

Ironies of Crime, Control, and Criminology

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Abstract Irony is a kind of communication in which shared knowledge about a particular context is formed as a counter-intuitive statement with hidden meaning. Irony is important because it branches the tree of knowledge and balances morality. This paper reviews the definition and value of irony; examines ironic works on crime and control; proposes an irony of criminology: it can be studied with science and thereby improved; draws on this idea to provide a method-based theory of theory and findings; and concludes by discussing implications for future work in reflexive criminology.

The accumulated wisdom of criminology is replete with irony (see, e.g., Cottee 2004; Merton 1938; Messner and Rosenfeld 2006; Sieber 1981; Young 2002). Irony is important because it stimulates thought by revealing the nuances, twists, and turns of life (Marx 1981; Schneider 1975: 332). The humanities have paid substantial attention to irony's utility as a tool of knowledge construction and communication (Hutcheon 1994; Muecke 1982). Yet irony is at the outermost periphery of the social sciences, including criminology (Schneider 1975). This lack of interest in irony is unfortunate because it has the ability to help advance and balance knowledge through the negation and reconstruction of existing concepts, theories, and findings.

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the relevance of irony for crime, control, and “the science of criminology”, otherwise known as “reflexive criminology” (Nelken 1994a, b). This line of inquiry focuses on determining the causes and consequences of criminological constructions: its concepts, theories, research methods, and findings. In turn, the paper (1) defines irony, (2) discusses its value to science, (3) examines ironies of crime and control, and

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(4) concludes by suggesting an irony and theory of criminology that can be used to improve our understanding of the discipline, crime, and control.

The Concept of Irony

What is irony? This is a question that has been addressed many times, albeit without any one answer gaining supremacy. “There is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and many would hold to the romantic claim...that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it” (Booth 1975: ix; also see Colebrook 2003a; Knox 1961; Muecke 1982). Nevertheless, irony does have common traits (Schneider 1975). Consider two examples of irony provided by Kierkegaard ([1841] 1989):

A man “walked along contemplating suicide—at that very moment a stone fell down and killed him, and he ended with the words: Praise the Lord!” (p. 426)

“Is a dung-basket beautiful then? Of course, and a golden shield is ugly, if the one is well made for its special work and the other badly” (p. 22)

These stories reveal the three fundamental attributes of irony, which is a kind of communication.

First, irony depends on *context*, or the situation (Booth 1975; Hutcheon 1994). In the first example above, the necessity of context is revealed by the way in which appreciation of death depends on the person contemplating suicide; in most contexts, people do not want to die. Also, the value of the dung-basket was not viewed in absolute but rather relative terms; not all dung-baskets are more beautiful than golden shields.

Second, irony depends on *shared knowledge*. Irony cannot be created out of nothing. Irony requires something to be known together by people (Hutcheon 1994). The man’s final words in the death story would not be ironic if *we* were unaware of his prior thoughts. “Praise the Lord!” seems pious, not ironic, without shared knowledge of the context. The idea that most dung-baskets are not worth more than golden shields is surely shared by almost all of us. It is no coincidence that the example does not compare the basket to something less valuable, such as a non-golden shield. The two examples are ironic because they build on shared knowledge about context. “It takes at least two to play this game in which the rules are reflexively established” (Booth 1975: 14).

Last, and perhaps most importantly, irony depends on *counter-intuition* and *hidden meaning*. It involves saying things that go against the grain, yet are correct and coherent (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989). Irony is “covert, intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface” (Booth 1975: 6). It depends on negating and flipping a subject in a clever way so as to reveal hidden truth (Hutcheon 1994; Niebuhr 1952).

In sum, irony is a kind of communication in which (1) shared knowledge (2) about a particular context (3) is formed as a counter-intuitive statement with hidden meaning (see Booth 1975).

The Value of Irony

The idea that irony has important implications for the social sciences, including criminology, is not new. As Schneider (1975) pointed out decades ago, “irony is intimately bound up with a great deal of...thought.” Indeed, “ironic perspectives stimulate such

thought profoundly” (p. 323; Egan 1997; Purdy 1999: 203). Irony confers at least two major benefits on criminology. It (1) branches the tree of criminological knowledge and (2) balances the field’s moral scale.

Branching the Tree of Knowledge

Irony increases our comprehension of the world through mystification. It provides a “subjective freedom that at all times has in its power the possibility of a beginning and is not handicapped by earlier situations. There is something seductive about all beginnings, because the subject is still free, and this is the enjoyment the ironist craves” (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 253; Rorty 1989).

The benefit of new beginnings and freedom is that they allow for plentiful and variable discoveries. “For irony, everything becomes nothing, but nothing can be taken in several ways” (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 258). Thus, irony may be used in science to find new starting points in inquiry and take multiple directions from there. This is how the tree of knowledge branches off. To be ironic is to mutate ideas. Irony may be called “the birth-pains of the objective mind” (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 444).

New beginnings are obtained via irony because it “limits, finitizes, and circumscribes” current ideas and in doing so creates “truth, actuality, [and] content” (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 326). Irony is a form of control that “disciplines and punishes and thereby yields balance and consistency. Irony is a disciplinarian feared only by those who do not know it but loved by those who do” (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 326). Persons who understand irony—its methods and virtues—realize that no path is a dead end (Hutcheon 1994).

Balancing the Moral Scale

The discovery and assumption of new paths are important not only for scientific reasons, but also for moralistic ones. Irony has “a corrective function. It is like a gyroscope that keeps life on an even keel or straight course, restoring the balance” (Muecke 1982: 4). To lack irony is to be single-minded (Muecke 1982; Hutcheon 1994).

Criminology has always straddled the fence between “science for the government and citizens” and “science for the offender” (see Becker 1967; Sutherland 1937). Irony balances these two extremes. “A diplomat’s view of the world is ironic in many ways” (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 253). Just as it looks at both sides of the scientific coin, irony also looks at both sides of the moralistic one. Irony is itself morally neutral and capable of being used by multiple sides in a debate. “[N]o epistemological... or ideological... position is ever *intrinsically* either right or wrong, either dangerous or safe, either reactionary or progressive. And the ironic stance is no exception” (Hutcheon 1994: 10).

Summary

Although irony is in and of itself not truth, it is a way to truth (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 327). Scientific irony is objective truth achieved via counter-intuitive ideas about existing scientific concepts, theories, or findings. In other words, scientific irony is the discovery of hidden meaning and balancing of morality through the destruction and rebuilding of existing ideas.

Ironies of Crime and Control

Irony has important implications for criminology. There are many interesting ironies of crime and control. There are cases where a concept, theory, or finding is proposed that is counter-intuitive and potentially valid (see, e.g., Schneider 1975). Examples include that law enforcement increases crime (Tannenbaum 1938), private vices are public benefits (Mandeville [1724] 2007), crime is normal (Durkheim 1982; also see Goffman 1963), and the so-called American Dream facilitates crime and undermines control (Merton 1938; Messner and Rosenfeld 2006; also see Hinkle and Weisburd 2008). Below, we briefly discuss ironies of crime and control found in Plato's (2000) *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, Sutherland's (1937) *The Professional Thief*, and qualitative studies in the St. Louis School tradition (Wright and Decker 1994).

Plato's The Trial and Death of Socrates

Perhaps the greatest story of irony ever told is Plato's (2000) *The Trial and Death of Socrates*. This work has been examined at great length in the humanities (see especially Kierkegaard [1841] 1989; also, see Colebrook 2003b). It has received very little attention, however, in criminology. Yet this "novel meets history" has important—and ironic—implications for capital punishment, knowledge, deterrence, and crime.

The story begins when a criminal prosecution is brought against Socrates. He is charged with corrupting youth and impiety (Plato 2000: 3). At the trial, he gives a speech defending his actions. He testifies to know nothing. Yet if that is true, then why is he being prosecuted for spreading false, new knowledge? Socrates' knowledge is both different and threatening. This knowledge, or wisdom, is of an ironic nature. As explained by Socrates:

What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What sort of wisdom is it?... I shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness to the existence and nature of my wisdom. [A friend of mine] went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle... if any man was wiser than I [Socrates], and the Pythian replied that no one wiser.... When I heard of this I asked myself: "Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? *I am very conscious that I am not wise at all*; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest?" (p. 24, emphasis added)

To understand this riddle Socrates began an investigation of his own. He sought out persons thought to be the wisest and most knowledgeable of all so that he "could refute the oracle and say to it: 'This man is wiser than I, but you said I was'" (p. 24). In public, he spoke with politicians, poets, and craftsmen. He learned that they believed they know things that in fact they do not know. "Yet Socrates does not think he knows what he does not know" (p. 25). Thus, the oracle deemed him wisest of all because he recognized his ignorance. Socrates' dismantling of others' perceived knowledge made him a target for prosecution, however. As he told the council judging him, "I know very well enough that this very conduct makes me unpopular" (p. 27).

The council voted to convict Socrates of the charges. The penalty was execution, and it was accepted by him: "I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god" (Plato 2000: 42). Socrates' acceptance of his condemnation is itself ironic; "he let the established order of things appear to remain established and thereby brought about its downfall" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 271). By adhering to the state's orders, he revealed the irrationality of its behavior.

Yet the irony extends further. Socrates' ignorance also applies to his understanding of death. "He is ignorant of what death is and of what there is after death, whether there is anything or nothing at all; consequently he is ignorant" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 269). As explained by Socrates:

To fear death...is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they know that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know... I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld. (p. 32)

Taken together, the story of Socrates' trial and death has several ironies of knowledge, crime and control. The first irony is that Socrates is the wisest man because he knows of nothing other than his ignorance.¹ The second irony is that Socrates discovered his wisdom by seeking and dismantling the perceived wisdom of others. A third irony is that Socrates is under trial for acting unwise and yet he is spreading the idea that no one is wise. The fourth irony is that the false wisdom of men has led them to prosecute the pure wisdom of Socrates. A final irony is that his ignorance of life in the underworld means that the death penalty held no personal meaning to him: "He becomes a sacrifice.... Admittedly the tragic hero does not fear death, but still he knows it as a pain,...but Socrates knows nothing at all, and thus it is an irony over the state that it condemns him to death and believes that it has inflicted punishment upon him" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989: 271).

Sutherland's *The Professional Thief*

A well-known classic of criminology is Sutherland's (1937) *The Professional Thief*. This work examines the history and experience of an ex-criminal. A "professional thief is one who steals professionally" (Sutherland 1937: 3). Rather than regarding crime as a hobby or chance occurrence, the professional thief treats stealing as a full-time job (note the irony of crime as employment here) that requires careful planning and the execution of skill. Although this criminological masterpiece has garnered substantial praise (see, e.g., Vasoli and Terzola 1974), scholars have largely ignored the ironies of this tale for crime and its control.

The common enemy of professional thieves—namely the government—provides an orienting force for reaching a consensus, or code. Professional criminals have their own code—meaning a system of values, attitudes, and beliefs. This criminal code provides guidance regarding how to treat other criminals (ch. 1 and 2), government officials (ch. 4 and 5), and law-abiding citizens (ch. 8). The following sections focus on how—according to the code—criminals are supposed to treat each other. The irony of this morality is discussed.

¹ Kierkegaard ([1841] 1989: 269) provides an interesting insight into the wisdom of Socrates' ignorance: "[W]hen Socrates declared that he was ignorant, he nevertheless did know something, for he knew about his ignorance; on the other hand, however, this knowledge was not a knowledge of something, that is, did not have any positive content, and to the extent his ignorance was ironic... If his knowledge had been a knowledge of something, his ignorance would merely have been a conversational technique. His irony, however, was complete in itself".

The Ironic Ethic of Support Among Thieves

Among the characteristics that separate “amateur” from professional thieves are, in ironic fashion, “congeniality, sympathy, understandings, agreements, rules, [and] codes of behavior” (p. 4). These qualities manifest themselves in a number of ways. Broadly, these characteristics may be subsumed under the umbrella philosophy of “support.” Above all, support involves protection against formal control agents (p. 211). Suspicion of police, for example, may be communicated between criminals; in such situations, “one mob (group of thieves who work together) would advise the other, directly or through a third party, of any imminent danger” (p. 5). Professional criminals also try to deter law enforcement by not drawing attention to themselves or other criminals: “Not only does one thief warn another thief of danger, but also he avoids doing things which will put other thieves in danger” (pp. 5–6). When a criminal is apprehended by the police, then underworld participants come together to help the arrestee: “Thieves also give much assistance to other thieves who are in trouble” (p. 7) by helping to fix cases, secure bonds, or escape from jail (p. 4).

A principal rule is “no thief must squawk (inform) on another” (pp. 10, 203–204). To provide government officials with incriminating information is a grievous sin. Secrecy is at the heart of the underworld because criminals know a lot about crimes in and around their community. This ubiquity of knowledge acts as a stabilizing force because everyone knows about everyone, and so to accuse one person may bring accusations upon oneself or peers. “Crimes against silence”—or “squawking”—often are handled through expulsion from the criminal community: “This is done by spreading the news that he has squawked, which makes it impossible for him to get into any mob. That is the greatest disgrace and the greatest hardship that can befall a thief” (p. 11; cf. p. 131). An irony here is that squawking is both possible and punishable because criminals share information with each other.²

There is more to support than evading governmental controls. Arrest, jail, and other formal punishments are the costs of crime, but offenders also help each other to obtain rewards from lawbreaking (p. 210). “Should one mob find some bad features in any spot, they will always advise other mobs of it, as they will also advise them if a spot is lucrative” (p. 8). It is obvious that sharing business reduces the profits of crime, but thieves are tolerant of competition (p. 9). Even in cases where criminals are attracting danger to a locale, little or no retaliatory action will be taken because “[i]t is the spirit of thieves to be tolerant of other thieves and let everyone grift as he sees fit” (p. 9).

In addition, consider morality and social control within “mobs”, defined as groups of professional thieves (pp. 27–28). Mobs have their own code of conduct: “many codes, rules, and understandings, most of which are so general that they apply to the whole profession as well as to a particular mob” (p. 35). Examples of violations include “drunkenness, lack of ability or of co-operation, and being late to meets” (pp. 31, 203). The worst transgression within a mob is “burning, or holding out the amount stolen” (p. 31). This goes against the rule “that the division of all gains...is to be even” (p. 35). There are a number of other rules, such as ensuring the dispersion of risk is equal among members (p. 36); fall-money is sole

² A related irony is that squawking may be detected by and confirmed to criminals through their use of *misinformation*: “Sometimes a stool pigeon may give an enforcement body information regarding a particular case about which he happens to know. The copper is more likely to advise the professional thief that the stool pigeon is giving information about him than he is to seek or use information from the stool pigeon. The word of a copper is never taken as conclusive proof that a person is a stool, for coppers will always lie about anyone they dislike. The thief tests the suspected stool pigeon by giving him false information; if this information comes back from an enforcement officer, it is taken as conclusive proof that the man is wrong” (pp. 130–131).

property of the mob and may be used for any member (p. 36); members are honest with each other (p. 36) and not accountable for events beyond their control (p. 37); and, when a member faces prosecution it is the duty of every other member to get the case dropped or to end in a not-guilty verdict (p. 38).³

To summarize, an ironic theme in Sutherland's (1937) *The Professional Thief* is that criminals have their own ethics, which largely reflect the rules that govern law-abiding society. Offenders are typically thought of as antisocial and predatory, but support among thieves shows that they may also be pro-social, fair, and concerned about the wellbeing of others. These behaviors and characteristics may be seen as running counter to the nature of criminals. What Sutherland suggests, however, is that the professional world of crime is characterized by civility. All of this is especially ironic when you consider Hobbes' ([1651] 1985) classic thesis: people join together to form a government to keep themselves protected from predators. Criminals may join together to protect themselves from law enforcement.

The St. Louis School

Beginning in the late 1980s, Wright and Decker (1994) began a research project based on active residential burglars at the University of Missouri—St. Louis that spawned a series of active offender-based research projects that continue to the present day. Besides burglars (Wright and Decker 1994; Mullins and Wright 2003), this method has been used to study robbers (Jacobs and Wright 1999, 2008; Wright and Decker 1997), carjacking and auto theft (Jacobs et al. 2003; Mullins and Cherbonneau 2011), gangs (Decker and van Winkle 1996; Miller 2001), retaliators (Jacobs and Wright 2006; Mullins et al. 2004; Rosenfeld et al. 2003), and drug dealers (Jacobs 1999; Jacques 2010; Jacques and Wright 2008a, b, Jacques and Wright 2011).

The goal of this research is to understand crime by obtaining qualitative data through interviews with, experiments on, and observations of active offenders. The philosophy underpinning the “St. Louis School”, or SLS, is that *active* offenders know things that institutionalized criminals (1) do not know, (2) cannot remember, (3) will not be truthful about, or (4) refuse to discuss (Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). There are many reasons why researching active offenders rather than incarcerated ones is advantageous. Memory is known to decay over time. The behavior of criminals may vary from one generation to the next (Jacobs 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Sutherland 1937: 210). Institutionalized offenders may be afraid to speak the whole truth (Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). For these reasons and others it is important to interview active offenders (Jacques and Wright 2010a; but see Copes and Hochstetler 2010).

In recent years, the SLS has been concerned with the ironies of crime and control. Consider Jacobs et al. (2000) examination of robbery and informal social control. Although the power of informal controls such as community or parental supervision are well established (Sampson and Laub 2005), far less is known about how an anti-social form of informal control—namely retaliation—affects the crime rate (but see Black 1983). What

³ When a troupe member acts in a way that is selfish and hurts the group, then this behavior is seen as unethical and controlled. Mobs exercise control of members through the curtailment of interaction. This avoidance may take the form of *discharge* or *withdrawal* from the mob. “A member may be discharged from the mob by the boss...or by the mob acting together.... Discharge is for something which affects the welfare of the whole mob” (p. 30). Alternatively, “a member may withdraw from a mob” to express distaste for its actions (p. 31). To be discharged is to be fired; to withdraw is to quit.

Jacobs and colleagues suggest is that retaliation is a sanction that may reduce robbery. The irony here is that crime may deter crime (also see Topalli et al. 2002).

Topalli's (2005) article on the connection between street culture and neutralization techniques exemplifies the irony genre (Anderson 1999; Skyes and Matza 1957). Although conventional culture holds violent retaliation and resisting cooperation with law enforcement to be bad, there are oppositional cultures that believe such actions are good; acting otherwise is deviant. The irony here is that for some people being good is bad and requires neutralizing.

Jacques and Wright (2008a) have used this approach to explore drug market violence. They suggest that systemic violence (Goldstein 1985) may be understood by explaining peaceful behaviors such as avoidance and toleration. Their reasoning is that because violent and peaceful behaviors cannot be committed simultaneously by the same person, then theories of why peace does happen naturally explain why violence does not happen, and vice versa. The irony is that peace may be used to explain violence.

Jacques and Wright (2008b) also examined the link between the victimization of drug dealers and termination of their criminal activities. Life course criminology has mostly argued that people desist when good things happen to them, such as marriage, employment, or children (Sampson and Laub 2005). Jacques and Wright (2008b) argue that victimizations experienced by drug dealers, such as robberies or frauds, may lead to a change in their agency or to extra informal social control by people such as parents. In this way, victimizations lead some drug dealers down a path of stronger agency or conventional bonds and, in turn, desistance and the termination of their drug dealing. The irony is that victimizations may terminate crime.

A final example of irony in the SLS is Jacobs' (2010) take on serendipity in robbery. He uses the experiences of active robbers to show their crimes are not always planned but rather emerge from unanticipated and unexpected circumstances. Yet the ability to recognize such serendipitous opportunities requires explanation. One possibility is that setbacks prime people for innovation. "The most prolific entrepreneurs", for example, "typically experience setback after setback before tasting success and only taste success because failure is pedagogical.... Street offenders are widely perceived to be failures in almost every sense of the word. Maybe it is failure that makes serendipity possible and real" (p. 526). The irony here is that failure provides the opportunity for success.

The Science and Irony of Criminology

The story of Socrates told by Plato (2000), of a professional thief told by Sutherland (1937), and of active criminals told by members of the SLS are not ironies of criminology *per se*. Rather, they highlight ironies of crime and control (also see Schneider 1975; Sieber 1981). What, then, is the irony of criminology?

The Irony and Science of Criminology

Jacques and Wright (2008c) recently moved the SLS in a new direction by changing the focus from crime to method. Although method is first and foremost a means of theory production and evaluation, it is also a behavior that should be amenable to scientific explanation. They conceptualized active offender research as the process of recruiting, compensating, and obtaining data, and then theorized these behaviors as a function of "relational distance", or intimacy. In short, they argued that as a researcher and criminal

become more acquainted with each other, then recruitment becomes more likely, compensation decreases, and the data provided is more plentiful and true.

The irony of this work is it shows criminological method can be studied with science. This idea has since been elaborated on in other papers (Jacques and Wright 2010a, b, c, d). Although Jacques and Wright focus their attention on method, it stands to reason that the whole of criminology—not only method—may be understood via science. This very idea has been touched upon by scholars working in the area of *reflexive criminology*. “It is ... a way of restating what is involved in the practice of [criminology]... It may help pose new questions, draw attention to unnoticed continuities between texts and contexts, and inspire different ways of carrying out and writing up research” (Nelken 1994a: 30).

Reflexive criminology, or what might be termed the *science of criminology*, is motivated by academic and practical concerns. “[I]f criminology does not try to understand itself and its own conditions of existence it is unlikely to offer much insight into crime either” (Nelken 1994a: 10). On the one hand, explaining any kind of behavior—including crime, control, or the study of them—is fair game for science and a worthy endeavor unto itself. On the other hand—and similar to how criminology can be used to improve crime control—reflexive criminology can be used to improve criminology. In turn, and perhaps ironically, studying criminology may have the effect of improving crime control. The logic here is that “[o]nly when [criminology] is itself seen as a practical activity, subject to its own constraints, does it become possible to investigate the similarities and differences between this practice and that of the actors whose activities are being described” (Nelken 1994a: 8).

The nature of reflexive criminology is inherently ironic. Recall that scientific irony is objective truth made through counter-intuitive ideas about existing concepts, theories, or findings. Irony’s value for criminology is its ability to branch the tree of knowledge and balance our field’s moral scale. By acknowledging and systematically studying the notion that criminological “findings” are based not only on reality but also are influenced by the characteristics of researchers (e.g., their personalities, culture, or social status), it may be possible to better understand and further develop criminological “discoveries” by controlling for the ways in which they are molded by researchers; this is how irony can branch the tree of disciplinary knowledge. Moreover, by branching the tree of knowledge in this way and improving our knowledge of crime and control, it should be possible to better manipulate them by, for example, reducing discrimination in our own ideas and the way they are implemented in the real world; this is how irony can balance our moral scale. The true and important irony of criminology is that it may be understood through science (also see Nelken 1994a). The predator, criminology, becomes science’s prey.

Science of Criminology

What is the science of criminology? *Science* is defined as the *conceptualization* (definition and compartmentalization), *theorization* (explanation and prediction), and *researching* (collection and analysis) of information, especially as it relates to the empirical world; together, these three aspects of science create *findings* (statements of fact) about the world. *Criminology* is the science of crime and control (Sutherland et al. 1992; Nelken 1994c). It is possible to conceptualize, theorize, research, and find out which factors affect the kind and quantity of criminology that is conducted. This is true because criminology is an empirical behavior, and all such behaviors are amenable to scientific exploration (Popper [1959] 2002). The *science of criminology* is defined as the conceptualization, theorization, and researching of criminology aimed at finding how and why it exists as it does.

Criminology varies both qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitatively, for instance, there are different kinds (i.e., qualities) of criminological theories, including rationality (Bentham [1789] 1988), self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), social bonds (Hirschi 1969), social disorganization (Shaw and McKay 1942), strain (Agnew 1992), and anomie theory (Merton 1938; Messner and Rosenfeld 2006). Methods also vary in kind. They may be broadly categorized as quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative methods collect and analyze numbers (e.g., Piquero and Weisburd 2010). Qualitative methods collect and analyze verbal descriptions and visuals (e.g., Sutherland 1937).

Not only does criminology differ in quality, but each kind differs in quantity. For example, some kinds of theories are proposed or analyzed more often in criminology. Also, the methods used to generate findings about theory differ in their rate or magnitude. In the modern era it is more common, for instance, to use quantitative than qualitative methods (Tewksbury et al. 2010). Moreover, theories and methods have their own divisions and respective prevalence, such as differences in Sutherland's (1937) and Anderson's (1999) cultural theories, or the amount of hierarchical linear modeling compared to simpler linear regressions. In short, criminological ideas differ in kind and some are more prevalent than others.

Questions for the Science of Criminology

It seems likely that criminological concepts, theories, methods, and findings of criminology are influenced by more than the subject matter (Jacques and Wright 2008a; Nelken 1994a, b). If this were not true, then criminological data would—assuming it is not entirely random—always lead to the same conclusions.⁴ If the causes of criminology are not revealed, then the field will remain ignorant of its own origin, evolution, practice, potential, and consequences (see, e.g., Rafter 2008, 2009).

Since criminology is a qualitative and quantitative variable, it should be possible to devise theories of criminology that are testable—meaning falsifiable or supportable—through empirical research (see Popper [1959] 2002). This raises a series of questions for the science of criminology:

Conceptually:

- What are the different *kinds* of criminological concepts, theories, methods, and findings?

Methodologically:

- What is the *prevalence* of each concept, theory, method, and finding?

Theoretically:

- What *explains* the relative prevalence of criminological concepts, theories, methods, and findings?

⁴ As noted by DiCristina (2000: 367–378), for example, different constructions of crime and control may depend on whether one's method is quantitative or qualitative: "Both may occasionally converge on the same image of reality, and both can be used for purposes of theory construction and evaluation. However, this does not imply that they will lead to the construction of the same theories or the same evaluations... Given that they involve the application of different observational theories, they have different strengths and weaknesses, and different results seem inevitable. Moreover, when they do converge on the same image of reality, it is from different angles; consequently, during the process of convergence, the knowledge the produce may be significantly different all the way up the point of convergence".

Factually:

- How do concepts, methods, and theories work independently or together to shape *findings*—meaning facts about crime and control?

In short, the science of criminology is concerned with conceptualizing, theorizing, researching, and finding out why, how, and at what prevalence criminological concepts, methods, theories, and findings exist as they do. This field may be termed *criminology-ology*.

If it is possible to answer the above questions, then criminology may be improved by determining what factors influence criminology at both a qualitative and quantitative level. Just as law enforcement can be improved or crime reduced through good science, criminology can benefit from a reflexive, scientifically-oriented self-appraisal (see Nelken 1994a).⁵

The Irony of Criminological Method and Theory

As suggested above, there are several paths that reflexive criminologists may take in studying criminology. One avenue is to examine how the characteristics of researched persons—such as criminal versus victim or social control agent—affect what is theorized and discovered about crime and control. It is possible that the amount of different kinds of methods employed by criminologists may influence—in an empirically predictable/explainable manner—the prevalence of different kinds of criminological theories and findings.

The ironies of crime and control reviewed above—Socrates' trial and death, Sutherland's professional thief, and those from the SLS—share a common trait. They are all based on methods that see the offender as the explanatory centerpiece; that is, these works are concerned primarily with the offenders' perspective. The offenders' perspective on crime is a methodological strategy (Bernasco 2010; Shaw [1930] 1966). It is nested in the belief that important knowledge may be obtained from communicating with and observing offenders because (1) they know things about crime (2) that others, including police and victims, do not know. Also, (3) changing the perspective from the law enforcer or victim to the criminal—the hunter to the hunted—provides insights into the nuances of theories and how they may be altered to reach greater levels of generality and specificity in their predictions.

If these three assumptions about the offenders' perspective are true, then research with offenders should provide its own unique insights into crime. By considering how offenders think and what they know, then criminology may advance. This is the fundamental idea behind the offenders' perspective on crime (see Bernasco 2010; Jacques and Wright 2010a; Shaw 1930; Sutherland 1937). We see, then, the similarities between the offenders' perspective and irony: both are concerned with branching the tree of knowledge and balancing the moral scale.

⁵ To be clear, a history of criminology and a science of criminology are different (Rafter 2008). A history of criminology describes events in the science of crime and control. A science of criminology not only conceptualizes and documents it but, and most importantly, also explains its occurrence beyond the uniqueness of the particular case. This is what makes science distinct from history.

A Theory of How Method Affects Theory and Findings

Compared to research based on researchers' interaction with governments or victims, methods relying on interaction with offenders tend to produce theories and findings that have a relatively neutral or positive view of the offender in relation to the government and the rest of society. When criminologists get to know or sympathize with criminals, then theories of crime change from state- or victim-oriented to offender-oriented. In doing so, these studies find irony in more conventional criminological definitions, theories, and data.

For example, Socrates' story shows how governments may make unwise judgments of guilt (Plato 2000). The actions of the professional thief and his associates reveal that criminals are supportive of each other and pro-social in order to escape punishment by the government (Sutherland 1937). And as described in Jacobs et al. (2000), offenders use retaliation to deter and punish victimization because the government is unlikely to do so on their behalf.

These examples and this line of reasoning may be formed into a general and falsifiable hypothesis:

Criminological theories cast offenders in a more positive light and as less culpable for crime as criminological methods become increasingly dependent on interaction between criminologists and offenders.

Stated differently, the hypothesis above suggests that the more criminologists derive their data via interaction with offenders, they are portrayed as less blameworthy and anti-social. The flipside is that the government and society (including victims) are increasingly seen as the cause of crime or engaged in immoral behavior. In this way, a method of criminology—the offenders' perspective—explains the theories and findings of criminology. This is ironic.

The counterpart to the above hypothesis is that criminological theory is also likely to be affected by the intimacy between researchers, government officials, and victims, suggesting the following:

Criminological theories cast government officials and victims in a more positive light and as less culpable for crime as criminological methods become increasingly dependent on interaction between criminologists and these persons.

In other words, the more often criminologists derive their data from government officials (e.g., the UCR) or victims (e.g., the NCVS), then the more they are seen as acting appropriately and as being blameless for offending. Conversely, such methods lead criminals to be seen as more troublesome. Again, methods of criminology—official statistics and victim surveys—explain the theories and findings of criminology.

What all of the above suggests is that criminological knowledge is not a pure description of behaviors and their causes, but is rather a social construction—a group of concepts, theories, and findings—dependent, in part, on the kind and quantity of criminological methods employed (also see Nelken 1994a). The irony of criminological theory and findings is that criminological method may explain them. Although this is a counter-intuitive statement, it does hold promise for branching the criminological tree of knowledge and balancing our moral scale.

Moving the Science of Criminology Forward

This paper has outlined reasons why engaging in an ironic endeavor—the scientific study of criminology—is advantageous: it branches the tree of knowledge and balances our

moral scale. As a field, how do we move the science of criminology forward? The staples of science tell us the answer: conceptualize our field; theorize its connections; and do research to find whether those theories are valid and concepts are valuable.

For instance, researchers may take up the task of formally testing the method-based theory we propose above. Such a study could be conducted by obtaining a random sample of research; quantifying and measuring the amount of culpability attributed to offenders, government officials, and victims; and analyzing how those attributes are affected by whether the research method collected data from offenders or government officials and victims. If such a study found that offender-based research is significantly and positively associated with theories and findings that portray offenders in a positive light, then the theory has gained empirical support; otherwise it is falsified. If support is found, then the theory can be used to design subsequent criminological projects: its logic suggests that more neutral and objective theories and findings are produced by obtaining information from offenders *and* government officials/victims rather than from just one or the other.

Theory testing, however, is best accomplished when there a number of theoretical competitors to compare. Therefore it is important for competing scientific theories of criminology to be developed (see Nelken 1994b). Quantitative research may then be used to test their worth as measured by validity, generality, simplicity, testability, and practicality for making changes to our field (see Kuhn 1977). With that said, the science of criminology should—to the degree possible—reach beyond our criminological knowledge as portrayed in our discipline’s scholarly forums such as journals, textbooks, and lectures. For instance, as a collective we have come to group theories into sub-classes, such as social disorganization/control, culture/learning, and anomie/strain. Yet there could be a different, more original, more useful way to group criminological concepts, theories, methods, and findings. What these groupings may be is beyond the scope of this present paper, but the point here is that we should push beyond our current ideas—if doing so helps us make sense of them and improve their utility in the real world. The irony of criminology is that studying it as a behavior may help us to practice it.

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