the concept of detainee dignity, examining the way it has been developed in the GPCS and its use in reforming police custody policies and practices. To do this requires an appreciation of some of the relevant features of the context of the research, which we examine next.

Relevant features of the research context

Police custody is where suspects are taken when they are arrested whilst an investigation is mounted and whilst a decision is reached about what should happen next with the suspect's case. As noted above, since the 1950s, police work has been considered 'dirty work', which is *physically, socially or morally tainted* and in which staff must carry out tasks which are physically disgusting or degrading (Hughes 1951, p. 319, Hughes 1958, p. 122, Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Based on Ashforth and Kreiner's definitions, police custody is without doubt 'dirty work' (1999, p. 415–8). Staff may become *physically* but perhaps also *psychologically* tainted as a result of the poor material conditions in which they work and their close proximity to detainees who may be unpredictable, sometimes aggressive and who may be bleeding, spitting, vomiting, urinating or worse. It has also long been recognised that those in police custody are likely to be highly stigmatised being seen as the 'disreputable' or 'police property' in need of social discipline (Choongh 1997, pp. 40–41). As such, the *socially* tainted nature of the work is also clear. As for *moral* taint, the fact that postings to police custody are unpopular, with staff ending up there sometimes as 'punishment, pasturing or a route to promotion' (Skinns 2011, p. 89), this suggests it is not considered a virtuous role.

Though police work may be seen as tainted, the police tend to have high occupational esteem (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, p. 420). This is because police culture helps them to cope with the stigmatised nature of what they do (Waddington 1999). Police culture refers to the 'common sense' of police work or 'the way things are done around here' (Holdaway 1983, p. 2, O'Neill and Singh 2007, p. 2) or more broadly the 'residual core of beliefs and values, of associated strategies and tactics relevant to policing, which remain a principle guide for the day-to-day work of the rank-and-file officer' (Holdaway 1983, p. 2). The standard narrative on police culture can be found in Reiner's formulation of the core characteristics of street officer culture, which include a sense of mission, action-orientation, cynicism and pessimism, suspicion, isolation/solidarity, conservatism, machismo,

racial prejudice and pragmatism (the latest version of these can be found in Bowling *et al.* 2019, pp. 172–9).

For the purposes of this paper, one of these characteristics is particularly salient, namely, cynicism. This originated from the scholars of Ancient Greece. Cynics valued the individual to such an extent that they scorned institutions (e.g. of religion or government), often using humour to target the powerful (Dean *et al.* 1998). Niederhoffer (1967) first noted cynicism in relation to the police. He saw it as arising from the anomie experienced by 'professionalised' new recruits when confronted with the realities of the job post-police academy, with strain arising when the ideals of the job – linked to service, protection legality – and expectations about career prospects were out of line with what happened in practice. In this paper, cynicism will be defined as the loss of hope that staff experience about the ideals of the job when at the 'coal face' of the custody suite where they may feel like 'a beleaguered minority about to be overrun by the forces of barbarism' (Bowling *et al.* 2019, p. 173). This may be expressed as a hardness and bitterness towards detainees, managers and others staff may encounter therein, including researchers and leading therefore to challenges in using AI in police custody research.

By contrast, storytelling is a feature of police culture which can be harnessed by the AI method. This is because in AI, participants are invited to share stories, for example about their best or most ideal day at work (Elliott 1999, p. 214, Michaels 2005, Leeson *et al.* 2016), and because frontline police officers are believed to learn their craft and become socialised into their role, in part through story-telling. Though police stories may vary in length and type, depending on the context and who is telling it and whom the audience is, and though these stories may not give precise and accurate details about the craft of police work, they reveal essential aspects of the job. These enable police officers to ascribe meaning and make sense of their day-to-day activities and ensure that beliefs and values about police work are 'shaped and reshaped' (Holdaway 1983, p. 154, Shearing and Ericson 1991, Van Hulst 2013, p. 638). However, 'not every police officer is good at telling stories. A lot of experience is helpful, but skills of humour and imagination are also relevant to being a better storyteller … ' (Terpstra 2017, p. 19). Overall, though, the raconteur-like qualities expected of frontline police officers and the sense-making and culture-confirming role that these stories play, suggest that the storytelling aspect of AI may put police officer participants at ease and enable them to engage more fully with an AI-informed research process.

Suspects may not be in the same position, however. As noted above, those in police custody are likely to be 'police property', the 'disreputable' and seen as 'undeserving' as a result (Choongh 1997, pp. 40–41). The suspect population is also disproportionately vulnerable, making the pains of police detention all the more hard-hitting (Skinns and Wooff 2021), with 20% of the suspect population having a psychiatric condition, 50% experiencing substance misuse, and 74% having physical health condition requiring regular medication (Rekrut-Lapa and Lapa 2014, p. 74). These rates are higher than for the general population. Suspects are also part of the 'collateral damage' of neoliberalism evident in the post-financial crash austerity politics, which saw a decade of major cuts across the public sector since 2010 (Skinns 2014, Alston 2018). This may make detainees understandably cynical about the benefits of a strengths-based approach such as AI for organisational reform, given that any such reforms will not tackle the structural causes of their personal and social difficulties.

Methodology

This paper is based on experiences of planning and designing the project, negotiating access, collecting data, formulating theory and developing impact across different parts of the GPCS. This was a five-year national mixed-methods study, the overarching aim of which was to examine rigorously what 'good' police custody means. In Phase 1 in 2014, survey data were collected from custody managers in 40 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales. The survey focused on who works in, manages and owns police custody suites, and on size, busyness and fitness for purpose. In Phase 2 in

2014/15, qualitative data were collected through observation and interviews in four custody blocks, in four police forces. These were given the pseudonyms Mill City, Stone Street, Combiville and Newtown.[3] In total, the research team spent 532 h observing and conducted 97 interviews, 47 with staff and 50 with detainees, with the latter being conducted with detainees once they had left the custody suite, with the research team meeting detainees in a public setting. As explained below, interviews in particular were based on the principles of AI, so this data forms a significant part of our reflections on the use of AI in the next section. The Phase 2 data were used to develop a questionnaire which was administered in 2016–17 to nearly 800 staff and detainees in 27 custody facilities in 13 police forces in England and Wales. Analysis of the Phase 3 data resulted in a set of good practice recommendations from the research, as part of Phase 4. The findings on which they were based and the recommendations themselves were subjected to multiple rounds of consultation with various police stakeholders.[4] At the time of writing, the research had moved into Phase 5, in which three forces were implementing the recommendations from the research between October 2020 and December 2021.

Throughout initial discussions of the research with key stakeholders in 'Phase 0',[5] the grant application and design phase of the project, as well as through the aforementioned data collection phases, we have applied the principles of AI. When the GPCS officially commenced in 2013, there was no existing literature on using AI in police research, meaning we drew on the prisons literature instead. In addition, as none of the research team had used AI before we took an exploratory approach to using AI in police research, learning and adapting as we went along about how best to employ it. The principles of AI were used more explicitly in some phases than others, in particular in Phase 2. This involved mainly the discovery phase of AI and to a lesser extent the dream phase (see the sample interview questions below). With regards the semi-structured interviews, questions, especially at the outset, they were posed in an AI-informed way, in order to set the tone for the remainder of the interview (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999, Bushe 2012). These AI-informed questions also sometimes emulated those asked in other relevant studies, such as in Liebling *et al.* (1999, p. 79) and Watkins and Cooperrider (2000, pp. 4–5).

Examples of AI-type questions used with staff

- Can you describe for me the day you remember as your best day at work whilst working in police custody? (This was the first question asked of staff) (Discovery phase)
- What qualities do you need as a person to work in police custody? (Dream phase)
- Can you describe what the ideal staff-detainee relationship would look like? (Discovery phase)
- Can you provide an example of when you have made a positive difference to a detainee? (Discovery phase)
- What would your ideal custody suite look like? (Dream phase)

Examples of AI-type questions used with detainees

- Can you tell me something in your life that you are most proud of? (This was the first question asked of detainees) (Discovery phase)
- Custody is unpleasant at the best of times, but is there a particular part of the process that you would say was done well by the staff? Why? (Discovery phase)
- What's the most upsetting thing about being in police custody? Is there anything that has helped or made it better for you? (Discovery phase)
- What would the ideal custody suite, or cell, look like? (Dream phase)

Aside from using AI-informed questions, the researchers also reframed participants' negative responses into positive ones, which is a common technique in AI. When participants said something in a problem-focused way, the interviewer almost immediately reframed it in an appreciative way, where appropriate. After their responses were reframed, research participants were then asked to agree, disagree, correct or add to the reframed statement, in order to capture a nuanced interpretation of their views (Elliott 1999, Liebling 2015). Reframing is seen as necessary in AI to prevent an inevitable drift into negative language and experiences, and to help participants re-engage with appreciative thinking (Liebling *et al*. 1999).

With regard to the observational part of Phase 2 – in which researchers carried out participant observation in custody blocks – as far as possible, the research team posed questions during informal conversations in an appreciative way and tried to reframe what was said to them as per the AI method. In addition, staff responses to these questions during observation enabled the subsequent fine-tuning of the interview schedule and prepared participants and the research team for subsequent AI-informed interviews.

In later phases of the research, the emphasis on AI was implicit, deriving from the explicit emphasis on AI in Phase 2 and the research design of the study. We used an 'exploratory sequential design' (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018, p. 84), meaning that qualitative research was undertaken first (in Phase 2), with findings from it being used to develop the quantitative research that followed in Phase 3. As a result, the Phase 3 data were grounded in the lived realities of staff and detainees, which had been informed by being asked to think positively about these experiences. Similarly, as explained in more detail below, when analysing the data and formulating the recommendations from the research in Phase 4 and when implementing these recommendations in Phase 5, the principles of AI and the need to articulate what was 'good' about police custody was a key concern. In these later stages of the research, through continual dissemination of results and the growing involvement of stakeholders, the research moved beyond the discovery and dream phase and into the destiny phase.

The research involved a series of complex ethical issues, which can be only summarised briefly here, focusing on the aspects most relevant to the use of AI. Consideration was given to the impact of the research on participants and to mitigating risks wherever possible. For example, we ensured that AI-informed questions that might have appeared crass in the context of custody were framed appropriately. In addition, we informed detainees that they may withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason. As discussed in the section below on detainee perspectives on AI, this was crucial where detainees disliked being asked to frame their experiences of police custody in a positive light. Similarly, emphasising the voluntary nature of the research, which was enabled, for example, by interviewing detainees post-custody, was a further way of facilitating withdrawal from the research where detainees disliked the appreciative framing of interview questions. No detainees did withdraw from the research, though one nearly did, as discussed in the section on detainee perspectives below. The research was also premised on informed consent, which meant explaining in simple terms – in writing in information sheets and verbally – that we were trying to uncover police custody at its best.[6] Having reviewed the literature and explained the methodology of the research, we now explore the value of AI in the police custody fieldwork, when accessing the police and collecting data.

AI in field work

Formal and informal access involves an ongoing set of negotiations for any research project involving the police (Rowe 2007, Belur 2014, Greene and Skinns 2018). In terms of formal access, in the GPCS, this meant continual negotiations with a range of gatekeepers. In these negotiations, the AI-informed framing of the research, emphasising the discovery of good practice, was a key enabler, especially at the national level. This was a deliberate strategy, in a bid to shift the focus from police custody as a site of malpractice evident in earlier studies (e.g. Holdaway 1980,

Sanders *et al.* 1989, Bridges and Sanders 1990, Dixon *et al.* 1990, Hodgson 1992). It was also a successful strategy. When initially approached, nearly all police stakeholders supported the research funding application, in principle, by providing letters of support. However, this did not guarantee access to participants at the operational level, with AI sometimes hindering access, as described in the next section. Indeed, once the research began, across all three phases of the research, access 'on the ground' had to be negotiated and re-negotiated on a continual basis. For example, as described in Greene and Skinns (2018, p. 65), in Phase 3 of the research when the research team surveyed staff and detainees in 27 custody suites in 13 forces, the research team engaged in an 'almost constant series of negotiations … in which it was incumbent on the research team to persuade often stressed and busy people to assist them' which was a challenge for the team and for staff too.

Next, we reflect on our experiences of using AI as a data collection tool – largely during interviews with the police and detainees – from the perspective of the police, policed and the researchers.

Police perspectives

As noted at the start, the notion of research which aimed to appreciate police custody was initially a source of bemusement, leading to comments such as 'my best day will be last day!' These views about the appreciative nature of the research were particularly stark in Stone Street, where the researcher noted, 'staff laughed [at the idea of appreciating police custody] to the point where they were spitting their coffee out, saying "there is nothing good about this place"' (SS_Obs_undated). These views are unsurprising given the unpopularity of working in police custody for some (Skinns 2011, p. 89), and its potentially physically, socially, psychologically and morally tainted status (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, pp. 415–8). The views in Stone Street were also pronounced, as it was old, dingy, dirty, and unfit for purpose and it was replaced soon after the research finished. These staff views on the appreciative nature of the research contrasted with those of staff in the other Phase 2 custody blocks. Combiville, for example, was a new purpose-built, light, bright, airy and spacious facility. In other words, it was easier for staff to see, feel, smell, breathe and therefore to talk about the 'good' in Combiville than Stone Street. In Phase 3, these 'representational' qualities of police custody were later found to have a significant impact on staff and detainee experiences (Sparks *et al.* 1996, p. 308, Skinns *et al.* 2020), so in hindsight it unsurprising that they also had a bearing on staff's receptiveness to talking about police custody in positive terms.

When it came to using AI in interviews, however, initial bemusement gave way and interviewees talked at length, such as about their best day. This was perhaps because, by the time of the interview, participants had more of a chance to think about their response to questions (e.g. about their best day at work), rather than providing an on-the-spot reaction in front of their colleagues. By this point, the researcher had also forged relationships with interviewees, sometimes over several weeks of participant observation, in which they had primed them for an AI-informed interview. Willingness to engage with AI was also due to staff enthusiasm for telling stories about their work (Holdaway 1983, Shearing and Ericson 1991, Van Hulst 2013, p. 638). The researchers were told numerous stories during the course of Phase 2, which exposed the 'good' and the 'bad'. For example, in answer to a discovery phase question, 'what are the key decisions you take about detainees in this custody suite?', a custody officer recounted the way he had challenged the arrest at 1am of a 14-year old boy whilst he was at home in bed, following an allegation of assault on his 15-year old girlfriend nearly two months earlier. This story provided an abundance of information about the training of new officers and, from an AI perspective, about the humanity and moral code employed by staff when dealing with vulnerable detainees.

Whilst AI can align with police culture, as was the case with storytelling, aspects of it may also hinder the use of AI. The initial bemusement described above could be attributed to officer cynicism. Some staff were de-sensitised and demoralised by the constant flow of detainees, many of whom had a range of complex needs and vulnerabilities. This prompted a routinised and process-driven

approach to their work, which could be lacking in empathy and humanity towards detainees, and a sense of hopelessness about the reality of their role, hence the comment that 'my best day will be my last day'. A similar degree of cynicism was evident in their attitudes towards the GPCS. The notion of 'good' police custody grated on them, with one officer in Stone Street saying it was 'good' 'when you compare it to hell'.

Detainee perspectives

The existing literature shows that using AI with criminal justice populations is riddled with challenges (Liebling *et al.* 1999, Liebling *et al.* 2001, Cowburn and Lavis 2013, Liebling 2015). We found however that, as with prisoners, these difficulties were surmountable for those in police custody. For some detainees, AI was an important way of immediately establishing a rapport with them, which was especially important given the fleeting contact that the detainee had with the researcher – either in police custody or over the telephone or via email – prior to interview. To do this, an AI-influenced discovery phase type 'ice-breaker' question was posed at the outset of the interview with detainees: 'Can you start by telling me about something you are most proud of in your life?' This enabled detainees to talk about a topic beyond their custody experience, with the aim of reassuring them that the researchers understood they were not just a 'detainee'. It also put the detainee in a positive mind-set and thus better able to engage with an AI-influenced interview.

In some cases, this ice-breaker question worked as intended, particularly when detainees reflected on things that were unique to them. For example, SS_Det1_M talked about being proud of an anti-poverty campaign in which he had recently been involved. However, it was less clear for how long the AI-tone lasted. In response to the ice-breaker question, some detainees talked initially in a positive way about something they were proud of, but then quickly turned this into a negative. For example, SS_DET3_M talked about being proud of attempting to secure building qualifications at College, but was quick to note his failures to complete them. Using AI was especially awkward when people struggled to think of *anything* that they were proud of, which was not unusual given the difficult circumstances of some detainees. For example, CV_DET4_F said, 'I can't think … Something I'm proud of?' Aside from being awkward for the researchers and inhibiting detainees, this realisation could only have served to worsen detainees' views of themselves. Apart from potentially presenting ethical challenges, this is the opposite of what AI aims to achieve, given the emphasis on individual and organisational transformation, and often required the researcher to think quickly and ask a more neutral follow-up question. This exposes the limitations of strict adherence to AI, which was developed for use in organisations and groups outside of the criminal justice process. It also highlights the importance of the consideration given to interview schedules prior to fieldwork and the iterative learning and reframing of questions that employing AI in this context requires.

A further barrier to the use of AI in interviews with criminal justice populations is the potential for naïve optimism, which may be of particular concern in research involving vulnerable participants. Such naïve optimism may stymie trust in researchers and make participants unwilling to answer questions. In turn, this may inhibit the quality of data gathered and, in the worst case scenario, may offend or upset already vulnerable participants, thereby raising the possibility of harm. For instance, starting an interview with 'what was your best hour in police custody' could be seen as insensitive to what some detainees may see as an unpleasant, distressing and undignified experience. This was certainly the case for one detainee in Combiville. A vulnerable female detainee, Sarah, was initially offended by the very notion of 'good' police custody, asking the researcher via email why the study was 'only about good treatment'.[7] Though she was offered the opportunity to discontinue participating in the research, she nonetheless took part in an interview, with the researcher also adapting the interview questions to avoid upsetting her further and to reassure her that police custody was also recognised as unpleasant. In her case, not only was the naïve optimism associated with AI a source of annoyance, the AI approach also seemed to impede the

development of a trusting relationship with the researcher and furthermore ran the risk of compounding her distress if her negative experiences were not taken seriously. Given that researchers must minimise harm to participants, it would have been ethically problematic to continue with the research without adjusting the questions asked.

Researcher perspectives

Criminal justice researchers do not typically employ AI methods and this means 'learning to "do" AI is challenging' (Robinson *et al.* 2013, p. 9). In this section, we therefore examine the challenges the researchers experienced when using AI as a data collection tool. As one researcher more readily engaged with the methodology than the other did, we argue here that the value of AI as a data collection tool rests largely on researchers' subjectivities and the way they intersect with the context of the research, both in terms of the topic and the more immediate research setting.

These two contrasting experience were most evident in relation to the way the researchers engaged with the reframing of participants' responses. When reframing, AI encourages researchers not to ignore negative experiences. Rather they counterbalance participants' tendency towards the negative by reinterpreting what participants say in a positive way whilst also inviting them to check this reinterpretation:

CV_DET1:	I didn't think it was fair that I had no right to reply, at all, nothing. It was just arm behind back … into the meat wagon … not allowed to say anything to anyone.
Interviewer 1:	So again, correct me if I am wrong, but it sounds like telling your side of the story there and then is important to you?
CV_DET1:	Yeah, I wish they had yeah. Because I am sure we could have sorted it out between us. Yeah, I think it is. I think it would be everyone, just to explain how the situation had come about. They didn't know what caused the whole thing.

As this quotation shows, for this researcher, reframing was a way of understanding what mattered to research participants, i.e. being given a voice in custody. AI also enabled exploration of what ideally should happen, and how and why that would help to make things better. When reframing, the researchers tended to use the phrase 'correct me if I'm wrong' so as to encourage participants to amend the researcher's reinterpretation of their response. This was particularly important with detainee participants because it was imperative that they felt they were being listened to and because they may have felt uneasy correcting a researcher.

In some circumstances, though, reframing was inappropriate, which was acknowledged by both researchers. One detainee, CV_DET10_M, for example, described having been released from custody into the pouring rain, wearing only a T-shirt. To reframe this in the positive would have been trite and possibly offensive to the participant. One of the researchers was therefore sceptical about the value of reframing, believing it to be too difficult to put into practice and unethical. Such naïve optimism risked upsetting detainees or could lead to failures to acknowledge detainee views as valid, thereby adding to the pain of their detention, as well as potentially putting words in their mouths.

These challenges meant that the researchers had to adjust their approach quickly and nimbly, either clarifying or adjusting questions. They also led them to have contrasting views on its utility, with one embracing AI and the other largely rejecting it. This was a consequence of the subjectivities of the researchers and the context of the research. In Stone Street, for example, the material conditions were such that it felt almost idiotic for the researcher to ask staff or detainees what was 'good' about it. Their contrasting experiences were also connected to them as individuals, particularly their different levels of interest and enthusiasm for the methodology, their own cynicism and approach to research which subsequently influenced their confidence and fervour for applying it in practice. Therefore, when assessing the value of AI as a data collection tool, it is important to recognise that 'failures' with its application may be as much to do with the way it is implemented, the people implementing it, and perhaps especially the context it is being implemented in, as the methodological framework itself.

AI, theory development and organisational change

As noted above, theory developed through AI is regarded by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987/2017) as integral to organisational reform and thus to the method itself. Yet this has been given limited consideration in studies employing AI (Cooperrider and Srivastva 2017, p. 83), including the police and prisons research reviewed earlier. Therefore, here, we illustrate some of the ways in which theory derived from the AI-informed research discussed thus far, has impacted on police custody policies and practices.

One of the main ways this is evident is through the concept of dignity. A key idea that emerged from the AI-informed interviews in Phase 2 was that what mattered most to detainees was being 'treated like a human being', that is, as no different from police officers, as innocent until proven otherwise and, therefore, worthy of help and respect. This idea was incorporated into questions in the Phase 3 survey and whilst analysing the survey data we began to link it to notions of dignity linked to feelings of equal worth i.e. the equal value of all human beings (Skinns *et al.* 2020). Indeed, this type of dignity has become central to how we have come to conceptualise 'good' police custody. Though it is impossible to definitively say that such an insight from Phase 2 would have emerged had AI not been used, there are a few reasons to think that AI played a key role. As a concept, it is aspirational and points to an ideal and something that detainees might wish to see more of in their interactions with staff in 'good' police custody settings. It is difficult to see how detainees would have arrived at such an insight in Phase 2 had they only been asked to focus on the problems they saw in police custody and to speak in negative terms about their experiences.

In terms of driving organisational reform, the concept of detainee dignity is a key prong in the recommendations from the research (Skinns 2019). Prior to their publication in 2019, these recommendations were repeatedly consulted on and written up in an accessible format, corresponding to some extent to the design phase of the 4-D method. However, theory was also relevant to the more recent destiny phase. At the time of writing, recommendations from the research were in the process of being implemented and evaluated as part of Phase 5 of the GPCS, targeting staff attitudes, behaviour, force policies and the agency of individual officers. For example, in one of the three Phase 5 police forces, staff were encouraged to use their discretion to seek a better balance between managing risk and maintaining detainee dignity when it came to decisions about the keeping of personal effects by detainees and this was supported by police policies and advice from managers about more complex decisions. Staff there saw themselves as having taken 'baby step' towards putting these recommendations into practice (Skinns 2021). The concept of dignity has also impacted on the training and policies of other police forces. For example, Norfolk Police used evidence from the GPCS about the importance of dignity to support a move away from the use of rip proof clothing. Moreover, national-level police custody strategies also draw on the language of dignity taken from the GPCS, which is acknowledged in the text.

In recommending and then implementing these theoretically-informed police custody reforms, we have also been mindful that notions of dignity and the idea of 'good' police custody or 'good' police work may have hollow and ideological qualities, becoming a potential 'fig leaf' for poor practices (Skinns *et al.* 2017, Skinns *et al.* 2020). Indeed, this is a further critique that can be levelled at AI. At the same time, if dignity is properly implemented, for example, by treating detainees as human beings of equal worth, this may also have a much-needed levelling effect in increasingly unequal societies. Since dignity also embodies the lived experiences of detainees from Phase 2, this serves as another reason why this concept deserves to be acknowledged, acted on and used to drive organisational reform. It offers a way of empowering them to be heard, even if only indirectly and post-hoc. In the present study, AI played an important role in this process.

Conclusion

This conclusion proceeds in four parts. First, we summarise key findings. Second, we examine the ways in which the present paper builds on the existing AI-influenced police and prison research and, third, the ways in which we have moved beyond it, with regards the role of AI in the development of theory-informed recommendations and organisational reforms. Fourth and finally, we turn to the primary purpose of this paper to examine the implications of this discussion for the value of AI to police research.

First, in sum, to differing extents from start to finish the research has drawn on the principles of AI, including in its conception, when accessing participants, when collecting data, especially interview data, when formulating theory and whilst trying to introduce organisational reform. As a research team, we have been challenged by this approach, individually and collectively, particularly at the fieldwork stage and again at the implementation/organisational reform stage, meaning that the study cannot be described as having wholly adopted AI. Nonetheless, it seems to have made a difference to the trajectory of the project. To draw an analogy with a flower, because of AI, a seed was planted in Phase 2 about the value detainees placed on being treated like a human being. This idea sprouted and developed a stem in Phase 3, where it was explored in a broader sample of police forces and participants and became linked to notions of dignity of equal worth and to 'good' police custody. In Phase 4, a bud formed because of the good practice recommendations from the research, of which dignity is a critical part. At the time of writing, we are waiting to see whether in Phase 5 this bud will flower and spread because of the theory-informed recommendations and changes to police custody policies and practices. As such, overall, AI has added value to the GPCS, which may not have been possible without it.

This conclusion is strengthened by comparing our experiences to those of other police and prisons researchers, which were summarised using bullet points in the introductory section on AI. Each is now discussed in turn in this second part of the conclusion:

- As found by others, AI enabled a more nuanced view of police custody. For example, the aspirational nature of dignity in police custody may have been missing had a problem-focused approach been taken. However, providing a more rounded picture, balancing the negatives and positives was difficult in practice. For staff, this was due to their cynical outlook and for detainees it was due to the painful nature of police custody. Therefore, there are limitations to the claim made by Cooperrider and Srivastva that there is 'no inquiry where there is no experience of mystery' or sense of reverence for the enchantment and wonderment of social life (2017, p. 128).
- Where there is the greatest alignment between the GPCS and prior research is in relation to its benefits for formally accessing police organisations. The AI-informed framing of the research around notions of 'good' police custody opened the door to police organisations at the national and local level. It helped to build trust at critical early points in the research and at a time when austerity and cuts to police budgets were starting to take hold. However, this is not to say that access was routinely provided 'on the ground' when data collection commenced.
- Where power differentials were at their greatest, namely, between the researchers and suspects, it was especially hard to realise the benefits of AI, without this being awkward, insensitive, naively optimistic and potentially unethical, in the face of hardship, pain and suffering of detainees. As such, from time to time, morally, ethically, practically, the researchers had to step back from the AI approach, filtering this also through their positionality and sense of enthusiasm for AI. However, the research has subsequently enabled detainees' voices to be heard, for example, in relation to the value they attached to being 'treated like a human being' (Skinns et al. 2020). This demonstrates that, in spite of the challenges of implementing AI during data collection, there was still scope for a more inclusive approach in which the least powerful were able to influence the overall conclusions of the research.

- As others have found, the grounding of the research in the lived experiences of detainee and staff helped to make the research more socially useful. The AI approach provided a hook in relation to detainee dignity, which could be readily latched on to by police forces when engaging with the recommendations from the research. This social relevance of findings and recommendations were also a consequence, though, of the mixed-methods research design, in which qualitative research was undertaken first (in Phase 2), in order to provide a grounding for the quantitative research that followed in Phase 3.
- The research certainly humanised detainees, indeed, perhaps necessarily to a greater extent than staff due to the power differentials involved. Though there is not space to discuss it here, there is also scope to humanise police officers more fully because of the AI-informed nature of the research, particularly around themes such as the material conditions of custody. For staff, working in light, bright and well-maintained custody blocks was critical to nearly all aspects of their experiences therein, including to 'good' police custody, perhaps because it helped reduce their sense of doing 'dirty work'.

Third, through our focus on theory derived from AI-informed research as a route to police organisational reform, we have also moved beyond this existing research. AI-influenced interview questions enabled the development of AI-influenced theory, both inductively and deductively (Skinns et al. 2020). Though concepts such as dignity, still needed to be translated into an accessible format in the good practice recommendations, its appeal was sufficient to persuade forces to take up these recommendations locally and nationally and to implement them in Phase 5 of the GPCS. Dignity is only one of a number of theoretical ideas derived from the GPCS, but it serves to illustrate the importance of theory to the impact of AI-influenced research on organisational reform and how theory can indeed provoke 'new possibilities for social action' (Cooperrider and Srivastva 2017, p. 98). In the context of the GPCS, dignity played a particularly critical role in contributing to the destiny phase of the 4-D method in which positive change spills out to increasing numbers of participants within organisations who put into practice the most workable actions (Ludema et al. 2001, Bushe 2012). The relevance of theory to the destiny phase or indeed any other part of the 4-D method is therefore something that would be valuable to explore in future AI-informed criminal justice research.

Fourth, the foregoing discussion suggests that AI is likely to be a valuable tool not just for police custody research, but also for police research as a whole, especially in studies which aim to impact on police stakeholders. The cynicism of the police, which has been identified as a core feature of front-line officers, and the conceptions police officers hold of their work as 'dirty work' (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999), may undermine the use of AI. However, as shown in the GPCS and other research studies, these culture-laden forms of resistance to research can be overcome. This may be due to the fit between the story-telling aspects AI and the story-telling features of police culture. In simple terms, the police like telling stories, sometimes for amusement but also as a way of shaping and re-shaping the beliefs and values about what their job entails. AI involves data collection, which values the stories that participants tell, for example, about best days or ideal interactions. However, this aligning of police culture with AI-informed methodology has its imperfections. Using police storytelling as a source of data may tap into narratives that serve purposes other than data collection. Stories may be embellished and exaggerated, reflecting talk not action, and a gap between what is said and what was actually happens. This may impact on the veracity of what research participants say and thus on the robustness of the research. The link between police story-telling and AI may, on the surface, be a helpful one in terms of eliciting information of a positively framed kind from police research participants. On a deeper level, however, researchers may end up with an inaccurate portrayal of 'good' police work. It is critical therefore for researchers to be reflexively aware of these potential dynamics in AI-informed police research.

A further reason for AI being a valuable tool in police research, including the GPCS, is that it enables academics to conduct research *with* the police as part of diverse police research agenda

(Bowling *et al.* 2019, p. 14). Collaborative working relationships between academics and the organisations they research are an essential component of AI on epistemological, ethical and practical grounds (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987/2017, p. 127). It is therefore understandable that in the GPCS and other police research, AI has helped build trust with police participants and enable access. AI also dovetails with broader drivers, encouraging closer and more collaborative relationships between the police and academics. These include academics' desire to make an impact with their research and police interest in evidence-based practice (Canter 2004, Marks *et al.* 2010, Bannister and Hardill 2013, Engel and Henderson 2013, Rojek *et al.* 2015, Chubb and Watermeyer 2017, Pearce and Evans 2018). Even though these police-academic partnerships may sometimes be 'uneasy alliances' and create challenges for academics in terms of maintaining the interdependent independence necessary for researchers to develop their own perspective and to offer, sometimes critical, insights, (Rock 1990, p. 39, Greene and Skinns 2018, Bacon *et al.* 2020), they have, at least for the time being, become increasingly normalised, suggesting a growing role for AI in police research in the future.[8] Notwithstanding the difficulties with the use of AI in police research, particularly in relation to the ethical treatment of vulnerable citizens, and provided AI is used reflexively and in ways that recognise the power differentials between the police and policed, the findings presented here suggest that a growing role for AI in police research is something to be embraced and also appreciated.

Notes

1. Others have also noted its roots in symbolic interactionism, in particular, in the 'appreciative stance' found in the work of David Matza (Sheptycki 2016, Leeson et al. 2016). He saw the researcher's job as the full comprehension of deviant groups through appreciation and empathy not just criticism (Matza 2010, pp. 15–16).
2. See also Gardner (2018) who reaches similar conclusions in research on local authorities.
3. These are abbreviated to MC, ST, CV and NT, respectively, and combined with either DET to denote detainee, CS to denote custody sergeant or OBS to denote observation notes, followed by a number or date.
4. This consultation largely took place at the National Custody Forum, which meets twice per year. This group is led by the National Police Chief Council's lead for police custody and all forces are represented at it, as are various other national-level stakeholders such as the College of Policing (CoP), Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICRS), the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice etc.
5. Phase 0 took place in 2011 prior to the lead author submitting the grant application to the ESRC. It was used to consult with key stakeholders about the proposed research, to set out its likely benefits for stakeholders and to discuss potential access to conduct the research.
6. For a fuller discussion of ethical issues in police custody research, see Skinns *et al.* (2016).
7. She was visibly upset on arrival in police custody, had numerous medical and mental health problems, including an attempted suicide the month prior to her arrest, as well as prior negative experiences with the police.
8. This is of course unless the recent criticism of police-academic collaboration gains traction (e.g. Jameela 2021). However, it is early days in this shifting terrain and it is therefore hard to predict what will happen to police-academic research collaborations in the future and the role of AI within them.

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