

# Contemporary Comment

## *The Uneasy Relationship between Criminology and Qualitative Research*

Max Travers\*

---

### *Abstract*

This comment considers the prospects for qualitative research in criminology by considering four recent texts: Bartels and Richards (2011), Westmarland (2011), Copes (2012), and Gadd, Karstedt and Messner (2012). Together they indicate a growing interest in qualitative methods, and even an emerging movement or sub-field. There is still, however, a tendency to present qualitative methods in one-dimensional terms as equivalent to the fieldwork tradition in anthropology and symbolic interactionism, without appreciating the value of discourse analysis as a means of collecting a different type of qualitative data, or the distinctive nature of different theoretical traditions. In addition, most texts see qualitative and quantitative research as complementary. It may be difficult to achieve a rapprochement or synthesis through combining or mixing methods, since qualitative and quantitative researchers, when pursuing scientific objectives, ask different questions and follow distinctive logics of explanation.

### **Introduction**

According to a study conducted by Tewkesbury, Dabney and Copes (2012), an average of 5.74 per cent of papers in the main American criminology journals, over a five-year period, employed qualitative methods. Outside the US the position was hardly better. In the *British Journal of Criminology* 37.44 per cent of papers were qualitative, as were 11.39 per cent in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*. Such statistics do not have to be taken at face value as there may be other reasons for rejections by journals. But even if they indicate a lack of interest in qualitative research within the discipline, this may be changing. Specialist texts on qualitative methods in criminology suitable for undergraduate teaching have recently been published in Australia, Britain and the US, and *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods* contains several chapters on qualitative approaches that are not usually discussed in mainstream journals or undergraduate textbooks. As each new

---

\* Max Travers is Senior Lecturer in sociology in the School of Social Sciences, University of Tasmania. Recent publications include *Understanding Law and Society* (Routledge, 2009) and *The Sentencing of Children: Professional Work and Perspectives* (New Academia, 2012). He is currently researching bail decision-making, and hopes to conduct comparative research on the challenges facing youth courts in East Asian countries. Email: max.travers@utas.edu.au.

book or collection is published, there will perhaps be a virtuous circle that leads to advances in the way we teach research methods, and to qualitative research becoming a larger sub-field within criminology.

This, however, depends on whether you see these collections as adequately explaining and justifying qualitative research, and doing justice to both different methods and theoretical traditions. My own view is that the first three texts above tend, in different ways when discussing theories and methods, to present qualitative research in one-dimensional terms, without explaining the distinction between different theoretical traditions. By contrast, the fourth represents a major advance, recognising a variety of methods and theories, so that it becomes possible to establish a more equal and fruitful relationship with quantitative research. However, even this text does not sufficiently address or explain why it may be difficult to achieve a rapprochement or synthesis between qualitative and quantitative methods.

### Four qualitative methods texts

Each of these texts has a different purpose and, in some ways, has a distinctive character reflecting how criminology has developed in different countries. *Qualitative Criminology: Stories from the Field* ('QC'), edited by Bartels and Richards (2011), presents a number of accounts, both by established Australian researchers who have conducted studies based on several years of fieldwork, and by postgraduate students and those doing interview-based qualitative research on applied projects. Although this is a welcome and informative text, there is not much developed discussion of methodological issues in conducting qualitative research. The contributors do not consider epistemological or ethical issues in much depth or in relation to wider literatures. As Chris Cunneen notes, 'rarely are we afforded the opportunity to examine our own assumptions about the value of particular research methods' (QC:167).

There is more discussion, particularly about ethical issues and ethics review, in *Researching Crime and Justice: Tales from the Field* ('RCJ') by Westmarland (2011), an engaging textbook aimed at British students, based on interviews with established researchers. In Britain, there is also a practical and pragmatic approach to collecting data, rather than viewing criminology as a social science. We are told, for example, that 'there are no "right", superior or proper methods' and, in any event, when conducting any form of research 'there are compromises, innovations and ingenious routes that have to be taken to achieve certain ends' (RCJ:23). There are still relatively few references in RCJ to the research literature on qualitative methods outside criminology. In the British context, it is interesting to note that there is no equivalent in criminology to Martyn Hammersley (for example, 2008), who has made significant contributions to both qualitative research and the sociology of education.

Although a similar criticism could be made of *Advancing Qualitative Methods in Criminology and Criminal Justice* ('AQM'), originally published as a special issue of the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, this is probably because the contributors know that many readers will be familiar with the ideas of well-known qualitative researchers, such as Jack Katz or Howard Becker. Most criminologists in the US understand criminology as a social science, and strongly believe that it should be modelled on natural science. This also explains the title of this qualitative text. 'Advancing' does not mean considering the issue of innovation, but promoting qualitative research against what these researchers suggest can

seem like overwhelming opposition from quantitative researchers. One indication of these difficulties is that these qualitative researchers have chosen to advance their case by presenting quantitative findings, using a positivist research design. It would also be interesting to see some qualitative data about the experiences of qualitative researchers in getting published, although some contributors do supply personal accounts.

The odd one out among these collections is the *Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods* ('SHCR'), which for this reviewer was a welcome surprise. This is partly because of the calibre of the contributors, who discuss in some depth the scientific issues that arise when using different quantitative and qualitative methods, but also because the editors from the outset see 'method' as meaning 'methodology'. This is 'understood to encompass not only techniques for researching the empirical world, but also the logics that underlie their application' (SHCR:1). In qualitative research this means recognising that there are several different theoretical traditions, rather than, as the other collections imply, only one way of understanding ethnography and qualitative data analysis. The editors are also optimistic about the state of methodological awareness and discussion in criminology:

methodology is very much alive in our discipline; constantly evolving to new challenges; fit for purpose in so many respects; and more often than not learning from experience. Evaluation and action researchers, in-depth interviewer and international survey researchers, statistical modellers and ethnomethodologists have at least this much in common. Indeed, the tidy alignment between theoretical perspective, political perspective, and methodological approach appear to be becoming part of criminological history that many scholars are less preferable with than their predecessors (SHCR:4).

They go on to present feminist work as 'the most obvious example' of a trend towards employing mixed methods in a way that overcomes previous divisions:

Within the study of violence against women, for example, a succession of reflexive turns have not only steered the discipline out of its more positivistic preoccupations, but have also fostered a considerable rapprochement between theoretically sophisticated and in-depth qualitative work on victimisation and the kinds of statistical, evaluation and econometric methodologies that are needed to persuade policy audiences of the importance of preventative intervention (SHCR:5).

Although this optimistic viewpoint, which suggests if not a synthesis, then a 'rapprochement' between quantitative and qualitative traditions, might appeal to many readers, it may oversimplify the difficulties in ending the paradigm wars. A growing number of criminologists, not just feminists, conduct mixed methods research. The difficulty for the qualitative researcher is that such studies often remain within the positivist tradition. They seek to explain some problem by describing variables, rather than examining meaning in the depth required for a qualitative study. Mixed methods studies are usually uninterested in the distinction between different qualitative research traditions; qualitative research can become a technique rather than, as in this special issue, leading into the reflective discussion of difficult epistemological or ethical issues.

Even though the sophisticated introduction to SHCR recognises that there is a distinction between theoretical traditions such as feminism, critical ethnography and ethnomethodology, it does not fully explain the differences between them. To give an example, feminists and critical ethnographers see themselves as having a better understanding of society than the people they are studying. By contrast, ethnomethodologists are only concerned with addressing how their research subjects understand their own lives and actions. Similarly, these constructionist approaches have at best an uneasy relationship with 'statistical, evaluation and econometric methodologies'.

Although the issues are complex, and contestable, there may be no middle point or synthesis where everyone can work together conducting mixed methods research. The next two sections will attempt to make this point in different ways, by considering the relationship between ethnography and discourse analysis, and the conceptual and practical difficulties that arise in trying to combine quantitative and qualitative methods.

## **Ethnography and discourse analysis**

Most contributors to QC, RCJ and AQM and the contributors to this special issue understand qualitative research as equivalent to the fieldwork tradition in anthropology and symbolic interactionism. Research involves a researcher gaining access to some social group or institution, and conducting observation and interviews over a long period of time. There is a reference to visual sociology in RCJ, and a chapter in AQM on internet ethnography based, for example, on observing chat rooms. SHCR goes further in recognising the diversity of methods used by qualitative researchers in ethnographic projects. It contains three chapters on interviewing, and chapters on using life histories, ethnographic photography, autoethnography and autobiographies as data. There is also a chapter on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis.

Aaron Kupchik notes that Doug Maynard's study of plea-bargaining (Maynard 1984), based on analysing recordings, 'was radically different than most ethnographic attempts to study courtroom negotiation' (SHCR:326). Maynard employed a different method to interviewing or observation, and collected a different type of qualitative data. But he was also working in a theoretical tradition that looks more closely at actions and meaning than other interpretive approaches:

Unlike previous ethnographic accounts of courtroom activities, he was not necessarily interested in excavating the sets of meanings that prosecutors or defense attorneys bring to negotiations. Rather he focused on the actual observable methods that the courtroom actors use to negotiate pleas ... Rather than assuming that plea-bargains naturally flow from pre-existing values, ideas, or norms, Maynard's ethnomethodology illustrated how pleas were created and recreated through the collaborative discursive labor of the courtroom actors themselves in the everyday conduct of their work (SHCR:326).

One interesting question in relation to conversation analysis is why it has not had more of an impact on criminology. Papers employing this method are not published in criminology journals, and the two texts aimed at undergraduate students, and even AQM, do not seem aware that this literature exists. One reason is that this is an uncompromising, philosophically driven interpretive approach, and it cannot easily reach an accommodation with the positivist, quantitative mainstream. But this does not seem a good enough reason why we should not be teaching students about discourse analysis as a type of ethnography on methods courses, alongside other techniques, such as digital or visual research.

## **Combining quantitative and qualitative methods**

A key issue in teaching methods in criminology is how to understand the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods. A good starting point is the rather quotable comment by Travis Pratt in a special issue on quantitative methods of the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*. This quantitative researcher believes that methodological debates are unhelpful or inappropriate in an applied field: 'The qualitative-quantitative

dichotomy strikes many as, at best, an empty debate and at worst, utterly foolish — much like debating whether a hammer or monkey-wrench is better' (Pratt 2010:1).

Whether or not this was meant sincerely, sadly there is often no opportunity for debate. Some contributors to AQM report that, when submitting papers or applying for grants, qualitative researchers are effectively told that the monkey wrench is better, since the hammer cannot produce objective knowledge. Although such anecdotal reports of reviewing have to be treated carefully (perhaps there are other reasons for rejections by journals, such as the quality of the research), it would not be surprising if journals develop a bias towards an epistemological viewpoint or particular conception of scientific practice. It is no use pointing to, say, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* as an insightful study (Whyte 1943) because the quantitative reviewer often cannot see the value of research that is simply 'anecdotal', and will ask for a better sample or procedures to check observations — as if the ethnographer is conducting an experiment in laboratory conditions. Similarly, qualitative researchers often see little value in quantitative studies or even in how qualitative methods are employed in evaluation research. As John Brent and Peter Kraska report in an interesting review of these issues, 'the concern is that the epistemological foundations of mixed methods research create prolific grounds for positivism and quantitative methods which, in turn, sideline interpretive and qualitative research' (AQM:39–40).

These are not, however, simply rhetorical positions based on aesthetic or philosophical preferences, in some cases coloured by a political message about the need to make research relevant to policy makers or, alternatively, the need for criminological research to address the experiences of subordinate groups. To give an example, consider my own study based on observation and interviewing in children's courts in Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales (Travers 2012). One aim of this ethnomethodological study was to understand how sentencing decisions are made, with the further aim of explaining why Victoria has a much lower detention rate than other states. It was in my view successful, through case-by-case comparisons, in demonstrating that magistrates in Victoria are more lenient. In this respect it strengthens quantitative research, since the statistical differences are often dismissed on the grounds that other states have a higher crime rate. But it was also apparent that magistrates themselves were not interested in comparison. They did not even systematically compare themselves with colleagues. This, however, raises the question as to how magistrates, and other practitioners such as prosecutors or youth case workers, understand their practical, day-to-day work. This is not a trivial question if you are a scientific criminologist. You cannot answer the question using quantitative methods. One conclusion might be that, while quantitative researchers need some qualitative data to get started, and vice versa, the two research methods seek to address different questions, following distinctive logics of explanation (see Kaplan 1964).

This viewpoint sometimes leads qualitative researchers to a more critical view of quantitative research. Many contributors in these collections complain that something is concealed by quantitative studies. This can also become a more politically developed critique of the ideological assumptions and practices associated with evidence-based policy, the audit society and even the entire modern state (for example, Scott 1999). Ethnomethodologists are indifferent to such moral and political questions. Their deliberate study policy makes it possible to see the world as understood by research subjects, rather than through ideological lenses. Nevertheless, qualitative research — even when pursued without a political motivation — raises difficult questions for those who believe that evidence-based policy based on randomised controlled trials will solve the crime problem. It even suggests that you cannot determine as an outsider whether a professional has done a

good or bad job, not only because there are different views in the field, but also because, in some cases, the outcome is known to everyone before a hearing and, in other cases, it remains unclear even after a trial has concluded what caused the outcome. This might be called 'hard-core' interpretive qualitative research: the outcomes measured by quantitative sociologists result from processes that are largely unknown and difficult to describe, let alone measure.

## Research methods teaching

An engaging feature of these four texts is that each presents qualitative research as a movement within criminology. Even when the aim is to achieve a rapprochement between methods, it is still recognised that qualitative researchers must aim for quality in their work, take methodological issues seriously and win respect from quantitative colleagues. British criminology is, in some respects, more receptive to qualitative research than criminology in Australia or the US. It has been refreshing in recent years to see well-designed and well-executed interview studies published in the *British Journal of Criminology* that employ grounded theory (for example, Erez and Ibarra 2007). This approach was developed to make qualitative research seem scientific and respectable in the face of criticisms during the 1970s that it was loose, anecdotal and journalistic. Nevertheless, it would also be good to see some more adventurous ethnographic research published, whether by feminists, ethnomethodologists or postmodernists. This happens in other interdisciplinary fields — so why not in criminology?

A few contributors in AQM give political advice, based on their own experiences, about how qualitative researchers in the US can improve their rather isolated and marginal position. Mark Pogrebin recommends holding special sessions at conferences, making more applications for funding and seeking editorial positions on journals. He suggests that, when seeking to get published, it is important to remain true to your own principles. My own recommendation is that we need to continue to think critically about fundamental issues, and improve the understanding of different theoretical traditions and techniques on methods courses. Criminologists in Australia have more opportunities to take introductory methods courses than in previous years, and these often cover both quantitative and qualitative methods, with some emphasis on the use of mixed methods. There is also, perhaps, a need for more specialised courses that recognise the diversity of qualitative research, in both methods and theories. Another development already helping to raise standards in criminology outside the US is a closer relationship between some departments of law and social science.

It may take a long time for qualitative criminology to develop as a sub-field, and some may feel that the historical development of criminology as a policy science makes this impossible. But these four texts make an important start, by raising awareness of different qualitative methods and contributing to greater diversity.

## References

Bartels L and Richards K (eds) (2011) *Qualitative Criminology: Stories from the Field*, The Federation Press, 2011

Copes H (ed) (2012) *Advancing Qualitative Methods in Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Routledge, 2012

Cunneen C (2011) 'Criminological Research and the Search for Meaning: Some Reflections on Praxis' in Bartels L and Richards K (eds) (2011) *Qualitative Criminology: Stories from the Field*, The Federation Press, 2011

Erez E and Ibarra P (2007) 'Making Your Home a Shelter: Electronic Monitoring and Victim Re-entry in Domestic Violence Cases', *British Journal of Criminology* 47(11), 100–20

Gadd D, Karstedt S and Messner S (eds) (2012) *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*, Sage, 2012

Hammersley M (2008) *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry*, Sage, 2008

Kaplan A (1964) *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science*, Chandler, 1964

Maynard D (1984) *Inside Plea-Bargaining: The Language of Negotiation*, Plenum, 1984

Pratt T (2012) 'Introduction' in Pratt T (ed) *Advancing Quantitative Methods in Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Routledge, 2012, 1–2

Scott J (1999) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, 1999

Tewkesbury R, Dabney D and Copes H (2012) 'The Prominence of Qualitative Research in Criminology and Criminal Justice Scholarship' in Copes H (ed) *Advancing Qualitative Methods in Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Routledge, 2012, 4–24

Travers M (2012) *The Sentencing of Children: Professional Work and Perspectives*, New Academia Press, 2012

Westmarland L (2011) *Researching Crime and Justice: Tales from the Field*, Routledge, 2011

Whyte WF (1943) *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, University of Chicago Press, 1943