

THOUGHT PIECE

'Thought Pieces' are papers which draw on the author's personal knowledge and experience to offer stimulating and thought provoking ideas relevant to the aims of the Journal. The ideas are located in an academic, research, and/or practice context and all papers are peer reviewed. Responses to them should be submitted to the Journal in the normal way.

THE VALUE(S) OF CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Anne Robinson, Principal Lecturer, Dept. of Law, Criminology and Community Justice, Sheffield Hallam University

Awareness and understanding of values is of critical importance in criminology and criminological enquiry. Why? Because thinking about crime and how such thinking informs actions and systems set up to control or reduce the impacts of crime are not mere abstractions, but derive from beliefs, values and assumptions about the social world and individuals within it..

And these can work in ways that discriminate, oppress and exclude sectors of society, sometimes deliberately but often unwittingly. It is a fairly safe presumption that most in the criminological world would not want to be associated with that. But if we want to see ourselves, in contrast, as caring, moral, humane, civilised, then it is imperative that we identify and articulate our values and ensure they are consistent with those qualities.

And that requires more than just saying that we are 'good', principled academics, researchers, policy-makers or practitioners. It means being rigorous in examining our activities - in the academy or in the real world of criminal justice – and questioning where we are going, what values we think are driving us and which ones are driving us in reality. That is an extensive and on-going process, which requires us to reflect and to reconsider what has become matter-of-fact or taken-for-granted in our thinking or our day to day practices. We are often so busy getting on with tasks that we don't take time to step back – so we benefit from prompts now and then to carefully and consciously do exactly that. A good starting point for reflection is Howard Becker's notion of 'taking sides', and the understanding that we can never be entirely objective – indeed the attempt within sociological and criminological research to take a neutral stance is itself underpinned by

particular values and assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge and approaches to enquiry. It can be argued that striving to eliminate bias and to be value-neutral may be less productive than overt discussion and reflection on the particular positions, perspectives and values that we adopt.

And these positions, perspectives and values stimulate key questions about power and affiliation. For example, the post-modern criminologist might ask, whose science and whose knowledge counts? Where might a Marxist's allegiances lie given the erosion of traditional class structures? And whose 'side' should contemporary feminists take? Similarly, what are the issues about the divide between public and private lives and how does today's criminal justice system understand and respond?

Moving beyond conventional disciplinary approaches may lead to different and exciting ways of developing thinking and new knowledge. Appreciative, narrative and other qualitative forms of enquiry change the researcher-subject relationship to one of participation and co-production, and demand that the researcher reflects upon and evaluates his or her role, influence and impact within the research process.

This kind of developed self-awareness is also significant within professional education – whether in police, the probation service or youth justice. The question of values underscores practice in these agencies, often exposing tensions between their functions and the efficient exercise of responsibilities on the one hand, and due attention to human rights and ethics on the other. This is particularly evident in the police, in terms of friction between sophisticated understandings of the social and political contexts of crime and ethical standards, and the common-sense craft of policing on the ground. This also comes to the fore in the face of civil unrest and demands for military-style responses, for example in the riots of summer 2011. But it is seen in probation, youth justice and victim services as well.

Good practice inherently relates to positive and enhancing virtues and values, otherwise we are essentially engaging in a technical and bureaucratic exercise. And that then opens space for the machinery of criminal justice to be used in ways that are repressive, punitive and/or discriminatory, actively or through neglect. Powers allowing stop and search, imposition of ASBOs, recall of offenders on licence back to prison, use of Intensive Supervision and Surveillance for young people to name just a few, can all be employed wisely and well, but negatively when less thought and consideration is brought to bear.

The challenge for professional education – and probation training is the area we have been most involved in at SHU – is to promote clear thinking and articulation of values, working to establish shared sets of normative values sufficiently robust to withstand organisational pressures and workplace cultures. The exercise of discretion is critical in this, enabling training practitioners to make choices and to use the room they have for manoeuvre to problem-solve and to work towards outcomes that are fair and proportionate. Legitimacy, accountability and defensibility are all important here, but so is the confidence to do what is right and just in the circumstances.

Not that this is easy, for teachers or for those being taught, although it is probably one of the most intriguing areas of professional education – the challenge, of course, is to relate values and principles to the decisions and actions made in practice. It is no good talking values but not employing them!

Interestingly, Fergus McNeill and Stephen Farrall (2013) suggest that moral values and integrity are seen not just in what we do but are embodied by criminal justice practitioners, who model virtue and goodness that probationers and others might aspire to. A recent and powerful example is Nelson Mandela and what he stood for in terms of fairness and forgiveness even after his experiences of the vicious apartheid regime.

Criminologists involved in education – whether professional education or academic programmes – are also in the business of modelling openness and transparency about values, authenticity, critical thinking and reflexivity – models that learners might seek to emulate and to take forward into their future lives and careers. There is surely great value in modelling engagement with reflexivity and critical ideas about values and values-thinking.

*The above is an adapted version of one of several brief speeches given at the launch event on 11 December 2013 for **Values in Criminology and Criminal Justice** (2013) M. Cowburn, M. Duggan, A. Robinson and P. Senior (Eds.) Bristol: Policy Press*

References

- Becker, H. (1967) 'Whose side are we on?' *Social Problems* Vol 14(3): 234-47
- McNeill, F. & Farrall, S. (2013) 'A moral in the story? Virtues, values and desistance from crime' in M. Cowburn, M. Duggan, A. Robinson and P. Senior (Eds.) *Values in Criminology and Criminal Justice* Bristol: Policy Press