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Postmodernism and criminological thought: 'whose science, whose knowledge?'

Liz Austen with Malcolm Cowburn

Introduction

In 1991 Sandra Harding published her seminal work on scientific inquiry *Whose Science Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*; this chapter borrows part of the title of her book to highlight the challenge to established forms of knowledge that is presented by post-modern thought. The challenge is epistemological and ethical. It involves re-examining the basis of criminological knowledge and how this impacts on the practices of criminal justice agencies. Key to this exploration is the *social construction* of crime. From a postmodern perspective, crime, people who commit crimes, people who suffer as a result of crimes and the legal processes through which crimes are defined and processed are not considered only to have objective characteristics that can be measured and described. They are open to interpretation and it is interpretation that 'constructs' the science and the knowledge. Post-modernism introduces the possibility of there being many voices that can contribute to understanding. It challenges the authority of positivist-dominated criminology to speak about crime, criminals and victims. It demands a re-examination of criminal justice processes that are underpinned by positivist assumptions and positivist forms of knowledge. In bringing these challenges post-modernist approaches provide a means whereby the experiences and voices of marginalised groups (for example women, minority ethnic groups, sexual minorities disabled people and victims

of crime) can enter the dominant discourses that shape criminology and community justice.

In doing this, post-modern theory demands that the question first posed by Becker (1967) concerning 'sides' and 'allegiances' in relation to research and (by extension) policy and practice, is addressed. By giving voice to groups, their 'side' is more clearly articulated. By problematising the authority of 'scientific' epistemologies, it could be argued that post-modern thought is clearly on the 'side' of the subordinate; the person, group or community that is defined and contained by someone else's knowledge. However, it is not that straightforward. As other chapters in this book show, taking sides is not merely a binary choice. Post-modernism highlights this complexity and the difficulties involved in articulating allegiances and identifying standpoints.

This chapter first outlines some basic tenets of post-modern thought, it then moves on to consider the impact of post-modern thought on theorising crime and deviance. Closely linked to this is *how* criminological research is conducted; the discussion explores this and what it means. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the contribution that postmodernism can make to criminology and community justice.

Criminology, positivism, discourse and the post-modern challenge

Criminology has many meanings but at its widest and most commonly accepted it is taken to be the scientific understanding of crime and criminals. But such a definition will really not get us very far. For hidden within the term there come many different approaches to 'science' and different disciplines. (Carrabine et al, 2004, p. 4)

In their 'sociological introduction' to 'Criminology' Carrabine and colleagues point to the disturbance that post-modern thought has caused to the academic discipline of criminology. Prior to the challenge of post-modern thinking, the words 'science' and 'scientific' represented incontrovertible bodies of knowledge underpinned by particular methodological approaches. The

science of crime and criminals operated within what was considered to be unproblematic boundaries defined and prescribed by criminal law. Law as a 'grand narrative' or what was 'right' and what was 'wrong' was unchallenged,; those transgressing its dictates were uncontroversially identified as 'criminals', and criminals were one of the 'objects' of study for the criminologist. Similarly, the method of studying criminals was also an uncontested activity guided by the methodological principle of science – objectivity. The aim of scientific inquiry was to understand a phenomenon (in this case crime and the criminal), and a key part of understanding was to identify and explain causation. If this part of the study was accurate and effective, it could then be employed in predicting future events (crimes) and if prediction was successful it could intervene in the criminogenic process and thus reduce crime. Thus criminological research could contribute 'positively' to creating social conditions in which the incidence of crime was reduced and criminals were appropriately 'treated' by the criminal justice system (CJS).

Postmodern thought has challenged both the epistemological underpinnings of much criminological research and has also threatened the ontological security of the discipline as a 'positively' focused social science. In his seminal text, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard called for 'incredulity towards meta-narratives' and a rejection of grand theories that offered universal explanations of social phenomena or prescribed social action based on the theories (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). Since that date post-modernism has grown and diversified.

It is not the intention here to provide a definitive account of post-modernism; to do so may be the activity of a classifying modernist. However, Cheek & Gough (2005, p. 302) suggest 'we can no more provide a straightforward definition of 'postmodernism' than stipulate the meanings of 'love' or 'justice' – these terms are perpetual foci of speculation and debate'. There are many different variations of postmodern thought from the radical postmodernists (who promote the end of modernity and a hyper-real replacement) to the strategic postmodernists (who reconstruct the notion of modernity) (Lemert 2005, p. 67). A central principle within post-modernism is disenchantment with

traditional, modernist and scientific values (Lea 1993), and, within this, there is a rejection of 'rationality, linearity, progress, and control' (Cherryholmes 1988 in Cheek & Gough 2005, p. 302). Gergen (2000, p. 195) suggests that 'perhaps it is best to view [post-modernism] as pointing to a range of inter-related dialogues on our current condition'. He does, however, go on to reflect on the impact of the prefix 'post' – it invokes a sense of 'rapid transition', 'a creeping sense of fragmentation', and:

a pervasive sense of erosion in a firm sense of self, the falling away of traditional values, and the loss of confidence in the *grand narratives* of the past – a trust that governments, economic planners, or scientists, for example can lead us to a better future' (Gergen 2000, p. 195, emphasis in original)

In relation to the academic world, Gergen notes that post-modern thought is seen 'set against the modernist faith in the individual mind, rationality, objectivity and truth' (p. 195).

As mentioned above these characteristics are central to dominant understandings of criminology and its historical aspirations to positivist knowledge. Reiner (2007:, p. 347) notes:

The term 'positivism' in histories of criminological theory is used to refer to the project of seeking causal explanations of crime on the methodological and logical model attributed to the natural sciences.

But, as implied above, the process of 'seeking' was prescribed and defined. Social science (in this case criminology) adopted the methodology of natural sciences (Nicholson 1995). Key to this methodology is careful systematic observation from which general laws are elicited. Van Langenhove (1995) has suggested that underpinning the natural science approach to social data is an assumption that analysis of 'facts', collected through systematic observation, and measurement will reveal laws that form the basis of prediction in relation to personal behaviours, social movements and so on. He notes:

Within the natural sciences model for social sciences, the idea of

explanation is copied from the models of explanation used in the classical physical sciences such as inorganic chemistry and Newtonian physics. These models are aimed at generating law-like predictions based on causal relations. (Van Langenhove, 1995, p. 14)

However, the process by which data are collected is of crucial importance if 'contamination' is to be avoided. The prime source of contamination is the researcher, her or his personal history, social location, education, and beliefs. All of these factors have the potential to introduce 'bias' into the research process and findings, unless they are very consciously noted and excluded. Hammersley and Gomm (2000, p.154) characterise this approach to research as 'foundationalist' (they note that the term 'positivist' has become too 'elastic' to be of any analytical value). Foundationalism refers to a research approach that uses terms like 'validity', 'error' and 'bias'. A key aspect of foundational research is that '... the sources of data are treated as independent of, and as imposing themselves on, the researcher' (Hammersley and Gomm, p. 154). Where error and bias occur it is because of the 'illegitimate intrusion of external factors, notably the subjectivity of the researcher or the influence of his or her social context' (Hammersley and Gomm, p. 154). Objectivity provides the remedy to these faults. Foundationalist social research may be both quantitative and qualitative, but it particularly influences quantitative approaches. Such research, based on 'hard' data is particularly influential in social/penal policy circles; sometimes the mere presence of statistical calculations can appear to '[transform] data into valid conclusions' (Hammersley and Gomm, 2000, p. 155). However, the terminology and assumptions of foundationalist research are also found in qualitative work with assumptions that interviews are aiming to catch and depict the truth or 'reality' of a situation separated from the researcher or the research process (Hammersley and Gomm (2000, p. 155).

Foundational knowledge, however, does not operate in a vacuum; it is inextricably linked to the operation of (political) power. There is not space here to develop fully this relationship, but it is of clear significance for the political location of (some) criminological knowledge. Foucault (1977), for

example, has shown how the growth of social scientific knowledge was used to categorise and discipline subordinate populations within prisons. Wacquant (2001) has developed this analysis further by incorporating a closer ethnic analysis of prison populations to suggest that prisons in the USA may be playing a role in sustaining white hegemony in that country (the paper was written before Obama became President but, in terms of the overall distribution of wealth in the USA, black and Hispanic groups are overrepresented in the groups living in poverty in 2012) (1).

The challenge of post-modernism to foundational methodologies and, consequently, hegemonic knowledge has been profound. Hammersley and Gomm (2000) suggest that the dominance of foundationalism in social science collapsed during the middle decades of the previous century and that this has led to the emergence of sceptical and relativist views (including post-modernism). Relativist views assert the locational specificity of the knowledges produced by research (Hammersley & Gomm 2000, p. 156; Harding 2006, pp 145-156). While the logical validity of these knowledge claims has been questioned (Hammersley & Gomm 2000, p. 157), the effect of considering relativistic knowledges has been to assert the voices of subordinated populations.

Alongside the relativistic response to foundational knowledge, standpoint theory has also provided a robust alternative voice – particularly, but not exclusively from feminist scholars (see for example Harding 1991, Lennon & Whitford, 1994; 2006; Code 2006). Standpoint theories have provided the vehicle through which subordinated groupings - for example women (feminist standpoint), ethnic minorities (post-colonial theory) and gay and lesbian people (queer theory) - can develop research from a standpoint that does not objectify and interpret their experiences from a hegemonic (i.e. white, male, middle-class, middle-aged, able-bodied and heterosexual) perspective that is implicitly embodied in natural science methodologies. Hammersley & Gomm (2000, p. 158) summarise standpoint theories thus:

... all accounts of the world reflect the social, ethnic, gendered etc position of the people who produced them. They are constructed on the basis of particular assumptions and purposes, and their truth or falsity can only be judged in terms of standards that are themselves social constructions, and therefore relative.

However, the theories and practices are not merely aspects of a cultural perspective, they are created or resist creation within a context of power and resistance. In 1991, Sandra Harding commented that foundational approaches to research:

fail to grasp that modern science has been constructed by and within power relations in society, not apart from them. The issue is not how one scientist or another used or abused social power in doing his (sic) science but rather where the sciences and their agendas, concepts, and consequences have been located within particular currents of politics. How have their ideas and practices advanced some groups at the expense of others? (Harding, 1991, p. 81)

Social/criminological research occurs, not in a vacuum, but in dynamic relationship to political power. Harding (2006) develops this argument more forcefully in her later work highlighting, in particular, the relationship between power and, not only research methodology, but also the research agenda as embodied in the sources of major funding for research. This is an issue that is returned to later in this chapter. However, in problematising epistemologies and highlighting the links between power and knowledge, post-modern thinking highlights the socially constructed nature of knowledge; a key concept in this process is the notion of *discourse*.

Burr (2003, p. 64) has commented that the word discourse 'refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events.' Foucault's (1972, p. 117) fuller definition of the term is: 'A body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the

conditions of operation of the enunciative function.’ Or more simply, ‘practices which form the objects of which they speak.’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 49 cited by Burr, 2003, p. 64). However, Bell (1993, p. 42) further clarifies Foucault’s use of the term and locates discourse within a political context; knowledge and power are inextricably interwoven:

For Foucault, [discourse] is both less and more than “language”. It is less in that [it] is not a description of the whole language system . . . it is more in that it is not just speaking and writing, but entails social and political relations: one cannot dissociate discourse from a social context where relations of power and knowledge circulate.

Lukes (2005: 88) highlights Foucault’s concern with power and knowledge, particularly ‘expert’ knowledges focused on ‘solving’ social problems (for example crime):

[Foucault] proposed that there is a deep and intimate connection between power and knowledge, viewing these mechanisms in relation to the various applied social scientific disciplines that, so he argued, render them effective: their effectiveness, in his view, largely derives from the shaping impact on people of experts’ knowledge claims. (Lukes, 2005: 88).

Walker and Boyeskie (2001) have developed this further in relation to criminological thought by highlighting how various criminological discourses have socially constructed ‘criminality’. However, they caution against uncritically accepting dominant discourses of crime and criminality that are particularly driven by quantitative approaches: ‘... unless discourse is understood, the relevance of theory driven research may be lost to obsession with proper methods and/or mesmerising statistical numeration’ (Walker and Boyeskie 2001, p. 109). They suggest that postmodern approaches to discourse and discourse analysis point to the importance of an approach that is critically aware of the power of interpretation (hermeneutics) in understanding the ‘power of words in research, policy and the language of our field’ (Walker and Boyeskie 2001, p. 110). They highlight the power implicit

in, for example, Beccaria's – language of 'law' or Foucault's (1977) analysis of insanity and 'unreason' and power.

Nevertheless, 'expert knowledge' is a key component of a discourse that has underpinned much criminological thought since the 19th century; this is the modernist notion of 'progress' which has its roots in the very origin of positivist thought. Auguste Comte (1798-1857) is viewed as one of the founding thinkers of 'sociology'. He linked the development of 'scientific' ways of thinking with social progress and suggested that societies are destined to go through three stages of development the *theological/religious*, the *metaphysical* and the *positive* stages. The final stage of development was characterised by the predominance of rational thought and scientific method. It was considered that eventually scientific method would develop and be applicable to all areas of study (the study of the science of humanity being the final stage of development). The key feature of scientific method being that, by virtue of its rigour and 'objectivity' human problems could be studied and resolved; and of course it is from Comte's terminology that the word 'positivist' was derived (Jenkins 2002, pp 20-22). Thus the notion of 'progress' is inextricably interwoven with foundationalist/positivist epistemologies. And progress was achieved by identifying universal laws that were deemed to apply to 'humanity'. In relation to criminology, Reiner (2007) points to the work of Lombroso, Ferri and the 'moral statisticians' Guerry and Quetelet as being significant early positivist thinkers. As mentioned earlier, the positivist methodological orientation was predominantly (but not exclusively) quantitative and it sought to uncover generalisable laws and predict behaviours and social developments.

Generalisable laws and particularly the prediction of behaviours are both central tenets and ongoing aspirations in the assessment of the likelihood that a person convicted of a criminal offence will re-offend. This activity has become a central feature of the activities of many parts of the CJS. In the next section of this chapter postmodern insights are brought to bear on risk assessment and the likelihood of reoffending.

‘The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth’: a postmodern reflection on risk assessment (2)

Risk assessment is an activity that is central to the operation of criminal justice agencies and also lies at the heart of a foundationalist approach. The probation service has a standardised approach to assessing the risk of reoffending posed by each offender supervised using the Offender Group Reconviction Score (OGRS) and the structured tool, OASys (Canton, 2011). Since 2001 (with the formation of the National Probation Service) Probation Areas – now Probation Trusts - have employed forensic psychologists to assist in risk assessing serious offenders. Moreover, forensic psychologists have worked in prisons and developed risk assessment protocols for a range of offenders for many years (McGurk et al, 1987). Forensic psychology is the dominant discipline within the CJS concerned with the assessment of risk. There is an immense and enduring psychological literature in relation to risk assessment and risk management (for example see Beech and Ward, 2004; Bengtson and Långström, 2007). Essentially the literature is underpinned by foundationalist assumptions, and is concerned with developing more accurate means of predicting the likelihood that a convicted offender will commit another offence.

The literature identifies two different approaches to assessment - actuarial and clinical (Grubin, 1999) or artefact and clinical (Kemshall, 2003). Actuarial approaches use risk factors that have been consistently identified as relevant criminogenic features – typically these factors are: previous offences, relationship history, and criminality (Beech and Ward, 2004; Farrington, 2007) and are described as being *static* (i.e. they are not amenable to change). Clinical approaches are based on the assessment made by the professional (psychologist, psychiatrist, probation officer) dealing with the individual person who may pose a risk to others. Purely clinical approaches generally include consideration of *dynamic* factors (for example, mood, attitudes, physical circumstances – including the availability of victims) affecting the individual under assessment. However, the actuarial tendency in assessing offenders is strong within a broad 'community protection' approach (Kemshall, 2008) and the research literature continues to indicate that a pure actuarial approach is

more accurate in predicting re-offending (Bengtson and Långström, 2007). A key feature of much of the psychological literature on risk and risk assessment is its 'scientific' and, therefore, inaccessible (to the lay reader) language. The terminologies, derived from medical, psychological and statistical vocabularies, together create what may be considered to be 'expert' knowledge. A key part of sustaining and developing this form of knowledge is the 'risk analysis professional' (Douglas, 1992, p. 11) who operates within 'the favoured paradigm of individual rational choice'. Additionally, Douglas (1992, p. 12) notes that the development of risk 'expertise' has led to the development of specialist sub-disciplines that develop their own technical language (i.e. inaccessible to the general public) which, in its quest for 'objectivity', ignores issues such as 'intersubjectivity, consensus making . . . [and] social influences on decisions'. Even the names of some of the instruments (Static – 99; Static – 2002; the Risk Matrix – 2002 – cited in Bengtson and Långström, 2007, p. 138) imply an abstracted technical world with processes and procedures only to be understood by technical 'experts'. These are characteristics of 'risk' that have been identified in sociological, particularly post-modern, theory. Bauman (1993, pp 200–8), for example, highlights how risk discourses, through technologized approaches to knowledge create a self-perpetuating highly technical form of knowledge as the only valid way to approach, understand, assess and manage risk. This has the effect of prioritizing certain forms of intellectual activity (calculative and mathematical) and certain subjects for inquiry (Bauman, 1993, p. 194). The offender and his 'offending behaviour' become the sole concern; other issues related to relationships, social class and other identities become erased and irrelevant to this administrative criminological gaze (Kemshall, 2003, p. 69). What this gaze does not see is the various discriminations that occur in criminal justice processes (for example, in relation to ethnicity, gender and class).

However, as Robinson (2011, p. 107) has observed, although risk prediction is promoted as being an 'objective' and merely a 'technical' process, it is not value-free. Moreover, it is also only as 'strong' as the information that is put into the system. Thus, while the foundationalist aspiration of being able to

predict re-offending and particularly serious reoffending is sustained through increasingly complex iterations of assessment manuals, it is also brought under critical scrutiny through an examination of both values and practice. Robinson (2011, p. 107) comments that 'the choice of tools and the use that is made of them in order to target services and surveillance can be extremely value-laden and potentially politicised.' Douglas (1992) notes that the way that a culture constructs and manages risks provides insights into how that culture is structured and what issues shape its social organization (Sparks, 2001, p. 168). Risk is a political vehicle used widely to legitimate the policies and practices of particular groups at specific times (Douglas, 1992, Sparks, 2001).

However, the process of risk assessment is not mechanistically undertaken by automatons. While actuarial approaches to risk have the potential to oppress socially marginalised groups (Silver and Miller 2002), Canton and Eadie (2002, cited in Robinson 2011, p. 108) have highlighted the importance and role of professional values and accountabilities in recognising and, in some cases ameliorating these issues. Effectively, concerns with social justice and values represent a different form of knowledge that may be in conflict with narrow administrative practices.

Contested knowledges, power, resistance and research: the 'dilemmas and predicaments' of the 21st century criminologist

Ian Loader and Richard Sparks (2011, p.26) have pointed to the 'dilemmas and predicaments' involved in answering 'questions concerning the work criminologists can and should do, the problems that are selected for attention, the methods deployed to solve them, and the audiences towards which such activity is addressed'. This chapter concludes with reflection on these issues from a postmodern perspective and, to do this, it is essential to return to the challenges to foundationalist epistemologies identified earlier. Hammersley and Gomm (2000, p. 160) indicate that, although in many ways foundationalist epistemology and associated methodologies were deemed to have failed by the end of the twentieth century, the principal radical alternative approaches (relativism and feminist standpoint theory) were also 'weak' and untenable. They therefore suggested that it was necessary to reconsider, amongst other

things, 'the nature of ... bias as [it] relates to social research' (Hammersley and Gomm 2000, p. 160). This, inevitably, brings discussion full circle back to Becker's statement in relation to bias power and knowledge: we provoke the charge of bias, in ourselves and others by refusing to give credence and deference to an established status order, in which knowledge of truth and the right to be heard are not equally distributed' (Becker, 1967:242).

The issue of bias is complex and is defined differently according to the epistemological standpoint of the researcher (Hammersley and Gomm 2000; Harding 2006). It is not the intention here to delve deeply into the philosophical and methodological implications of these debates. There is, however one implication of post-modern deconstruction of foundationalist metanarratives that is of importance to this chapter; this is the identification of how the relationship between research funders and dominant forms of knowledge shapes the research agenda and inevitably prioritises some forms of knowledge and excludes others. Hammersley and Gomm (2000, p. 165) have suggested that 'we live in dangerous times for research'. The agendas of those funding research are driving what is to be researched and how it is to be researched. They suggest that 'the pursuit of knowledge' is subordinated to more applied outcomes defined before any research has occurred. They worry that the increased emphasis on the role of research 'users', is shaping a narrowly utilitarian concept of knowledge. More recent developments in the assessment of research outcomes (3) that give weight to the 'impact' of research have added to these concerns. Similarly Walters (2009) has examined the nature of research funded and undertaken by the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate (HORDS) and also the Scottish Executive. He has identified 'how Home Office criminology is politically driven; how it provides policy salient information for politically relevant crime and criminal justice issues; how its research agenda is motivated by outcomes that are of immediate benefit to existing political demands' (Walters, 2009, p. 207). However, for Walters (2008), it is through the research funding activities of central governments that some activities are defined as crime whilst others are ignored. He highlights how the activities of

working class people are more likely to be viewed as crimes whereas dishonest activities of middle class affluent groups may be neglected:

It is clear that the Home Office is only interested in rubber-stamping the political priorities of the government of the day. If it were concerned with understanding and explaining the most violent aspect of contemporary British Society (notably the modern corporation), it would fund projects that analyse corporate negligence, commercial disasters and workplace injuries – but it doesn't. (Walters, 2008, p. 13)

He further outlines other aspects of how funded research knowledge creates a particular version of events – generally designed to serve the interests of the funder.

However, Walters (2009, p. 210) suggests that criminology does not have to play the tune demanded by the paymaster. He identifies the development of a 'public criminology that ... takes as part of its defining mission a more vigorous systematic and effective intervention in the world of social policy and social action' (Walters, 2009, p. 210). Constitutive penology 'as an analytical approach to examining the discourses, institutions, philosophies, and practices of punishing' (Barker 2010, p. 237) adopts a similar critical position; Cowling (2006, p. 8) notes that the aim of constitutive criminologists is not to 'replace one truth with another' instead it is to invoke 'a multiplicity of resistances' 'to the ubiquity of power'. The work of Chong Ho Shon (2002) illustrates these processes by exploring the detail of encounters between the police and citizens; for example, he notes that 'prior research has overlooked instances of language use where the meaning and intention is ambiguous or where a participant subverts the communicative process by saying one thing to mean another'. (Chong Ho Shon, 2002, p. 151). Edwards and Sheptycki (2009) similarly identify a new form of criminology ('third wave'), which acknowledges the politics of research without a partisan approach.

A key part of developing these approaches is to recognise and utilise a wide range of knowledges developed in a variety of subordinated groups. This

requires criminology and criminologists to participate in dissemination beyond the university classroom and academic journals. It requires the recognition of diversity and diverse forms of knowledge. It requires recognition and rejection of grand homogenising 'meta-narratives' and the validation of diverse voices. However, for this activity to be effective, it requires a type of academic rigour that is critical and aware of epistemological issues in the construction of knowledge. Although Hammersley and Gomm (2000, p. 165) suggest that aligned and campaigning standpoints are not appropriate for research because '... they do not maximise the chances of discovering the truth about the matter concerned, which is the primary responsibility of the researcher', they appear to have re-adopted foundationalist assumptions about the nature of truth. The work of Sandra Harding (1991, 2006) may provide a post-modern way through the seeming impasse. She argues for what she calls 'strong objectivity' or a pluralist approach to knowledge building. 'Strong objectivity' requires the researcher to state the ideological and political position from which they make their inquiries and explore the relationship of these to the matter being researched, the method whereby it has been researched, the resultant findings and what others have published (Harding, 1991, p. 152). 'Strong objectivity' requires that the knower, the researcher explicitly theorise his/her effect – as an involved party - in the creation of knowledge.

Postmodernism provides many challenges for criminology, an academic discipline initially built upon foundationalist epistemological assumptions. Through engaging with the challenges some criminologies have changed. Public criminology recognises the need to incorporate a range of experiences and knowledge. It critically examines the role of research and how this relates to broader criminological/sociological issues such as the defining and policing of certain acts as criminal. Reflexive criminological practice does require criminologists to ponder on issues of allegiances in all stages of research. However, allegiance or strong objectivity does not automatically equate with a simple taking of sides. As Liebling has noted:

In my experience it is possible to take more than one side seriously, to find merit in more than one perspective, and to do this without causing outrage on the side of officials or prisoners, but this is a precarious position with a high emotional price to pay. (Liebling, 2001, p. 473)

However to do this requires the researcher to be able to account fully for how findings have been achieved. Harding (2006, p. 156) summarises the challenges and the hopes that post-modernism presents:

... we can be confident that the sciences thought to have advanced the forms of democratic social relations envisioned by the Enlightenment and its heirs today are most likely not the ones that work well to advance the new forms of democratic social relations for which feminisms, multiculturalism and postcolonialisms yearn today. Nor can they engage effectively with the recently appearing new ways of producing scientific knowledge. ... The rise of new social values, interests and the relations they direct requires new inquiry practices and principles that can support and in turn be supported by these new forms of, we hope, democratic social relations. Our methodological and epistemological choices are always also ethical and political choices.

Notes

- (1) See United States Census Bureau (2012) The National Data Book; The 2012 Statistical Abstract, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0711.pdf>
- (2) This section draws from and develops the work of Cowburn (2010, pp234-7)
- (3) See <http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/assessmentcriteriaandleveldefinitions/>

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