Feminism for the mainstream criminologist  
An invitation  
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Abstract

Feminism has historically been peripheral to the study and practice of criminal justice; mainstream criminologists have not been widely exposed to feminist perspectives. This has contributed to perceptions that criminology is about men and feminism is only about women. Consequently, many criminologists and criminal justice practitioners have yet to understand, much less appreciate, the importance of feminism’s contribution to criminology. To address this problem, this article explains some of the major feminist insights in the interrelated areas of epistemology, theory, methodology, and policy. Examples from the criminal justice literature are used to illustrate both the basis for feminist concerns as well as the diversity of feminist scholarship. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

It seems pro forma to begin an article on feminism deploring the fact that mainstream criminologists do not “get it.” This work, however, is authored by someone who herself did not always “get” feminism and only in recent years has come to recognize feminist insights as not just helpful to understanding the relationship between gender and crime, but essential. This article assumes that many criminologists’ dismissal of feminism stems as much from ignorance and misinformation as deliberate, ideological resistance. The purpose here is neither to attack mainstream approaches nor to unequivocally defend feminist ones. Rather, this article represents an invitation to academicians and practitioners from all intellectual and professional backgrounds to consider the contributions of feminist thought in theory, methods, policy, and practice.1

The rapidly expanding body of literature on women and gender suggests that the days when a criminologist could pass off a study of men as being a general and generalizable study of crime are numbered.2 Accompanying the increased attention to gender has been increased opportunities for funding for research on women, gender, and crime. For instance, the 1994 Violence Against Women Act not only provided additional rights to victims of stalking, domestic violence, and sexual assault, but also marked US$1.6 billion for programs providing services to women victims of domestic violence. To take full advantage of the opportunities available to integrate gender into this research, teaching, and practice, however, requires an understanding of the myriad ways in which gender shapes both men’s and women’s experiences in the criminal justice system.

Feminist criminologists have been at the forefront in pointing out that when women and other marginalized groups are ignored, devalued, or misrepresented, society in general and the understanding of crime and justice in particular suffer as a result. “Feminism” and “feminist criminology” refer not

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to one perspective but a diverse set of perspectives that, generally speaking, focus on women’s interests, are overtly political, and strive to present a new vision of equality and social justice (Rafter & Heidensohn, 1995). Feminists generally share a view that gender inequalities exist in society and that these inequalities should be addressed, though they may differ in their location of the source of the problem and the measures to be pursued. As will be described in greater detail below, feminist contributions to the understanding of crime and justice cannot be underestimated: Arguably “no other perspective has done as much to raise societal consciousness about the oppression of women and gender inequality” (Wonders, 1999, p. 113).

Despite feminism’s impact on the study and practice of criminal justice, many scholars and practitioners lack an understanding of even the most rudimentary aspects of feminist criminological thought, much less feminism’s relevance to criminal justice. Part of the problem is that much feminist scholarship is still published in specialized journals (e.g., Women and Criminal Justice, Gender and Society, Violence Against Women, Feminist Theory), included in “special issues” focusing on some aspect of women and crime [cf., Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 14 (2) (1998); American Psychologist, 54 (1) (1999); Homicide Studies, 2 (4) (1998); Corrections Today, 60 (7) (1998); International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice, 21 (2) (1997); Crime and Delinquency, 41 (4) (1995); Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 3 (2) (1992); Southern California Review of Law and Women’s Studies, 2 (1) (1992); Social Pathology, 3 (2) (1997); Law and Social Inquiry, 19 (4) (1995); Justice Quarterly, 12 (1) (1995); Crime and Delinquency, 35 (1) (1989)] or receives book-length treatments that require more of a commitment than many nonfeminist criminologists are willing to invest. This literature frequently assumes a baseline level of knowledge that nonfeminists or scholars new to the study of gender and crime may not possess. As with other approaches, feminist scholarship often relies on terminology (e.g., “androcentrism,” “intersectionality,” “standpoint epistemology,” “gender essentialism,” “reflexivity,” “doing gender,” “hegemonic masculinity”) that — while widely recognized by many feminist-oriented criminologists — alienates rather than informs practitioners or scholars from more mainstream orientations.

Feminism and mainstream criminology seem trapped in, if not a vicious cycle, at least an unproductive one. Historically, feminism has had a peripheral relationship to the discipline on the whole and mainstream criminologists have not been widely exposed to feminist perspectives. Many men and women continue to assume (falsely) that “feminism is about women, while criminology is about men” (Naffine, 1996: pp. 1–2), which, in turn, keeps feminist perspectives marginal to the discipline. The result is that many academicians, practitioners, and policymakers have yet to understand, much less appreciate, the importance of gender and feminism’s contribution to criminology.

To address this problem, the present work dedicates itself to explaining some of the major feminist insights in the interrelated areas of theory (including theories of knowledge), methodology, and policy to criminologists unfamiliar with feminism. Following an overview of how gender was addressed in the study and practice of criminal justice, examples are presented that illustrate feminist concerns as well as the diversity of feminist scholarship.

Women and gender in criminology

When the question arises as to why many standard criminal justice texts dedicate relatively little attention to women, one of the most oft-cited responses is that women comprise a small percentage of those involved in the criminal justice system. For example, according to official crime statistics, women comprise only around 7 percent of prison inmates and 11 percent of jail inmates, 21 percent of those arrested, and 14 percent of all sworn officers in large police departments (Federal Bureau of Investigations [FBI], 1998; Gilliard, 1999; National Center for Women and Policing, 1999).

As a justification for neglect, many people recognize that this explanation falls short on a number of fronts. First, while women are underrepresented as victims, offenders, and workers, the number of women involved in the criminal processing system is large and growing. Currently, women account for nearly 2.3 million of those arrested, including half a million arrests for index crimes and 83,000 arrests for violent crimes (FBI, 1998). Nearly 64,000 adult women were being held in local jails at midyear 1998 and almost 83,000 women were imprisoned under the jurisdiction of state and federal authorities (Gilliard, 1999). Over 32,000 women are employed in large law enforcement agencies and another 42,000 are custody/security staff employed in state and federal correctional facilities (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 1997; National Center for Women and Policing, 1999).

Secondly, policies and practices that disproportionately affect men have an impact on women as well. For instance, it is women who shoulder the economic and emotional responsibility for child-care
when a male parent is incarcerated. Also, as corrections budgets have been increased, state funds to support low-income women and their children have been cut along with social service jobs that are disproportionately staffed by women (Danner, 1998).

Moreover, while the criminal justice system is overwhelmingly male, gender is relevant when we are discussing men’s involvement in the system as well as women’s. Gender is the strongest predictor of criminal involvement: boys and men perpetrate more, and more serious crimes than do girls and women. There is a benefit from asking, “Why are women so underrepresented in crime?” as well as examining why men are overrepresented. Also, both men and women “do gender,” that is, handle situations in such a way that the outcome is considered gender-appropriate. Studying how men and women accomplish masculinity and femininity prompts one to consider how social structures constrain and channel behavior that, in turn, may influence a person’s criminal or law-abiding behavior or their actions in the workplace (Martin & Jurik, 1996; Messerschmidt, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Discussing gender and crime is definitely an easier exercise now than it would have been thirty years ago. Since the 1970s, hundreds of books and articles have appeared that reflect the in-roads feminism has made into criminology and related fields. Feminism’s influence, though, has been far from uniform. Most criminal justice scholarship, practice, and policymaking that consider women and gender adopt one of three general approaches (Daly, 1995; Goodstein, 1992).

In the main, most criminological scholarship focuses on men or extends theorizing based on men’s experiences to women without offering any reconceptualization (Daly, 1995). In contrast, some scholars recognize that women’s criminal justice experiences are often ignored or distorted when one simply “adds women and stirs.” A second approach, then, includes feminist research that focuses attention on crimes that adversely affect women more than they affect men, such as domestic violence. This approach also pays attention to the ways in which women’s experiences differ not just from men’s, but from each other based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, class, age, and sexual orientation. While addressing women’s “invisibility” is an improvement over simply adding women and stirring, scholarship in this category still evinces a tendency to treat men as the norm and women as the anomalies. Such an approach precludes efforts to achieve fairer treatment of men and women throughout the criminal justice system. If an entire field has been shaped by a male norm, then one must seriously question whether the issues deemed important to the understanding of victims, offenders, and workers include those that are important for women.

Recognizing the importance of studying women on their own terms, some scholars have adopted a more advanced feminist approach. For example, Beth E. Richie’s (1996) interviews with women inmates led her to develop the idea of “gender entrapment” as a means of understanding the criminal behavior of battered African American women. For many of these women, Richie (p. 4) concluded criminal behavior is a logical extension of “their racialized gender identities, their culturally expected gender roles, and the violence in their intimate relationships.” Richie found that nearly all of the battered Black women in her study occupied a privileged status in their families growing up, receiving extra attention, opportunities, and material possessions. These women, however, also felt burdened by a responsibility to “make good” on their families’ investments in their futures. As a result, their identities were closely aligned with meeting the needs of others, an identity that made them vulnerable to abuse as adults (Richie, 1996).

Feminist criminologists hope that, in the future, approaches such as Richie’s, which recognize a multiplicity of factors and offer a richer contextual analysis, will be the rule rather than the exception. Theories and research will “reach beyond the current stereotypes of women, and beyond the current real lives of women, to think of women differently” (Naffine, 1996, p. 143). The knowledge base will be transformed to include a theoretical and analytical focus on the interacting relations of class, race, and gender, as well as sexual orientation, age, and ethnicity. Admittedly, to date, feminist approaches have worked better to criticize than to construct core theoretical frameworks as Richie did. Although critiques are valuable in that they call attention to women’s invisibility or misrepresentation in criminology, feminists and nonfeminists alike generally recognize that feminist perspectives must move beyond criticizing from the sidelines if the criminal justice system’s approach to gender is to be reconstructed. This poses a major challenge given that one’s inherited ways of thinking obstruct one’s ability to imagine or comprehend new ways of viewing crime and criminal justice (Collins, 1998; Daly, 1995; Eicher, 1988). By acknowledging some of the limitations of mainstream approaches and considering feminist perspectives as one possible means of advancing the understanding of gender and crime, feminist and nonfeminist scholars hopefully can work together to address the criminal justice ground remaining not only to be covered, but plowed and replanted.

**Feminist epistemologies**

Epistemology refers to “theories of what knowledge is, what makes it possible, and how to get it”
Feminist perspectives have made more progress in fields that have stronger traditions of interpretive understanding such as literature and history. By contrast, the criminological tradition continues to be deeply embedded in the scientific method (Naffine, 1996). Much of mainstream criminology is rooted in claims that “science is value neutral” and “scientific methods protect against our scholarship being contaminated by subjectivity.” Studies can be replicated, positivism assumes, because researchers produce knowledge in similar ways, rendering individual criminologists interchangeable with others.

Are some beliefs better supported by empirical evidence than others? Yes. Are there advantages to using traditional (e.g., quantitative) research methods? Absolutely. Does the use of certain research procedural safeguards mitigate against biased results? Of course. These points are not disputed here. What is challenged is the assumption that one can and should strive to achieve “absolute objectivity” and universally valid knowledge.

Recently, in a special issue of The New York Times Magazine, Richard Powers heralded the “vesting of authority in experiment” as the best idea of the millennium. Powers (1999, p. 83) acknowledged, however, that thinkers “from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Thomas Kuhn and beyond” have expressed concern that fact and artifact may be closer than most empiricists are comfortable accepting... That great empiricists have rejected initial data on hunches, until their observations produced more acceptable numbers. That scientists need pre-existing theory and supposition even to ask the questions that will lead to data. That the shape of a question produces the data that answer it.

These concerns and others lie at the heart of feminist epistemology. The most conservative feminist epistemological program, feminist empiricism, basically accepts the value of the scientific method, but points out that ignoring women or misrepresenting their experiences is methodologically unsound. Feminist empiricism tries to correct “bad science” through stricter adherence to existing norms of scientific inquiry. This approach has filled in gaps in the knowledge of women victims of crime (particularly violence in the home and between intimates), the judicial treatment of offending women and girls, and the experiences of women criminal justice workers (Martin & Jurik, 1996; Naffine, 1996; Smart, 1995).

By contrast, other feminist epistemologies — feminist standpoint theories, for example — go beyond critiquing empirical practice to challenging mainstream criminology’s empirical assumptions. Many feminists consider science and knowledge (as well as our definitions of crimes, masculinity, and femininity) to be socially situated and question how disinterested knowledge or “objectivity” is possible in a society that is deeply stratified by gender, race, and class. As philosopher Sandra Harding (1991, p. 59) observes, “… [T]he subject of belief and of knowledge is never simply an individual, let alone an abstract one capable of transcending its own historical location. It is always an individual in a particular social situation.”

Feminist standpoint theories assume that the perspective of the researcher influences what is known. Standpoint feminists try to construct knowledge from the perspective of the persons being studied on the grounds that the perspective of the oppressed or marginalized tends to be less distorted. The powerful have more interest in obscuring the conditions that produce their privileges and authority than the dominated groups have in hiding the conditions that produce their situation (Harding, 1991).

A third feminist epistemological approach, feminist postmodernism, criticizes standpoint feminists for assuming that women are a “clearly defined and uncontroversially given interest group” (Smart, 1995, p. 10). While positivists and other “modernists” (including many feminists) claim that the truth can be determined provided all agree on responsible ways of going about it, postmodern critics argue for multiple truths that take context into account (Collins, 1998, pp. 196–197; Wonders, 1999). Many criminologists recognize that “knowledge” or “truth” often reflects the perspective of those with more power (e.g., definitions of what actions are considered illegal, what constitutes a fair punishment). Postmodernists take this further, questioning whether any knowledge is knowable and rejecting the ideas that there is a universal definition of justice, i.e., one that would be true for all people, all of the time (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996; Wonders, 1999). Toward this end, postmodernism emphasizes the importance of alternative discourses and accounts and frequently takes the form of examining the effects of language and symbolic representation, e.g., how legal discourse constructs different “types of woman” such as “prostitute” or “bad mother” (Smart, 1998, pp. 28–30).

Some charge that postmodernism basically amounts to a “call to inaction” (Tong, 1989, p. 232). If justice is different for everyone depending on one’s perspective, then what is the point of trying to pursue it? If one cannot be certain that the good quality knowledge produced will provide useful insight (or a fair outcome) then, as one student asked, “Why not just sit by the pool?” (Smart, 1995, p. 212). Such criticism, however, paints an overly dismal view
of the postmodern perspective. Postmodern and feminist scholars recognize a responsibility to build bridges across diverse groups in order to work collectively—not to arrive at a universal understanding of justice, but “to do our best to make judgments that make the world a good place to be” for everyone (Wonders, 1999, p. 122).

Regardless of where one falls on the “knowledge is scientifically derived” to “knowledge is socially produced” to “knowledge is power/power is knowledge” continuum, it is hard to imagine a criminal justice enterprise where epistemology is irrelevant. Yet rarely does it receive even passing mention. Given that one routinely encounters “totalitarianism,” “bureaucratization,” “psychopharmacology,” and “heteroskedasticity” in academic publications, it is more than a matter of “epistemology” being a word that does not roll easily off the tongue.

The nature of the concept itself may contribute to the reluctance to address it. It is far easier to open a discussion by stating “The following are some of the major theories of crime causation . . .” than challenging whether one can ever claim to “know” why people commit crimes or any other class of “truths.” Questioning how knowledge has been or ought to be produced can be unsettling, and the process of inquiry—almost by definition—does not lead to straightforward, universally accepted answers. Even among feminists, this process has been described as painful, if inevitable and productive (Smart, 1995, p. 11). At the root of the problem, no doubt, is that most people were not intellectually reared to appreciate the importance of epistemology, much less articulate it. Yet recognition of the importance of epistemology and the biases of the scientific method lies at the core of transforming the discipline. Gaining a better understanding of gender and crime requires not only filling in gaps in knowledge but also challenging the assumptions upon which existing “knowledge” is based.

Theoretical contributions

Charges that criminology is “male-centered” (or “androcentric”) raise hackles among students, practitioners, and scholars alike who incorrectly reduce the criticism to an attack on the sex of the researchers. The reality is that women are vulnerable to androcentric bias just as men are capable of overcoming it. Male dominance of the discipline contributes to androcentricity, but is by no means the only source.

Ideally, theoretical development is grounded in a larger literature, building upon the insights and strengths of past scholarship. Past theorizing regarding the relationship between gender and crime has been seriously hampered by the fact that historically, most of it has focused on explaining men’s experiences of crime and justice and assuming these explanations also apply to women. By contrast, feminist scholarship has strengthened criminological theory in two major ways: by pointing out the limitations of applying theories of male criminality to women and by developing theories of men’s and women’s criminality.

Scholars such as Dorie Klein (1973/1995) and Eileen Leonard (1973/1995) have made systematic attempts to apply traditional theories of crime (i.e., anomie theory, labeling theory, differential association, subcultural theory, and Marxism) to women, and concluded that these theories are unsuited for explaining female patterns of crime. For example, Robert Merton (1938) also neglected to apply his anomie theory to women. His theory holds that when people lack legitimate means (e.g., a job, a savings account) to achieve socially accepted goals (e.g., material and monetary success), they innovate (e.g., steal, write bad checks). His theory also assumes that financial success is as important a goal for women as it is for men and fails to address why women—who are overrepresented among the poor and thus arguably subjected to more strain than men—are less likely to deviate.

Feminists have also taken issue with more recent theorizing that, while showing signs of trying to be more sensitive to issues of women and gender, also has shortcomings. One pitfall occurs when scholars strive to create a “gender-neutral” theory that makes no differentiation regarding the theory’s applicability to men and women. For example, Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi’s (1990) A General Theory of Crime (1990) attempt to be linguistically gender-neutral in discussing victimization and parenting. In doing so, Gottfredson and Hirschi overlook the reality that violent victimization is not gender-neutral (nor race- or class-neutral, for that matter); nearly two-thirds of men’s nonfatal violent victimizations are committed by a stranger, while nearly two-thirds of women’s nonfatal violent victimizations are committed by someone she knows (Craven, 1997). Elsewhere, Gottfredson and Hirschi assert that mothers and fathers are interchangeable in their influence in the socialization process, apparently denying the gendered character of parenting. Gottfredson and Hirschi’s inattention to gendered inequalities is illustrated by “both their gender-neutral stance when inappropriate and by lack of gender specificity when appropriate” (Miller & Burack, 1993, p. 116).

Feminist scholarship has been invaluable in calling attention to the “generalizability problem” of many traditional theoretical approaches (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988) but feminist contributions to theory have not been confined to the level of critique.
Increasingly, feminist perspectives are serving as the basis for theories of crime and crime control. For example, Julia and Herman Schwendinger’s (1983) Marxist feminist analysis, *Rape and Inequality*, links the nature and extent of rape to the unequal gender relations and class struggles that capitalism produces. James Messerschmidt’s (1986) socialist feminist work, *Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Crime*, sees both class and patriarchy as contributing to the type and seriousness of crime. Radical feminist approaches, which emphasize the role of patriarchy and masculine control of women’s labor and sexuality, arguably have had more impact on women abuse research than any other theoretical perspective (Simpson, 1989).

Another feminist theoretical contribution has been to point out the absence of research on masculinity. Men have been treated as the norm in the criminal justice system to such a degree that their gender has been ignored. The failure of criminological theories to address gender has led not only to the neglect of women in theory and research, but also to the delay in recognizing that gender shapes men’s experiences as well as women’s. Naffine (1996, p. 6) observes that “crime, men and masculinity have an intimate relationship, so intimate that we often fail to see it, and so intimate that it can seem natural.”

In recent years, the attention to women and gender prompted the reconsideration of what is “known” about men’s experiences and led to studies of masculinities and crime. Much of this research relies on Robert W. Connell’s (1987, 1995) conceptualizations of “hegemonic masculinity” and “emphasized femininity” that is, the “dominant forms of gender to which other types of masculinity and femininity are subordinated or opposed” (Messerschmidt, 1997, p. 10). In the United States, the dominant, culturally supported form of masculinity is based on White, middle-class, heterosexual men and emphasizes characteristics such as paid employment, subordination of women and girls, authority, control, and rationality (Pyke, 1996).

This scholarship emphasizes that race, gender, and class are not only social constructs, but also processes involving creative human actors, rather than static, categorical variables. As such, gender, race, and class are not equally significant in every social setting, but vary in importance depending upon the context (Messerschmidt, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Crime provides one structurally permitted means of establishing a man’s masculinity when other channels for doing so are blocked due to one’s race, ethnicity, class, or age.

For example, Jana Buflkin (1999) relies on James Messerschmidt’s structured action theory to illustrate how bias crimes are a means of “doing” gender. These overwhelmingly male bias crime offenders situationally achieve masculinity by attacking members of groups (i.e., women, homeless people, people with disabilities, religious, racial, and ethnic minorities, and homosexuals/bisexuals) who undermine the hegemonic masculine ideal. Several characteristics of known bias crimes (i.e., age, sex, number, and alcohol consumption of the perpetrators, the language used during and after the attacks, the seriousness of the injuries) suggest that the prime motivation for bias crimes is to accomplish masculinity.

Similarly, Jody Miller (1998) reports that while the women and men in her study reported similar motivations to commit robbery, the ways in which they commit robbery highlight the clear gender hierarchy that exists on the streets. Men tend to use physical violence and/or a gun to confront the victim, and typically target other men. Miller (1998, pp. 50–51) concludes that “male robbers . . . clearly view the act of robbery as a masculine accomplishment in which men compete with other men for money and status . . . The routine use of guns, physical contact, and violence in male-on-male robberies is a reflection of the masculine ideologies shaping men’s robberies.” By contrast, women robbers take into account the gendered nature of their environment by robbing other females who are less likely than males to be armed and are perceived as weak and easily intimidated. When women do rob men, they use perceptions of women as weak and sexually available to their advantage to manipulate men into situations where they become vulnerable to being robbed.

The growing body of scholarship that considers the situational constructions of gender, race, and class also helps to address concerns that much feminist criminology (as with mainstream criminology) tends to be gender essentialist; implying that there is a universal “women’s experience” or “men’s experience” that can be described independently of other facets of experience such as race, ethnicity, and class (Rice, 1990). The effect of essentialist perspectives has been to “reduce the lives of people who experience multiple forms of oppression to addition problems: ‘racism + sexism = straight Black women’s experience’” (Harris, 1997, p. 11). Racial and ethnic minority women victims, offenders, and workers are not simply subjected to “more” disadvantage than White women; their oppression is often of a qualitatively different kind. Theories of crime and justice need to acknowledge, for example, that “Black women experience sexual and patriarchal oppression by Black men but at the same time struggle alongside them against racial oppression” (Rice, 1990, p. 63).

In sum, overcoming androcentric theorizing involves more than simply extending theories designed to explain male criminality to women or
presenting theories in gender-neutral terms. It requires recognizing gender as a social process relevant to the actions of men as well as women. It demands that be overcome in order to essentialist tendencies to consider the complex ways in which gender interacts with other social characteristics. Compared to thirty years ago, more research and policymaking efforts consider feminist theoretical contributions. By and large, however, feminist theories have not been fully integrated into the study and practice of criminal justice and consequently have not received the same attention as varieties of strain theories, social control theories, or individualist theories. As a result, the richness and insights of feminist perspectives have yet to be widely appreciated. 9 At minimum, evaluations of a theory’s merits should be broadened to include feminist critiques and to consider how a given theory might be revised to recognize gender as a central organizing factor in social life (Renzetti, 1993). Ideally, to ensure that successive generations of practitioners and scholars will not replicate existing androcentric and essentialist biases, efforts to fully integrate feminist theoretical critiques and feminist theorizing into undergraduate and graduate curricula should be expanded (see Goodstein, 1992; Wilson, 1991; Wonders & Caulfield, 1993, for specific strategies for doing so).

Research methodology and methods

Just as feminists vary in their theoretical orientation and their views of how knowledge should be acquired, “there is not a distinctive feminist methodology but rather a feminist perspective on the research process” (Taylor & Rupp, 1991, p. 127). With this in mind, the following sections discuss major feminist methodological themes as they are manifested in criminological research. These themes relate to the choice of topic, choice of research methods, the subjective experiences of doing research (or “reflexivity”), and the relationship between the researcher and the research subjects (Gelsthorpe, 1990). Another area of feminist concern — the relationship between policy/action and research — is discussed in the next section. Admittedly, many of the methodological issues presented below are not unique to feminism but are shared by scholars of other orientations, particularly other critical ones, but their close identification with feminism warrants their inclusion here.

Choice of research topic

As the work cited throughout this article illustrates, feminist criminological scholarship comprises a substantial and mature body of literature that poses “some of the more difficult and interesting questions about the nature of (criminological) knowledge” (Naffine, 1996, p. 4). For example, [t]here are feminists who have carried out the more conventional (but necessary) empirical work of documenting sex bias within the criminal justice system. Feminists have questioned the scientific methods deployed by criminologists, as well as their highly orthodox approach to the nature of knowledge. Feminists have engaged with criminological theory, across the range, questioning its ability to provide general explanations of human behaviour. Feminists have provided an abundance of data about crime from the viewpoint of women (to counter the more usual viewpoint of men), and feminists have also helped to develop new epistemologies that question the very sense of writing from the perspective of a woman (or, for that matter, from the perspective of a man) (Naffine, 1996, p. 4).

While sharing a view that gender is central to the understanding of crime and justice, feminist criminological scholarship reflects considerable diversity and originality in the choice of topic. As the above quotation suggests, feminists have addressed time-honored criminological questions. More recently, feminists have applied themselves to newer lines of criminological inquiry such as the impact of sentencing policies on women (cf., Raeder, 1993), the blurred boundaries between victimization and criminalization (cf. Daly & Maher, 1998), and the media’s role in shaping perceptions of crime and justice (cf. Chancer, 1998; Danner & Carmody, 1999), to name but a few.

M. Joan McDermott (1992) observes that feminist research has evolved such that it is no longer just scholarship that is “on, by, and for women” but encompasses a larger sphere of inquiry. Feminist scholarship includes research “on” gender that includes men and masculinity; it recognizes that research conducted “by” a woman is not representative of all women’s experiences nor does being biologically male disqualify one from working from a feminist perspective. And, though remaining committed to positions “for” women, feminism ultimately aims to benefit both men and women.

Choice of research methods and methodologies

One of the thorniest points of contention is the discussion surrounding the use of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies; a debate that has been described as “sterile and based on false polarization” (Jayartne & Stewart, 1991, p. 85). Despite a perception that feminist scholarship is primarily qualitative, “feminist researchers use just about
any and all of the methods ... that traditional androcentric researchers have used. Of course, precisely how they carry out these methods of evidence-gathering is often strikingly different ... it is not by looking at research methods that one will be able to identify the distinctive features of the best of feminist research” (Harding, 1987, pp. 2–3). Not all feminist research is qualitative and not all studies that rely on qualitative methods are conducted from a feminist orientation.

Quantitative approaches obviously offer a number of advantages to the study of gender and crime, e.g., findings from representative samples may be more generalizable, statistical techniques can handle more contextual variables and permit simultaneous evaluation of complex theoretical models and interaction terms. Quantitative methods have come under fire, though, for obscuring the experience of women. Surveys frequently require coding individuals’ responses into categories predefined by researchers, but the reality is that “experiences don’t come in little boxes that are ready to be labeled and counted” (McDermott, 1992, p. 247). Also, when using existing data, it is hard to avoid adopting a “dataset mentality” and limit research questions to those that can be answered by available variables. These problems present a Catch-22 of sorts: one only collects and records information thought to be important, but characteristics cannot be established as important until the data are possessed. For example, because most large databases were originally designed to capture information salient to the processing and treatment of men offenders, characteristics that were particularly salient to women might not be recorded (e.g., extent of caretaking responsibilities for children and the elderly, childhood victimization experiences, obstetric/gynecological history).10

By contrast, qualitative approaches such as interviews, ethnographies, and life histories permit women and men to articulate or conceptualize their experiences more completely and in their own terms, potentially providing more accurate and valid information. This is particularly important given many feminists’ interest in examining the situation-at-hand, “taking real life as the starting point, its subjective concreteness as well as its societal entanglements” (Mies, 1991, p. 66). This view that subjective experience is part of science should not be misconstrued as a belief that simply describing an individual’s experiences or feelings in itself comprises a scientific treatment of a problem. Feminists in the main recognize the problem of viewing “the personal as inherently paradigmatic, the individual life story as coherent, unified, morally inspiring” (Kauffman, 1992/1993], pp. 262–263). Instead, many feminist scholars use narrative statements to identify important themes while at the same time giving their findings a human face. For example, one can report that many incarcerated girls are concerned about leaving the institutional setting, but the point is better illustrated by quoting girls’ statements such as, “I’ve been here so long, I don’t want to just be thrown out. I’m anxious” and “I was scared to help an old lady cross the street] when I was on [a day] leave once. I felt like I had institution written all over me” (Belknap, Holinger, & Dunn, 1997, p. 396).

Despite their advantages and roots in the Chicago School in the work of scholars such as W. I. Thomas and Robert Park, qualitative research methods have had to fight off a reputation as an oxymoron in mainstream criminal justice circles.11 Qualitative methods are sometimes stereotyped as unsystematic and politically motivated and therefore unscientific and overtly biased (Jayartne & Stewart, 1991, p. 93). Also, because qualitative research may be very time-consuming since it tends to involve more and more intensive contact with the research subjects, the samples in a qualitative study tend to be relatively small and homogeneous (Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988/1991). In view of the limitations of both methodologies, many feminists join mainstream methodologists in employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in order to compensate for the weaknesses in one method by incorporating the strengths of another. For example, Barbara Owen’s (1998) study of women prisoners, In the Mix, includes a quasi-ethnographic study of a women’s prison as well as a systematic survey of female prisoners and parolees. Kathleen Daly’s (1994) Gender, Crime and Punishment uses both a statistical analysis of sentencing disparity for a wide sample of cases, as well as qualitative analysis of a “deep sample” of forty matched pairs of women and men convicted of similar offenses.

Reflexivity

While most scholars support acknowledging the limitations of a particular methodological technique employed (be it quantitative or qualitative), feminist scholarship also emphasizes the importance of critically examining the nature of the research process itself. “Reflexivity” refers to identifying the assumptions underlying the research endeavor and often includes the investigator’s reaction to doing the research.

For the most part, criminology is unreflective. While conscious that researchers should not bring their prejudices to the research table, many criminologists, in their search for neutrality, fail to consider their own identity in their investigative enterprises. Perhaps this is the aftershock of attempting to impose the strictures and methods of the physical sciences
on criminology in our effort to make it more "scientific" (Pettiway, 1997, pp. xv–xvi).

Reflecting on the research process calls attention to possible sources of bias introduced as well as provides guidance to future researchers. Reflexivity also prompts examination of whether research can ever truly be said to be "objective." The identity of a researcher shapes even a deliberately noninterpretive research endeavor such as presenting transcripts of taped interviews with women involved in drugs and crime given that the researcher frames the questions, focuses the interviews, and edits the transcripts for publication (Pettiway, 1997). Not only do many feminists consider subjectivity as unavoidable, but some argue it may be a strength of a study. Barbara Owen (1998) reported that the relationships she formed with several prisoners led her to better appreciate the women’s experiences from their own point of view. The result, she suggested, is a study that not only contributed to a “scientific” understanding of women prisoners, but to a political awareness of their marginalized status.

In other words, it cannot simply be assumed that one’s choice of methods guarantees objective research. Reflexivity strengthens the research process by promoting greater honesty and awareness of the limitations and biases inherent in the research. It also provides a valuable guide to other researchers who may be considering undertaking similar research projects. Further, as will be discussed next, reflexivity encourages one to think about the relationship between themselves as researchers and the people who comprise the research subjects.

**Relationship between researcher and subjects**

Feminists have criticized researchers’ objectification and exploitation of their subjects, particularly when information is gained through interviews or surveys. Objectification occurs when it is assumed that a radical difference exists between the roles of scientist and subject. In the most extreme positivist forms, studying human beings is treated, in principle, as no different from studying things (Gorelick, 1996, p. 24). While conventional criminology assumes that scientific detachment requires emotional detachment, the quest for neutrality and objectivity can be a disadvantage when so much emphasis is placed on “maintaining distance” that context and recognition of the individual humanity of the subjects are stripped away.

Part of the problem is that traditional guidelines for interviewing (i.e., advise interviewers to adopt an objective, noninvolved stance; view interviews as noninteractive) assume the situation is a one-way hierarchical process. When one assumes that the interviewer’s role is to collect but never to provide information, the interviewee is reduced to mere data (Carty, 1996). By contrast, many feminists propose treating interviewees as informants or experts, and using an open-ended format in order to permit new questions to emerge during the course of the interview (Taylor & Rupp, 1991). A feminist methodological approach tries to minimize hierarchical relationships within the research process. Ideally, the research enterprise will strive for a collaborative and reciprocal association between the researcher and the subject consistent with Ann Oakley’s maxim: “No intimacy without reciprocity” (quoted in May, 1993, p. 90).

Admittedly, there are difficulties and some drawbacks in minimizing the distance between interviewer and subject. Researchers responsible to funding agencies may not have total control of how their studies are conducted. The subjects themselves may not embrace the idea of collaboration. Particularly in criminal justice, it seems unlikely that offenders, victims, and even many criminal justice workers will see themselves on equal footing with the academic researchers. Language, dress, age, and other cues may serve as constant reminders of the differences in roles and status between the researcher and the subjects. For instance, Belknap et al. (1997) noticed that while juvenile justice professionals seemed to forget the presence of researcher–onlookers while participating in a focus group, many of the incarcerated girls in the same study tended to check how the researchers responded to their own and their peers’ comments (Belknap et al., 1997).

Confidentiality and privacy issues — always a concern when a study involves human subjects — become even more important when researchers form rapport, ties, even friendships with the study participants. Women respondents may find it easier to reveal intimate details of their victimization or offending experiences when the interviewer is a woman. All researchers “must take extra precautions not to betray the trust so freely given” (Fonow & Cook, 1991, p. 8) given that researchers may not have complete control of how information will be used once it is gathered from respondents. In spite of these obstacles, a number of specific actions may be undertaken to reduce the distance between researchers and subjects, e.g., sharing drafts of the report with the subjects and soliciting their feedback, encouraging subjects to ask questions and responding with reasonable answers, and reciprocating subjects for the help they provide.

As noted earlier, “feminist research methods” is something of a misnomer. Many of the measures championed by feminist criminologists can be and have been adopted by researchers from mainstream orientations. There remains a need, though, for
criminologists to give more thought to the approach to research. This not only means giving qualitative methods their due but also considering reflexivity and the relationship between researcher and subject. For example, research proposals routinely justify their choice of a mail survey versus face-to-face interviews on the grounds of time and money. It should also be considered how the subject’s race, gender, and class might influence the choice of research methods. Proposals should be critiqued not only on the basis of sample selection and measurements, but also whether subjects were recruited for their participation in the study and what steps were taken to reduce the distance between researcher and subject. Attending to these aspects of the research process does not constitute subscribing to a “feminist methodology” per se. Rather, it indicates a commitment to good research practices designed to give greater visibility to the experiences of women (and other historically marginalized groups) and to increase the subject’s involvement in the research process.

Policy and action

In reviewing the presidential addresses to the American Society of Criminology, Ngaire Naffine (1996) observes that increasingly, mainstream criminologists are encouraged to be applied and practical, to inform policymakers, and contribute to the public debate about crime. Here again is an area where feminist criminology has proven valuable to the larger criminal justice arena. Feminists have always placed a premium on policy and action; one of feminism’s defining components is a standing and overt commitment to identifying “a set of strategies for change” (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988, p. 502).

Feminists are perhaps best known for raising awareness of violence against women and the need for laws and policies regarding marital rape, acquaintance rape, stalking, and other crimes that disproportionately involve women victims. Feminists have also called for responses to women victims of crime that reflect an appreciation for the differences that exist among women. For example, a shortage of bilingual and bicultural criminal justice workers creates a system ill-prepared to address many battered Latinas’ claims. Latinas and other racial and ethnic minority women must decide whether to seek assistance from an outsider who “may not look like her, sound like her, speak her language, or share any of her cultural values” (Rivera, 1994/1997, p. 261). Minority women may fear that the police will not do enough (ignoring their complaints) and/or that the police will do too much (being overly zealous toward the minority men they arrest). Some women also may encounter a failure on the part of their racial, ethnic, religious, and community leaders to recognize “a sexist problem within the community . . . as important as a racist problem outside of it” (Rasche, 1988/1995, p. 257).

Feminism’s impact in the arena of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women has been substantial, but to confine feminism’s contribution to these issues is to sell feminism short. Feminists also engage in policy evaluation, asking “What is this policy supposed to accomplish?,” “How will it actually be implemented?,” “Who wins and who loses if this policy is adopted?,” “What can we do to improve on this?” (Miller, 1998a, 1998b; Renzetti, 1998).

Women’s stake in the “war on crime” is important, though often unrecognized. While the public construction of the criminal is male, “the hidden victims of many of the get-tough policies have been women, particularly women of color” (Chesney-Lind, 1998, p. xi). Feminists have played an important role in calling attention to the unintended or unforeseen consequences of purportedly “gender-neutral” policies. New sentencing policies have been implemented with the goal of treating women and men the same. With regard to the Federal Sentencing Guidelines, Myrna Raeder (1993) suggests considering sentencing fewer men to prison on the grounds that it would be more humane for men, women, and their children. Instead, women have been increasingly incarcerated; a shift that has been described as “equality with a vengeance.” There are other, less well-known examples to consider too, such as Massey, Miller, and Wilhelmi’s (1998) finding that in civil forfeiture cases (involving the confiscation of assets from suspected drug offenders), judges falsely assume that social and economic power are equally distributed in a marriage or intimate relationship. Moreover, judges blame wives for their failure or inability to control their husband. Judicial interpretations thus “often ignore not only the gendered power dynamics within intimate relationships but also the structural limits to women’s efficacy in disentangling themselves from such relationships that are present in these situations” (p. 29).

In addition to women being harmed by purportedly “gender-neutral” policies or policies aimed primarily at men, some policies have been targeted specifically at women and therefore are cause for concern. For instance, according to a 1996 report prepared by the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, at least 200 women in more than thirty states have been arrested for their alleged drug use or other actions during pregnancy. Feminist perspectives encourage us to recognize the harmful consequences of criminalizing pregnant women’s behavior rather than expanding the availability of treatment for preg-
nant women (including those who have small children, are infected with HIV, and/or on Medicaid). One major concern is that criminalizing maternal conduct discourages drug-using women from seeking prenatal care and drug treatment out of fear that they will be subjected to prosecution (Humphries, 1999).

Feminists have not limited their interests to policies aimed at or affecting women, but have also challenged the masculine basis of many programs and policies. Feminists have been critical of correctional officer and police training programs for their overemphasis on physical strength, intimidation, and aggressiveness as a means for resolving disputes while devaluing interpersonal skills. Similarly, feminist criminologists are among those critical of boot camps for being unnecessarily demeaning and abusive to inmates. The boot camp model embodies a distorted image of masculinity, one that emphasizes aggressiveness, unquestioned authority, and insensitivity to others’ pain while deemphasizing “feminine” characteristics such as group cooperation and empathy. “Why,” Merry Morash and Lila Rucker (1990/1998, pp. 35 and 38) ask, “would a method that has been developed to prepare people to go into war, and as a tool to manage legal violence, be considered as having such potential in deterring or rehabilitating offenders? . . . [T]he program elements of militarism, hard labor, and fear engendered by severe conditions do not hold much promise, and they appear to set the stage for abuse of authority.”

The aforementioned examples are just a few of the myriad ways in which feminists have contributed to criminal justice policymaking and evaluation. Feminist scholarship has called attention to previously ignored policy issues, evaluated the impact of purportedly “gender-neutral” policies on women, examined the effects of policies targeted specifically at women, and challenged the value of criminal justice policies and practices based on stereotypical ideas of masculinity and femininity. By definition, feminism gives great weight to identifying strategies for social change and ending domination in all its forms. Feminist perspectives remind one — not only of one’s professional responsibilities — but also one’s social responsibility to consider the implications of our research and policy for women.

Conclusions

“If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution.” Emma Goldman’s statement may make a great T-shirt, but her view is hardly universal among feminists. While feminist criminologists generally agree that a transformation of criminal justice discipline is desirable, there is less consensus regarding how to go about actually carrying it out. Do feminists wait for mainstream criminology to invite them to the dance? If invited, do feminists attend even if it means being reduced to standing against the walls waiting to be asked to dance, or dancing by themselves as a token feminist or woman on the faculty or editorial board? Do feminists hold their own dance, that is, continue to publish articles in specialized journals and books, teach specialized classes on “gender and crime,” and sit on panels comprised almost entirely of like-minded scholars? While this approach offers the benefit of facilitating the exchange of ideas and support, it also risks making feminism even more peripheral to the discipline. As the scholarship cited throughout this article illustrates, feminists engage in a variety of strategies, working as both insiders and outsiders to the criminal justice enterprise. By attempting to meet mainstream criminologists midway by explaining the strength and diversity of feminist perspectives, this article presents another strategy.

Regardless of one’s political or theoretical orientation, feminism challenges criminology to reject androcentric thinking. More generally, it challenges all people working in the discipline to be thoughtful and relevant. Thoughtful in the theoretical assumptions upon which the research is based, the methods used, the conclusions drawn, and the policies recommended. Thoughtful in developing the content of the classes taught. Thoughtful in acknowledging the limitations of criminological scholarship, in considering the complexities and diversity of the people’s lives and experiences upon which scholarship is based, and in communicating with research participants, students, and colleagues.

Given the overt emphasis placed upon policy and action, feminism also challenges one to be relevant. A colleague once observed that best-selling detective fiction writer Walter Mosley had more of an impact on what the public thought of crime and justice than academics did if for no other reason than millions of people read Mosley’s novels while most criminological research was not considered outside of academic circles. Part of being relevant means making scholarship accessible in how and where it is presented. Prioritizing relevance also encourages collaboration — not only among academics at other universities, and of other ranks and disciplinary backgrounds — but also with people outside the university setting, including policymakers, practitioners, lawmakers, journalists, victims, offenders, and advocates. It means treating the implications of research for policy and practice as being at least as important as individual careers and egos.

Although feminist perspectives pose a demanding set of standards, the pursuit of these standards can be very rewarding. Feminism presents an invitation to
criminologists, practitioners, and policymakers to recognize the existence of sexism, to try to understand its causes, and to work toward identifying and overcoming all forms of discrimination that operate throughout the justice system. Fellow criminologists, consider yourselves invited.

Acknowledgments

This article has benefited greatly from the thoughtful suggestions offered by Lynn Chancer of Fordham University, Mona Danner of Old Dominion University, and Helen Eigenberg of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Notes

1. As used here, the terms “mainstream criminology” and “conventional criminology” do not refer to a theory but to an amalgam of dominant sociological approaches to crime, such as strain, social control, interactionist, and ecological theories (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996; Thomas & O’Maolchatha, 1989).

2. While in the 1970s, the typical article published in one of four major criminology journals used an all-male sample, by the 1990s, most articles published in these same journals included a sample of both men and women (Hannon & Dufour, 1998).


4. Readers interested in learning more about feminist approaches to criminology are urged to consult any number of the excellent texts on the subject (cf. Belknap, 1996; Daly & Maher, 1998; Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1990; Heidensohn, 1995; Naffine, 1996; Price & Sokoloff, 1995; Smart, 1976, 1995).

5. Obviously, other factors serve to marginalize feminism from criminology. For instance, Comack (1999, p. 165) posits that “the essentialist and dualistic thinking that has pervaded our approaches to understanding issues like violence against women [i.e., ‘women as victims/men as offenders’] . . . has had significant implications for the placement of feminism within the criminological enterprise. So long as women are recognized only as victims and not as active agents, there is little need to embrace or integrate feminist analyses into the criminological agenda.” Others (including one of the reviewers of this article) point to “a refusal to engage in the ideas . . . [It is] too hard and ultimately scary for those scholars or practitioners who have devoted their lives to either ignoring gender or to developing ‘gender-neutral’ theories to change.”

6. The peripheral position of feminism is not unique to criminology but is a problem of larger sociology as well. In the classic essay, The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology, Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne (1985/1993, p. 177) observe that feminist perspectives have made more progress in fields which have stronger traditions of interpretive understanding. Scholars in anthropology, literature, and history are more open to questions such as “What are the effects of the social and political circumstances in which knowledge is created and received? . . . What are the effects of the gender of the researcher, the audience, or those studied or written about?”

7. Before proceeding, three caveats are in order. First, this article is a primer rather than a comprehensive treatment of feminist criminology. In the interests of clarity and conciseness, some concepts have been omitted from discussion and some important distinctions have been glossed over. While feminists tend to share a general notion of what is meant by a particular concept, the reality is that a given term encompasses a range of perspectives and understandings. In some respects, the concepts presented in this article and any categories discussed in connection with them are “ideal types.” Relatedly, issues of epistemology, theory, methods and methodology, and policy presented in separate sections here, even though they are intertwined. Every attempt has been made to make the overlap and interconnections apparent without being overly repetitious. Lastly, the near-exclusive focus on feminist perspectives is not meant to suggest that only feminism has “the answers” or asks the right questions. Many concerns presented in this article are shared by other criminological approaches, particularly critical ones. For example, feminism generally shares a view with other critical approaches that the major sources of crime are the class, ethnic, and patriarchal relations that control society, and regards structural and cultural change as essential to reducing criminality (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996; Thomas & O’Maolchatha, 1989).

8. The present discussion of epistemology is grossly simplified in the interest of clarity and brevity. For excellent treatments of epistemology, empiricism, and criminology, readers are encouraged to consult Carol Smart’s (1995) Law, Crime and Sexuality: Essays in Feminism or Ngaire Naffine’s (1996) Feminism and Criminology.

9. This deficiency is also found in standard textbooks. Earlier studies of introductory criminal justice and criminology textbooks conclude that women are typically ignored or depicted in stereotypical ways (Baro & Eigenberg, 1993; Wright, 1992). A nonrandom sampling of the texts on my shelves suggests the problem persists and the short shrift extends to feminist perspectives as well. For example, in discussing “other branches of conflict theory,” Senna and Siegel (1998) cite only one feminist perspective — radical feminism — ignoring other major critical feminist perspectives such as Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, and postmodern feminism.

10. As Jayartine and Stewart (1991) point out, quantitative procedures that are inconsistent with feminist values can be adapted without abandoning those strategies that can be beneficial to the research enterprise.

11. Thomas’s own work on female crime showed an appreciation for the interaction between society and the individual. He, however, saw women’s physiology and biology as being at the root of their inferior position in society (see Klein 1973/1995).
12. For example, in one case a woman claimed she lived in fear of bodily harm from her husband—a man who had threatened her in the past and had beaten to death his previous wife. The appellate court, however, rejected her claim of lack of consent under duress because the threat was not “immediate.”

References


