Where Are We? Why Are We Here? Where Are We Going? How Do We Get There? The Future of Qualitative Research in American Criminology

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The roots of American criminology are anchored firmly in qualitative research, which has animated the discipline from its earliest days. It is difficult to imagine where criminology would be today without such qualitative classics as Shaw’s *The Jack-Roller* (1930), Sutherland’s *The Professional Thief* (1937), or Whyte’s *Street Corner Society* (1943). Qualitative research has provided criminology with many of its most influential and enduring theoretical concepts, including, among numerous others, differential association, labeling and deviance amplification, self-help, techniques of neutralization, moral panic, and stakes in conformity.

As the chapters in this volume amply demonstrate, qualitative research continues to have much to contribute to the advancement of contemporary criminology. Yet qualitative research currently enjoys far less prestige among American criminologists than its quantitative counterpart and consequently exerts far less influence on the discipline (Buckler 2008; Kleck, Tark, and Bellows 2006; Tewksbury, Dabney, and Copes 2010; Tewksbury, DeMichele, and Miller 2005). Why has quantitative research achieved such dominance in American criminology, and what implications does this have for the future of qualitative criminological research? Those are the questions that we will explore in this chapter.
We begin by outlining the ways in which quantitative criminology’s adoption of the epistemological assumptions and workplace practices of the physical sciences have served to promote its reputation as representing real science. Next we describe a broader conceptualization of science that recognizes the centrality of qualitative research in the advancement of scientific knowledge. We then advocate the adoption of a more inclusive conceptualization of qualitative criminological research that emphasizes its important place in the scientific study of crime and control. Finally, we propose that qualitative criminological researchers should adopt some of the workplace practices underpinning the dominance of their quantitative counterparts, while capitalizing on the unique strengths of their own disciplinary approach.

The Allure of the Physical Sciences

The reasons for the dominance of quantitative research in contemporary American criminology, at least in part, can be tied to its close association with the long-standing rules and workplace practices of the physical sciences (Buckler 2008; DiCristina 1997). The allure of the physical sciences is not difficult to comprehend. Beginning with the Enlightenment, and spurred by the Industrial Revolution, the physical sciences have emerged as the predominant means of understanding the natural world. The physical sciences assume that the behavior of the natural world is patterned. Events are not random, but rather are caused by prior events. The interrelated goals of the physical sciences are to describe, explain, and predict events, typically with the ultimate aim of being able to control their occurrence (Bacon 1939; Kuhn 1977). Indeed, the enormous prestige enjoyed today by the physical sciences can be attributed largely to their past successes in controlling disease. The prospect of being able to marshal the prestige and power of the physical sciences to control crime, which often is likened to a disease, holds obvious appeal for criminologists, policy makers, and the public at large.

Why are the physical sciences so widely perceived to wield such profound explanatory power? Part of their appeal resides in the fact that they render their findings in mathematical terms, which lends them an air of precision, objectivity, and credibility (see Heath and Heath 2007). But there is more to it than that. Much of the perceived power of the physical sciences resides in their epistemological stance of skepticism, which requires researchers to be mindful of the possibility of alternative explanations (see Popper 2002/1959) and to explicate fully the experimental and analytical procedures undertaken to address that possibility, such as the use of random sampling, control groups or areas, and the reporting of confidence levels and error terms.

In adopting the methods of the physical sciences, quantitative criminological researchers by definition are employing clearly spelled-out, stepwise procedures to conduct their work. This methodological clarity and openness allows for the possibility of replication. Replication in turn provides for the accumulation of
reliable knowledge through a process of confirmation or falsification and amendment. Thus, quantitative criminology, much like the physical sciences it emulates, is a communal endeavor. It is widely expected that data will be made available to others for purposes of verification, and it is common for many researchers to “mine” the same dataset, using it to examine issues other than for which it originally was constructed. The widespread sharing of datasets among quantitative criminological researchers has yielded huge gains in efficiency, saving both time and money. The ready availability of quantitative datasets has been a boon, especially to PhD students and untenured faculty members, who typically have neither the time nor the money to collect their own data. By the time these individuals are tenured, most of them have firmly joined the quantitative criminological camp, further swelling its ranks.

Public and private funding agencies—perhaps criminology’s most powerful and influential stakeholders—increasingly demand accountability and seek to get the most from every grant dollar invested in criminological research. In an era of strict fiscal oversight and constraint, the transparency and efficiency that are characteristic of quantitative criminological research have combined to make it especially attractive to funding agencies, many of which stipulate that data collected with grant funds must be archived for use by other researchers. No one should doubt that more external funding is available for quantitative criminological research than for its qualitative counterpart, and this, coupled with the fact that the resulting data typically are made available for others to use, has served to entrench its disciplinary dominance.

Whether a cause or a consequence of its dominance, quantitative criminological research has come to be accepted by policy makers and the public as representing real science. Quantitative criminological research offers a “big picture” perspective supported by aggregate data that can be contrasted to other aggregates, thereby allowing for comparisons over time or across groups. Such data are an especially valuable resource for other researchers, and this too has functioned to reinforce the preeminent status enjoyed by quantitative research in American criminology.

Given all of the above, it is hardly surprising that quantitative research methods courses dominate the curriculum at all of the major American PhD programs in criminology and criminal justice. Quantitative criminological training now is almost universally regarded as essential, whereas its qualitative counterpart typically continues to be treated as an option (Buckler 2008; DiCristina 1997; Sever 2001; Sullivan and Maxfield 2003). Indeed, some programs offer no courses whatsoever in qualitative research methods. This means that most American PhD students in criminology and criminal justice receive little or no training in qualitative research methods. As a result, few of them are prepared to write qualitative dissertations or to go on to teach qualitative methods to the next generation of scholars (see Tewksbury, Dabney, and Copes 2010). This also has acted to tighten the hold that quantitative methods have on the American criminological imagination.
A Broader Conceptualization of Science

As qualitative criminological researchers, this is the position we now find ourselves in. Like it or not, qualitative research currently possesses far less scientific legitimacy than its quantitative counterpart in the American criminological community. This is not because qualitative research is inherently unscientific. Rather, it reflects the fact that mainstream American criminology has adopted a narrow interpretation of science anchored in the physical sciences, especially physics, where quantification reigns supreme (see Whyte 1984). Such an interpretation, however, misrepresents both the full range of science and the important contributions that qualitative methods have made to its advancement. As Mayr (1983: 54–55) reminds us, for example, qualitative methods have been crucial to the scientific study of evolution and evolutionary biology:

The physical world is a world of quantification (Newton’s movements and forces) and of mass actions. By contrast, the world of life can be designated as a world of qualities. Individual differences, communication systems, stored information, properties of the macromolecules, interactions in ecosystems, and many other aspects of living organisms are prevalingly qualitative in nature. One can translate these qualitative aspects into quantitative ones, but one loses thereby the real significance of the respective biological phenomenon, exactly as if one would describe a painting of Rembrandt in terms of the wave lengths of the prevailing color reflected by each square millimeter of the painting.

In a like manner, many times in the history of biology brave efforts to translate qualitative biological phenomena into mathematical terms have ultimately proved complete failures because they lost touch with reality. Early efforts to emphasize the importance of quality, like those of Galen Paracelsus, and van Helmont, were likewise failures owing to the choice of wrong parameters, but they were the first steps in the right direction. The champions of quantification tend to consider the recognition of quality as something unscientific or at best as something purely descriptive and classificatory. They reveal by this bias how little they understand the nature of biological phenomena. Quantification is important in many fields of biology, but not to the exclusion of all qualitative aspects.

Qualitative methods play an equally important part in the scientific study of crime and control, especially when it comes to the development of useful systems of classification. Although, as Mayr notes, classification often is derided by the champions of quantification as being a merely descriptive exercise, it actually plays a crucial role in theory development and testing; it lets us know that what we are measuring is meaningful and why that is so. It should go without saying that while the what in the foregoing sentence may be descriptive, the why clearly is theoretical.

A Broader Conceptualization of Qualitative Research

Given the centrality of qualitative methods to the advancement of science, it is perhaps ironic that so many qualitative criminologists have done their best to distance themselves from what they disparagingly refer to as positivistic, by which they typically mean quantitative, criminological research. As we see it, there is
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no mileage in taking on positivism. Doing so serves only further to marginalize qualitative criminologists and, fairly or unfairly, risks stigmatizing them as not just unscientific but anti-scientific. Instead, we need to adopt a broader, more inclusive conceptualization of qualitative criminological research that emphasizes its important place in the scientific study of crime and control. We realize that there will be qualitatively inclined criminologists who object strongly to joining ranks with the positivists, but our view is that we must demonstrate that our research meets the basic tenets of science. Otherwise, there is little hope of raising its stature within the discipline.

As already noted, the pursuit of science involves describing, explaining, and ultimately trying to predict and control the behavior of the natural world. Doing so requires the development of conceptual and theoretical statements—that is, what exists and why it exists as it does—that are capable of falsification. No theory can be truly scientific if its validity cannot be subjected to empirical testing, which is to say that it must be observable and thus measurable (see Homans 1967; Popper 2002/1959).

Not all conceptual and theoretical statements are equally valuable. There is no hard and fast agreement about what makes one such statement better than another, but there is some consensus that their value rises along with their demonstrated validity, generality, simplicity, fruitfulness, and utility (Kuhn 1977; Merton 1968; Popper 2002/1959). Conceptual and theoretical statements are valid to the extent that they are supported by the available evidence. Their generality increases in tandem with the number of phenomena they cover (in the case of concepts) or explain (in the case of theories). Simplicity—or parsimoniousness—is judged according to how concisely any given conceptual or theoretical statement organizes or explains the phenomena of interest. Conceptual or theoretical statements become increasingly more fruitful as they open up additional lines of scientific inquiry. Finally, the utility of such statements is assessed with reference to their ability to control something or lead to further scientific developments. These enduring criteria transcend the methodological and analytical fads and fashions that characterize both qualitative and quantitative criminological research, whereby new too often is confused with better.

All social scientific research, whether qualitative or quantitative, involves collecting and analyzing data to create or examine concepts and theories, with its success generally being judged in light of the five basic criteria described above. There are four stages in the social scientific research process, namely preparing to collect the data, collecting it, conducting an analysis, and disseminating the findings. Qualitative and quantitative methods simply represent the means by which these tasks are accomplished. The primary difference between them, at least as we see it, has less to do with the way in which those data are collected than it does with the form in which they are represented. Qualitative data are recorded units of empirical information represented in non-numerical—which is
to say typically textual, verbal, or pictorial—form, whereas quantitative data are recorded units of empirical information distilled into numerical form. In other words, qualitative data are non-numerical observations, and quantitative data are qualitative observations translated into numbers. The irony of quantitative research, then, is that it is anchored in qualitative experience.

The traditional view is that quantitative and qualitative criminological research methods may or may not be complementary, but they are clearly distinct. Both sides make much ado about matters such as, for example, the differences between deductive and inductive reasoning, which serves to reinforce the notion of a pronounced quantitative/qualitative divide (see Figure 17.1).

![Figure 17.1. Traditional View of the Relationship between Quantitative and Qualitative Research.](image)

Our view, however, is that both methods are rooted in common experience and thus are part of a shared scientific endeavor. Each aims faithfully to reproduce some aspect of social reality. Much like television engineers rely on digitalization (i.e., converting images into binary code to transmit them from one point to another), quantitative criminological researchers convert qualitative observations into numerical representations before analyzing them. The difference, of course, is that whereas video technology has advanced to a point where images can be digitized and reproduced with a high degree of accuracy, quantitative criminological research currently lacks the ability to do so, at best yielding only a partial and highly abstracted portrait of the phenomena as they were observed originally. Nevertheless, such research remains embedded in qualitative experience and can be tied back to that experience, even if it imperfectly represents it (see Figure 17.2).

![Figure 17.2. Our View of the Relationship between Quantitative and Qualitative Research.](image)
Viewed in this way, qualitative methods are integral to the conduct of criminological research in much the same way that they have been critical to the advancement of biology as a scientific discipline.

**Scientific Qualitative Research in Action**

For all practical purposes, reality is composed of everything that can be perceived empirically to exist. Reality, of course, consists of many distinct parts. We can think of these things as parts—or conceptual categories—because they differ from one another according to some set of characteristics. In essence, these categories are defined by the differences and similarities in their characteristics. In criminology, for instance, robbery differs from burglary in the use or threat of force, and armed robbery differs from strong-arm robbery in the use of a weapon. At root, such distinctions are inherently qualitative. Thus, qualitative research is especially well suited to dividing up social reality into smaller conceptual categories based on some set of meaningful characteristics. Quantitative research, by contrast, is poorly suited to this critical stage of the scientific process, because before reducing something to a number and measuring it, you first must have a meaningful classification scheme within which to do so.

Because theories consist of statements about the way or ways in which concepts are causally connected, the value of any given theory depends on the value of its concepts. Bad concepts result in bad theories. The development of sound theory, then, requires sound conceptual development. An example of this process can be found in Sutherland’s (1940) famous reconceptualization of crime. He begins with this observation:

The criminal statistics show unequivocally that crime, as popularly conceived and officially measured, has a high incidence in the lower class and a low incidence in the upper class; less than two percent of the persons committed to prisons in a year belong to the upper class. These statistics refer to criminals handled by the police, the criminal and juvenile courts, and the prisons, and to such crimes as murder, assault, burglary, robbery, larceny, sex offenses, and drunkenness, but exclude traffic violations. . . . [C]riminologists have used the case histories and criminal statistics derived from these agencies of criminal justice as their principal data. From them, they have derived general theories of criminal behavior. These theories are that, since crime is concentrated in the lower class, it is caused by poverty or by personal and social characteristics believed to be associated statistically with poverty.[.] . . . [T]he conception and explanations of crime which have just been described are misleading and incorrect . . . The conventional explanations are invalid principally because they are derived from biased samples. The samples are biased in that they have not included vast areas of criminal behavior of persons not in the lower class. One of these neglected areas is the criminal behavior of business and professional men (p. 1–2).

In the excerpt below, Robert Merton, another great conceptualizer and theorist, reflects on the implications of Sutherland’s qualitative insights for criminological theories and the quantitative findings they are based on:

Once the concept of crime is clarified to refer to the violation of criminal law and is thus extended to include “white-collar criminality” in business and
professionals—violations which are less often reflected in official crime statistics than are lower-class violations—the presumptive high association between low social status and crime may no longer obtain. We need not pursue Sutherland’s analysis further to detect the function of conceptual clarification in this instance. It provides for a reconstruction of data by indicating more precisely just what they include and what they exclude. In doing so, it leads to a liquidation of hypotheses set up to account for spurious data by questioning the assumptions on which the initial statistical data were based. By hanging a question mark on an implicit assumption underlying the research definition of crime—the assumption that violations of the criminal code by members of the several social classes are representatively registered in official statistics—this conceptual clarification had direct implications for a nucleus of theories (Merton 1968: 144–5).

There is another way that concepts affect theory. Because the conceptual categories included in any given classification scheme are logically connected to one another, a change in one may bring about changes in others. Qualitative research plays a central role in discovering new connections between various conceptual categories and in theorizing how or why changes among them occur. These ideas then can be tested at the aggregate level by quantitative researchers. During an ethnographic study in St. Louis, for example, one of us noticed that an influx of crack cocaine was driving down the street value of stolen goods there, leading some offenders to abandon burglary in favor of robbery, which nets cash directly. This observation led to the hypothesis that the proliferation of crack cocaine was responsible, at least in part, for recent declines in burglary rates and increases in robbery rates nationally. That hypothesis was tested and supported quantitatively using a two-stage hierarchical linear model that decomposed between and within city variation in crime rates for 142 US cities, suggesting that crack cocaine had shifted the balance of urban offending rewards from burglary to robbery across the country (see Baumer et al. 1998). Note here that although quantitative researchers might have noticed that US burglary and robbery rates were diverging, it took field-based qualitative research to identify the causal mechanisms underpinning this change. In this way, qualitative and quantitative methods are interdependent players in the advancement of science. To overgeneralize a bit, qualitative researchers tend to generate ideas, and quantitative researchers tend to test them, but neither has a corner on theory (see Figure 17.3).

![Figure 17.3. Interdependence of Qualitative and Quantitative Research.](attachment:qualitative_quantitative.png)
Raising the Status of Qualitative Criminological Research

In our view, the surest way to raise the status of qualitative criminological research in America is to capitalize on its important role in the generation of scientific knowledge about crime and criminals. Put differently, it is time to stop trying to differentiate ourselves from our quantitative counterparts in favor of building links with them in the pursuit of a methodologically unified, empirically based scientific criminology. Careful description and conceptual classification, the hallmarks of good qualitative research, are necessary first steps in that pursuit. But qualitative research has much more than that to contribute to the advancement of a scientific criminology. It also can generate theories about the ways in which one conceptual category is linked to another. Those theories should be stated in terms that can be tested empirically, with their merit being judged according to their validity, generality, simplicity, fruitfulness, and utility. Many of the nation’s most successful qualitative criminologists, as measured by publication in the discipline’s leading mainstream journals, are notable in that they largely have adopted such a strategy already.

Another important way to raise the status of qualitative criminological research is for those who practice it to begin to develop better mechanisms for data sharing (see Miller 2005). Data sharing is almost a defining feature of the physical sciences, and it is widely practiced in disciplines anchored in that research paradigm, including quantitative criminology. Qualitative criminological researchers, conversely, very seldom archive their data for use by others. Indeed, few of them are willing even to consider doing so, often citing concerns about confidentiality. In our view, such concerns are overblown. Qualitative data can be stripped of personal identifiers, and bona fide researchers can be required to guarantee in writing that they will protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants as a condition of access. Oversight by institutional review boards can and should ensure that such guarantees are upheld in practice.

The sharing of qualitative criminological data can be expected to yield large gains in economy and efficiency that rival those achieved in quantitative criminology. Ready access to such datasets almost certainly will encourage more PhD students and untenured faculty members to use them for their own research, thereby increasing the pool of potential future qualitative criminologists. And as more criminologists turn to qualitative research, demand for graduate training in qualitative criminological research methods can be expected to grow accordingly. That training, in turn, will prepare more PhD students to write qualitative dissertations and equip them to teach qualitative methods to future generations of scholars. One major benefit of increased data sharing, then, will be to greatly increase the number of criminologists doing qualitative research, which in and of itself almost surely will raise its disciplinary prestige.

Another major benefit of increased data sharing is that this will serve to open up qualitative data to the scrutiny of other researchers. Openness should spur qualitative researchers to specify carefully their data collection and analysis
procedures, serving to allay any suspicion, warranted or not, that such data are somehow less systematic or rigorous than their quantitative counterpart. More importantly, it will allow for the possibility of verification and replication, which are critical to the advancement of reliable scientific knowledge.

Perhaps the most important benefit of increased data sharing is that this will permit other researchers to use data collected for one purpose to examine an unrelated issue, thereby opening up additional lines of scientific inquiry. Just as with quantitative research, qualitative researchers rarely, if ever, exhaust the scientific potential of their data. Even datasets that have been mined extensively may generate new and important ideas, especially when viewed through a different theoretical lens. This already has happened on at least two occasions, both of which involve revisiting qualitative data with a feminist eye. In one of these studies, Miller (1998) reanalyzed ethnographic interview data from a study of male and female armed robbers in St. Louis to show how gender shaped the offense. And in the other, Mullins (2006) combined four separate ethnographic interview datasets from research on drug robbers, carjackers, criminal informants, and retaliators in St. Louis to draw out the links between masculinities, street life, and criminal violence.

Yet another way to raise the status of qualitative criminological research is to broaden its focus by moving beyond the study of poor, urban, or minority populations. A notable concentration on such populations is not restricted to qualitative criminological researchers; it is shared by their quantitative counterparts (see Jacques and Wright 2010). That said, the fact that quantitative researchers typically seek to analyze differences between individuals and groups has pushed some of them to collect information on socially advantaged persons, because to do otherwise produces inadequate variation between cases. Qualitative criminological researchers actually lag behind in this regard, owing to their focus on in-depth case studies and “going to where the crime is”—or at least to where it is thought to be. To put it bluntly, qualitative criminological researchers appear to have fallen into the trap identified by Sutherland of letting official crime statistics determine where, what, and whom to study. Though forms and rates may vary across groups, people of all kinds commit crime; thus researchers should study all kinds of people.

Even studying individuals or groups among whom crime is rare can produce important criminological insights. Given that residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods are relatively disposed to handle conflict through the use of violence (Jacobs and Wright 2006; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003), for example, how do people in advantaged suburban communities deal with the provocations that are part and parcel of communal life? Based on qualitative fieldwork, Baumgartner (1988) finds the answer to be via resorting to various peaceful conflict management strategies, including toleration, avoidance, and negotiation, with mobilizing police as a last resort (also see Jacques and Wright 2013). Such findings are important because, as Baumgartner explains, “the factors that create and sustain non-confrontation of this sort can shed light not only on the conditions
that promote tolerance and avoidance but also, by implication, on those that undermine quarreling, violence, mediation, adjudication, and a host of other sequels to disapproved acts” (p. v–vi). In other words, by studying people and places less involved with serious criminality, we may glean important insights into the mechanisms that serve to both produce and inhibit lawbreaking. Such insights, of course, are crucial to the conceptual and theoretical development of an empirically based, scientific criminology.

Conclusion

There currently is little agreement about the standards of rigor by which qualitative research in criminology should be judged (Miller 2005). This has been advanced as one of the major reasons that qualitative research has not featured anywhere near as prominently as its quantitative counterpart in the discipline’s most influential journals (Buckler 2008). Our view is that all criminological research, be it qualitative or quantitative, should be anchored in and judged by the standards of science. Doing so is critical to the development of a methodologically unified, empirically based criminology. The goal of all science is to produce conceptual and theoretical statements about the world that can be confirmed or falsified and amended through empirical testing. Because science rests on the bedrock principle of falsification, no concept or theory ever can be considered to be the last word on a subject. Instead, its value will forever be judged according to contemporary standards of validity, generality, simplicity, fruitfulness, and utility. By adhering to these standards, science has established itself as the preeminent method of understanding the natural world, and from our perspective, both qualitative and quantitative criminology would be well advised to follow suit.

References


