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**The Trouble(s) with Unification: Debating Assumptions,
Methods, and Expertise in Criminology**

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Abstract

Describing the 'crisis' in criminology is hardly new. In response to recent concerns, Robert Agnew (2011) has started an important conversation about the value of working toward unifying criminology. In this paper we explore in more depth the complications of such an endeavour. We focus on theoretical assumptions, the political implications of methodological decisions, and the complexity required for a more robust approach to the question of expertise in criminal justice policymaking. We hope to continue this conversation and propose one means to consider on what basis theoretical integration, mixed methods, and a more modest criminology best can proceed.

Key words: Agnew; unification; critique; theoretical assumptions; methodological decision-making; expertise and professionalism; pragmatism.

Introduction

Over the last decade concerns about the state of the field of criminology have spilled over into the Presidential Address at the *American Society of Criminology's* annual meetings. Senior scholars have decried the limits of criminological knowledge (Laub, 2004), the complexity of evidence (Clear, 2010), and the failure to address the persistent problem of race (Tonry, 2008). In addition, the recognition of criminology's general historical illiteracy (Bursik, 2009) might be seen alongside the failure to take seriously the consequences of accepting unquestioned and sometimes unconscious theoretical assumptions (Agnew, 2014). Findings of low levels of explained variance through theory testing imply that contemporary criminological research is disregarding key variables, theories, and approaches, and is failing to focus on the processes that underlie crime (Weisburd & Piquero, 2008; Wikstrom, 2007).

Robert Agnew (2011) has offered an important contribution designed to spark a constructive conversation about how best to address the concerns expressed above. While interest in integration is certainly not new, his call for a unified criminology offers a means to address underlying assumptions in criminology by exploring literature from fields such as evolutionary theory, social psychology, and biology. In response, some have expressed doubt that fragmentation is in fact a problem for criminology and insist that existing divisions ensure its interdisciplinary vitality. According to Brisman (2012), criminology is a hybrid subject that is constantly changing, and is in far more danger from a totalizing homogeneity than from its current state of disciplinary discord.

In this paper, we hope to contribute to Agnew's (2011) call for constructive conversation and earnest engagement. While sympathetic to the project he outlines, we consider three themes that may complicate his larger project. These include: the problem of base assumptions in our theories; the observation that methods are often guided by ideological determinations about the nature of reality; and questions about expertise, professionalism, and policymaking in criminology. We argue that these efforts to unify criminology must not gloss over core differences related to assumptions about human nature or fail to account for the distinctive epistemological bases for criminological research programs. Those interested in unifying criminology should also consider how the quantified self and self-serving approaches to expertise may reveal the dark side of careerism. This paper attempts to map the external realities and internal constraints within the field and also examines the potential for unification through the lens of theoretical assumptions, epistemic methodological choices, and the promise and peril of professionalism. In the hope of continuing this conversation, we conclude by introducing three projects that could complement nascent calls for unification.

Mapping the Challenges: External Realities and Internal Constraints

The notion that a 'crisis' in criminology exists has been contested. Brisman (2012) suggests such a charge is overblown. He asks: Is criminology any more fragmented than other disciplines? This seems to suggest that fragmentation itself is not a problem for other disciplines. Two books in disparate fields challenge that notion. In physics, the trouble surrounds the emergence of string theory, a way of thinking about physics that is long on speculation, but short on ways to test underlying assumptions. Smolin (2007) suggests that the answer involves examining the history of physics, and recognizing the difference between periods of deep thinking and theory creation, and periods of rigorous mathematical problem solving. Closer to criminology's historical roots, concerns in sociology are focused on how theory has been simplified to meet the needs of large-scale empirical testing. Theory generation, Gross (2008) argues, has been inadequately protected. The commitment to the conceptual clarity required to develop a falsifiable theory is not easily quantified. It is a distinct, yet underappreciated, exercise in the production of knowledge. If sociology suffers when theory loses its autonomy from systematic attempts at empirical research, how might these observations apply to criminology?

In an important contribution, Agnew (2011) presents criminology as a divided field undermined by insular approaches to the investigation of different types of crime, based on different explanations, and using different methods. The largest division exists between mainstream and critical criminologists. Agnew (2011, p. 5) describes his project in the following passage:

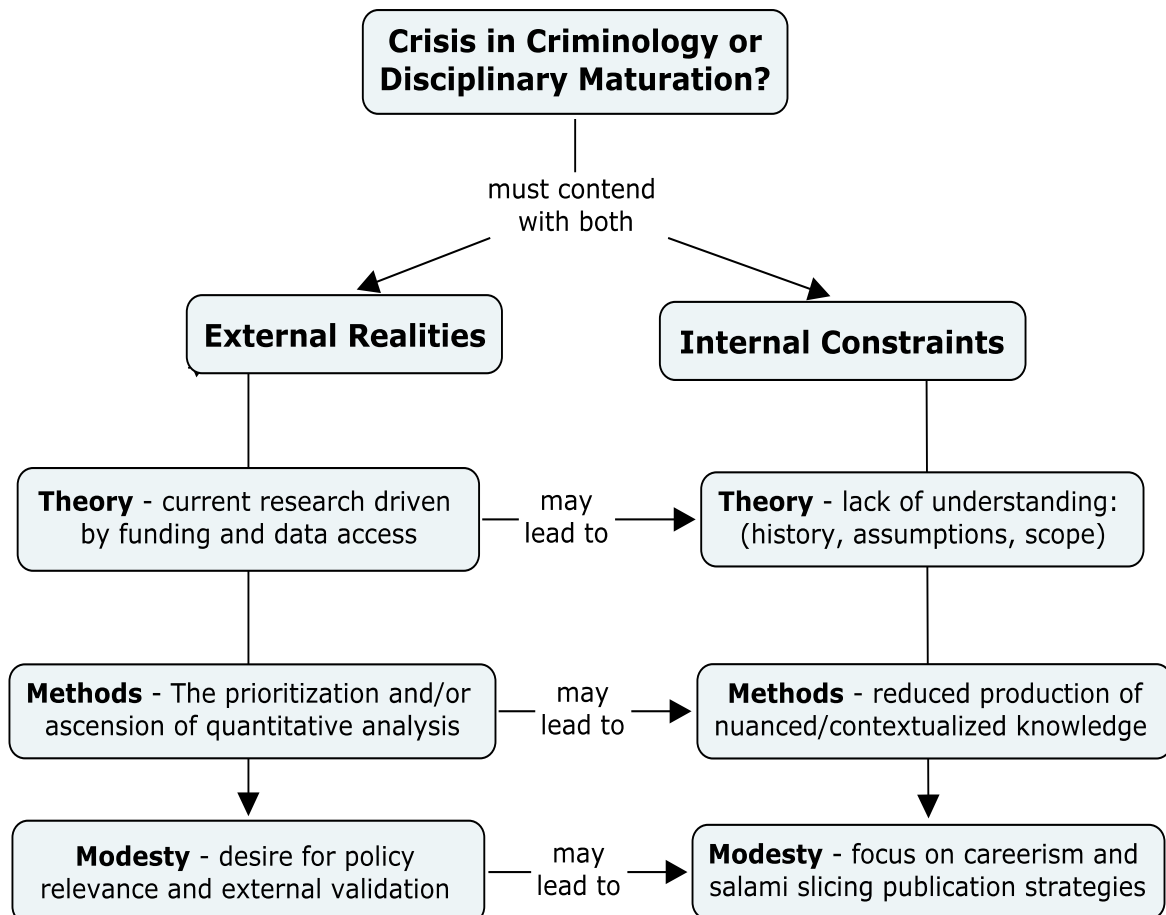
This book is motivated by the belief that this division has hurt the field and the larger society...this division undermines efforts to develop a "coherent, understandable framework" for the analysis of crime.... I believe that each of the major theories and perspectives has something of value to offer to the study of crime. This should come

as no surprise: each theory and perspective reflects the work of talented criminologists who have studied crime for many years. It would be surprising if these theories and perspective did *not* capture something of value regarding crime. Combining the key insights of these theories and perspectives should therefore allow us to better explain and control crime.

Part of the division within criminology, noted by Agnew, may be exacerbated by the declining influence of criminologists on criminal justice policy (Wheeldon & Heidt, 2007). Haggerty (2004) has outlined external factors that have played a role in the ideology of crime control. These include: the rise of neo-liberal forms of governance and a renewed emphasis on individual responsibility; the ascendancy of a highly symbolic public discourse about crime; and the transformation of the criminal justice system by new technologies of detection, capture and monitoring. Building on Haggerty's work, Wheeldon and Heidt (2007) considered some internal complications within criminology. These include: the importance of acknowledging what is known as the postmodern critique and the need for critical approaches to present a realistic and coherent strategy for policy implementation.

Based on these external and internal constraints, these general categories might be used to consider Agnew's efforts to integrate assumptions. Unification must reconcile three very different views of human nature, three unique views of the nature of the reality, and internal dilemmas within criminology about self - interest, professionalism, and the proper role of expertise. Both external realities and internal constraints have been reframed and are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Mapping Criminology's External Realities and Internal Constraints



Criminological Theory and Assumptive Thinking Errors

The role of unquestioned assumptions in contemporary theoretical criminology is best seen alongside the general lack of historical understanding within the field (Laub, 2004; Meier, 1985; Messner, Krohn, & Liska, 1989; Rafter, 2010). Too many criminology programs (and criminologists) have demonstrated a disinterest for learning, teaching, or critically considering criminology's complicated history (Bursik, 2009; Walker, 1997). We argue that this failure extends to a misreading of core assumptions of various theories, their scope, and problem focus. Despite useful attempts at understanding these elements (Barak, 1998; Bernard & Snipes, 1996; Messner, Krohn & Liska, 1989; Robinson & Beaver, 2008), the aforementioned complications have created considerable obstacles for theory development. Agnew (2011) implies that a lack of interest in underlying assumptions has led both mainstream and critical criminologists to adopt inflexible positions that make integration difficult. Others have noted that many social scientific theories, including those produced by criminologists, fail to clearly specify their scope and problem focus (Cohen, 1989; Wagner, 1984). This inhibits robust theory development and integration. It may, in fact, lead to theory stagnation.

The suggestion that integration is an impossible project (Hirschi, 1979) is distinct from arguments that challenge its perceived utility. However, neither can be understood without recognizing that one view of human nature has influenced criminological theory and policy more than any other. As Agnew (2011) correctly notes, the assumptive role of hedonistic, self-interested, and rational actor models of human beings have played an overly influential role in criminology. These have led to what Haggerty (2004) observes is the contemporary influence of new technologies focused on the administration and management of crime and criminals. The shift from the search for how crime emerges to its control is based on an acknowledgement that crime is here to stay, and implies that attempts to explain and understand it are futile. This has led to attempts at improving the efficiency of the criminal justice system (Wilson, 1975), and replaces other more contentious goals based on the complex character of crime (Garland, 2001).

Prioritizing crime control over explaining and understanding crime rates and criminal behavior inevitably leads to a focus on theories consistent with politically and administratively convenient assumptions about human nature that can offer agency-specific strategies to reduce crime. For Agnew (2011), the answer is expanding the range of assumptions and integrating how these assumptions inform criminology and criminal justice:

Recent research in several disciplines, however, has taken a new look at many of these assumptions, including those regarding free will versus determinism, the nature of human nature, the nature of society, and how we perceive "reality". This research suggests that the different assumptions made by crime theories and perspectives have each captured a *part* of the truth. Drawing on this research, I offer a new set of underlying assumptions for criminology...These assumptions integrate and extend the different assumptions made by current theories and perspectives. (2011, p. viii, italics in original)

One challenge for this approach is how to address the historical and conceptual differences that underlie three distinct views of human nature. While Agnew is correct to observe that base assumptions that inform criminological theories are under explored, his proposed solution may fail to meaningfully account for unequivocal differences amongst them.

The first set of assumptions originates in Classical School thought, but can also be found in modern incarnations of rational choice and deterrence theories. According to this view, people are naturally hedonistic and must be controlled. The notion that people have free will, are rational, and can anticipate outcomes of acting in their own self-interest remains a core assumption in the criminal justice system. More specifically, these assumptions have their roots in Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism and a Hobbesian view of the state of nature (Lilly et al. 2011; Williams & McShane, 2010). Both Bentham and Hobbes would agree that people are naturally selfish and require laws and properly administered punishments to deter them from committing crime. It is not difficult to see how this view is connected to the rational choice and deterrence perspectives.

Second, other theories, including many positivist theories, claim that people are blank slates or 'tabula rasa'. This assumption suggests that people are born without any sort of inherent nature, and instead are completely shaped by their environment. Traced to the writings of Aristotle, the term

'tabula rasa' is most closely associated with the writings of political philosopher, John Locke (Agnew, 2011; Bohm & Vogel, 2011). When theorists assume that people are empty vessels whose behavior is shaped by experience, their peers, parents, and other influences become central. This view of human nature connects to the learning perspective in criminology and the idea that mentorship, social programs, and rehabilitation can be useful approaches to prevent and address criminal behavior.

Third, other theories claim that people are naturally altruistic. According to some theorists, people are socially concerned actors who wish to help others and avoid harming them. This is because people tend to value social ties and do not want to risk losing them. This view can be associated with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who assumed that humans were inherently good, but corrupted by negative influences from society, societal pressures to conform, and the inequalities that arise from private property. If a person assumes that people are inherently altruistic and that social groups or bureaucracies corrupt individuals, then one might focus on how societal norms, pressures, and power allow some harmful behavior to continue while defining less detrimental behavior as criminal. Best connected to strain and critical theories, this set of assumptions is wary of power in all its forms. It is especially concerned with the power wielded, both formally and informally, by the criminal justice system. These three views are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 – Assumptions of Human Nature and Criminological Foci

Assumption	Orientation	Criminal Justice Focus
Hedonistic	Naturally self interested	Controlling behavior through environment and/or punishment
Tabla Rasa	Naturally social	Promoting the benefits of social solutions to harm and crime
Corrupted by Society	Naturally altruistic	Limiting the corruptive influence of societal norms and pressures

Agnew's (2011) answer is to argue that all of the above assumptions have some support, and then to use them to summarize his new set of integrated and extended assumptions. By defining his assumptions in ways that categorize these ideas as polar opposites (determinism/agency; self-interest/social concern; consensus/conflict) he is able to square the criminological circle by establishing middle ground and further his unification project. For example, for Agnew (2011) the assumptions of human nature that animate many theories are better seen as a disagreement between self-interest on the one hand, and social concern on the other. By setting up a dichotomy via the poles of hedonism and altruism - mediated by the tabula rasa view, Agnew's unified assumption is that people, as social creatures, have the potential to be both.

This reformulation serves Agnew's goals while appeasing potential critics by allowing that each view and theory-based research program has value. While it is clever, it may also be premature. To truly connect social concern to a Rousseauian view about the corrupting influences of society, one must be prepared to argue in straightforward terms about the power of the state to make and unmake social norms and acknowledge the inevitable harms that can result from this arrangement. Agnew appears too polite to do so. Instead he conflates one aspect of critical theories, altruism (or perhaps solidarity), while ignoring other aspects of human nature often ascribed to these theories. This is not to say that social concern as a distinct motivation is of little utility to criminological thinking. Indeed, Agnew marshals some impressive and varied evidence in support of social concern drawn from a variety of fields. However, if a theory of social concern is a promising way to understand criminology, the theory itself should be developed and key propositions tested.

Perhaps the biggest question is to what extent Agnew's effort can be applied to other attempts to integrate and unify criminological thought. For example, psychosocial criminology seeks to unify disparate criminological theories by rejecting the sociological monopoly on critical criminology (Hall, 2012). Instead of viewing every phenomenon/process/injustice as the product of socio-cultural

relations, this approach views criminal behavior as the result of a relationship between external forces like the physical environment, political economy and historical processes on the one hand, and internal dimensions such as the neurological system, drives, and desires on the other. Thus, criminality is best understood as a function of the lived experience of an individual who must manage the interactions between external and internal pressures. While this approach also speaks to a new kind of integration, it is not clear how it could fit within Agnew's unification framework or other past efforts identified by Henry (2012).

Methods, Politics, and Mistaken Meaning

Another challenge for Agnew (2011) is how he addresses what might be called the "method wars" in criminology. While he sees value in both quantitative and qualitative research, he downplays how underlying disagreements about methods amount to stark epistemological differences about knowledge and the nature of reality. Just as there are three core assumptions about human nature that animate most criminological theories, there are three research traditions, each of which is based on different assumptions about the nature of the world. These include: positivism, constructivism, and pragmatism (Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2012). The positivist tradition posits an objective reality that can be accurately observed and measured. Quantitative designs seek to test research hypotheses using deductive top-down approaches to define and compare variables, while eliminating possible confounding factors (Slife & Williams, 1995).

The constructivist tradition is skeptical of universal truth and focuses instead on the subjective nature of the world. Based on lived experiences, qualitative designs generate or refine theories using inductive pattern seeking, and bottom-up approaches designed to capture in depth narratives that illuminate personal understanding (Palys, 1992). A third tradition, pragmatism, sees methods as primarily a means to capture socially useful data. While few recognize it as such, it is perhaps the most common form of social research. All quantitative research is based on qualitative judgments about how to conceptualize a research problem, operationalize variables, and select statistical tests, methods, and models. Likewise, most qualitative analysis involves pattern seeking in which researchers find ways to count, compare, and contrast concepts, themes, experiences, and ideas. Mixed methods research recognizes the inherent relationship between these two traditions. It specifically rejects either/or epistemological and methodological divisions, and combines both approaches through a back and forth process called abductive reasoning (Morgan, 2007). Based on the intuition of the researcher, pragmatism relies upon more flexible approaches to discover the best combination of methods to answer the research question in the most comprehensive way possible (Wheeldon, 2010).

Agnew (2011) appears to call for an explicit focus on mixed methods as part of a détente in the method wars:

The multiple perspectives approach (MPA) therefore draws on both the positivistic and constructionist approaches, incorporating the advantages of each. Drawing on the positivistic approach, it assumes that there is an objective reality. That is, people really do possess certain characteristics, live in certain types of environments, and have certain experiences. Or, in the words of Pinker (2002, p. 203), "the world really does contain ducks, who really do share properties." And while it may not be possible to measure this reality in a way free of all biases, it is possible to construct reduced-bias measures of it. Drawing on the constructionist approach, it argues that the subjective views of respondents are also important. While a wide range of factors beyond objective reality affects such views, they nevertheless guide behavior. So they too affect outcome variables, even after reduced-bias measures of reality are taken into account. (2011, p. 181)

He argues criminology would do well to address the shortcomings of quantitative and qualitative research by focusing on the overlap of data from a variety of sources that emerge through various stages of data collection. For example, to fully explore issues surrounding juvenile justice, Agnew calls for primary data to be drawn from juveniles, parents, and teachers alongside other information sources such as official records, or independent assessments by trained observers. In addition to easily quantified data, he argues criminology would benefit from a deeper consideration of

the value of interviews to capture the subjective views of different respondents, including those caught up in and who work within the system itself.

This is a promising call but requires more detailed development. Mixing methods requires the rejection of the siren song of universalism via logical positivism. Some “truths” may in fact exist, but pragmatism is far more interested in how to make sense of these truths to solve real problems in socially useful ways rather than attempting to establish generalizable facts from which to uniformly proceed. Richard Rorty (1979), the American pragmatist, sought to replace the competitive process of discovering one truth with the notion that the solutions to the problems of society require that multiple descriptions of the world be leveraged to solve contemporary problems in inclusive and practical ways (Rorty, 1998).

This starting place is far from the positivistic view of much mainstream criminology, and Agnew does not deny that there is an objective reality out there to be discovered. The trouble, according to the late Jock Young (2011), is that the quest for the Grand Narrative often ascribed to critical scholars has ironically been turned on its head. Reborn in an era of ‘quantophilia’ or an “...irrational love for numbers in the form of t-values, F-ratios and associated p-values” (Moomal, 1997), it is statistical signifiers and signs that have replaced Derridian discourse. In the place of “...mouthing near incomprehensible phrases, with a hint of a French accent” (Young, 2011, p. 218), today it is the unthinking prioritization of statistical methods based on positivistic assumptions that overwhelm more critical engagement with theories of crime, criminality, and other harmful behavior (Ferrell, 2009).

At its roots, this is an epistemological problem that cannot easily be papered over. Quantitative research requires the creation of categories, a focus on statistical means, numeric indicators, and efforts to explain away outliers. Thus, ever-larger data sets designed to focus on the most common outcomes overwhelm the unique views of individuals of specific interest to qualitative researchers. While Merton, Sutherland, Sellin, Shaw and McKay, Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin could be classified as conflict theorists who did not reject the positivist approach, for some commentators, recent statistical methods are “...wholly inadequate and inappropriate for the study of human affairs (Ferrell, 2009, p. 1). Legitimate questions remain about whether “fetishizing” these methods can truly capture the imaginative leaps needed to try to understand “the making of laws, the breaking of laws, and the reaction to the breaking of laws” (Sutherland & Cressey, 1947, p. 1).

Agnew is not the only criminologist to call for mixing methods in recent years (see, for example, Maruna, 2010). Few have fully considered some of the significant epistemological stumbling blocks. While pragmatism may offer a way out, it will not succeed by making qualitative techniques secondary to quantitative analysis. Scholars must be aware of, but not beholden to, differing ontological starting points, and modest enough to establish a more equal footing for research traditions with which they are perhaps less comfortable. This requires overcoming the scholarly stubbornness, a feature of the field (Robinson, 2012). Research must be viewed not as a defined either/or category but as a more fluid and iterative process that can better account for the complex relationships between objects and subjects. Perhaps the greatest strength of pragmatism is the inherent methodological modesty it implies. The issue is not which one method is better overall, but which methods make more sense depending on the type of criminological questions of interest. A general challenge for Agnew’s project is how to encourage researchers to spend more time justifying these approaches, developing research programs based on mixed designs, and engaging in the sort of in-depth examinations multi-method analysis requires. Another challenge to such a shift, however, may be related to broader structural constraints.

Modesty, Fragmentation, and the Dark Side of Careerism

While Agnew’s call for rethinking theoretical assumptions and mixing methods is laudable, he is silent on perhaps the most practical difficulty his project faces. The desire to quantify everything rewards certain forms of academic contributions. Haggerty’s (2004) observation about the ascendancy of neo-liberal thinking in criminology may be relevant to the careerist calculations that appear to guide many within our discipline. While Agnew’s approach requires new approaches to, and analysis of, established criminological problems, the biggest challenge for unification is the failure to recognize that many benefit from its current configuration. There may be far more criminologists who are assisted, and not limited, by the fragmented state of contemporary criminology.

Of course, fragmentation itself is part of broader social forces. The *Quantified Self Movement* involves using tools and techniques to monitor and track all aspects of one's social life (Kelly, 2007; Wolf, 2007). From sleeping, exercising, driving, thinking, even assessing intimate performances of one kind or another, the movement proclaims itself as the triumph of rational faculties over muddled intuitions. The belief in the value of "Self Knowledge through Numbers" is already a part of administrative academe in today's bureaucratic university. As the trend toward the new public management based on numeric accountability becomes ingrained, the quest for tenure and respectability quickly turns into efforts to catalogue easily quantified measurements of success. As Laub (2004, p. 3) suggested a decade ago:

Today "career concerns" are center-stage in the field - for example, publication counts, citation counts, the amount of external funding generated, departmental rankings and so forth are the new measures of intellectual impact and scholarship.

The career-based complications suggested above are relevant in three ways. First, pursuing unification suggests some researchers abandon tried and true approaches that have resulted in past publication success. This is a very risky proposition, especially for those at the beginning of their careers.¹ For example, in a review of 95 published articles in *Criminology* between 2010 and 2012, less than a tenth used qualitative or mixed method approaches, the same approaches that Agnew seems to suggest are lacking in criminology (Wheeldon, 2012). These findings appear consistent over time. Between 1951 and 2008 only 11 percent of articles appearing in the field's top peer-review outlets were qualitative (Dooley, 2010, p. 63-65).

In a publish or perish profession like academia, scholars at all levels see publishing as a key stepping-stone to career development (Gabbidon, Higgins, & Martin, 2011). Current trends in publication may be aggravating the problem of "goal displacement," whereby formalistic outputs become more important than the substantive purposes of an endeavor (Merton, 1949). Former Nobel laureate Peter Higgs, whose work in theoretical physics led to the discovery of the Higgs boson, made headlines recently when he proclaimed that he would be unable to get a tenure track position in today's job market, because of expectations to churn out paper after paper. Higgs stated:

Today I wouldn't get an academic job. It's as simple as that. I don't think I would be regarded as productive enough.... It's difficult to imagine how I would ever have enough peace and quiet in the present sort of climate to do what I did in 1964.²

The pressure to publish is leading to what Phillip Cohen, a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, calls the "dark side of careerism." He highlights one case in which two nearly identical papers were published in the journals: *Criminology* and *Social Problems*. The phenomenon has been called "salami slicing" and occurs when authors create several publications out of material that could have been published in a single article. The trouble is not that the articles use the same data or even that the analysis appears very similar. The problem is each paper fails to refer to the other in any way whatsoever. Cohen argues (2012): "Little of substance is learned from one that could

¹ This might be seen alongside Robinson's (2012) droll observations about the perverse inclination among some to use annual meetings as an excuse to test each and every possible permutation of widely accepted theories. Reported breathlessly at conferences, these exhaustive and at times exhausting efforts produce more and more publications at the cost of imaginative, innovative, or otherwise useful efforts.

² The Guardian's Decca Altkenhead spoke with Peter Higgs on his way to the 2013 Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/dec/06/peter-higgs-boson-academic-system>

not be learned from the other, they contain many nearly identical passages, and they both claim to make the same major original contributions.”³

Second, the need to publish to achieve promotion or tenure in an increasingly competitive academic environment is not just relevant for those willing to play the “tier-one criminological journal game.” Others who contribute critical and cultural explorations or qualitative research are also served by the current state of the discipline. Fragmentation allows journals and other academic venues to explore new ideas at the margins of criminology, break new ground, or engage politically unpopular or even dangerous ideas. While a common conception of what criminology is and how it can be studied is useful, such efforts are not without inherent dangers. Calls for unification should they focus on integrating the most popular theories, rely on statistically acceptable methods, and/or politically “appropriate” topics, will play into fears voiced by Brisman (2012, p. 61) who suggests that the:

...path entitled “a unified theory of crime” may lead us toward a “unified theory of crime causation,” which may, in turn, lead to an avenue headed to capitals, legislative hills, and policymakers awaiting the delivery of [crime] prevention and control recommendations.

A third consideration that may complicate efforts at unification is based on disagreements about expertise and the proper role and relationship between criminologists and criminal justice policy making (Wheeldon & Heidt, 2007). Savelsberg, King & Cleveland (2004) argue that for many criminologists, the topics under investigation are defined by the prevailing political perspectives of the time. In an era of the quantified self, there seems to be little recognition amongst some criminologists of the ethical and professional issues that arise when a scholar develops a new program or assessment tool, tests it themselves (or with friendly colleagues and graduate students), and then sells the result to state agencies. There seems little official pushback against the rise of self-evaluated programs used first to establish expertise, and later leveraged to promote one’s own professional and financial interests.

While advocating research-based programs or advising on specific practices can certainly be part of public scholarship, the failure to consider the consequences of conflating the profit incentive with self-serving “evidence-based” research (or whatever other buzz word is in vogue) is problematic. Will unification efforts be used to entrench profit seeking and the entrepreneurial spirit within the criminological industrial complex (Christie, 2000)? If so, it is unlikely that those who seek “disciplinary enlightenment” will be in any rush to seek a place within such an endeavor.

Unification in Criminology: Promise and Problems

Agnew’s call for a more unified approach to criminology offers an important opportunity for a productive conversation on key issues in the field. We believe this conversation is long overdue. In this paper we have sought to contribute to existing efforts by pushing for greater clarity on how to understand what unification might mean for assumptive views within theory, the challenges associated with methodological mindset biases, and problematizing the role of criminological expertise. Below the surface, Agnew’s work appears to be a call for a more pragmatic approach to understanding theories, debating methods, and rethinking criminological meaning. Pragmatism is the uniquely American philosophical tradition linking theory and practice. Richard Rorty (1998) has offered the most recent and compelling variant by integrating philosophers such as Charles S. Pierce, William James, John Dewey, and George Hebert Mead (Gross, 2008). However, it is a concept that has evolved over time. We offer three projects to advance Agnew’s call, address the concerns expressed above, and consider how to promote deeper dialogue within the field.

First, if Agnew’s (2011) focus on base assumptions in criminological theories cannot be understood by simply creating new categories of self-interest and social concern, another lens is required. Agnew is right to focus on the outsized role self-interest has played in how we present crime and criminality. However, to take seriously the ways in which assumptions about human nature shape

³ The post and detailed examples of the similarities between the two papers are availability on Cohen’s blog: Family Inequality available at <http://familyinequality.wordpress.com/2012/06/11/one-case/>

understanding, it may be dangerous to engage in a reductive approach designed to reframe complex differences based on simple dichotomies. A historically informed approach to unification requires returning to Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau and exploring to what extent their views continue to shape societal expectations about crime and social control. However, a focus on base assumptions while necessary is not sufficient. One answer might be to rethink how we teach theory. To make the most of Agnew's efforts at unification, criminology should be informed by other contributions from philosophy and social theory.⁴

Building on observations from contemporary physics (Smolin, 2007), sociology (Gross, 2008), and philosophy (Berube, 2008), instead of efforts to memorize and catalogue criminological theories, more space could be created for theorizing about crime and effort expended toward the analysis of the ideas that underlie it. This could include comparisons between different theories and attempts to further clarify their connections to each other. Several leading criminologists have suggested that analyzing theories and ideas in this way would be beneficial to the field (Farrington, 2003; Laub, 2004). Others have done work that could be seen as part of this unacknowledged area of criminological research (Bernard & Snipes, 1996; Cornish, 1999; McCord, 1989; Robinson, 1999).

Such an approach would require researchers to think through the base assumptions of each theory, and consider to what extent relevant propositions combine key concepts (Agnew, 2011). Further, theorists attempting to integrate and unify would do well to carefully consider which criminological problem(s) they are trying to explain (i.e., criminal behavior, criminal acts, crime rates or some other phenomenon) and to clearly state the scope of their theories. It might be useful to clarify some of these aspects in existing as they are not always completely clear. Likewise, such an effort would benefit from a practical means to distinguish between unit theories or specific explanations of phenomena (Wagner & Berger, 1985) and orienting strategies, which are meta-theoretical entities that offer broader assumptions about the nature of inquiry (Berger & Zelditch, 1993). These distinctions can assist researchers and theorists to engage in new kinds of integration, and better understand differences between theoretical research programs (TRPs).

Second, if Agnew's (2011) work can be read as providing a renewed call for mixed methods research to solve real criminological problems, one area of interest would be to explicate the criminological consequences of Rorty's pragmatism (1979; 1998). Making sense of pragmatism's call to action within the socio-legal realities of the modern criminal justice system requires careful consideration. There is potential here but also perhaps some peril. It does not fit easily with the desire for certainty through positivistic research designs or efforts to combat the under-representation of qualitative research by building a community of scholars committed to its resurgence. Disciplinary discord based on epistemic differences requires abandoning the either/or conception of what "good" research involves.

In the short term, the most important contribution individual scholars can make is to ensure that qualitative techniques are not relegated to one or two weeks in a research methods course syllabus. Too many fall for the fallacy that just because most criminology is currently fascinated with complex statistical methods, that the only data that matters are those that can be quantified and tested numerically. Instead, Capstone courses and graduate level coursework must involve qualitative projects, in which both classical and grounded approaches are attempted. Building this skill set

⁴ Predictably, we have a view on how that might be achieved. See Heidt & Wheeldon (Under contract) *Introducing Criminological Thinking: Maps, Theories, and Understanding*. Thousand, Oaks: Sage Publications.

requires creating opportunities for the next generation to explore narrative data, engage ethnographic methods, and consider the benefits and challenges inherent in qualitative criminological research.⁵

Third and finally, while Agnew does not consider the role that careerism may play in the subversion of his worthy project, we view this as a significant oversight. It is likely to sabotage his unified project and must be acknowledged if it is to be addressed. Some mainstream criminologists may dismiss his call for more introspection as so much navel gazing, while others who benefit from the current state of fragmentation may play up the dangers represented by a totalizing criminological project. This is perhaps the most vexing problem for unification. Fragmentation has become the norm. Whatever the challenge for criminological knowledge that it represents, divisions serve a variety of goals. It ensures different scholars can claim ownership over various pieces of the criminological project and allows all to participate in the ever-growing expectation juggernaut of publication.

For example, the number of new journals that have emerged encourages silo-thinking by allowing that those who claim expertise within one epistemological bubble need not wrestle with verifiable but perhaps uncomfortable truths from another. This may be the sort of obstinacy that Robinson (2012) views as the largest impediment to confronting the crises in criminology:

...Every time I review the program of the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), one of my common reactions is, "Oh look! Another test of low self-control theory!" ... we gather by the thousands to share with others our studies, and the great bulk of what we do has already been done, again and again and again, ad nauseam.... Instead of breaking the mold and being innovative and bold—instead of embracing necessary changes such as using inter-disciplinary approaches to more fully understand human behavior, integrating our existing theories to more fully explain criminality, and reaching out to legislators with our findings to actually influence criminal justice policy—we instead just continue on our current path, testing the same limited and disciplinary theories in mostly the same ways, completely isolated from the real-world of criminal justice policy. (2012, p. 28)

Perhaps the concerns voiced above are less a function of stubbornness and instead the practical result of Laub's (2004) observations. Careers are built on one's perceived expertise in one or more areas in any discipline, and one's preferred approach to study an issue becomes connected to one's own view on an issue or topic. Too often, mental mindsets result in a certain rigidity of thinking (Heuer, 1999), and personal theoretical and methodological choices are often and inevitably seen as superior. Once these conceptual frames are adopted, it becomes increasingly difficult to appreciate other perspectives (Wagner, 1992). This is no less true in the hallowed halls of academia (Klein & Stern, 2009).

We suggest expertise be reflexively reimagined. Instead of the promotion of one view over all others, expertise might be seen as based on the quality of the debate it sets out. By presenting two competing views, experts are those who don't advocate *per se*, but who instead organize existing scholarship into credible and accessible arguments based on the needs, interests, and inclinations of the stakeholders involved. This view may offer a way out of entrenchment in one theoretical, methodological, or professional perspective. It can be applied whatever one's opinion and integrated into the work of students and researchers in a variety of settings (Wheeldon, Chavez, & Cooke, 2013). Expertise, whatever one's epistemic starting point, could also be viewed in part as the extent to which

⁵ We were lucky to participate in a useful dialogue during our 2012 panel at ASC that helped clarify our thinking on many of these issues. Dr. Bob Bursik was kind enough to serve as discussant on our panel and his comments provided useful insight into the challenges (and choices) involved in editing the journal *Criminology*. In response to our concerns about the relative lack of qualitative research in mainstream publications, he suggested that this might result from the small number of qualitative manuscripts submitted. The reality is that qualitative research and analysis takes time, and thus, there simply may be fewer researchers who, facing the pressure to publish, choose one qualitative article over three quantitative submissions. This is no doubt true, as are observations about the challenge of institutional review boards and the worries about research involving human subjects in conflict with the law. However, personal experience suggests the negative feedback loop that results from regular rejection of qualitative manuscripts may also play a role.

individuals take personal responsibility for acknowledging themselves in the research process – including how interests, interactions, and beliefs shape and influence research decisions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

We suggest unification not be viewed as an immediate goal. As a longer-term project it might best proceed by working to developing a means to embrace the potential for integrative dissent to promote intellectual exchange (Collins, 1998). Before attempting to unify the field, criminologists could first work toward adopting a common means to debate, discuss, and respectfully consider core criminological questions. By identifying inherent philosophical, epistemological and methodological differences in various criminological policies, programs, or practices, we can model a process of constructive reflection. Annual meetings of the ASC and other conferences devoted to the study of crime might be re-purposed and traditional panels re-imagined. Junior and senior scholars who have agreed to debate would arrive at the meetings prepared to argue for and against an agreed upon proposition or issue (Wheeldon et al. 2013). Teams could be determined randomly and participants would have to be willing to argue against their own perspectives. Audience participation and effective moderation would allow a more detailed and coherent view of the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches to be explored. Taken together, this approach could allow epistemic authority, upon which unification could be based, more likely to emerge (Gieryn, 1999).⁶

It is particularly important to acknowledge that a movement towards unification does not require the imposition of one all-encompassing theoretical perspective. Even the most clearly articulated and empirically validated general theory of crime and criminal behavior would not be capable of unifying criminology. Crime and criminal behavior cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, the dynamics of the criminal justice system and the origins of the criminal law must also be taken into account. This is because these factors influence the types of theories and research produced by criminologists (Bernard, Snipes, & Gerould, 2010). Agnew's (2011) analysis of the basic assumptions in criminology is an important example of research in this direction. It is only a start. Perhaps the real value of Agnew's contribution is that it provides an exemplar for future research in this largely unexplored and neglected area.

A push towards unification could serve as motivation to develop some of the untapped areas of criminology such as how the levels of explanation and problem domains of the different theories relate to each other (Bernard et al., 2010). For example, macro-level theories have received little attention in the last 30 years and remain undeveloped (Rosenfeld, 2011). It is also still unclear as to how variables and propositions from different disciplines relate to one another (Robinson, 2012; Robinson & Beaver, 2008). While it's true that some of these connections have been identified within sociological, psychological, and the more recent biosocial explanations, the relationship of biology and the relevance of larger social structural, economic and political factors in crime have yet to be clearly specified (Hall, 2012). Agnew (2011) reminds us there is much more work to be done.

Limitations and Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to contribute to Agnew's call for constructive conversation and earnest engagement around criminology's disciplinary discord. While challenges exist, we are sympathetic to Agnew's project and we hope our contribution can further discussion about the

⁶ On an optimistic view, such an approach could assist to address the unproductive and territorial division that exists between conflict (or critical) and mainstream criminologists. As Agnew (2011) notes, in modern criminology this distinction seems to exist more in the perceptions of criminologists than in social reality. Few critical criminologists would argue that laws against murder, robbery, theft, and rape don't serve at least some purpose. Likewise, there are many mainstream criminologists who recognize that laws about drug use, prostitution, gambling, and regulations for businesses and corporations privilege some in society over others. The division seems particularly strange given criminology's history. Many early criminologists who laid the foundations for our contemporary theories (e.g., Merton, Sutherland, Cohen, and Cloward & Ohlin) could not easily be classified as consensus or conflict theorists. Merton and Sutherland were monitored by the FBI in the 1950s and 60s (Lilly, Cullen & Ball, 2011). Further, Sutherland's (1949) work on white collar and other crimes of the powerful and Merton's (1949) strain theory can all be seen, at least in part, as veiled critiques of capitalism (Taylor, Walton & Young, 1973).

potential for a more unified approach to criminology. The issues that we have raised include the problem of simplifying base assumptions in criminological theories, the observation that methods are, in fact, guided by political determinations about the nature of reality, and the recognition of the complications of careerism for the role of criminologists in policymaking. Nevertheless, there are limitations associated with our own analysis. These might be located within these same themes.

One limitation to our analysis is the possibility that the crisis described above is simply inaccurate. In an era of developments in cultural criminology and other imaginative criminological efforts, unification may appear to be a solution in search of a problem (Brisman, 2012). According to this view, efforts to unite assumptions, approaches, and activities into a homogeneous criminological enterprise are foolhardy. Perhaps the greatest danger is that by unifying criminological assumptions, the result is an account of crime and criminal behavior which, while lending itself to testability, may miss the broader nuance of the phenomenological aspect of crime, and its intimate connection with culture (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008).

More specifically, this means connections between crime and consumer culture will continue to be buried within individualistic accounts of crime that fail to meaningfully consider motivation. For some, crime cannot be understood without reference to our materialistic culture. Psychologically manipulated through marketing to consume, too many are swayed by political slogans that justify the inevitable inequalities that result (Hall, 2012). Our analysis does not tackle this question head on. Certainly structural arrangements that guide and order social relations can help explain which views of human nature are popularized, research methods prioritized, and professional activities lionized. As such, it is worthy of more detailed exploration elsewhere.

Another limitation concerns our suggestion, inspired in part by Agnew, that the next generation of scholars reclaim the term *pragmatic criminology* based on the contributions of Richard Rorty. Applying Rorty to contemporary criminology is distinct from exploring the influence of John Dewey on George Hebert Mead's efforts to integrate pragmatism with the ethnographic work of the Chicago school. It is not without challenges.⁷ Yet, unified criminology cannot proceed without addressing the epistemological critiques presented by those who have and will continue to influence the field. Mixed methods may offer a way out of the either/or "epistemic shoot-out", and enhance detailed and collaborative methodological decision-making. However, more and deeper analysis of the implications of such a pragmatic focus is needed. Our view is that it will require a profound shift in the way we teach students, engage in research, and publish findings.

Of course, simply suggesting the value of new ideas is inadequate. They must be tested and explored, revised, and rejected if necessary. One idea to prepare the groundwork for future efforts at unification is to engage rather than gloss over essential differences. These include, but are not limited to, assumptions about human nature, distinctive epistemological bases in criminological research programs, and the dangers inherent in self-serving approaches to expertise. Beyond the dry recitation of past work based on old orthodoxies, annual meetings could propel the field forward by focusing on key questions and outstanding issues. By assisting young and established scholars alike to engage in contemporary debates, we can support dialogue on what can (or should) be unified and how best to organize such an effort.

Reinvigorating debate at criminological meetings is not without risks. It may threaten the ordered and organized efforts of conference committees who might legitimately fear that divisions now hidden by fragmentation emerge in ways that undermine the idea of one harmonious criminological family. The stubborn refusal to engage our criminological divisions, however well intentioned, is misdirected. Properly planned and facilitated, debate could strengthen the criminological community by demonstrating how to engage controversial ideas based on a commitment to respectful disagreement. Perhaps ancient models of debate can open new doors and energize scholars fed up with the old divides. Agnew has taken an important first step toward a longer-

⁷ Beyond the scope of this paper is to what extent Rorty and his version of pragmatism can be easily applied to criminology. Rorty's critics have pursued several lines of attack. While the ultimate nature of truth and knowledge remains contested, we accept Rorty's central claim that attempts to pick and choose among theoretical approaches and/or research traditions must be based on their ability to do what they say they can do. We hope to build on these observations in future work.

term discourse on how to re-invigorate contemporary criminology. We look forward to continuing the conversation.

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