

Research prevention and the zombie university

Peter Squires explores the challenges to critical criminological research in an age of market positivism and exclusionary research protocols

As criminal justice agencies draft protocols to limit research opportunities around their own interests and priorities – on grounds of ethics, risk or governance – universities have also become increasingly complicit in a process of selective research retrenchment, embracing ethical codes that marginalise critical and qualitative research traditions while favouring a culture of ‘market positivism’. This article will both start a debate, whilst also soliciting further examples of the ways in which this research prevention culture has spread across social science, criminology in particular, in the UK.

A crisis is looming for criminological research in the UK. This may be just one dimension of the wider crisis reflected by the recent launch of the Council for the Defence of British Universities (Gibney, 2012). Even so, there are serious grounds for thinking that these problems may be especially acute for *critical* criminological work in the sense that powerful organisations (departments of state, private corporations) are always likely to be a little wary of researchers burrowing away, finding inconvenient truths. At present however, the problems go much deeper. After all, criminological research is always likely to raise difficult issues, for the very boundaries of legality and our concepts of justice have far more than academic significance.

The scale of the crisis facing criminological work became fully apparent in a recent university discussion of research ethics. Research with offenders was judged *inherently* more problematic than research with other research subjects

because, by definition, it was claimed, offenders are more ‘prone’ to dishonesty and might not tell the truth. In a similar vein, here reinforcing stereotypes of criminals and criminality, offenders, it seems, also presented greater risk. They are the ‘dangerous others’ of tabloid fame.

Whatever such remarks imply about the naivety, ignorance or inexperience of the ethics adjudicator – police officers and politicians, apparently, *always* tell the truth – what it means for grounded criminological research is especially troubling.

Today, however, following a rampant epidemic of censorious mission creep by criminal justice agencies (metaphorically pulling up the drawbridges and circling the wagons via their new research protocols) and the active complicity of many universities, criminological research is confronted by more than just misunderstanding. The infrastructure of research governance (which some colleagues have come to refer to as a ‘research prevention culture’) now surrounds intended researchers with ethical, risk assessment and methodological stumbling blocks designed, as Katz (2007) has argued, more to protect the managers, decision-makers, and resource allocators of criminal justice agencies themselves than the unfortunate citizens most frequently encountering them.

In his recent book *The Criminological Imagination* Jock Young (2011) encourages readers to consider just how many of criminology’s classic studies would simply not have been undertaken under the contemporary regime of social science governance. And he is

not just talking about the regime of bogus ‘market positivism’ – the appliance of science, a selective ‘policy-led evidence chasing’ and blinkered versions of ‘what works’. As Young shows, so much of American social science is deeply mired in this pseudo-science; it also underpins the new tick-box, competency testing, *Vitae* Researcher Development Framework now making its way across many British university campuses. Not unlike the *Chalara fraxinea* currently withering British ash trees, this training for the new regime of market positivism has the potential to reinforce a critical die-back at the heart of critical criminology and its ability to ask the really searching questions.

It is especially telling that criminologists were not so long ago lamenting the absence of a ‘public criminology’ – even as parts of government and the research establishment appeared perfectly content that it remains so. As the Prime Minister recently noted, criminality is ‘simple’. Unfortunately the purpose of a public criminology with nothing to say beyond helping the ‘extended police family’ with their enquiries and, metaphorically, measuring heads, rather escapes us.

Yet this potential for critical ‘criminological die-back’ (another dimension of ‘research concentration’) is only part of our problem; just because you are ‘critical’ doesn’t mean there isn’t something to criticise. Foucault’s complaint against criminology was essentially that most of its practitioners had never entirely escaped the prison, but today, the discipline is not simply becoming increasingly and explicitly policed, it is also becoming, irony of ironies, incarcerated all over again. The problem is not simply a question of exclusion; it also bears directly on the research questions being asked.

A couple of illustrations might suffice here. The recent (April 2012) Ministry of Justice/NOMS research application guidance, notes that, ‘as a consequence of the sheer volume of requests, NOMS must be selective when considering proposals’ before explaining, ‘research is encouraged whenever it has the potential to increase the effectiveness of

operational policy/delivery', although not, apparently, when it questions existing policy and practice. Articulating the principles to be followed when reviewing research requests, the guidance, drawing upon the Government Social Research Code, notes:

the research must be aimed at informing and improving policy formulation, analysis and delivery, clearly allied to strategic priorities (emphasis added).

Aside from what this says explicitly about conforming to governmental priorities and increasing the effectiveness of *existing* operational policy and performance (while simultaneously asserting the need for objectivity) and there are further remarks about 'sound' methodologies and employing 'established scientific principles', there are serious questions of democratic deficit in this prescriptive model of research. Research is to be undertaken for the benefit of existing policies, agencies, interests and priorities, rather than for service users, clients, or detainees; furthermore this is an *a priori* requirement, to be demonstrated in advance of obtaining research approval and access, let alone research findings.

This, the flip side of the current 'impact agenda', demands that the 'benefits' of research be known in advance, even as the Government Social Research Code states: 'research must not be undertaken with a view to reaching particular conclusions or prescribing particular courses of action'. Investigative and exploratory research, critical research; the kind of research that cannot tell in advance what might be discovered because it is not predicated upon a narrow and incremental hypothesis-testing model of usable scientific outcomes – or narrow questions – in short, the kinds of inquiry that critical criminology has best pioneered, becomes ruled out in this new research regime.

We recently had some direct experience of how these new constraints are being interpreted and implemented at ground level. The outcome speaks volumes – not just about research but also about inter-agency collaboration.

Colleagues had been commissioned to undertake a small scale evaluation on behalf of a local police division. As the project evolved it became clear that a few exploratory interviews with local magistrates might be helpful. When approached, the Bench were unclear about the appropriateness of their participation. They took advice from their Senior Clerk and then wrote back to us spelling out, 'we cannot get involved in any research for external agencies'.

Expanding upon the reason for this refusal, the letter continued:

Professional researchers who seek facilities for the conduct of research involving any member of the judiciary are required in the first instance to submit their proposals for projects to the Judicial Office at the Royal Courts of Justice. Each application should be supported by a formal business plan which shows clearly how the research will benefit the judiciary of England and Wales and/or HM Courts Service.

Stepping back from the, rather less than democratic or accountable: 'no research for external agencies', the clarification offered further compounds our problem. Research proposals must demonstrate benefit in advance. Not unlike the CJS shift towards precautionary criminalisation, or 'pre-criming', researchers seeking opportunities to investigate the delivery of criminal justice policies will have to pre-determine that their findings will benefit and support the institutions, interests and policies they will be examining even prior to undertaking the work itself.

One suspects that contributing to democratic accountability, openness and oversight in policy making or implementation will not necessarily be considered sufficient priorities.

And this, finally, brings us full circle, back to the ways in which universities have themselves become complicit in the processes of critical dieback. For example, a recent psychological study, justifying the use of a laboratory-based model for examining crowd behaviour, does so in terms of the ways in which professional and ethical guidelines 'have become tighter' since the

1960s. Maybe they needed to be, after all psychology certainly has a few skeletons in its cupboards; the Stanford and Milgram experiments, for example. Comparable criminological research harms are few and far between. However the real issue here is with this notion of 'ethical constraint'. For ethics is not just about the power to exclude or restrict research, the game within which universities have embroiled themselves. We come around, once more, face to face with Foucault; saying yes to ethics, is not saying no to power. Ethical governance is not just about narrow research processes: confidentiality, sampling, or questionnaire design in the bureaucratic ways that many universities have embraced it. Rather, ethics is about the questions being asked in the first place.

It is not hard to see how and why this has occurred. The quantitative market positivism of the REF2014 and its conceptions of 'impactology' undoubtedly exacerbate the problem. But when the critical faculties die back and research centres spend longer measuring their own 'outputs' or monitoring their own internal 'processes' whilst failing to challenge the selectivity, exclusion and diminishing accountability of contemporary policy change and implementation, something important has been lost. Stumbling unsteadily through this new landscape is the zombie university. ■

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