EDITORIAL

(RE)VISIONING CRIMINOLOGY: NEW TRENDS, OLD DEBATES

After a cursory scan of the articles within this edition of *Acta Criminologica*, one is struck by the diverse collection of “criminologies” and explorations into crime (and victimisation), as well as the wide range of evidence-based reforms that are on offer to institutions and systems created to address these issues. One is also struck by the interdisciplinary nature of the criminological subject matter with which the authors engage. In this, and other editions of *Acta Criminologica*, you will find that criminological work has not only emerged from the conventional corridors of criminology, but it has dynamically manifested within, and across, the humanities and social sciences. Research exploring the antecedents, predictors and impacts of crime can also be found in the health sciences, economics and the clinical and mental health disciplines, to name just a few. This edition of *Acta Criminologica* illustrates that not only is there a wide spectrum of topics that occupy criminological research, but that criminological inquiries have gone inter-continental, technological and retro-theoretical. In this edition, authors reconsider conventional criminological theory, as well as stimulate progressive perspectives on modern-day events that our grounding theories on crime and deviance could not have anticipated.

Restivo and Lanier, for instance, boldly dust off Becker, Tannenbaum and Hirschi for a contemporary discussion of Labeling Theory and juvenile offenders. This is juxtaposed with Lochner and Zinn’s novel application of the Locard’s exchange principle in their exploration of modern criminal investigation and the use of cellphone technology. Others fearlessly tread institutional spaces, with De Wet’s investigation into risk factors for workplace bullying in schools and Dastile’s examination of women’s routes to imprisonment challenging ‘the systems’, while authors such as Potgieter ‘go public’ and straight to the source, using perception surveys to explore the reasons why the public is reluctant to report crimes to the police. Others go intercontinental. Joseph, Kirchhoff, Maden and Barkhuizen’s investigation into the sexual molestation of women on public transport systems in Asia, Roelofse and Bogdalski’s study on Polish police officers’ perceptions of community policing and Debalkie and Snyman’s analysis of police corruption and its prevention in Ethiopia and South Africa challenge us to explore crime, corruption and victimisation beyond our borders and to exchange theoretical perspectives in these pursuits. Then there are questions of methodology, such as Masiloane’s timely examination of the construction and analysis of South Africa’s crime statistics and van Graan and Van der Watt’s valuable analysis of the use of crime dockets as empirical evidence.

While much of this work could be generally (narrowly) defined as ‘criminology’, the inclination towards cross-disciplinary research and theory development – that further blurs the boundaries of criminology – is becoming more prevalent, not to mention necessary. The intersections between crime and technology, newly articulated forms of ‘deviance’ and victimisation in institutional spaces and public places that have not traditionally been considered places of risk, and the field of social media and victimisation are just a few examples of where interdisciplinary knowledge(s), methodologies and theories are rapidly developing. Similarly, the application of conventional criminological theories are being ‘tested’ in new social environments, with the use of mixed methodologies and other methods traditionally employed within the domain of other scientific disciplines.

While acknowledging, and indeed practicing, interdisciplinarity on questions of crime and victimisation, one is met with a dearth of well-articulated descriptions of the reasoning and selection of methodologies that are employed to produce these interdisciplinary projects. This also applies to the theoretical frameworks informing, and emerging from, these
interdisciplinary projects. I include my own interdisciplinary work in this observation. For the reader, it is often a matter of deduction and guesswork. What did each discipline bring to the project – methodologically and theoretically – and how did this offering enhance the understanding of the subject under study? Attempting to get to grips with this indeterminate concept of interdisciplinarity, one questions what distinctions can be made between research that could be called ‘interdisciplinary’ and research that is simply ‘collaborative’? Interdisciplinary work should be more than the muddying of disciplinary waters. This prized and promoted practice should involve a more conscious and methodical approach to the borrowing, lending and sharing of disciplinary perspectives, theories, methodologies and analytical tools. It seems that while both ‘good collaborative practice’ and ‘interdisciplinarity’ largely centre around a common question, the latter would involve more than complementarity or a convergence of interests. It should instead work towards a critical interdisciplinary discourse; a more nuanced, non-discipline-aligned method or theory which (re)shapes traditional methods and distorts theoretical boundaries in the production of a new, more integrated knowledge. Critique and theoretical disharmony should be an essential part of this process. Of course, there is something inherently interdisciplinary about criminology. The study of prisons, for instance, naturally brings together a range of ‘criminologies’ – penology, victimology, cartographic and reformist criminology – but it is the institutional features of prisons that can force the permeability of other disciplinary boundaries, including psychology, social work, health and even theology around a common goal of understanding imprisonment, its impacts and the incarcerated offender.

Cozily aligned to the conversation about interdisciplinary scholarship on crime and victimisation is the awkward debate about what constitutes criminology, or indeed what it takes to be a criminologist in South Africa. These debates are impassioned, polemical and unresolved. They are mostly unspoken, uncomfortable, and to some extent, historical. They are also necessary. In 2012 the University of South Africa hosted the First International Conference: Law & Criminal Justice and Multi-Inter-Transdisciplinary (M-I-T) Research. The papers presented were a stimulating combination of classical, critical, and for a lack of a better descriptor, applied criminologies and criminal justice studies. The conference was awash with conventional criminologists, police, social workers, sociologists, psychologists, development studies and security specialists, lawyers, policy makers and mélange of other scholars, analysts and practitioners whose sole purpose was to address crime, violence, corruption and security. At the core of these presentations of studies and theoretical propositions about crime and violence, was the judicious application of interdisciplinary methods. The M-I-T conference produced a range of innovative practices, models and theoretical developments in the areas of law and criminal justice. The key message surrounding ‘successful’ adaptations of crime and violence prevention models, programmes and theories – not to mention, good criminological research and practice – was a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary theory and collaboration amongst disciplines and stakeholders. It also promoted the blurring of boundaries towards the development of a more holistic, integrated approach towards improving criminal justice and legal practice.

Despite the wide range of interdisciplinary projects presented at the M-I-T conference, and those being conducted across the country, we remain silent about how far ‘our criminology’ can stretch into other domains before it can no longer be considered ‘criminology’. In a 2012 edition of Acta Criminologica, a colleague and I asked a number of questions:

How can one discuss interdisciplinary research in criminology when it is fractured by its own widely diverse institutional arrangements and lack of (theoretical) cohesion?

How does one promote ‘working across’ when we have yet to really ‘work within’?
These questions are still of concern. However, the tiresome critiques within our own discipline of criminology need to be replaced with a more robust (re)examination of the question of how we define, demarcate and ‘do’ criminology, theoretically, methodological and ethically. Most importantly, it might be time to return, although tentatively, to the suggestion that criminology is indeed unique and that this discipline has yet to contribute something more profound, something more unified, to the business of crime and violence prevention in South Africa.

Prof Lillian Artz

Gender Health & Research Unit
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Cape Town
Email: Lillian.Artz@uct.ac.za