

# THE STATUS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN CRIMINOLOGY

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## Standards of Rigor in Criminology and the Place of Qualitative Scholarship

Criminology's emergence as an independent discipline is fairly recent. For the most part, criminology developed as a subfield of sociology, and leading criminologists are now housed both in sociology and criminology programs. Criminologists have long felt marginalized within the discipline of sociology (with evidence of good reason), and this has been one of the factors contributing to its independent development. This split is significant, both in terms of situating the field in the historical linkages between the two disciplines, and in understanding the consequences of this division for the scholarly study of crime generally, and the place of qualitative research in criminology specifically.

Qualitative research was very much at the heart of early studies of crime. The field research tradition of the Chicago School—and its use of the urban landscape as a social laboratory—resulted in numerous studies of crime and deviance (see Adler and Adler, 1987). As this model of research was contested within the broader field of sociology, so also it fell out of favor among those studying crime, particularly with the evolution of survey research methods and the advancement of statistical techniques (see Hagan and McCarthy, 1997: 3-4).

While there remains a divide within sociology between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and interpretive and positivist epistemologies, it is even more palpable within the discipline of criminology.<sup>1</sup> While criminology remains influenced by its sociological roots, its emergence as a separate discipline (with separate journals and separate audiences) has resulted in greater insulation of the discipline from theoretical developments in other social sciences. This has limited the cross-fertilization of ideas across disciplines. It has also meant that many of the trends that have taken hold, or at least shaken up sociology's claim as positivist Science—for instance, the postmodern and poststructuralist turns—have had minimal impact on the criminological enterprise. Moreover, because large scale crime research is funded by government agencies in justice and public health, often with the expectation of direct policy relevance, the claim to “scientific” rigor is ever important, and remains largely defined in quantitative and positivistic terms. This trend is reflected in the dominance of theory testing models, often with the use of large, complex datasets that require advanced statistical techniques.

Largely as a result of the revitalization of neighborhood studies of crime, as well as growing interest in situational aspects of offending, there has been a recent resurgence of appreciation<sup>2</sup> for qualitative research in criminology. Before discussing this further, however, I would first like to

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<sup>1</sup> My discussion here applies specifically to the U.S. context of criminology.

<sup>2</sup> Appreciation, though, can co-occur with marginalization, particularly when qualitative work is seen as an “added bonus” that, for instance, makes for good reading to attract the interest of distracted undergraduates, but does not have epistemological impact on the core agendas of the discipline.

focus on some of the consequences of the positivist/quantitative dominance in the field for qualitative scholarship on crime.

First, the distinction between qualitative data collection methods and qualitative analysis is an important one. It has been common in the field to employ qualitative data collection methods or use qualitative data for quantitative analyses. This is evident in several areas of research. Policing scholars, for instance, have relied on large-scale observational studies of police/citizen interactions to analyze police decision-making (focusing on the impact of citizen behavior on arrest decisions, and more recently, also examining the impact of police actions on citizen behavior). In addition, official narrative records such as police incident reports have been employed in the study of homicide and other crimes. While each of these types of data sources would be useful for qualitative analysis of social processes associated with crime and criminal justice, they have been used primarily as source material to create quantitative datasets to examine event characteristics statistically.

Second is a general lack of training in, and thus understanding of, the epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research, appropriate qualitative data analysis strategies, and the particular strengths of qualitative research for illuminating social processes associated with crime and justice. Qualitative research is routinely characterized as “descriptive,” “exploratory,” and has even been excluded from what constitutes “empirical data.” This has resulted in some seemingly contradictory outcomes.

On the one hand, because it is viewed as simply descriptive (and thus easy to accomplish), there is some use of qualitative methods among criminologists not trained in its methodology. The result is that qualitative data often appears as supplemental, descriptive data that provides “color” and “flash” to liven up quantitative analyses. Likewise, it is common to see studies that make use of qualitative data (most typically in-depth interview data)—but not qualitative analysis techniques—such that narrative accounts are plugged into preconceived conceptual frameworks as descriptive evidence (or descriptive illustration), rather than being used inductively for theory building or theory refinement. Such work is problematic on a number of levels: it is unable to further social inquiry, because the data is not rigorously analyzed; and it reinforces a sense of the limited utility of qualitative inquiry for the development and elaboration of social theory. Often, analysis flaws (or lack of analysis) is apparent to a qualitatively trained eye, but goes unnoticed to a wider criminological audience.

On the other hand, the lack of understanding also means that qualitative studies are often held to inappropriate standards of (quantitative) rigor. For instance, this is the case when case studies, as well as purposive and snowball sampling strategies (typical and often necessary for the study of criminal offenders), are criticized for failing to adhere to standards of generalizability. In addition, misunderstanding of the method and its goals sometimes leads to a devaluation of its validity. For instance, I recently co-authored a paper based on in-depth interviews with African American young men about their negative experiences with the police. The paper was derided by one reviewer as “journalistic,” and another reviewer referred to the data—in the case of young men’s descriptions of their own encounters with the police—as “hearsay,” and—in the case of their accounts of their perceptions of neighborhood policing—as “double hearsay.” I give this example not to bemoan a set of negative reviews, but to highlight what I see as dangers to the

qualitative enterprise when reviewers drawn from the broader discipline do not appreciate its methodological approach, and thus qualitative studies are expected to adhere to standards which undermine the very strengths and foundations of the methodology.

### Standards of Rigor in Qualitative Research within Criminology

It is difficult to identify a uniform set of standards for rigor in qualitative research within criminology. This results in part from the issues noted above. On the other hand, I noted earlier a growing appreciation for qualitative research in the discipline. Despite the dominance of positivist paradigms adopting quantitative approaches, there are many significant qualitative studies of crime, criminalization, and criminal justice processes.

This research emanates from several sources, including scholars from other social science disciplines whose research addresses these issues but who do not participate actively in the discipline (see, for example, Adler and Adler, 1985; Bourgois, 1995; Comfort, 2003; Glassner and Loughlin, 1987; Ferguson, 2000; Katz, 1988; Pattillo, 1998; Venkatesh, 2002), as well as criminologists (and criminological sociologists/anthropologists) themselves (see, for example, Anderson, 1999; Fagan and Wilkinson, 1998; Ferrell, 1996; Fleisher, 1998; Jacobs, 1999; Maruna, 2001; Moore, 1991; Shover, 1996; Sullivan, 1989; Vigil, 1988; Wright and Decker, 1994, 1997). Qualitative research is perhaps most widely established in criminology among feminist scholars studying gender, race, crime and criminal justice<sup>3</sup> (see, for example, Bottcher, 2001; Britton, 2003; Joe-Laidler and Hunt, 1997; Kruttschnitt, et al., 2000; Maher, 1997; McCorkel, 2003; Miller, 1998, 2001; Miller and White, 2003; Mullins and Wright, 2003; Richie, 1996). In addition, there have been several notable efforts among criminologists to integrate qualitative and quantitative research in ways that go beyond my earlier description (see Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Nurse, 2002; Sampson and Laub, 2003).

What does not exist, however, is ongoing, active dialogue among qualitative researchers in criminology to discuss issues of methodological rigor. Nonetheless, I will make note here of some common themes and lauded works that provide insight into these issues. I focus specifically on qualitative studies in criminology that have utilized in-depth interview techniques, as this has been the approach most typically adopted (but see Ferrell, 1996; Fleisher, 1998; Maher, 1997; McCorkel, 2003). Much of this work focuses on what Hagan and McCarthy characterize as the “foreground” of crime, examining such issues as in situ motivations for offending, social processes associated with crime and the streets, and situational analyses of crime events. This is the primary body of work I will draw from here.

SAMPLING. Most qualitative research in criminology relies on purposive or snowball sampling techniques. The study of active offenders, for instance, requires the use of innovative methods to locate research participants. One technique successfully employed is the use of a fieldworker immersed in the social setting to generate contacts (see Jacobs, 1999; Wright and Decker, 1994; 1997). Another is the use of samples identified through various social control agents (Maruna, 2001; Miller, 2001), though this strategy comes with limitations that scholars must address in their analyses (see Agar, 1977).

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<sup>3</sup> Though within a discipline dominated by positivist epistemology, this results in some level of dual marginalization based on the combination of theoretical and methodological approaches.

THE USE OF COMPARATIVE SAMPLES. An increasingly popular sampling strategy within qualitative criminological studies is the use of comparative samples. Such an approach allows for some specification of similarities and variations in social processes and meaning systems across groups (for instance, offenders/non-offenders, desisters/persisters, females/males, African Americans/whites/Latinos), settings (neighborhoods, cities, institutional settings) and/or over time. This strategy can strengthen internal validity by allowing for more refined analysis and greater contextual specification.

ANALYSIS STRATEGIES. This is perhaps the black box of qualitative research in criminology. While sampling and data collection procedures are widely discussed, systematic descriptions of the process of data analysis are typically not provided. Hagan and McCarthy (1995), for example, who blend qualitative and quantitative data, focus on the research questions of interest as their description of the analysis strategy. Some researchers describe the use of triangulation procedures, the examination of deviant cases, the use of interrater checks for reliability of analysis, and/or the use of tabular data to verify the representativeness of the patterns presented in data analysis. Such strategies, when described, speak to the internal validity of the analysis. Issues of reliability are typically addressed through the use of multiple interviews or repeated question sequences within a single interview, or are assumed by the current involvement of research participants in the activities of interest.

Finally, Maruna (2001) provides an example of a detailed description of his analysis plan, strongly influenced by positivist models. His discussion focuses on the use of blind coding by multiple coders (to achieve interrater reliability) of “episodes or phrases that were extracted from the body of the larger text” (p. 170) so that the coders had no information about the broader context of the interview. These pieces of text were then applied to “well validated” (p. 169) a priori coding schemes. Coding focused on “manifest (rather than latent) content or style” (p. 169), and a small number of women and minorities were included in the sample “in an effort to uncover the universal rather than the...specific” (p. 176). I highlight this particular study in detail because Maruna’s use of this analysis strategy was well received by quantitative scholars in criminology,<sup>4</sup> but raises vexing questions about the disciplinary push to inscribe such analytic strategies to a methodological approach whose strengths include inductive theory development and detailed attention to context, including the context of speech within the interview process (see Miller and Glassner, 2004). This problem is exacerbated because of the lack of transparency in most qualitative scholars’ descriptions of their analysis strategies.

#### Addressing Areas of Divergence Between Criminology and Other Disciplines

As described, standards of rigor in criminology are neither unified nor well specified. While this is less the case with regard to sampling and data collection techniques, it is a serious limitation with regard to standards for data analysis and the integration of theory. Several suggestions follow from this recognition.

First, it may be beneficial to develop avenues through which qualitative criminologists can come together to discuss methodological issues and address standards of rigor. This is important both

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<sup>4</sup> His study received the major book award in 2001.

to make the process more transparent for scholarly audiences, and to ensure that appropriate standards are applied in the evaluation of qualitative scholarship within the discipline. The lack of transparency is also associated with the limited amount of data sharing that takes place, and the general lack of public availability of the data collected for nearly all qualitative studies in the field.<sup>5</sup> In addition, I noted earlier the broader problem of criminology's insulation from theoretical and other developments in other social science fields. Greater cross-fertilization across disciplines would be beneficial for the field generally, and would benefit qualitative researchers specifically.

Second, a serious limitation within the field is the lack of qualitative training for young scholars. With few exceptions, the training of new generations of scholars within leading criminology programs is dominated by a quantitative theory-testing orientation. My own program, widely recognized as more diverse and complementary methodologically than most (and Ph.D. students are required to take qualitative research methods), nonetheless strenuously trains students throughout the program in positivist epistemologies. Of course, these are practical imperatives of the market. But the broader problems for qualitative scholarship within the discipline are nonetheless replicated. Anecdotally, I would suggest this does not stem from a lack of interest on students' part. I have been invited to speak with students in several programs where there is recognition among faculty of student interest in the methodology, but with limited faculty specialization to meet this need.

#### Promising Areas for Investigation in Criminology

Several topics and areas are promising in the discipline for investigation. Qualitative methods have been applied widely in situational studies of crime, and have included analyses of such issues as offender decision-making, social networks, and social processes shaping criminal events. In some cases, this research has been combined with analyses of gender/race inequalities, as well as neighborhood and street contexts. Such studies will be improved with greater attention to strategies for making linkages between micro-level interactional processes, state policies, and structural inequalities (see Wacquant, 2002). Again, this would be facilitated by decreased insulation from developments in other social science disciplines.

Additional areas have received some limited attention from qualitative researchers, but offer promise for future investigations. This includes the use of life history narratives to understand pathways to offending (and desistance) (see Daly, 1992; Gaarder and Belknap, 2002; Giordano et al., 2002; Moore, 1991; Sampson and Laub, 2003), as well as research on organizational processes and decision-making within criminal justice and other relevant institutions (see Britton, 2003; Comfort, 2003; Ferguson, 2000; Frohmann, 1991; Kruttschnitt, et al., 2000; McCorkel, 2003).

In addition, a number of opportunities exist for greater cross-fertilization within the discipline between qualitative and quantitative research. For example, there are promising examples of efforts to test theoretical propositions emerging from qualitative studies using quantitative analyses (see Peterson et al., 2001; Stewart and Simons, 2004). Moreover, efforts are underway

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, this is a challenging problem for criminology in particular because the protection of confidentiality is especially important given the potentially damaging nature of data collected from those involved in crime.

to develop studies that are multi-method, multi-level and/or comparative, and these offer promising approaches for efforts to integrate qualitative and quantitative research (see for example Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Klein et al., 2001). Finally, there are underdeveloped opportunities with data already on hand for such combined efforts: quantitative studies which draw from qualitative data, such as those I made note of earlier, offer just such an untapped resource.

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