

CRIMINAL JUSTICE EVALUATION RESEARCH AND THEORY RESEARCH

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH

As defined in the professions, criminal justice research has broad parameters. In some academic settings the focus is on theories of criminal behavior, while in others the emphasis is on the dynamics and operations of the system itself. While criminology enjoys a long history of empirical endeavor, much of the research in criminal justice emerges from theory and methods developed in contiguous disciplines such as anthropology, political science, sociology and psychology, and applied professions such as social work, business, law, and public administration. Much of the empirical effort in criminal justice focuses on management information, needs assessment, and evaluation research.

Evaluation research has been challenged as effective research (Weiss 1972). It is suggested that evaluation research is inferior to theoretical research. Needs assessment and development of management information in criminal justice settings are not perceived as research. I will argue that any collection of data which meets rigorous standards in design, collection, and analysis is intrinsically equal as research, and can be used for various purposes, regardless of the primary character of the research.

STATE OF THE ART

The quality of research in criminal justice settings has been challenged by several scholars, and most visibly by Martinson (1974). He collected and reviewed all available English language reports focusing on rehabilitation which had been completed from 1945 to 1967, and found no evidence that any rehabilitation program consistently reduced recidivism. This challenge focused attention on the rehabilitation process (Palmer 1975). His second, perhaps more vital conclusion received little review. Martinson suggests that the problem may be one of *methods* rather than *substance*. "It is just possible that some of our treatment programs are working to some extent, but that our research is so bad that it is incapable of telling." (Martinson 1974 3) After applying criteria such as measurable outcomes and the presence of a comparison

group to the reports in his study, only 231 reports remained, and he found that many of these studies had fatal or confounding effects in the design. Unlike the challenge to rehabilitation, this assertion has not been challenged, and its ready acceptance by scholars indicates general doubt about the quality of research in this area.

A similar project focused on the use of volunteers with criminal offenders. Scioli and Cook (1976) evaluated 250 reports, monographs, and supporting statements which attempted to present findings from evaluations of volunteer programs. When evaluations which did not measure program outcome were eliminated, only 43 reports remained. Of these, 35 measured program impact on offenders, mainly focusing on one-to-one volunteer relationships, excluding consideration of other program components. Only 3 reports were free of defects which seriously limited the quality of the evaluation. The focus of scholars and practitioners was on the absence of support for volunteer programs rather than on the comments regarding the quality of research.

Earlier investigators drew similar conclusions in assessing the state of the art (Shelley 1971; Baily 1966; Schnur 1965; Glaser 1965; Cressey 1958). More recently, Logan (1980) evaluated research in the late 1960's and early 1970's and reached the same conclusions. All assessments of evaluation research end with an expressed need for improvement in application of research techniques in criminal justice or correctional settings. Logan (1980) set seven criteria to serve as a guide to the minimal level of acceptable technical competence which focused on efforts to evaluate treatment programs. None of the 100 studies, met the seven minimal conditions for quality research. Only 12 adequately measured the independent variable, and only one satisfied as many as six of the seven conditions.

THEORETICAL & APPLIED RESEARCH

The inadequacies of criminal justice research have been attributed to the applied or practical nature of the field. There is a sense that applied research is less rigorous than

theoretical research. Such a position is inappropriate, because research methods are neither good nor bad. They are either correctly or incorrectly applied to the problem under study. If applied or practical research is inferior, the appropriate response is an indictment of the researcher who has used research tools incorrectly, and no indictment of applied research.

EVALUATION RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL RESEARCH

It has been suggested that evaluation research is inferior to theory research as conducted in the various professional disciplines in pursuit of theoretical issues. *Evaluation research is research*. It must be qualitatively equivalent to theoretical research. The tasks and techniques are, or should be the same. The safeguards, standards and objectivity are, or should be the same, to insure that quality is maintained in the research process.

BIASING FACTORS

The quality of research is limited to the skills, abilities, and objectivity of the researcher. Environmental pressures impinge on research efforts, regardless of setting. While emphasis has been placed on the unique nature of environmental stresses in the evaluation of action programs, similar stresses can be identified in other research settings.

The funding agency or evaluated agency is likely to try influencing the research process (Adams 1975). In the early 1970's a research team was evaluating a community treatment program in a major urban area under contract from the county commission. The state planning agency had invested heavily in the program of prime concern. State planning agency representatives met the research team and stressed the importance of finding the program effective and essential. They indicated with little subtlety that future grant and research funds from the planning agency would depend on "cooperation" from the research team in this case. The team refused to modify the research design, and insisted that the findings must flow from the data.

If a researcher succumbs to such pressure, the weakness is not in evaluation research techniques. Similar pressures exist in academic and professional communities. Only

research with "significant" findings can be published. A researcher had completed an experimental examination of one aspect of human behavior, but had achieved non-significant results. On replication, the results were again non-significant. The researcher said that the same design would be repeated until the "correct" results were obtained. When researchers manipulate their designs and significance levels to reach "significant" results, the weakness does not lie in methodology, but in falsifying objective research operations.

The funding agency defines research goals (Street 1974). The outcome expected from experimental intervention determines both the dependent and independent variables. But the researcher must determine the manner of definition and measurement of the variables. "Timeliness" and "relevancy" as defined by the discipline may also impose professional bias on the researcher who naturally wants to publish findings and theoretical analysis.

A political element affects public program evaluation (Weiss 1972). Programs in the public sector are created in politics, and the products, effectiveness assessment, and evaluation are all political. Evaluation findings may provide the basis for support or rejection of the program. It is difficult to avoid biasing pressures. Effective researchers will state findings objectively, and will avoid involvement in debates about interpretation. There is a place for the social activist, but such concerns must be kept out of the program evaluation process because they destroy objectivity and invalidate the research. Findings and design must be determined by the data and the type of research question approached, and not by the preference of researcher, funding agency, or the social research object itself. The competent researcher separates areas of social involvement from areas of application of research skills.

Evaluation research must be conducted with greater care than other types of research. If the evaluation develops information which is viewed as unfavorable to the program, then the quality of the data will be questioned (Weiss 1972). Even if the data is favorable, the evaluation will be challenged by opponents of the program. They will diligently seek flaws to discredit the methodology or the

analysis. The basic data gathering procedures and the analysis of data will be scrutinized to a degree seldom applied to basic and theoretical research. Thus, each component of the research design must be carefully constructed to gather data which is high both in quality and in relevance.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION AND THEORY

Theoretical research and applied research need not be separate endeavors. If the quality of applied research is equal to the quality of theoretical research, then the quality of data will permit analysis focused on verification of theoretical propositions. The return from the investment of resources in developing evaluation research can be maximized by including the measurement of variables which assess theoretical hypotheses.

Sophisticated empirical research can be conducted at the same time that practical research is conducted. Two products result: 1) a report on the practical findings, and 2) a theoretically significant journal article. While the main variables are determined by the nature of the program being evaluated, with the stated program outcomes, other variables can and should also be measured. If the main dependent and independent variables are inappropriate for the study of the theoretical issue, then the primary variables for the theory test can be entered as secondary variables in the practical evaluation research design. A major evaluation is a series of minor hypothesis testing situations, or at least, minor comparisons which can be converted into hypothesis testing situations. The practical report focuses on those comparisons from the perspective of the information needed to manage the program. The theoretical analysis focuses on the comparisons relevant to the verification of theory.

APPROACHING THEORY

Development of scientific theory is recognized as the province of the academic scholar-scientist. There are differences in approach which scholars take in the development of theory, but there is some consensus as to the purpose of the development of scientific theory. While non-professionals and some scientists see the purpose of science as practical improvement in the "real world,"

science is more correctly viewed as the effort to expand knowledge and understanding. The pursuit of science is to establish general laws which help to integrate and develop knowledge about a field of inquiry (Braithwaite 1966). The basic purpose of science is to develop theories which explain natural phenomena including those encountered in criminal justice as well as the other social sciences.

Some scholars define the development of theory in rigorous terms. Philosophers of science suggest that the model advanced by the physical sciences is the proper model for the development and testing of theories (Popper 1961; Hempel 1939). This model stresses the logical deduction of testable propositions from a broad general theory. According to this model, the development of theory involves development of a formal system of explanation through a set of systematically interrelated postulates from which testable hypotheses can be drawn (Zetterberg 1965). In this context, research becomes a mechanism whereby hypotheses are tested.

The inductive method of theory development is less frequently discussed as an appropriate scientific approach. In this context, information is gathered about the relations between phenomena. As more becomes known about the relations among the variables under analysis, a theory or set of theories begin to emerge which explain the findings. In this context, research becomes the mechanism whereby relations between variables are discovered.

The pursuit of theory, whether inductive or deductive, requires the accurate and careful testing of relations between variables. Applied research can provide information which can be used in the development of theory. The original purpose of research does not change the nature of the data. If the data are not sound they cannot be used for development of theory or for program evaluation. Sound data must be used for both.

SUMMARY

Criminal justice is a newly emerging field with broad parameters not clearly defined in contemporary literature. While criminology is well established as an area of professional research, criminal justice research, particularly

evaluation research, has been judged inadequate. Research in criminal justice is often practical or applied research. The techniques and procedures used in applied research are identical to research employed in the verification of theory. If the quality of research is maintained, then theoretical hypotheses can be tested in applied research designs. The development of theory in the area of criminal justice is a legitimate and essential activity. Both deductive and inductive approaches are appropriate vehicles for developing theory in criminal justice research. As an emerging field of study, criminal justice must be carefully developed through application of rigorous and effective research methods. The quality of research will determine the quality of knowledge. Thus, the quality of criminal justice research must be maintained at high levels regardless of the form which the research effort takes.

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