

Inescapable Morality: Responding to the Qualitative versus Quantitative Issue

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Abstract

There is a lively debate currently in criminology research regarding which method researchers should use, qualitative or quantitative. Often, however, researchers do not examine the fundamental assumptions implicit in both approaches to criminology and do not discuss them in the discourse on methodology. An implicit fundamental assumption that undergirds both approaches is a moral one about what is true, right, or best. This paper explicates some of those moral assumptions, and points to the need for a broader dialogue about moral issues in criminology. These moral issues, once they are part of the broader discourse, will inform questions of method.

Introduction

Shootings in schools, terrorist attacks, Ponzi schemes, corporate embezzlement from retirement accounts, and entire towns left desolate due to corporate ecological crimes—all of these crimes prompt feelings of disgust, grief, fear, or moral outrage from their victims and those who witness. These crimes are deeply meaningful issues of concern for us within the broader society, and we feel an intense need to learn why these crimes occurred, how they occurred, and what we might be able to do to prevent future occurrences. In this light, we can see criminology as the systematic attempt to explain criminal behavior, how it occurs, when it occurs, and the reasons why it occurs. Criminologists and others choose to use multiple methods in this endeavor, including both qualitative and quantitative ones. Often, however, researchers choose these methods without a thoroughgoing examination of the philosophical assumptions or positions that gave rise to the methodologies, or the implications of using them. Various philosophers of social science have noted that one of the common unexamined assumptions that give rise to methodological choices is an inherently moral one (Taylor, 2007, 1985a, 1985b; Rabinow, 1984; Fay 1996, Richardson, Fowers & Guignon, 1999). In this paper, I briefly outline the moral history of modern social science methodology, describe the implications of this morality, outline the qualitative response to those implications, and note limitations to the qualitative response. I then argue that what the field needs is a morally based discussion of the subject of study (in this case, individuals who behave criminally).

Moral History of Method

Examining the nature and history of method is very important for discussion in the social sciences. As Slife & Williams (1997) argue, “method itself is a theory – a philosophy. Similar to any other theory or philosophy it makes assumptions about the world, and important implications arise from those assumptions” (p. 120). The history of the social sciences is broad and deep, and links directly to the rise of the methods and mindset of natural science as the preferred set of methods for knowing or understanding human nature and behavior. Charles Taylor (2007) highlights the history and nature of our culture’s current faith in natural science, and by implication, the rise of the social sciences following the natural-science model. His argument is carefully nuanced (so much so that I cannot do it justice in this short article), but one major theme that develops when we look at our current faith in science historically is that it has deep roots in Christianity and developed due to a particular moral framework. Seventeenth-century Christian thinkers struggled with their philosophical framework, which held that the entire cosmic order (including human beings) was the embodiment of Ideas (in the Platonic sense). William of Occam, in particular, argued that this cosmic order was a challenge to the sovereignty of God. God, he and others argued, not only created a perfectly ordered reality (as we see in the laws of nature), but instrumentally stood apart from that reality. These thinkers also believed that human beings could be like God, and could stand apart from His creation and dispassionately observe it. In this view, the world and all things within it (including people) became “mechanized,” operating according to a set of natural laws which God ultimately set (p. 284 – 285).

Descartes, who inherited this mechanistic philosophy, built upon it. He furthers the process of “disengagement,” the ideal in which we stand apart from the reality around us. He

argued that regardless of our varied experiences in the world, “[T]he real ontological focus of all these experiences is in the mind, although they are caused by features of the object or organ concerned. And the correct understanding of what is happening when we have these experiences is the one available from a third person perspective, where we note the causal relations here” (p. 285).

Ultimately, these philosophers thought, to be like God, we must be able to view the world as He does, dispassionately and in a “disengaged” fashion. This disengagement entails two fundamental assumptions about the world: objectivism and realism. According to Fay (1996), objectivism “may be defined as the reality that exists ‘in itself’ independently of the mind and this reality is knowable as such” (p. 200), while realism “is the twofold philosophical thesis that, first, a reality independent of human perception and cognition exists; and second, that this reality has its own inherent order” (p. 202). The scientific method developed out of centuries of careful philosophical thought under the assumptions or assertions of objectivism and realism.

The implicit morality operating here (as it applies to criminology) is that a good scientist remains disengaged from the topic she studies. It is only through this disengagement that she can study reality objectively, and the scientific method she follows is what guarantees that her findings are true in-the-world regardless of her own feelings about the topic or society’s views about her findings (Bernstein, 1976). In essence, “what one claims to be the case corresponds to what actually is the case. This is what makes them true: true beliefs are copies of mind-independent entities” (Fay, 1996, p. 203). This method has helped individuals and entire societies through the development of technology, and with that advancement in technology came an increase in the prestige of the method that spawned it. The assumptions behind the method,

that of a disengaged observer objectively studying reality, came with the package of modernity.

As Taylor (1997) put it,

[T]his stems partly from the crucial role of disengaged thinking in the most prestigious and impressive epistemic activity of modern civilization viz., natural science. But partly also . . . the attached sense of freedom, control invulnerability, and hence dignity. It was easy to take the prestige of the disengaged stance, based on the successes of natural science, and the sense of moral superiority attaching to it (p. 285).

The power, the prestige, and the moral superiority of scientific, objective knowledge are evident in the attitude of social scientists. Unfortunately, this valuing of method has become so intense in the social sciences that it qualifies as scientism. As Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon (1999) explain, “[B]y *scientism* we mean not legitimate science but the dogmatic insistence that the subject matter of our science, in this case human action and social life, must be approached by way of methods that are treated as being beyond question” (p. 16, emphasis in the original). Such scientism rules out other potential methods of uncovering or even making truth claims.

In essence, the philosophical assumption that human beings can be value-free observers of the world is inherently a moral one. Our society (particularly our academic society) grants moral prestige to those who rigorously follow the objective method, because society accepts that path as the proper way to create true knowledge, and with that knowledge comes power. In the case of criminology, society grants moral prestige to those who can use the methods of natural science to predict and (hopefully) control criminal behavior. To claim, as some have, that science is inherently value-free, and hence better than other methods of developing truth claims, is ultimately self-contradictory. To value being value-free is in and of itself a value. In criminology and other social sciences, this value implies that human beings are objects in this

world that social scientists are disengaged from, and are creatures whose behavior experts can predict and control in a purely objective, scientific manner.

Critiques of the Morality of Method

The moral value of disengaged, objective observer is multi-layered, and critics question this ideal on two levels. First, some critics object to the assumptions that natural scientists hold about human beings and behavior; second, they challenge the illusion of value-neutrality in the scientific method, pointing out that such “neutrality” provides cover for other values, whether troubling or beneficent. I will examine each objection in turn.

When we view human beings as creatures that can both objectively know and can be objectively known by others, we face certain problematic consequences. This is especially true when we think of the intensely moral issues that arise when studying deviant and criminal behavior. By adopting the disengaged, dispassionate, “experience far” methods of relating to and knowing the world, we impoverish our understanding of humans who intensely feel and whose actions are intensely meaningful (to someone, if not to themselves). In fact, some critics have gone so far as to assert that “the language of science, when applied to the study of human beings is a relatively impoverished language. Using traditional scientific investigations, we force ourselves to study human beings at a distance” (Slife & Williams, 1995, p. 195). Although, as Taylor noted, the disengaged and objective moral stance of natural science methods does protect those using that stance and its methods, these methods may come at too high a cost. Criminal behavior, for example, often entails intensely subjective meanings and experiences for both the criminals and their victims. To assume that these “experience far” methodologies could help us better understand these behaviors does deplorable violence to the experience of committing or being victimized in a crime when we limit our explanations to the language that these

methodologies allow. The individuals involved did not experience these events in a disengaged, objective manner, and to describe these events in such a manner can in no way accurately reflect the experience of committing or being victimized in a crime. Abstracting away from highly significant experiences like these is ultimately counterproductive and cannot further our understanding of events (Taylor, 1985a).

The view that we are disengaged selves, apart from a world that is best known objectively, has led to varied and troubling perspectives on human nature. If we are creatures standing apart from an objective world, we are not beholden to it, and therefore it loses any moral force over us. Taylor (1995) terms this consciousness, disengaged ultimately from the world around it, as a *punctual self*—a self that is not only disengaged, but should be disengaged to accurately know the world. Ultimately, what develops is a view of human beings as not only disengaged from the world around them (a world that includes culture, law, moral values, and history), but as people who are individuals in a radical sense. Given that people are individuals, first and foremost, nothing exterior to them has any moral authority over them. Not only that, but any dependence upon the outside world, particularly to such subjective matters as seemingly arbitrary moral values, can potentially compromise their ability accurately view the world for themselves.

Although often advocated under the guise of natural science, this viewpoint is far more a moral one than a scientific one, and has led to the antiauthoritarian tenor of modernity. Not only are individuals not subject to outside mores or influences unless they choose to be, this mindset holds that a good scientist should remain free from such subjective contamination. This “helps explain why social scientists insist on treating cultural and moral values as purely subjective and feel the need to distance themselves from such subjective elements in order to concentrate on

finding causal laws of human behavior” (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999, pp. 12-13).

However, the value that it is best to be free from subjectivity and moral constraint to be purely objective is not without limitations. Bernstein (1976) emphatically states that “‘Objectivism’ in the study of social and political life is not an innocent mistaken epistemological doctrine. It has dangerous consequences insofar as it tends to distort and reify ‘facts’ which are historically conditioned – ‘facts’ which reveal only one among the many different possibilities that human action may take” (p. 112).

Another consequent view of the objective and disengaged values that natural scientists assume is that of *atomism* (Slife & Williams, 1995). Atomism is based on the philosophy that all things are reducible to the atoms which comprise it. In the case of criminology, it is the view that criminals and criminal behavior are ultimately reducible to a set of variables which cause this behavior. Advocates of this view invest a great deal of faith in the belief that if we could just accurately uncover, operationalize, and measure these variables (atoms), we could then determine what causes criminal behavior and deviance.

Although admirable in aspiration, this perspective has troubling implications for our understanding of humans and human behavior. If we are reducible to the atoms that comprise our nature and our behavior, those atoms also consequently determine our being (this determinism is the underlying law that would make our behavior predictable and controllable if we knew all the atoms). If our atoms determine everything about us, then who we are and what we do is not under our control. According to some critics, however, our culture and society rests on the foundation that people are not creatures whose being and actions are determined by a certain set of variables in the manner natural scientists assume. Instead, our cultural assumption

is that people are instead creatures of agency (or agentic beings) (Williams, 1994). Williams (1992) defines “agency” as “one could have done otherwise, all things being the same” (p. 755).

This crucial distinction between deterministic thinking and agentic thinking comes into focus most sharply when we look at criminally deviant behavior. On the one hand, if a criminal could have done otherwise than commit the crime, then he is morally responsible for choosing to behave criminally. He should therefore be punished for his transgression. On the other hand, if variables outside of a criminal’s control determined his criminal behavior, then he is not morally responsible for committing the crime—the variables caused the crime, rather than the criminal. For example, poverty, a history of child abuse, population density, and being the victim of a crime earlier in life, all could have been the atoms that caused the deviant act.

This viewpoint has two implications. First, it implies that we could change the variables which determine the criminal’s behavior (and thereby change the criminal) by preventing poverty, child abuse, etc. Second, we can conclude that because the individuals are not responsible for their behavior, punishment models are problematic. It makes no sense to punish somebody for something he had no control over, and hence is not morally responsible for. This approach has a decided advantage, however; by upholding this assumption, criminologists can offer a great deal of hope that they can change the lives and circumstances of human beings whose behavior is controlled by these disparate, atomistic variables. Critics of this perspective, on the other hand, argue that deterministic models rule out such cherished concepts as moral accountability and responsibility, as well as a sense of a fuller and deeper human engagement with the social world.

Some theorists and philosophers of social science express concern about the disengaged morality so common in the social sciences and how this leads us to view human beings (Bellah,

Madsen, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Cushman 1990; 1995; Gergen 1985; 1994; Sandel 1996).

Paradoxically, many social-science theorists assume the moral value of a disengaged view, and build models of the determinants of human behavior, while simultaneously assuming that they are un-determined in their own efforts to do so. They value disengagement from troubling subjective elements, and feel free from any arbitrary external constraint that would somehow influence their perspective or their findings (such as politics, religion, or deep moral feeling). As mentioned previously, this felt need to remain free from arbitrary value sources has developed roughly at the same time as our assumptions about science and the natural world, and has left the legacy of anti-authoritarianism to modernity (1996). This anti-authoritarian philosophy grew with the Enlightenment notion that human beings have individual autonomy, and with the ideas of human rights and the inherent worth of the individual.

What social scientists have inherited today is an implicit moral value that operates behind the scenes—a stance that is most evident in criminology. “Modern social scientists generally intend – even while claiming to be value-free or value-neutral – to aid in the active re-engineering of human society in directions indicated by fundamental Western ideals of freedom, dignity, and inalienable rights for all individuals” (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999, p. 48). A version of this moral assumption about human nature is what Sandel, (1996) describes as liberal individualism. Liberal individualism is the notion that people are inherently free from outside and external arbitrary constraint (“liberal” as in “liberated from”) and ultimately that an individual is likewise disengaged from external contexts and constituencies. These individuals have both inherent worth and dignity, an assumption so strong that questioning it seems irrational or irresponsible. A consequence to this view, however, is that human choice and action (whether criminal or not) is “about more or less efficient means-ends relations and leaves the

behavior, we bring the assumptions of criminality with us into the research, with the common-sense assumption that criminal behavior is bad for individuals and for society. We also carry the assumption that our definitions of criminality are right, good, or correct in an uncritical and unquestioning way—definitions of criminality which may themselves be limited, biased, or unjust. Foucault argues that those bent on normalizing those they study, use social science to pacify and force them to conform. It is an exercise of power by those with an implicit moral agenda which they hide behind the veil of scientific rhetoric and of claims of objective truth (Foucault, 1977).

Another consequence to the moral assumption that science reveals objective truth in a value-free fashion is that any discussion about what a morally good thing to study or the best method of applying the research findings becomes puzzling at best or incomprehensible at worst. Many of us would agree, for example, that scientifically studying the best methods of torture is morally questionable if not downright abhorrent. There is nothing, however, in a value-free social science that would inform us that such research would be somehow bad or inappropriate. In essence, a value-free social science gives us no tools we can use to study the worth of the ends we seek as we do research (Richardson, Fowers & Guignon, 1999). Because some social scientists value being value-free, there is no reason, other than ultimately arbitrary ones, that they cannot research whatever they wish, regardless of whether others find it enlightening, helpful, hurtful, or morally repugnant.

The Qualitative Response

Qualitative thinkers critique, rebel against, or challenge the moral assumptions that scientists are disengaged observers of the objects of the natural world, objects which include human beings. Although the theoretically disengaged position of scientists yields

technologically advantageous results when applied to physical principles, human beings are not objects in the natural world, their behavior determined by forces outside of their control. A methodology that developed from a philosophy assuming objectivism fails as an epistemic strategy to use in studying human behavior “because such phenomena are morally constituted, agentially controlled, contextual and uncertain” (Martin & Sugarman, 1999, p. 47). To study people as objects does not accurately reflect the nature of the individual, for a given individual is “not a thing at all, but an engaged participant in the world. Perceptions and judgments are less fundamental to this process than practices – ways of doing things” (Polt, 1999, p. 84).

Qualitative researchers hold a very different moral assumption about human beings. Human beings are not creatures that social scientists should study in a disengaged fashion to discover the atomistic variables that determine their behavior, but are instead creatures living agentic lives, thoroughly immersed and inseparable from the world that contextualizes them, and inherently subjective in worldview and behavior. As Taylor (1985a) argues, for us to truly understand a human’s behavior, we have to understand her “vision of things” because how she perceives things and what she thinks of them, “the meanings things have” for a that individual, inform her behavior, whether it be criminal or law-abiding. The implication for this is that “personal interpretations can enter into the definition of the phenomenon under study” (pp. 120 – 121).

If a social scientist chooses to theorize apart from the people she studies, she builds her theory apart from them, operationalizes her variables apart from them, studies them in an experience-far manner, and interprets her results in a disengaged fashion, she is in no way capturing or accurately looking at the very phenomenon she sought in the first place to study—a phenomenon that the participants actually experienced in a richly subjective way. If she refuses

to acknowledge this and dogmatically values scientism over the subject matter, she will always fail in her endeavor to understand. Additionally, her contributions will be of limited utility, because unlike the natural world, the social world is one of language, emotion, moral values, and other subjective experiences. This language-based subjectivity is an important part of how we frame what is “true” both within the field and within the culture at large. To use natural-science methods to study creatures that do not conform to natural-science assumptions seems inadequate to critics. “[T]he difference between the natural and the social sciences thus becomes quite clear. The distinguishing mark of the social sciences is that the semantic field that is relevant to understanding is that of the society or community under study whereas the natural sciences have only their own norms and conventions with which to contend” (Warnke, 1987, p. 142).

The challenge then, for qualitative researchers is to truly get into the “semantic field that is relevant to understanding” and to thoroughly understand the phenomenon they are studying from the subjective perspective of those experiencing said phenomenon. Our epistemic values as an academic culture only increase this challenge, because we value the veracity of our research findings (whether or not they are “true” in some meaningful or consistent way), as well as their consistency (we wish our findings to be credible or dependable). Attempting to serve both masters (studying the subjective but being systematic), qualitative researchers have developed their own sets of methodologies, methods designed to assist social scientists who truly wish to understand the experience of the participants in a manner that limits the researcher’s own subjective opinion about that experience. The understandable fear is that if the researcher does not follow a given method, the result of their study will ultimately be merely a reflection of their personal opinions about the experience of the participants. Therefore, the qualitative researcher

“adopts an attitude that is disinterested, objective, and aloof. He must discipline himself to bracket the cares and pragmatic interests that govern his everyday life” (Bernstein p. 167).

Critique of the Qualitative Moral Perspective

I note a double-bind in qualitative researchers who attempt to adopt that aloof attitude. On the one hand, they acknowledge and embrace the subjectivity of the participants and themselves. On the other hand, they often try to disengage their own subjectivity, to bracket it, or to employ various distancing methods in the hope that they can tell the most authentic story about their participant’s experiences with no taint of the researcher’s own agenda or opinion. They both embrace their participants’ subjectivity and try to limit or control their own. If qualitative researchers truly value the subjective experiences of the people they study, it seems to follow that they should also (being people themselves) embrace their own subjectivity, rather than attempting to methodologize it or bracket it away. Indeed, some qualitative researchers move in that direction, relying on the subjectivity of the observer to complete the picture of the phenomenon they study (McLeod, 2001).

Embracing the subjectivity of the observer, however, is risky, and remains fraught with certain issues. One of these issues is a potentially troubling epistemic and moral relativism. Because these researchers deal with inherently subjective phenomena, and each person’s experience is equally as valid as any other’s, it is very difficult to claim that any particular perspective on the phenomenon is true, right, or best—including that of the researcher, because it is all relative to the perspective-holder. Potentially then, even if qualitative researchers embrace and use their own subjective understanding in the research, they cannot ultimately claim that their perspective is the truest, most correct, or ultimately best (and many would not). Because of this epistemological and moral confusion, some, unfortunately, retreat into a form of

descriptivism, simply describing, the phenomenon in question to the best of their ability. This, however, moves them back into a detached frame, one in which they must feign intellectual neutrality or moral disinterest which can obscure the phenomenon under study, or even lessen the worth of the ends of the study itself (Bernstein, 1976; Richardson, Fowers & Guignon, 1999). This drive towards pure description, however, lacks any ground for evaluating different phenomenon. In criminology, descriptivism would unfortunately leave the researcher unable to justify whether or not one course of behavior is right or wrong, or even what appropriate behavior ought to be. Describing a criminal phenomenon in a compelling way that seems to be consistent and cohesive does not permit the researcher to evaluate if a given set of behaviors is morally beneficent or malevolent, and whether such behaviors should continue or cease. In essence, “these concepts have no place in a purely conceived, disinterested, aloof phenomenological stance directed at pure description” (Bernstein, 1976, p. 168).

One often unacknowledged factor in the qualitative/quantitative debate is that both quantitative researchers and qualitative researchers hold certain values in common, as different as they may argue they are. One of those core values, as I mentioned earlier, is the value of liberal individualism. Interestingly, proponents on both sides end up assuming a similar value as quantitative researchers, but qualitative researchers inherit this assumption from a different philosophical tradition. Rather than holding that we are disengaged from the world, their tradition argues instead that we are inherently engaged in the world (Gergen, 1991). We each are situated in a cultural, social, and moral context of a broader social world, a world which constructs our understanding.

When we look at what is meaningful, or accepted as “real,” however, we find that individualism creeps back into the assumptions behind much of the research. A given society’s

view about a certain matter, such as criminal behavior, will be different from another society's view. Within given societies, however, various sub-cultures exist with different perspectives. Within each sub-culture are groups or families that hold a different perspective, and within each sub-group or family given individuals may hold a different perspective. Whose perspective then is true, correct or best? There is no sure and certain way to tell. We can make an assumption when we research criminal phenomenon that "right" is relative to the culture, but that is a conceptually slippery slope. Ultimately what we end up with is that each individual, being a part of society, has her own unique experience and perspectives on matters of import. Because each person's context and situation is ultimately unique, her experience and perspective is just as true and right as any other's. What we assume to be important is the essence of the individual, the individual who is both apart from, yet still related to, the broader world. The consequence is that every individual is endowed with certain capacities, rights, and opinions. Much of the research is undertaken with these moral values about justice and the rights of the individual (be they criminal or victim) unstated but lurking in the back of the researchers' minds.

Beyond the Qualitative vs. Quantitative Debate

Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are based on certain moral and philosophical assumptions which criminologists often leave uncritically examined and undiscussed in the debate about method. What we need as a social science is an understanding, even if it is highly complex and incomplete, about the moral situation of all of us, both researchers and participants. We need to be clear about just what people are if we want to successfully study them, for whatever view we have of humans and human nature will necessarily inform the research questions we ask, how we ask them, and how we interpret our results. I do not wish to imply, however, that this perspective on human nature must be dogmatic

and unchanging, but rather that we in the social sciences carry out an ongoing, reflexive, and critical dialogue about who and what human beings are, what they should be about in the world.

The need for this clarifying conversation seems especially crucial for criminology, which is, in essence, the systematic study of marginalized, deviant individuals or groups. This is inherently a subjective and moral endeavor, and we should embrace rather than deny its subjectivity and morality. Wolfe (1989), in his efforts to construct a moral sociology, stated that “moral obligation is a learned practice. If we do not exercise our capacities to act as moral agents, they will atrophy and we will lose them. Living with the contradictory moral impulses of modernity means a great deal of trial and error, imperfect moral decisions, hesitations, and uncertainties” (p. 233). Criminology, as a field, is uniquely situated to be an important part of this moral dialogue. Once we can articulate a common moral understanding of others, we can begin to develop methods to use as we study patterns of behavior, and to evaluate the worth of the ends of our research.

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