Introduction

Why Theory Matters for Policy and Why Policy Matters for Theory

Kevin A. Wright

WHY THEORY MATTERS FOR POLICY

I remember learning about “Coleman’s Boat” as a sociology master’s student at Washington State University as if the seminar had taken place yesterday. The boat, essentially an upside-down trapezoid, is a diagram meant to show the relationship between social structure and individual agency (see Figure I.1). Macro-level factors (the top left of the boat) influence the belief systems and values of individual actors (the bottom left of the boat), those individual beliefs translate into individual actions (the bottom right of the boat), and those individual actions then accumulate and unintentionally create the macro-level again (the top right of the boat) (Coleman 1990). Bourdieu, Giddens, and Habermas are a bit fuzzier, but I remember that boat—perhaps there is indeed something to be written about theoretical parsimony (or whether a theory lends itself to simple, nautical representations). Still further back in my memory are psychologists Bandura, Skinner, and Kohlberg. More recent and accessible after my permanent transition into criminology are Merton, Sutherland, Shaw and McKay, Agnew, Akers, and Hirschi.

The truth is that these theories never really leave one’s memory—boat or no boat—because the human behavior that they attempt to explain is observable on a daily basis. Good theories are empirically supported by the social facts that surround us in everyday life. We see that people repeat behaviors for which they have been rewarded in the past; they put on presentations that may not be representative of their true selves but are ones that they wish
others to interpret as being reality; and they respond to pain, victimization, and trauma in a variety of ways that otherwise might appear abnormal. Many of us enter the field of criminology because we are fascinated by human behavior. We want to understand, prevent, respond to, or correct deviant behavior in particular. What this means is that programs and policies are needed that acknowledge, for example, that crime can be rewarding and may continue until prosocial behaviors replace that reward structure, that incarcerated men may portray themselves as ultra-masculine and refuse any assistance in the form of treatment, and that “career victims” may exist, alongside career criminals, due in part to their response to previous victimizations.

I remember something else from graduate school that I imagine has happened before and probably has happened since: I grossly misjudged the amount of time I would need to spend reading for each of my comprehensive exams. I read just about everything on the provided list for the criminological theory exam. I still have it; it’s 16 pages single-spaced and lists 57 books, 168 articles, and 14 book chapters (thank you, Travis Pratt and Leana Bouffard). Of course, students were also “expected to be familiar with the most current information regarding these theoretical traditions,” which meant that you could never really be “done reading.” Finally satisfied that I was in fact done reading, I looked at the calendar and knew that my criminological theory comprehensive exam was in three weeks . . . and so was my corrections comprehensive exam. I had read virtually nothing in corrections beyond a seminar I had taken during the previous semester. I scurried my way through the corrections list for two weeks and I faked my way through that exam. Sure, I read Beccaria (1764), I probably wrote something about risk assessment or intensive supervision, and I cited Frank Cullen a bunch, but I faked that thing (please forgive me, Jeff Bouffard).

I did, however, pass my corrections exam, and I did so in a particular way that would influence my approach to my work going forward: I relied heavily on all the reading that I had done for my criminological theory exam. This led me to the realization that the correction of crime was very rarely...
tied to the actual causes of crime. Life-course theories of crime, macro-level theories of crime, feminist theories of crime—all had something to say about why people engage in crime but were surprisingly absent when it came time to doing something about it. Stated differently, policy was not informed by theory. This is not to say that theorists in those traditions were not suggesting policies based on their chosen explanation of human behavior; however, for whatever reasons, their suggestions didn’t seem to take hold in corrections.

“Coleman’s Boat” must have been somewhere in my head while I was writing my dissertation. How could we expect to rehabilitate individuals while returning them to the same neighborhood, family, or peer setting that likely contributed to their criminal behavior in the first place? Community disadvantage influences individual beliefs and behaviors (e.g., Wilson 2010), and the accumulation of that behavior and its response contributes to further and perhaps worsened community disadvantage and instability (e.g., Clear 2007), which then again impact individual-level criminal behavior in the form of recidivism (e.g., Kubrin and Stewart 2006). If we are to meaningfully reduce recidivism, programs and policies would need to account for individual rehabilitation while also acknowledging the influence of criminogenic settings (Wright et al. 2012). Theory and policy are linked, criminology and criminal justice are linked, and answers to the social and economic problems brought on by crime and its response will require multiple methods of reasoning to account for these linkages. This is accomplished in the second edition of Criminology and Public Policy, and the names of the authors in this text should be added to our recent criminological memories.

WHY POLICY MATTERS FOR THEORY

The paragraph that begins “The policy implications of the current work…” often appears right before the concluding paragraphs of a research article. Should a book-length manuscript provide policy implications, these too often appear in a chapter toward the end or even in an appendix. The translation of findings to practice is an afterthought. Worse still, the “so what?” question is often left unanswered entirely. Sometimes this is because the research question or problem addressed was never worthy of additional study in the first place. Sometimes this is due to logistical issues such as “space constraints” of a journal or a desire to present objective evidence and not make claims to how it might inform policy. Sometimes, however, this is because the theory and its implications are so out of touch with the messy reality of human behavior—and the political, social, and fiscal challenges of responding to that behavior (Sampson, Winship, and Knight 2013)—that it is difficult to put findings into practice in any meaningful way. This is the bane of the ivory tower, and
it can contribute to the implementation of wasteful policies and programs that are created based on ideology rather than on science when the “policy implications of the current work” are underdeveloped or nonexistent.

You know DARE, right? Well, I won’t write about the specific shaky theoretical foundations of the program (see Akers 2010) or the lack of systematic evidence supporting its effectiveness (see Rosenbaum 2007). Instead, I’d rather share an amusing but troubling anecdote of my own experience with DARE as a ten-year-old. Admittedly, I don’t remember much from DARE, but one specific component has always stuck with me since “learning” it in the early 1990s. At its core, DARE relies on resisting the temptations of drugs and alcohol (e.g., Drug Abuse Resistance Education; “Just Say No”). As part of this education, my fellow students and I received a handout with strategies of resistance should we be offered the opportunity to partake in the use of drugs and alcohol. Listed were the cold shoulder approach, the walk away approach, and the simple no thanks approach. But it was a suggested phrase within the give an excuse approach regarding saying no to beer in particular that I always remember:

“No thanks, the bubbles hurt my throat.”

Each time I picture a kid saying that phrase today they’re laughed at or worse. I’ve shared this anecdote with my students—at both the college and high school levels—and they confirm the ridiculousness of the strategy. Part of the shaky theoretical foundations of DARE include ignoring the social contexts in which kids are pressured into using drugs and alcohol (Pratt, Gau, and Franklin 2011). Whatever the theoretical foundations, the program in practice suggests that they may need revision. DARE, Scared Straight, juvenile boot camps—each of these has been written about before with these concerns in mind (e.g., Finckenauer and Gavin 1999; Lutze 2006). They are not, however, the only examples where policies or programs rest on theoretical foundations that are unable to keep up with the complexity of human interaction. Much of restorative justice policy requires a sense of community that may not exist in the communities where it’s most needed. Policies that encourage deportation or restricted immigration often rely on questionable theoretical assumptions regarding the criminality of those born outside the country. And in an adult DARE parallel, strategies to avoid confrontation that are rewarded in cognitive behavioral therapy sessions—like walking away—may be met by violence in the street. Policy matters for theory because it is an added check on our theoretical work; it can validate theoretical principles or suggest that a revision is needed.
Instead of piling on DARE, I want to write about the other thing that I remember from my experience as a ten-year-old in the program: Officer Frank Pezzimenti. I was fortunate that the uniformed officer who led DARE represented one of my first police interactions in the relatively crime-free village of Fairport, New York; others aren’t so fortunate. We had many individuals share their time with us in elementary through high school—folk singers, motivational speakers, and monster truck drivers. I don’t remember any of their names, but I remember Officer Pezzimenti. I remember him as witty and funny, kind and caring—a supportive figure of trust and authority in the community. DARE may not do a great job of diverting youth away from drugs and alcohol, but its programmatic elements might be conducive toward building police legitimacy at an early age (see, e.g., Birkeland, Murphy-Graham, and Weiss 2005). Rather than simply just saying no to DARE, the program might be examined to determine what works and what doesn’t and, therefore, what might be kept and what might be discarded when creating a theory to then guide future programming (be it for preventing substance abuse or establishing police legitimacy).

Fortunately, the state of criminologists and their work is not as dismal as portrayed at the beginning of this section. A fair number of criminologists do indeed worry about the policy implications of their findings. Tittle (2016) suggests that “problem-solving criminology” is likely the second-most popular style of criminology (behind the more traditional “theoretical science criminology”—although he offers that problem-solving criminologists may even represent a majority). The journal *Criminology & Public Policy* is devoted to publishing works that engage in policy discussions of research findings. I especially enjoy the November 2007 issue that asked criminologists to make policy propositions based on their work and gave them the freedom to do so with brevity and candor (can we do this again, please?). Websites like the Office of Justice Programs (https://www.crimesolutions.gov/) organize what works based on the scientific evidence. Problem-solving criminology is being aimed at the highest levels of government—in March 2017, twenty-five former presidents of the American Society of Criminology urged the president of the United States to “promote criminal justice policies, programs, and practices that are evidence based.” Whether it be called problem-solving criminology, problem-oriented criminology, public criminology, policy-relevant criminology, or translational criminology, it’s clear that the policy implications of criminological findings won’t always be left to languish on the last page.

A good theory is abstract. It’s logically consistent. It’s simple, has a broad scope, and it doesn’t take you in circles. It’s testable and empirically valid.
Good theories generate good hypotheses, and with good data we may be in a position to better understand a particular phenomenon. Conceivably, then, we should be in good position to identify policies and programs based on theory that may affect that phenomenon. In criminology, this means informing public policy designed to address the problems brought on by criminal behavior and the response to that behavior. In some instances, however, it may be easier to start with the problem and work backward to develop or modify theory. Lest one be accused of selecting on the dependent variable or engaging in tautological reasoning, the theory can then be tested in other settings to see how well it holds up to the empirical data: from the specific to the general and back again.

REFERENCES


