

Breaking the Carnival Mirror: A Classroom Exercise to Reassess Criminality

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Abstract

We present a reflexive paper assignment calling for students to report on their own family and/or personal experiences in order to answer the question, “From where does the greatest harm arise?” We find that, through the process of answering this question and sharing findings in class, students’ conception of criminality is broadened. Institutional forms of deviance and white-collar crime come to be understood as the real commonplace sources of harm while street crime is seen to be less common than typically imagined. The book *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison: Ideology, Class and Criminal Justice* by Reiman and Leighton informs this assignment. The authors make the case that the criminal justice system presents to us a carnival mirror-like image of what causes the greatest harm to the society. The criminal justice system, through its policies and procedures, leads the public to conceive of only a narrow and distorted depiction of criminality. The typical crime is thought to be person to person, violent, and carried out by the typical criminal, who is assumed to be black, young, and urban. In opposition to this carnival mirror view, Reiman and Leighton explain that certain institutions cause immensely more harm than that caused by street criminality.

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Personal Reflexive Statement

The authors are personally committed to the larger goal of reducing harm. It is our belief that hierarchies and power relations can obscure the greatest sources of harm to the greatest numbers of individuals. It is therefore appropriate to deconstruct the norms that indicate that individuals and organizations holding a certain high status are somehow beyond reproach. While at the same time, we think it is equally proper to see the harms caused by less highly esteemed individuals in their proper context. In other words, we think harm should be assessed independently of the status the perpetrator holds.

This work was conceived of in light of Wall Street scandals and government bailouts as well as the disastrous case of the Enron Corporation and its ruinous actions leaving countless former employees and stockholders destitute. It was also developed under consideration of mass incarceration, as we know it today, where the typical criminal, black, urban, and male continue to be punished disproportionately.

Introduction: Methods and Approaches for Student Learning

Common approaches to teaching the deviance classroom have been the application of films, documentary, and otherwise other sources from popular culture. There is a vast amount of literature that addresses how visual and audio content allows students to access material from introductory to advanced courses in sociology and other disciplines (Hinds-Aldrich 2012; Rothe and Collins 2013; Scanlan et al. 2000; Van Horn and Van Horn 2013). Film, it has been argued, provides opportunities for a population defined as “visual learners” (Rothe and Collins 2013). Rothe and Collins (2013) describe an exercise where music and film are introduced together as a mechanism for understanding criminology theory content. They show how popular culture can be used to connect abstract concepts to students’ lives. Finally, we also want to point out that there are a number of alternative strategies for connecting theory and concepts of deviance via “concrete practices” (Bordt 2001:490), “experiential learning approaches” (Greenberg 1989:330), and “engaging in direct contact” (Nurse and Krain 2006:283).

We consider a writing exercise that is informed by Reiman and Leighton’s (2010) book *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*. The exercise asks students to write a short essay detailing harm that has come to their families or person. The combined stories are then used to depict a reality where the presumed *typical criminal* (young, urban, and black) and *typical crime* (street criminality) are

much less common than harm from other sources, such as white-collar crime and pollution. Although there is some evidence that there is an understanding within members of the society are more aware of white-collar crime as a source of harm (see Piquero, Carmichael, and Piquero 2008), we lack ways to convey this in the classroom and have largely failed to move away from more stereotypical depictions of crime.

We support the use of these methods but present an approach based on shared student inquiry because we agree with Rockell (2009:78) who argues that “understandings and beliefs are rarely challenged very successfully without the use of activities where the student discovers for himself [*sic*] the complex bases of criminal justice decision-making and the many sides of what might appear at first to be simple black and white issues.” It is through writing that we have the students discover this decision-making in the criminal justice system.

Grauerholz, Eisele, and Stark (2012) state that instructors can stimulate higher level thinking with multiple assignments including reflection and expressive writing. A focus on writing alternatives to promote learning is found across disciplines which can include teaching and understanding concepts of justice, self-reflection (Boud 2001), using community-based approaches (Reynolds et al. 2012), and recognizing other models for expression through writing (Ferriter 2009; Stiler and Philleo 2003). For instance, Mueller (2013) has students explore their family genealogy in a writing assignment in order to explore intergenerational wealth transfer. The assignment allows for “uncovering” and “reflecting” on their own “racialized group positions” (Mueller (2013:175). This writing assignment helped students understand how racial inequality is reproduced and their own position in this structure.

The work discussed above is consistent with scholarship that argues that instructors can do more than require “writing for writings sake.” Writing with purpose will both develop skills and provide opportunities for deeper learning (Grauerholz et al. 2012; Hudd, Sardi, and Lopriore 2012). Scholars have explored ways in which students collect their own data on race, participate in discussion groups, and present their work in class as a way of pushing the students to think about what they are doing while doing it (Martin 2010). Reflection through writing assignments such as journaling can allow for critical thought of new material or theoretical models (Coker and Scarboro 1990; Picca, Starks, and Gunderson 2013). Reflection provides space for student writing that is exploratory and allows for revealing connections between the material and their lives (Bean 2011). Picca et al. (2013) demonstrate that the outcomes for intensive writing assignment can connect personal lives to issues of race, class, gender, and the hidden advantages of privilege. Additionally, journaling provides a window into one of the strategies used in the social sciences for collecting qualitative data. Grauerholz et al. (2012) also state that through writing students can better understand abstract concepts and experiment with application of conceptual material that places them on track for mastering theory.

Background and Theory: From the Typical Criminal to Other Sources of Harm

In *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*, Reiman and Leighton (2010) put forth the concept of the “carnival mirror” as a metaphor for the image presented by the criminal justice system in the United States. They write, “The American criminal justice system is a mirror that shows a distorted image of the dangers that threaten us” (Reiman and Leighton 2010:60). In the United States, the notion of “crime” is “reserved primarily for the dangerous actions of the poor” (Reiman and Leighton 2010:58). Specifically, the authors find the “typical criminal” feared by most law-abiding Americans to be poor, young, urban, and disproportionately black (Reiman and Leighton 2010). The commonly held view associating crime with black men is well researched (see Russell 1998). Studies illustrate how media depictions of crime cases and criminals contribute to fear of African Americans, which amounts to a “more subtle form of racism than traditional racism, it manipulates the core value in all of us—the need to feel safe” (Eschhaoz 2002:42). Scholars have also documented how the “overpolicing of youth, people of color, and poor people” contributes to the associations people make between blackness and criminality (Becker 2013:213). Indeed, the criminal justice system, by focusing its efforts on the poor, young, urban, and black, sends the message that individuals from these categories represent the greatest sources of harm.

But as Reiman and Leighton argue, “the threat posed by the Typical Criminal is not the greatest threat to which we are exposed” (Reiman and Leighton 2010:63).

The acts of the Typical Criminal are not the only acts that endanger us, nor are they the acts that endanger us the most. . . . We have as great and sometimes even a greater chance of being killed or disabled by an occupational injury or disease, by unnecessary surgery, or by shoddy medical services, than by aggravated assault or even homicide! (Reiman and Leighton 2010:63)

In this sense, the authors clearly build on the legacy of Edwin Sutherland’s famous identification of white-collar criminality. Sutherland (1940) intended to bring practices “not ordinarily called crime” into the “scope of criminality” (p. 5). This somewhat vague proposition was groundbreaking in its effect. For Sutherland as well as Reiman and Leighton, the best question to ask is not, “who are the criminals?,” rather we should ask, “from where does the greatest harm arise?”

It is the political task of the social scientist—as of any liberal arts educator—continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals. (Mills 2000:187)

In “Assessing the Perceived Seriousness of White-collar and Street Crimes,” Piquero et al. conclude that in the public’s view, “white collar crimes were as serious if not more so—than street crimes” (Piquero et al. 2008:306). The authors go on to state,

The traditional assumption of the public perceiving street crimes as more serious than white collar crimes may be in question. The perception that white-collar crimes are relatively serious and in need of our attention is in fact corroborated within our data. (Piquero et al. 2008:306)

Clearly then, perhaps in part due to events like the ENRON scandal, there exists at least some awareness that harm may originate from sources other than the typical criminal and the typical crime. We know that “unlike conventional crimes, virtually every person is affected by white-collar crime” (Lynch, McGurrian, and Fenwick 2004:391). Some sociologists cite corporate corruption and scandal “as an important cause of recent economic recessions” (Steffensmeier, Schwartz, and Roche 2013:471), these undoubtedly causing immense harm. Friedrichs (1996) categorizes the costs of white-collar crime as both direct and indirect, physical costs, costs to the “social fabric,” and the erosion of confidence in major institutions (Friedrichs 1996:53-58). According to Lynch et al. (2004:391), it is “difficult to generate a precise measure of the financial and physical harm associated with white collar crime” (some of this might be explained by the fact that within a field like criminology, the study of white-collar crime is marginal; Barak 2014). This, as well, has had an impact on teaching as well where earlier work demonstrated how introductory textbooks underestimated the white-collar crimes (Wright and Ducaji 1992). Finally, McGurrian et al. (2013:7) examined “15 leading criminology and criminal justice journals, 13 introductory textbooks, and all criminology and criminal justice doctoral programs in the United States.” In their work, they found that white-collar crime was underrepresented in the sample.

The Exercise

The exercise was administered by author 1 in the Fall 2014 and 2015 semesters at a predominantly white private college in the Northeastern United States and by author 2 in the summer and fall of 2015 at a Western U.S. state university with a more racially diverse student population. Author 1 administered the exercise in social deviance courses, while author 2 presented the exercise in a qualitative research methods course. This assignment was also part of a qualitative research class, where the second author teaches; it is a medium-sized university and Hispanic Serving Institution that offers a bachelor of arts in sociology. The assignment was introduced as part of the Qualitative Research and Deviance unit covered during one week of the course. The course size ranges from 25 to 100 students and is racially and ethnically diverse.

By presenting the exercise at two very different universities, in different classes, with various student compositions, we were able to test the effectiveness of the exercise across a range of contexts. Again, we feel that the exercise can be a valuable addition in any sociology course that considers issues related to crime, criminal justice, harm, and public safety. We feel that instructors need not assign the book, but some effort should be made to introduce students to some of the basic concepts

we've discussed here (*The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison* was not assigned by author 2).

In teaching social deviance and the aforementioned *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison* at a small private college in the Northeast, one with a disproportionately large criminal justice program and a history of placing graduates for employment in the local prison system, author 1 found effectively teaching the central thesis of the book to be marginally successful at best. Course review comments in past years would question the instructor's obsession with white-collar crime at times. And one memorable exchange in the classroom involved students making an impassioned argument that conditions for prisoners were "too nice." The predominantly white classes were mostly silent in any discussion about the race and social class of typical criminals. As for the book itself, used as a supplement to the Thio, Taylor, and Schwartz (2013) *Deviant Behavior 11th Edition* text, comments ranged from "boring" to "too much reading" and "repetitive." Some students did, however, express their appreciation for the new perspectives on crime and deviance.

The Breaking the Carnival Mirror exercise came about as a simple effort to add to the variety of teaching exercises presented in the course to further the goal of active learning (see Chickering and Gamson 1987). We most commonly lecture in the course and supplement that with some group work and individual writing assignments because "It is all too easy for some students to sit on the periphery observing rather than engaging" (Jones 2006:100). For this exercise, the two authors asked students to "make an assessment of harm that has come to you and your family" (see Appendix). Students were given several days to write a small paper, two to three pages in length, assessing harm. Following Reiman and Leighton, we expected to hear stories of persons harmed by pollution, the workplace, poverty (however, unlikely among a population of mostly middle-class students), and the medical industry. This is, in fact, what we found. Specific examples follow in the next section.

An important second component to the exercise is the classroom discussion starting on the day papers are due. The simple prompt, "who would like to share their findings?," was enough to get the ball rolling in each case of our running the exercise. However, one of the authors did find students in their 2016 deviance course to be slightly more reluctant to participate in the discussion. If this is the case, we recommend instructors to ask, "has anyone known, or have you yourself been the victim of financial fraud?" One can expect several hands to rise. The same can be said for workplace injury, pollution, and so on. When students see that their responses are indeed part of a larger category, we find that they become more eager to share their findings.

Outcomes: Classroom Discussion and Student Papers

In the first running of the exercise at the private university, students were eager to report their findings in class. One volunteer followed another, then another, and before long over half of the class had spoken on issues including medical

malpractice, workplace injuries of both students and their relatives (back injuries being most common), and a long family history of chronic illnesses related to radon poisoning. The impromptu class discussion continued for the entire hour and 20-min class with almost every student volunteering their findings and many students asking questions of the presenter.

Student papers tended to mimic the sources of harm identified by Reiman and Leighton. Here examples of topics discussed are recounted. Here, “my family has suffered from workplace harm at the hand of corporate corruption,” a 20-year-old student went on to explain how the CEO of her father’s company defrauded workers, was sentenced to jail for one year, and ordered to pay back 15 years of compensation to workers, but “he committed suicide while serving his house arrest sentence. As a result of his death, his debt owed his victims from his corporate level crime miraculously disappeared.” Another student wrote of a tragic case where her mother, due to a heart condition, required medication totaling over US\$30,000.00 per month. Her family eventually fell below the poverty line and her mother, unable to cope with the resultant struggles, was hospitalized and eventually died. “The reckless pursuit of profit and the government’s inability to recognize the struggles of the poor population cut at least a year off my mother’s life. It took away her ability to see me graduate from high school or to see me off to college,” according to another student. Finally, in a less common example, a student wrote in great detail of the harm that came to her through the experience of poverty at a young age. “I was a seven-year-old girl standing in unsafe places begging strangers for money to eat. Poverty did that to me. The state didn’t provide enough . . . My mother didn’t care. She couldn’t. I was the last thing on her mind. Being malnourished changed my life,” according to this student.

The last two examples beg us to reassess criminality in terms of harm rather than transgressions of the criminal code. Poverty is, in fact, legal and accepted part of life in the United States. Yet it, along with the immense harms associated, is entirely preventable.

Outcomes: Rating the Exercise and Assessing What Was Learned

In our experience, it was telling in that students all reported instances of harm done to their person or family by sources other than the typical criminal/typical crime. In a follow-up survey ($N = 21$), 13 students reported that the “Breaking the Carnival Mirror” exercise enhanced their understanding of privileged deviance a great deal. Eight students reported that their understanding was somewhat enhanced and no student reported that their understanding of privileged deviance was not at all enhanced. To the question of whether the project enhanced their understanding of the study of deviance, 10 students responded “a great deal,” 10 students reported “somewhat,” and 1 student indicated “not at all.” And finally, when asked if the

project enhanced their enjoyment of sociology of deviance, nine students responded “a great deal,” 8 indicated “somewhat,” and 4 said “not at all.”

A follow-up survey ($N = 13$) was also distributed to the class. Nine students reported that the assignment enhanced their understanding of privileged deviance a great deal, while the remaining three students reported that their understanding was somewhat enhanced. The student responses to the questions whether understanding of general themes in the study of deviance were enhanced, six students responded “a great deal” and seven indicated “somewhat.” In the final questions, the students reported that the project enhanced their enjoyment of sociology of deviance, 10 students responded “a great deal” and 3 indicated “somewhat.” Qualitative student responses did not support the notion that the typical criminal/typical crime stereotype is a thing of the past. One student states of the exercise, “It steered me away from my previous assumptions of what was the greatest crime in society.” Another writes, “before I would have explained the typical criminal as someone who was poor, black, young, and male, but now I have a different outlook.”

Generally, students found the exercise to be helpful and informative. One student writes of the exercise, “we were able to personalize it and bring it closer to home, something that at least helped me understand the subject more clearly.” Another writes, “I enjoyed the assignment. It provided an opportunity to understand deviance in my own life, making it more personal.” And finally, some students referred specifically to the classroom discussion of the papers. For instance, one student states,

I enjoyed the use of examples from my own life to reflect the carnival mirror. Many other students also have had their own experiences with this corporate deviance. That made it evident how much of this deviance there is. Discussing our findings was a good way to really show that point.

Another writes, “by talking about personal experiences, it helped to gain a better understanding of privileged deviance.”

Among the state university students, several themes emerged that noted their knowledge of the issue pointed out in the assignment and the opportunity to enhance the conceptualization of the program. One student wrote, “the assignment did not alter my perspective, rather it expanded it. I work in an industrial field, and have worked in the military for a time; I’ve understood industrial negligence and lack of accountability for a while.” There were students who noted how the assignment altered their thinking toward more social justice issues. For example, one student wrote that the assignment “altered my perspective about large corporations and what they can get away with. I think now that instead of buying products from major corporations, I’ll turn to small businesses that care more.” Finally, students also appreciated the open-ended nature of the project and their ability to express themselves. For example, one student wrote that “this assignment allowed me to express feelings and gave me a new perspective on how to view certain things.”

Conclusion

In a world of widely communicated nonsense, any statement of fact is of political and moral significance. (Mills 2000:178)

The Breaking the Carnival Mirror exercise not only fosters self-exploration as a teaching tool, but it also allows students to “learn from and with one another” and to “find out about one another as people” (Jones 2006:89). Our writing exercise departs from conventional classroom assignments as we draw from student biographies as a site for learning, writing critically about white-collar crime, and a critical process in helping students use their sociological imagination (Bidwell 1995). Although somewhat crudely, students “analyze existing data” and “draw inferences about society,” while learning “that this is one of the methodologies available to sociologists” (Gerber and Fritsch 1993:135).

Shover and Cullen (2008) write that the curriculum of white-collar crime “does not equip students with a conceptual scheme making sense of this material or of pronouncements about white-collar crime they might encounter” (p. 171). Breaking the carnival mirror relies on harm reduction as the conceptual scheme. Rather than working to convince students that the typical criminal and typical crime are not so damaging, it allows students to reveal, through their own efforts, the greater sources of harm. It excels due to the fact that “students often want to see firsthand that the concepts, principles, and ideas they are learning are relevant in the ‘real world’” (Payne et al. 2003:327). Considering all sources of harm and thereby broadening the definition of crime is a political decision, one made in the spirit of Edwin Sutherland’s initial foray into the topic. This exercise effectively starts a conversation about why certain acts are criminal and others are not. We have been able to cast doubt among our student upon taken for granted assumptions linking poor African American men and criminality.

However, our exercise does have some pitfalls. In their rush to identify harm, students may discuss examples of “bad luck” and attribute them to systems comprised of well-meaning individuals functioning as efficiently as they can. For example, some papers discussed the perceived negligence of the health-care system and judged deviance or criminality as its root cause. To put it simply, not all harm is due to negligence on the part of individuals or systems for that matter. Perhaps problematically, the exercise leaves up to instructors where they might want to draw the line here. Is the capitalist system, a system reliant on exploitation, deviant in that it leads us to accept the harm of poverty? Or, is the state responsible by not providing support for impoverished citizens? Or, are employers who fail to pay a living wage to blame? These questions would serve to extend class discussion. Another problem would be in students’ lack of ability to conclusively connect issues like pollution to certain specific ailments. Doing so puts the instructor in the position of seeming unfair to corporations. In other words, making assumptions (that may be false) about these

links opens the instructor to criticism from a conservative position that would defend the corporate stance that what they do is harmless to people. These are not easy questions to address. But the difficulty addressing them shouldn't obscure the benefits of the exercise, in essence, bringing about a reassessment of crime and criminality.

We encourage instructors to assign this exercise in their course in order to promote student reflection and writing. The added benefit of using the exercise is the potential for provoking class discussion, which is another opportunity to build additional skills at voicing ideas. One of the goals of this article assignment is that our students' concept of criminality and deviance expands and they begin to question the assumptions of what crime means.

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Appendix

Paper Assignment

Choose one option below and prepare a short paper. The paper should be two to three pages in length, no cover page, double-spaced, 12-point type, and standard margins, with numbered pages. You are not expected to do extensive academic research. Your Reiman text should be your primary guide.

Option #1

Corporations are legal creations capable of great harm as evidenced by your reading and the ENRON film. Select a corporation of your choosing and make the case for removing its corporate charter on the grounds that it undermines to the public good. In order to achieve this, you will need to convince the reader that your corporation is a deviant actor. Convincing the public that a corporation should be abolished will take some creativity on your part. After all, we're all accustomed to fearing the typical criminal committing the typical crime. Corporations are still seen as pillars of

capitalism to be revered. They bring jobs and respectable people with white-collars make up their power structure.

Examples/ideas for option #1. General Electric made 14.2 billion dollars in profit in 2010. But they didn't pay any taxes in the United States that year. In fact, they claimed a tax benefit of 3.2 billion. Explore why. I'll bet you will find some deviant corporate behavior. Discuss the harms caused to society when corporations manipulate the system in such a way.

Do a Google search of corporate fines. Explore some of the rule/law breaking that led to the fine for a specific corporation. You might then make the case that the fine does not discourage the harmful corporate deviant behavior. And/or you might discuss corporate behavior that is not subject to punishment, but should be. (Hint: Find corporate deviance by asking how the corporation would behave if it was a friend of yours).

Option #2

In short, Reiman's Carnival Mirror is such because the system of criminal justice reflects back at us a flawed vision of what really causes us the greatest harm among potential threats. The notion of *crime* invokes a certain image with the *typical criminal* as the perpetrator. This option asks you to make an assessment of harm that has come to you and your family. You may find that the typical criminal has in fact caused you and your family the greatest harm. Or, if Reiman is correct, you will see that institutions and corporate actions cause the greatest harm. For this option, consider the medical industry, pollution, the workplace, or poverty as inflictors of harm.

Examples/ideas for option #2. The majority of cancer in the United States is due to environmental factors. If cancer has been a cause of harm in your family, see if you can, from the type of cancer, develop a link to a certain environmental cause. (Note, e.g., that New Jersey is not referred to as the "cancer state" out of the coincidence. Corporations willfully polluting the air has contributed to the cancer rate and killed countless people).

Back pain is common among laborers. Carpel tunnel syndrome affects many office workers. Mental health issues plague many in labor force who do boring and monotonous work proscribed by the capitalist class. Investigate in detail the harm caused your family member in the workplace. What conditions led to the harm and how could they have been avoided?