Feminist Criminology

Is the title of a new journal established under the auspices of the Women and Crime division of the American Society of Criminology.

Members interested in submitting papers should contact the editor, Susan Sharp at: *femcrim@ou.edu*

The United Nations, Vienna,

Has recently released some very interesting and partially voluminous documents on the state of illegal drug cultivation, trade, consumption and control efforts around the World.

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Viewpoints

This is a new item for the newsletter- an opportunity for members and non-members to make brief comments on a burning issue or to respond to comments in previous newsletters.

The following item is exactly that- a response to reports of the research methods conference of April 2005 in the last newsletter.

The methods debate in criminology

In the June 2005 issue of this newsletter, there was an interesting report on a conference on methods organised by the British Society of Criminology. It appeared that the keynote speaker, Nick Ross, was arguing for what has almost become the new orthodoxy or establishment in criminology, both in Britain and internationally. This is "crime science", or the view that only experimental methods, modelled on natural science, can produce robust findings that will help policy makers address the problem of crime. Alex Sutherland and Sarah Jones were worried about the focus on quantitative methods of evaluation, and the implication that other methods are worthless, and should not receive support from government agencies like the Home Office.

My natural inclination, both as a qualitative sociologist, and because I am sceptical that governments and criminologists can ever be successful in reducing crime, is to take a hard line against crime science. Where is the evidence that rigorous experimental evaluations have led to a reduction in crime? This is an emperor that seems to have no clothes, and there is already widespread cynicism among the electorate from contrasting how civil servants and Ministers present their achievements in meeting targets and what actually happens in criminal justice and other areas of policy. On the other hand, I also sympathise with crime scientists (see also the Editor's note following Sutherland and Jones' comments) because their complaint is not directed against qualitative researchers, but rather against what they perceive as low standards in the way government agencies conduct research on crime and criminal justice. Their argument is that a science is available, but that it is not being implemented.

I recently published an article in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* which compares the methodological standards in evaluation research and academic peer-reviewed social science. This drew on two examples; a "flagship" project conducted by a well-resourced research agency and a "small-scale" consultancy project, to examine some of the differences (see also the reply by Don Weatherburn 2005). One is that the methodological standards of rigorous quantitative research are not often met in criminal justice research, at least outside the USA. Another is that few researchers in criminology appear to have any interest or expertise in qualitative research. More generally, the article argued that one feature of good academic research, either by quantitative or qualitative researchers, is that it should be thoughtful and reflective about theory and method.

However, this does not happen in doing evaluation research, simply because there is not sufficient time or funding.

Interestingly, criminologists are not the only social scientists who are becoming interested in debates about method. Articles have been published in the *British Journal of Sociology* and *Sociology* about the relationship between pure and applied research, and quantitative and qualitative methods. These debates are not new, but as Carl May argues (personal communication) they have a sharper edge in the contemporary political climate. My own article also reviews the complaints of critical criminologists about increased government controls, and pressures to do evaluation research. In some respects, we have moved full circle back to the 1960s, in that the establishment is now aggressively promoting empiricist research, informed by quasi-functionalist assumptions, as if the sociological movement in criminology had never existed. It is worth remembering that Paul Wiles wrote critically about empiricism in the early 1970s, but is now Director of Research at the Home Office, championing a programme of empiricist research under the banner of "evidence-based" policy.

There are no easy answers to any of these issues, although I make three suggestions in my article. The first is that evaluators need to professionalise, and attempt to raise standards in dealing with local agencies. The second is that government agencies like the Home Office, and politicians like David Blunkett, need to tolerate and even encourage a broader range of research, including qualitative projects which go beyond interviewing in a narrowly evaluative framework. The most worrying part of this debate is the readiness of some proponents of crime science, including Paul Wiles in his (2002) Sir John Barry Memorial lecture, also published by the ANZJC, to dismiss whole traditions, such as postmodernism, without even attempting to understand them (no academic, in my view, should tolerate this kind of anti-intellectualism). The third is that criminologists have spent too much time debating politics, and need more engagement with how method is understood and debated in mainstream sociology.

References

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Contact: max.travers@utas.edu.au