

Criminological research: typologies versus hierarchies

Loraine Gelsthorpe and Gilly Sharpe argue for a broader range of methodological tools.

As others in this edition of *Criminal Justice Matters* have described, criminological developments in the past few years have been tied to evidence-based policy and to a 'what works' agenda. In reality this has seemingly led to a Home Office preference for particular kinds of methods and betrays an assumed hierarchy of valid social research methods. Echoing the Campbell Group and Cochrane collaborations and the advocates of 'crime science' who believe that methodologies should incline more to those found within the natural sciences, this has tended to prioritise the use of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), large samples, quantitatively based approaches, and quantitatively based systematic reviews. Certainly, RCT as a method is currently promulgated as the 'gold standard' of research within Home Office circles, and as a key sponsor of criminological research this has major implications for all researchers within the field.

not preclude randomised allocation to interventions). But it is hard to envisage the deliverers of various interventions as the blind deliverers of the pill.

Such is the consternation amongst criminologists about Home Office methodological turns and hierarchies that it is now hard to distinguish between urban myths and fairy tales at this stage in terms of what is being proposed. Nevertheless, what appears to be forgotten is that the notion of a 'hierarchy of evidence' has its roots in attempts to describe the process underlying the selection of studies for inclusion in a systematic review. Whereas the hierarchy – with systematic reviews and meta-analyses and randomized controlled trials (quantitative) at the top and case studies (qualitative) at the bottom – is intended as a list of study designs used to assess the effectiveness of interventions, ranked in order of decreasing *internal validity*, this is sometimes used as a proxy for indicating methodological quality of the included studies. The original purpose of such

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The appeal of RCT is perhaps indicative of a broad shift in penal policy in recent years -- from offender rehabilitation to offender categorisation and management. Certainly this is reflected in the current (Home Office) predilection for quantitative methods over qualitative ones – reflecting in part an abandonment of the search for the causes of crime in favour of focusing on strategies to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour, and to 'control', rather than 'correct', offending.

The fact that RCTs should be slipped into criminological discourse as the 'gold standard' at this point perhaps comes as no surprise given the faith that medical and pharmaceutical enterprises place in the 'double blind trial' with neither patient nor doctor knowing which is the placebo and which is the pill with potential. Although what is often forgotten here is that medical researchers pursue other research methods before reaching this ultimate test. Moreover, criminological researchers can never engage in a 'double' blind trial even if ethical obstacles can be overcome (bearing in mind that many argue that the vicissitudes of justice do

hierarchies is often forgotten.

What is worrying is that the Government defined standards of research excellence along these lines appear to shift things back to old debates about the relative merits and demerits of quantitative versus qualitative research at a time when the rest of the world has moved on. Those old debates were perhaps epitomised in early feminist claims that feminist methods were necessarily qualitative. Feminist researchers pitted themselves against the perceived methodological shortcomings of conventional approaches to research (largely because they were heavily dependent on scientific paradigms and processes commonly used in the natural sciences). Some feminist researchers, of course, went beyond this to suggest that any feminist research must evince a concern to make women visible; others suggested that feminist research had to be 'on, by and for women'; others still that power differentials had to be dismantled between the researcher and the researched. Some feminist writers further suggested that quantitative methods were inconsistent with feminist values and therefore had no place in feminist



methodologies. Both Shulamit Reinharz (1979) and Evelyn Fox Keller (1980), as examples of early feminist researchers, expressed a preference for qualitative work.

But even feminist researchers have moved on from this framework for thinking and are now engaged in a wide range of research using a wide range of methodologies. If we needed an example of this we need look no further than research on violence. First there are Liz Kelly's (1990) self-reflections on doing research on sexual violence and a description of her realisation of the need for feminists to use all kinds of methods. More recently, the Economic and Social Research Council's programme of research on violence directed by Betsy Stanko (and thus feminist inspired) displays a wide range of research methods – from an analysis of 19th century newspapers to interviews and quantitative surveys (Stanko, 2003), to the more recent analysis of the dilemmas and difficulties of doing research on gender violence by Tina Skinner, Marianne Hester and Ellen Malos in *Researching Gender Violence* (2005).

Of course, claims that feminist methodology is a distinctive enterprise have come under close scrutiny. There is arguably no ontological or epistemological position that is distinctively feminist – research reveals a variety of positions from realism to relativism. Moreover, there has been increasing recognition that whilst not having a monopoly on 'good' methods, feminist researchers should be concerned to promote sensitive research and this means recognising the subjectivity of those researched, and that research should be problem led rather than methodologically led (Gelsthorpe, 1992). As Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) have noted, what remains distinctively feminist is perhaps the particular positioning of theory, epistemology and ethics that means that feminist research questions versions of the truth from a particular stance – enabling an exploration of the relationship between knowledge and power. Thus feminist research is politically *for* women, and has some grounding in

women's experiences, but is perhaps no longer tied to early assumptions about the location, nature and power of the processes of knowledge production and feminist knowledge. Feminist research has moved on.

More generally, perhaps the mistake is to think that in giving value to one approach to methodological understanding, there is a need to devalue the other. In this sense, if qualitative methods now need any defence, then we would draw attention, by way of two examples, to their value in research with girls and young women who offend, and in regard to victims of domestic violence.

Recent qualitative research on girls' violence (e.g. Burman *et al*, 2001) highlights the complex interplay between girls' victimisation and their offending, the contexts of their violent encounters – typically arising out of relationships with other girls, fights over boyfriends and (sexual) reputation – and the meaning girls attach to violence. Through narrative interviews with girls and young women, which complement survey data on the incidence of fighting and violence in girls' everyday lives according to self-reports, the findings of this research challenge popular perceptions that girls are becoming more 'violent', predatory, and 'dangerous'. Indeed increases in girls' violence, indicated in the official criminal statistics, are arguably more to do with changes in the *processing* of girls in the contemporary criminal justice system than with changes in their *behaviour*.

Research currently in progress by one of us (Sharpe), interviewing girls subject to Youth Offending Team supervision in England, explores girls' pathways into crime and the contexts of their offending, as well as factors influencing their decisions to persist in, or desist from, offending, drawing on girls' own perspectives of their behaviour and needs. Focusing on offenders' (rather than criminologists') subjective understanding

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of their lives, and asking 'why' and 'how' is an attempt to better address youth offending in a way that is meaningful to the individuals involved. This approach represents a challenge to simplistic youth justice discourse and policy initiatives aimed at responsabilising and excluding young people who offend, and the repackaging of much troublesome youthful behaviour as intentionally 'anti-social'. As Noaks and Wincup have argued: "British criminologists have largely retreated from qualitative, ethnographic community-based studies of subculture and deviant lifestyles. Hence, there is a lack of authoritative explanations available to challenge the simplistic, blaming style of political discourse" (2004:34).

Feminist qualitative research with victims of domestic violence has resulted in widespread recognition by the police and the courts that domestic violence is both widespread and of public concern, rather than simply a private matter. Significant policy and practice changes have ensued: to the policing of domestic abuse; the protection and support offered to victims/survivors; the *Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004*, and the introduction of specialist domestic violence courts in some areas. Furthermore Hoyle (2000), interviewing police officers about their responses to specific incidents of domestic violence, highlights contradictions between officers' (somewhat negative or trivialising) *general* attitudes towards domestic violence, and the way they deal (rather more sensitively) with *specific* incidents or disputes in practice, showing how attitudes and actions can be inconsistent.

As Mike Maguire has suggested, qualitative research helps us to maintain a focus on the *people*: "without the 'correcting influence' of ethnographic or participant observation approaches, it is all too easy for those studying crime to lose their sense of reality and begin to perceive offenders not as people, but merely as 'problems' or 'numbers'" (2000: 149).

To conclude, one of us (Gelsthorpe) has been involved (as a member of the ESRC's Training and Development Board), in the ESRC's aim to ensure that social science students are exposed to as wide a range of methods as possible. There has been a particular push in recent years to ensure that social science students develop competence in statistical and other quantitative methods, but there has never been any intention that this should diminish the importance of qualitative skills. The ESRC has consistently kept in mind the need for all social scientists (criminologists included) to achieve a balanced portfolio of skills (and to have a full methodological toolkit, to use the common analogy). In other words, we should think of typologies of methods rather than hierarchies.

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