Book Review

The Poetics of Crime: Understanding and Researching Crime and Deviance Through Creative Sources

Michael Hviid Jacobsen (ed.)

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The Poetics of Crime provides a stimulating introduction to creative methods for studying crime, deviance and social control. Throughout the book, the contributors provide evidence that ‘poetic’ approaches are required in order to gain a deeper understanding of the creativity at the heart of human action. As explained by Wender, ‘Human beings are never “merely” present we dwell poetically, insofar as we make meaningful every phenomenon that we experience’ (p. 35). As a human activity, it follows that understanding crime and deviance requires investigation of the poetics through which actors make crime meaningful. The chapters in this book both demonstrate the case for exploring the meanings of crime, deviance and control and provide examples of creative methods through which this can be accomplished. The book is divided into four sections exploring in turn (i) the creative and symbolic nature of crime and social control, (ii) how fiction can help to understand criminological concepts, (iii) the representation of crime and deviance in popular culture and (iv) creative approaches for understanding crime and deviance.

The need for creative criminology is established in the first part of the book, demonstrating the imaginative, creative and normative process of crime, constructed through the meanings and emotions of actors. In Chapter 1, Wender argues that police arrests are symbolic interactions that cannot be understood as reductions of simple causal factors because each arrest is a distinct interaction between actors, each with their own constructions of the meaning of the encounter. Wender’s case examples show that police officers who successfully interpret the dynamics of interaction and appreciate the emotions of arrestees have a greater aptitude for completing an arrest without forceful retaliation. In Chapter 2, Brisman presents an analysis of a creative crime known as ‘culture jamming’. This ‘crime’, a form of social protest, involves the manipulation of corporate marketing campaigns to dramatically alter their meaning. This crime can be regarded as creative first because it is constructed through the expression of values, values that must be appreciated to understand the nature of the activity; and second because the tactics employed creatively exploit the very institutions that are the target of protest. Brisman uses the analogy of the Kudzu plant, a vine that is initially supported by but then effectively smothers competing species. Brisman observes that creative avenues of dissent are all the more important when the establishment offers no legitimate means to protest the *status quo*. In the final chapter of Part 1, Duedahl

presents a history of police photography to demonstrate that criminal mugshots can be used to shed light not only on the nature of convicted criminals but also the historical circumstances surrounding their arrest. The chapter further demonstrates how the task of taking photographs serves more than to passively document; rather the functions of police photography have evolved over time, serving a variety of purposes at the time of their taking, from detection to deterrence to international collaboration.

Part 2 of the book explores fiction as a source of knowledge and inspiration about crime, as well as the potential for fiction to clarify and communicate complex concepts. For example, in Chapter 4, Summer's analysis of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* provides an illustration of the situated nature of moral judgments. This shows how morals are constructed in specific cultural contexts, are defined by the powerful, and are forever changing. Through an analysis of Mark Twain's 'Corruption of a town' in Chapter 5, Ruggiero demonstrates how complex concepts explaining corruption, that is, opportunity, moral choice and competition, can be explained through fiction. Moreover, his analysis shows the benefits of using fiction to illustrate ideas that may seem counter-intuitive, or those that challenge assumptions; in the case of this chapter Twain's short story shows that given specific circumstances, corruption can perform a stabilising role within a community. In an analysis of *Scandinavian Crime Novels*, Agger shows how a crime novels, particularly those drawn from reflective genre themselves, can encourage reflection and critique about crime and the morality, psychology and social circumstances of those motivated to commit crime.?? Finally, in this part of the book Pickering-Iazzi explores how fiction influences our understanding of cities and urban space. Focusing on depictions of the mafia and the city of Palermo, through a consideration of different characters' understanding and experiences of the city, Pickering-Iazzi demonstrates how fictional imagery highlights the construction of dangerous spaces and how the motives and experiences different actors' influences their perceptions of and behaviour within different spaces.?? Social geography is more than a backdrop that can be objectively observed: it is shaped by and shapes the actors within it. In summary, the four chapters in Section 2 demonstrate how drawing parallels between fiction and the 'real' social world can provide inspiration for lines of further enquiry. They also demonstrate how fiction can provide a form of social model allowing for the creative exploration of the realms of the plausible. One of the most convincing roles for fiction in criminology appears to be that of communicating conceptions with the potential to enliven teaching, breathe life into abstract concepts, and provoke thought among students.

The majority of chapters in Part 3 stay with fiction, but shift focus to explore the relationship between fiction and popular culture. In making this more explicit link with broader culture this section makes a very convincing demonstration of the role of creative criminology in understanding crime. For example, in Chapter 8 Picart uses examples of film and newspaper reports to show how popular culture makes sense of serial killers through a range of different monstrous metaphors. The assignment of metaphors is influenced by factors such as race and gender. Thus, white, male serial killers are given the intelligent and charming characteristics of vampires (Hannibal Lecter) compared to the clumsy, childlike, Frankenstein's monsters that are female killers (Charlize Theron's portrayal of Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*). These characteristics are not accidental: they are deliberately constructed and emphasised through scripting and cinematography, and in the rewriting of elements of real-life stories. However, only one case of each type is presented, and my own quantitative research bias made me want to know how representative these gendered and

racial stereotypes of serial killers are. In contrast to the monster, in Chapter 9 Yar explores the creation of the superhero and shows how characteristics attributed to our superheroes provide a window on wider society's criminological concerns. The key theme in the superhero genre is the pervasive threat to society posed by the irrationality of evil, a threat that is strongest just as justice is failing to deliver, reinforcing a putative turn of payback and vengeance. This theme is clearly paralleled in the wider academic literature, but Yar contends that the findings derived from analysis of fiction should not be regarded as supplemental observations but instead should be presented on equal standing to findings derived from traditional social science research. In Chapter 10, Jacobsen and Petersen aim to show how films, in this case prison films, can contribute insights into the reality of prison life. Prison fiction allows for the exploration of a world hidden from most of society and enables the experiences of prison life to come alive. The chapter discusses how films can communicate the meanings of inmate life and show how strategies of survival and resistance are adopted. The authors also argue that films have also played a role in raising awareness and provoking political discussion of prison conditions in broader society.

The third and final section of the book explores creative and unconventional approaches for researching crime while providing a critique of conventional approaches (a critique most forcefully delivered in Ferrell's chapter). In Chapter 11, Frigon explores the use of performance art as a research method. Frigon's use of dance in prisons will seem unusual to many as the performances are explicitly not designed as a therapeutic intervention; rather the dance is the research. The research approach appears to have benefited from the stark contrasts between the life experiences of professional dancers and those of the inmates and perhaps also the dancers' lack of criminological preconceptions. These differences serve to amplify the insights emerging from the research. For example, the dancers working with the inmates perceived that they could observe the impact of the prison regime and its regulation of bodies, space and time from the way the inmates held their bodies and the way they moved. In Chapter 12, Walklate, McGarry and Mythem explore how the pervasive use of visual images of trauma following terrorist events serves to construct society's conceptions of legitimate victims, evil perpetrators and collective suffering. These constructions provide support for an emerging consensus that strong and drastic political action is required to tackle the terrorist threat.

In the final chapter, no holds are barred in a critique of criminological methods presented by Jeff Ferrell in 'Manifesto for Criminology beyond Method'. This is by far the most provocative chapter in the volume. Ferrell presents an attack on what is termed 'conventional criminology' and argues that the methods currently employed in criminological investigation are not only inadequate but damaging to the discipline. Ferrell does not call for improvements to conventional criminology or for a mixed-methods approach with creative criminologies providing a complement to conventional methods. For Ferrell the epistemological errors of conventional criminology are so fundamental that the only solution is to abandon formal methods in favour of flexible and fluid approaches that are open to surprise, deliberately disorganised and unsystematic, having more in common with the creative arts than science.

It is unfortunate that Ferrell's critique is based on a binary classification of criminology distinguishing creative, cultural criminology on the one hand from 'conventional criminology' on the other. Conventional criminology is generalised to be quantitative and positivist, ignoring the diverse range of criminological investigation. To exaggerate his dichotomy the

examples given of quantitative criminology are selective examples of poor practice, and constitute an unfair representation of all quantitative criminology. However, it can't be denied that these examples of poor practice exist, are not rare, and that Ferrell highlights genuine problems within quantitative criminology that should not be ignored.

Ferrell's criticisms include that the technical language of quantitative criminology is cliquish and impenetrable to outsiders; that the operationalisation of complex social concepts is critically flawed; that the variables measured and data analysed are poor reflections of the social world; and moreover that these variables are treated as objective facts uninfluenced by human action. Critically, he argues that conventional criminology is inseparable from the criminal justice system, supporting and propping up the system rather than exposing.

These problems have not gone unnoticed among 'conventional criminologists' themselves: Hough (2014) recently addressed similar criticisms raised by Jock Young. Ferrell ignores the less revolutionary alternatives to pure positivism found within quantitative criminology, contributions such as scientific realism (Tilley, 2002), which seeks not to identify universal laws but to understand interactions between causes, contexts and mechanisms, and that of Wikström's Situated Action Theory (2014), which recognises the situated, normative and moral basis of human action. No doubt, these alternatives would be regarded as wholly inadequate by Ferrell, whose cultural and anarchic epistemology starts from a postmodern abandonment of a search for causation. This is the dramatic point of departure, which means that cultural criminologists will not be happy with the compromise of mixed methods, and 'conventional criminology' will certainly not be content with the abandonment of traditional scientific methods.

Jacobsen states that the overall aim of *Poetics of Crime* is to provoke and expand the criminological imagination (p. 16). This is an aim that the book certainly achieves, even for those who do not subscribe to the call to abandon traditional methods. For those researchers whose concerns begin with assessing the scope of phenomena and/or exploring relationships between them (I count myself in this number) the chapters in this book can help in two ways. First, they suggest a range of inspiring and novel approaches to explore new dimensions of the criminological experience and enrich criminological explanation with meaning. Second, the critique of conventional methods provides a healthy opportunity for reflection. If one were to simply dismiss Ferrell's criticisms by pointing to better examples of quantitative research (the opposite tactic to that employed by Ferrell), one would lose the opportunity to address real issues that quantitative criminology does not reflect upon enough.

References

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