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ALLEGIANCE AND AMBIVALENCE

Some Dilemmas in Researching Disorder and Violence

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This issue arises from our deep commitment to criminological research and the need for honest accounts of its complexity and emotional intricacy. We wished to share, with neophyte researchers but also with others, some of the dilemmas we have faced and what these dilemmas signify. We aimed to encourage those who have embarked on difficult and sensitive research topics to reflect upon, and find meaning in, their own dilemmas.

As scholars, new and experienced, we write about actions that cause the suffering of many individuals—law breakers, law enforcers and victims. Yet by and large, we criminologists are professionals whose task is to observe and analyse account after account of the kinds of havoc individuals, groups or the state mete out. We are expected to do so in objective and reasonable prose, often discarding the turmoil encountered as irrelevant and standing in the way of the data. We rarely consider that such turmoil constitute data (Liebling 1999; and see Pickering, this issue). We face moral turmoil, as we witness or become part of, scenes of violence, struggle or maltreatment. Why is there so little dialogue on these matters? Haines and Sutton (2000) writing in this journal have likened criminology to a 'secular religion' that should be characterized as a paradigm with a moral discourse. The authors assert that 'all work—our own included—has a religious or moral dimension' (Haines and Sutton 2000: 147). With this we agree. But both of us have come to understand that no matter what our individual reputations in criminology as a discipline[1] we cannot avoid squalid politics and ethical predicaments when researching crime and violence.

Some criminologists may wonder why others are affected by the unhappy subjects we choose to study. In a presentation a few years ago, a leading criminologist mused that he could have been a professional bird watcher rather than a student of crime. At the time, Stanko envied this criminologist's honesty when he admitted that the substance of criminology seemed to him uncontroversial and apolitical. Of course, bird watchers must get worked up about the deterioration of the environment that affect the life and happiness of feathered creatures. There are probably more people with membership of animal and bird welfare organizations in the UK than criminologists in the world. But somehow bird watchers can be uncontroversial voyeurs of birds because it is pleasurable. Although some criminologists have been accused of being voyeurs of others' suffering, the controversy about politics and the emotional toll of criminal harm never seem far

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[1] Stanko is known as a feminist advocate; Liebling is known as a relatively tame critic of the prison, albeit one whose choices of research topic might belie this image.

behind. What is wrong with us that we have had sleepless nights from doing the kind of work we do?

This issue had its inception in a seminar for researchers of violence sponsored by the ESRC Violence Research Programme in April 1999. Throughout this seminar, we assumed that the kinds of experiences we have had as researchers—sleepless nights, encounters with danger, problems with articulating what violence means to different people in different contexts—were common to all. Many of the funded projects on the ESRC's programme raised methodological issues few researchers have addressed or resolved in print. How does a researcher safely and accurately collect information about violence and prostitution while conducting interviews with working women in the middle of the night? Do interviews conducted in massage parlours reflect objective information about the dangers working women face in the sex industry? Can research on violence lead to violence and what happens if it does (Burman, this issue; Winlow, *et al.* this issue)? What are political and emotional demands of doing research in a highly politicized undeclared, domestic war zone such as Northern Ireland? Can we be certain that even the language of a questionnaire methodology captures the tensions between an individual's professional identity and his/her personal identity (Gabe *et al.*, this issue)? Does the mainstay of criminological research, the crime survey, capture sufficiently the violence women experience (Walby and Myhill, this issue)?

The dilemmas of the researchers participating in the ESRC's Violence Research Programme are not unusual for many of those studying sensitive topics. Not only did researchers in the ESRC programme raise concerns about the impact of their research on research subjects themselves. They were acutely aware that conducting such research put some of us at great personal risk. Craig *et al.* (2000) recently addressed the potential dangers of doing research as a problem for social scientists, and advocate the development of a Safety Code of Practice. Much of what they suggest—assessing the risk of the fieldwork site, taking precautions during the fieldwork, maintaining back-up, supervision and strategies for protection—were strategies incorporated by many of the Violence Research Programme project teams due to necessity. Researchers however reported haggling with officials about whether a mobile phone was a luxury or a safety device worthy of public funding. Ultimately, researchers had to rely on their instinct when faced with compromising situations, displaying courage and emotional exhaustion as a result. Safety planning does not eliminate the dilemmas of having to contend with great difficulties in managing some research. We suggest that issues of emotional burn-out or potential danger are not unique to the violence research projects funded by the ESRC (as several of the articles in this issue attest). However, the ESRC research initiative sharpened our focus and provided the stimulus for the forum and the exchange. Safety planning does not serve to diminish the very real methodological and practical problems of studying violence and other forms of hidden crime, such as the informal linkages of so-called criminal networks or the bribery of public officials by corporate representatives vying for favourable contracts.

This collection of articles is an attempt to open up a discussion with our colleagues about the difficulties in researching order, disorder and violence in the UK. Such difficulties, we feel, are inevitable. These include juggling our emotional reactions to the subject matter, feelings of ambivalence towards and allegiance with those we research, and discovering the best way of capturing and understanding what violence means without jeopardizing our own safety. We found recently while co-facilitating a

seminar[2] that few shared private responses to researching violence. Few voiced the impact of this work on their emotional well-being to co-workers or to their supervisors (for exceptions, see Maher 1997; Stanko 1998; Liebling 1999; Ferrell and Hamm 1998). In addition, we also found that as a group we didn't often share what happened to our own theorizing when our political allegiances were questioned or heightened when we analysed controversial data. We asked the following questions at the seminar:

– Do we worry that our own findings will be used to harm people?
– Do we change our approach to analysis when we cannot bear to read what someone did to another or how it affected their lives?
– How do we cope with the anger that arises when we witness and document institutional injustices that hurt or degrade people?
– Is there something distinct about studying violence, as opposed to research we conduct in violent or potentially violent settings?

We found these questions helpful; they opened up a different agenda in debates about method and criminology that do not appear in most published texts (for a recent and welcome exception, see the collection by King and Wincup 2000). The purpose of this issue is to share some of our thoughts on these debates with our colleagues, and to provide a place where some developed accounts of this hidden dimension of the research process can be shared. We include debates about methodology too, for we wish to encourage others to reach beyond traditional approaches to crime and violence. It is through such discoveries—emotional as well as methodological—that we can challenge contemporary debate about crime.

Criminology, Order and Disorder

We wished to ground this issue firmly in the research generated by the ESRC Violence Research Programme. In preparing these articles for publication, and in hosting the seminar we organized to support those conducting so-called sensitive research, we appreciated that voicing our concerns about method and emotion have wider relevance. As colleagues in criminology, we would like to characterize our work as the study of disorder and violence. The term disorder captures a broader province, and denotes the unpredictability, irregularity and turbulence of our research settings and themes, in which violence and the memory of violence are ever present. Even in apparently ordered environments (such as we encounter in prisons most of the time, on the streets much of the time, and in the home some of the time), the under-the-surface tensions rising and falling in those apparently quieter moments register in us and in our research participants continually, and we read them as we might read the faces of our friends when we know that all is not well. It is when we do not know whether restraint will be shown, whether disturbances will erupt, whether agitation will escalate into violence, that we are faced with some of our most difficult (and yet informative) predicaments. As criminologists, we might consider all of our research settings as sensitive (Renzetti and Lee 1994).

[2] The ESRC Violence Research Programme sponsored a seminar for researchers in April 1998.

Is Researching Violence Special?

Of course, we can hear our colleagues say, not all criminologists grapple with these anxieties head on. Is researching violence special? The technical descriptions of social science methodologies and the debate about how to collect sensitive data rarely treat specific research topics differently. The King and Wincup volume provides an excellent and unusually honest account of the research process by well established criminologists in an untypically reflexive mood, and of some of the methodological and organizational issues which are peculiar to the study of the police, prisons, organized crime, the criminal courts, community penalties, or victims. Its focus is largely on officially sponsored research, although it does include a number of tantalising (but brief) accounts of the real research experience by less established contributors. What this issue seeks to do is to focus mainly on the theme of violence arising from the ESRC initiative, the broader research issues that these research projects raise, and the emotional toll such encounters with violent worlds and lives take. We share few of these experiences and when we do so, we do it privately. We miss out on an opportunity to theorize from (as well as reconcile ourselves with) our emotional data and in so doing fail to consider fully both the nature of knowledge and the nature of violence.

Many research students undergo the same social science training as those exploring parental choice in education or shopping in tax havens. Two topics do regularly feature in introductory social science research methods texts as marking potential problems for budding or even veteran criminologists: maintaining ethical standards and assuring that data are analytically objective. Ethical research is typically defined as that which safeguards the rights and feelings of those who are being researched. Assuring confidentiality, minimizing the impact of recalling and reporting stressful events, and avoiding deception are three components of any ethical expectation for social science researchers (Denscombe 1998). The value of objective analysis is the reliability and validity of its findings. The assumption is, despite several decades of critique of this position, that such objectivity is achievable. But the nature of violence, its definitions and its meanings are continuously contested. Those who choose to research violence will always be walking on shaky (i.e. socially and politically constructed) ground. Some of us know we are studying violence, even when the topic chosen is something more mundane (Incentives and Earned Privileges for prisoners). Lee (1995) reminds us that settings for research are made dangerous by violent conflict or in social situations where interpersonal violence and risk are commonplace (1995: 1). Researching violence means we choose to (or become obliged to) explore the dangerousness of violent groups or settings. Sometimes this means we put ourselves at risk. Concern for personal safety may impact upon the manner in which data are collected. It may also affect ethical and analytical objectivity. While there may be many reading this issue who have not faced the raw emotions emanating from these dilemmas, we think there are many more who have. Few of us share how we resolve or understand them.

This collection of articles highlights ethical concerns about the objectivity of data in ways that make visible the ambiguity within and without research on and about disorder and violence. There are for example inherent uncertainties in the way we choose our allegiances in the field. Take for instance the need for social scientists to protect the confidentiality of research subjects. Who or what is our allegiance to when, for instance, a police officer hits an arrestee or a bouncer roughly ejects an abusive drunk from a

night-club? Whose confidentiality should be protected? Whose rights should be upheld? Whose actions are on the side of right? Researching the violence of police, bouncers or prison life assumes that we can agree on the nature of the distinctions between legal and illegal use of violence in particular contexts. Such attributions are influenced by the assumption that we can agree on what we mean by violence. In the UK, however, the statute books are full of attempts to define particular behaviour as illegal (see Stanko *et al.* 1998).[3] If law is continually trying to redefine criminality, so too are researchers. This is a moral as well as legal issue, as criminologists have so often argued in the past.

The substantive topic of violence traverses so many areas in criminology. It is not limited to the study of harmful acts of one person to another. State policies, such as those concerning the death penalty or workplace deaths, or the changing nature of prison regimes, for instance, could be classified as studies of forms of state sanctioned or institutional violence. By and large we associate the potential risk of physical or sexual harm with the study of violence. Perhaps we also assume that if we do not speak to victims or offenders directly, we can avoid the emotional rollercoaster of face to face interviews. Yet so much of our work in criminology documents the sadness and despair of others. As Shani D'Cruze recently observed in her study of Victorian working women, 'I read many things in the course of this research that made me sad and angry' (1998: 1). Bosworth, this issue, argues that the study of historical prison records made her confront the indignities, humiliation and horror women faced in seventeenth or eighteenth century France. Ballinger's (2000) detailed and sensitive study of the last 15 women hanged in England and Wales demonstrates in a thought-provoking way that a historical account displays the sorrow and despair of these forgotten women. Not only did she discover the detail of many of these women's lives, but she also discovered facts that suggested that some of these hanged women were wrongly convicted. Historical research and research on state policies about imprisonment, the treatment of vulnerable and other witnesses or corporate manslaughter may cause distress for researcher[4] and reader alike. How much do we as researchers filter what readers see of the data we collect?

We should always acknowledge that criminological research (and perhaps especially research focused on violence) will inevitably raise dilemmas for researchers that involve some of the following: emotional distress, heightened adrenaline, fear, sometimes trauma, worry about and real risks to one's safety, anger, and anxiety about losing access to one's research site. We may experience savage critique when our findings are sensitive and unwelcome (see for example, Baldwin, in King and Wincup 2000), we have to learn to handle media obsession and distortion, we learn to listen to the expression of distress, to lives whose pains we can only imagine (or which we occasionally recognize or remember). We develop allegiances and commitments, or risk (re)victimizing those we study (see Walklate, in King and Wincup 200: 198). We experience shame, when we make second-rate judgments, say the wrong thing, act carelessly, or fail to anticipate the consequences of this comment, that question, or this report. Like King and Wincup (2000: 331) we wanted to make our and others' analyses of the research process more honest, to

[3] Most recently, the passage of the Protection of Harassment Act defines psychological violence as criminally harmful, violence with a racist motivation as aggravating its seriousness, and offered vulnerable witnesses special protection against courtroom intimidation.

[4] When Stanko was conducting her research for *Everyday Violence*, the person transcribing the taped interviews reported distress when transcribing the tapes. She hadn't considered preparing the transcriber for the kinds of things reported by her interviewees.

learn more from them, but also to offer encouragement to those in earlier stages of their academic apprenticeships, who seem to experience these struggles alone, and with guilt. We are unclear about how we as research managers as well as fieldworkers, can act on our duty of care to those we employ. We are sceptical about the utility of stringent codes of conduct. Like law in the books, such codes are unlikely to apply easily to the real world in action.

In many respects, with the passing of the much of vitriol from the theoretical criminological camps of the 1960s to the late 1980s, the discipline of criminology has established an aura of cosy realist objectivity or even consensus. Yet one could look back at the discord within the discipline and redefine it as stemming from how researchers acknowledged their so-called political allegiances. Researchers acknowledged the structures of power in their analyses of data and criminological problems. Feminist researchers, left realists, radical commentators, and administrative criminologists were grouped into camps, classified and at times pilloried for their allegiances either to the state or to particular groups of people. The often-heated theoretical debates of the 1960s through the 1980s were fought largely so that issues of class, race and gender found a way of challenging the so-called objectivity of academic discourse. The debate among researchers with varying alliances may be more civil in this first decade of 2000. Haines and Sutton (2000) reassuringly remind us that this does not mean the moral mission—located in laying bare one's political allegiances—has passed. 'Judgmentalism', they state, 'is everywhere in criminology' (2000: 149). So are, we argue in this issue, the emotional and methodological dilemmas in managing allegiances and alliances in our criminological research. Glancing at the titles of many of the articles published in this journal, one is struck by the strains experienced on a day-to-day basis. What is it like doing research on such difficult, saddening and emotional topics such as, the release of politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland (McEvoy *et al.* 1998), police canteen culture (Waddington 1999) or the agency/victimization of prostitute women (Phoenix 2000)? So how do we manage the dilemmas of allegiance and ambivalence that (we assert) inevitably arise in our work? How might we train young professionals to cope with what has now become routine tension and at times, routine sorrow?

Is researching violence special? It depends, we suppose, on how close one gets to the subject matter or experiences the impact of the implications of, for example, imagining, documenting (or having experienced) terrorizing confinement or rape. Not all of our fellow colleagues will agree that the work they do as criminologists is emotionally draining and taxing. Some may think it is very exciting indeed (see Ferrell and Hamm 1998 for a more radical account). Yet all criminologists must confront the dilemmas of engaging in a field where simple research findings become part of a popular discourse that has a special moral mission in contemporary society (Sparks 1992; Sasson 1995).

We would like to raise three themes. First, crime talk, and especially violence talk, is a contemporary form of moral discourse. Each of us is engaged in an enterprise that must engage with this contemporary discourse. Second, this moral discourse is steeped in contradictory notions of what kinds of crime and violence are normal, acceptable, illegal and abnormal. As researchers we are often in situations where we are to make judgments about behaviour, and decide whether such behaviour is worthy of note. Finally, such decisions may cause great emotional turmoil. What then do we do with an emotional reaction to the process of data collection?

Moral Talk

Media representation of violence emphasizes its spectacle. There continues to be a fascination with the potential excitement of violence (Best 1999; Brownstein 2000; and in academic criminology, Ferrell and Hamm 1998, Katz 1988). Such media reporting of violence is laced with its condemnation, while at the same time ignoring the enjoyment or pathos that reading about violence brings to viewers and readers.[5] The same may be true for those who study professional or organized crime. Popular attention continues to highlight the disorder of drunken louts over the brutality of police or others of those in power. The bizarre and macabre feature prominently. While the actions of family and friends dominate the statistics on violence, we huddle over stories of those aberrant few who snatch and kill children or who randomly attack women. Yet the ordinariness of most violence is seldom worth commentary (Stanko 1990; D'Cruze 2000).

There is an overall assumption that the moral talk of the media is matched by the immorality of the violent. But how do we take a stance on violence? Do all of us condemn its use? How do we study the informal systems that cause pain to others without tacitly condoning its use (Winlow *et al.*, this issue)? Moral dilemmas of research and fieldwork have been addressed by a number of researchers. It is useful to confront these tensions when researching violence. Sometimes we may understand and justify to ourselves a person's use of violence. Do we offer the same moral stance to its recipients? Or its other judges?

Representing violence more fully exposes the tensions of its popular portrayal, which may lead to those who study it being labelled as thrill seekers. Winlow *et al.*'s (this issue) ethnography of door staff muses that 'while we became fascinated by this occupation and all that surrounds it, we were never in the business of thrill seeking'. Bouncers do not randomly choose whether or when to defend themselves and others. They are required to deal with violence and sometimes do violence as part of their job. Being close enough to describe the way in which violence is a part of the *bone fide* occupational qualification for the peace keeping of leisure establishments means 'doing violence' as well. Westmarland (this issue) suggests that even as a police observer, she had to judge whether violence was necessary. She speaks of the way her experiences of violence in the so-called field led not to condemnation but to feelings of ambivalence and ambiguity. Was she to report the illegal use of force to a superior officer? Would this lead to loss of access to the research field? Violence in the course of self-defence may be laudable. But what happens if such self-defence happens in the course of conducting research?

But the line between self-defence and unnecessary violence is very thin indeed for some. As researchers, we are making these distinctions when collecting and analysing our data. Winlow *et al.* describe the entry and maintenance of access of their fieldworker for a study of door staff in the night-time economy. They detail the way in which Winlow constantly walked a fine line between passing and being exposed as an untrustworthy worker. But walking away from violence just wasn't possible. Both Winlow *et al.* and Westmarland question self-censorship in the reporting of state and private police operational work. How many of us who have conducted research with the police witnessed

[5] Stanko muses that soon there will be scholarly analyses of the significance of reading Harry Potter for children!

violence? If we did not, why didn't we see it? As researchers we know that the meaning of violence, its use and its impact vary—and this variance includes its moral foundation. In many respects, the term *moral* recognizes the negotiation of power differentials among different individuals, categories of individuals and wider distributions of privilege in the UK. Violent acts do not just occur between two independent actors. Those actors are located in a complex set of relationships. Such relationships affect the way individuals use and give meaning to experiences of violence. Any research on violence therefore is ultimately a narrative on the morality of social space and social privilege. For example, feminist research is credited for naming patriarchy as potentially dangerous. Men's violence to women was treated as normal and rarely an affront to the moral civility of British (and other) culture. So too the naming of racist violence as deserving of public condemnation challenges the manner in which such abuse was considered an extension of ordinary disputes between different people. Intimidation and violence often go hand in hand. It is we suggest virtually impossible to understand the power of intimidation without understanding the way in which people understand how social relations order their safety. As researchers, such astute awareness can only be informed by a sensitivity to deny legitimacy to threat. And the legitimacy is derived from the social privilege of some people over others. Researchers must be aware of the moral mission which includes their own understanding about how they feel about the violence they hear about, write about and represent to others. Yet sometimes comment about the nature of power relations in the use of violence may lead to questions about a researcher's objectivity.

Normative Judgment

Telling any story about violence entails a negotiation with norms. How the story of *what happened* is told, how the actors are described, and the consequences of the harm are only part of the account. Burman and her colleagues (this issue) detail the constant debates and concerns about the nature of definitions of violence arising in the study of violence and girls. They also admit, 'in retrospect, we underestimated the centrality of violence and abuse . . . to young people's lives.' The wider social context, the clash between class, sexuality, age and reason and the storyteller's stake in how the narrative is constructed are all important to the way research on violence is as much as a cautionary tale about how violence and abuse is a central feature of many people's lives. We have an image of the legitimate use of violence and the illegitimate use of violence, and this imagery comes out in the way respondents talk about it. Gabe *et al.* (this issue) try to tackle this as a problem of methodology. Exploring the way in which professionals talk about violence, as well as the professional stance against violence held by their professional organizations, the researchers traverse boundaries of discourse in the collection of information. They further interrogate these linguistic boundaries during their interviews with different professional groups. Unpicking the way discourses of violence dovetail with the moral mission of criminology, and the emotive content of the research task, enables us to see how and why emotionality creeps into the talk of those interviewed, and perhaps into the very instruments for the collection of data on violence. Ambivalence about naming violence as harmful still abounds (see Walby and Myhill, this issue). Although criminal statutes define behaviour as criminal acts, few people report

these acts to police. Whatever the reason for eschewing criminal law, people display their own ambivalence to naming harmful acts as criminal violence.

Outrage

Pickering, this issue, describes the high emotional toll she experienced conducting research in Northern Ireland. She used her outsider status as an Australian to gain access to Northern Irish women political activists. She could not just listen to the women's stories without feeling outrage in response to the violence she witnessed and recorded. Was her research compromised? She felt that such outrage was harnessed to inform her understanding about policing in Northern Ireland. Through awareness of these emotions, Pickering is able to explore the process of removing oneself from the research subject, a form of what she terms *othering*. She defines this as interrogating the assumptions of shared experience on the basis of gender, race or class. Questioning shared experience risks a form of betrayal in the research process. She suggests that we must modify our methodologies to take account of what is ugly or unwelcome or alienating. Emotionality, she concludes, is a 'critical way of knowing'.

Final Thoughts

How desirable is the capacity to become personally involved a research skill? What are the advantages and limits of emotional engagement in research? Can we take more than one side? Can we feel deep sympathy for those we study and still conduct rigorous research? Does acquiring sympathy for those whose worlds we study undermine or add to our professional integrity? Can our theories be objective even if our values are not? (see Liebling, this issue). How do we make judgments about what is right in the circumstances, when faced with seemingly impossible choices? Researchers have to draw on their personal, emotional, human resources—on bodies of knowledge which lie 'beyond the orbit of traditional academic discourse' (Ferrell and Hamm 1998: 257) in order to be faithful to and good at their craft. Effective research, we argue, is grounded in investments in innovation. Surely, learning how to be creative forms a part of any research apprenticeship as well as keeping us on our toes throughout our research careers. To do so, we argue, we need to be more open and reflective about these dimensions of the research endeavour. This issue offers a contribution to such reflexivity.

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