

A Criminologist's Journey: Embracing the Sociological Roots of Justice Studies

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Abstract

This piece has afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my role as a criminologist working in a sociology department. While this role is not unique – the field of criminology/criminal justice is rooted in sociology – more criminology/criminal justice departments are moving toward autonomy as the popularity of the major has grown immensely in the past 20 years. This paper traces my experience working in a sociology department while acknowledging the role that sociology plays in the teaching and research roles of criminologists.

Introduction

When I was asked to participate in a panel about teaching at The University of Winnipeg's spring conference "Educating Justice," I was initially unsure how to approach the presentation. However, the general focus on education in justice studies intrigued me. Much of the work that we do in the field of criminology and criminal justice, especially in the United States, is quantitative in nature, with many papers presented at national conferences and published in academic journals centered on issues that could best be examined quantitatively. Because of this, there are very few academic papers and conference panels devoted to issues surrounding criminology/criminal justice pedagogy. In fact, American scholarship that is devoted to the education/pedagogical side of criminal justice is mostly limited to one well-known journal, *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*. As well, there are a few sociology

journals that are devoted to the topic, but as with criminology/criminal justice, most of the scholarship that is published in the field focuses on research questions and issues beyond pedagogy. For these reasons, I felt that a panel devoted to teaching in justice studies was not just timely and necessary, but something that I would love to contribute to. Unlike a typical conference presentation, I was invited to reflect upon my experiences teaching justice studies in different disciplinary contexts. As I had experience teaching in criminology/criminal justice, and sociology programs, the organizers of Educating Justice were keen for me share my experiences teaching ‘across the disciplines’. This paper summarizes my journey from criminology to sociology, and reflects on the common ground between these disciplines in the United States.

My reflection begins by tracing my undergraduate and graduate training, which was interdisciplinary in nature, and led me to a career as a criminologist. I also touch on my experiences in the academic job market and the trepidation that many college departments have when considering candidates from stand-alone criminology/criminal justice departments. The heart of this paper focuses on my experiences in my new position as a faculty member in the sociology program at Northern State University. I argue that criminologists can bring considerable strengths to sociology programs because the justice studies field draws heavily upon the classical and contemporary sociology. I also encourage graduate students in justice studies to consider sociology programs as a place to embark on a career in academia.

An Academic Journey

In thinking about the theme of the panel and the conference, I reflected on my own career trajectory. I began my academic career at one university that stressed research, moving later to a college that stressed teaching but was technical in nature. At the beginning of the 2013-14 academic year, I joined the sociology section at Northern State University in Aberdeen,

South Dakota, in the upper Midwestern United States. I was attracted to Northern State because administrators and faculty embraced a balance of teaching and research rather than heavily favoring one over the other. While new academic positions often cause young scholars much stress, the main anxiety I had about my new position was the fact that criminal justice was nested in the sociology program, and I had very little experience with sociology programs – save for Classical Social Theory in my doctoral program at Florida State University. What really made me nervous was the fact that I would be teaching Introduction to Sociology as well as criminal justice/criminology courses. I was being asked to teach across disciplines or academic subjects, something I had not yet done as a relative young academic professional.

Shortly after I commenced my current position, I realized, much to my delight and surprise, that I loved teaching Introduction to Sociology. Much of what we discuss in criminology/criminal justice courses is sociological in nature; in fact, while criminology/criminal justice draws upon other disciplines such as biology, psychology, and economics, sociology has had the most influence on the field's development and many of those teaching in the field. As I embraced the sociological roots of justice studies and drew upon my own interdisciplinary education, my department chair approached me about teaching other sociology courses such as Social Problems, Race and Society, Communities, and, since I was an NCAA Division I athlete, a special topics class focusing on the sociology of sport. I soon realized that teaching these courses would not be a far stretch for me because I was educated in two interdisciplinary graduate programs in criminology/criminal justice that were heavily sociologically driven.

As the 2013-2014 academic year progressed, I was faced with new challenges as a criminologist working in a sociology program. Specifically, I was asked to fill in for a departmental colleague with health problems. I taught "Social Stratification" for close to six weeks during the spring 2014 term. As with Introduction to Sociology, I had a bit of trepidation

about doing this, but I soon learned that my training as a criminologist could help bring material related to poverty, race, and gender (to name a few social strata) to life, especially for the students enrolled in the course who were focusing on criminal justice within the sociology major. After this experience, I grew more comfortable in my role within my department as a criminologically-trained sociologist.

I believe that my educational background provided a good foundation for my current position as a criminologist within a larger sociology program. Despite the fact that I had originally aspired to be an attorney, I entered college at the University of Kentucky as an undecided major. As my junior year was arriving in what seemed like a fast and furious fashion without me feeling ready for it, I was still an undeclared major (many American university students are required to declare a major by the first semester of their junior year). I had enjoyed some of my psychology courses, so I chose that as a major, as it was a subject relevant to all career choices, but I wasn't too sure I wanted to pursue the graduate study required for a career in the field. In the spring semester of my junior year, I was trying to decide on a cognate area (similar to a minor), and a friend of mine suggested that I take some sociology courses – specifically Deviant Behavior – during the fall of my senior year. I knew the course was very popular among social work and psychology majors, so I decided to enroll in it. The rest, one could say, is history. Undoubtedly, I would say that my first experience with criminology/criminal justice course material was in a sociology program, so at the core, I always defined myself as a sociological criminologist.

Criminology/Criminal Justice: Sociology at Its Heart

When it came time to apply to jobs at the end of my graduate career, I applied to both criminal justice programs and sociology programs hiring criminologists; however, some sociology programs were reluctant to interview people educated in stand-alone criminal justice/criminology programs. I believe these programs are missing out on a wonderful pool

of candidates, as many scholars educated in justice studies programs have a strong foundation in sociology and a keen interest in broad issues related to justice. It goes without saying that crime does not occur in a social vacuum; thus, sociology has a large impact on what we study, how we study it, and how we interpret the results we obtain. More than this, I would argue issues of justice lay at the heart of many sociological fields of study. Therefore, the two academic fields have much in common and students and scholars have much to share across the disciplines.

The field of justice studies is, without a doubt, an interdisciplinary (social) science. The programs I have taught in have emphasized different disciplinary approaches to teaching about justice. My first academic position was in a “criminal justice” department with courses and scholars drawing heavily from the fields of criminology, criminal justice, public administration, and biology. My second position was in a criminal justice program that emphasized forensics and criminalistics. However, my current position is in a department that is rooted in sociology. While I was initially nervous about teaching justice studies in a sociology program, I have come to believe that this position best represents who I am as a criminological scholar. It is clear that a range of social events – especially crime and justice – can be best examined critically through a sociological lens. My teaching experiences over the past year have allowed me to better appreciate the sociological roots of criminology/criminal justice studies. I would encourage scholars teaching in justice studies to embrace the sociological roots of our field and consider using a sociological lens to bring perhaps different insights to the study of justice. Moreover, I feel that scholars with interdisciplinary backgrounds in criminology and criminal justice can use the “justice lens” to broaden and deepen the traditional study of sociology. As a result of my academic journey from criminology to sociology, I have come to believe that sociology is very much at the heart of justice studies.