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Antiracist & Decolonized Teaching: A Call to Action

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The criminal justice system has a disturbing and problematic history of white supremacy, oppression, and colonialism. This history has led us to police brutality, disproportionate minority contact, and sentencing disparities. The murder of George Floyd that has galvanized the recent national and international Black Lives Matter movement is one of the many tragedies representative of this history. The rate of killings by police officers in the United States (US) has remained constant, at around 1,100 people annually (Mapping Police Violence, 2020). In comparison to other countries in the Global North, the US is an outlier, with the highest rate of police killings (Prison Policy Initiative, 2020). Of the people affected by police killings in the US, Black Americans are killed at three times the rate of White Americans, despite being more likely to be unarmed. These types of disparities are ubiquitous in the criminal justice system and grow cumulatively as individuals are processed (Ghadnoosh, 2015). To criminologists, these facts are not new. Recently, many Criminology and Criminal Justice associations and departments have issued statements decrying the murder of George Floyd and so many others at the hands of police or white vigilantes. However, we need to make sure that, as a discipline, we do more than issue statements. We need to move beyond the platitudes of merely discussing the race-crime dyad and the discriminatory nature of the criminal justice system (Phillips, Earle, Parmar & Smith, 2019). We must acknowledge that criminal justice institutions are some of the most racially disparate institutions of our time (Earle, 2017). “There must be a critical deconstruction of the process of knowledge production about minorities, which in its current state means squaring up to the discipline of criminology itself” (Phillips & Bowling, 2003, p.271). Criminologists need to face that modern racism is sophisticated, it includes non-racial presumptions and weaponized colorblindness that serve to minimize racism and privilege whiteness (Earle, 2017). Criminology is complicit in oppression when it fails to interrogate whiteness in “discussions of social structure, racial and ethnic identity, explanations of criminal behavior, and the administration of justice” (Smith, 2014, p.108). Criminology has contradictions, gaps, and suppressions that need to be addressed urgently to ensure as a discipline we do not reproduce racial inequality in all its forms (Phillips et.al., 2019; Michalowski, 2016). As criminologists and criminal justice educators, we bear a special responsibility in addressing these lacunae.

To become meaningfully antiracist, we need to focus on our teaching agendas – not just in the delivery, but also in the content. Our discipline needs intellectual reflexivity and antiracism recall. Intellectual reflexivity requires that we not only recognize and reflect on the social problems of late modernity, but that we also become self-critical and engage in reconstruction of what the core objective of our discipline should be (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2011). Recall requires a return to the key principles of antiracism: a re-examination of the processes and methods for implementing antiracist education, identifying what has not been effective and what needs improvement, and a deliberate centering of race into the study of crime and social harm (Hage, 2016; Earle, 2017). Below are some initial suggestions of reflexive and recall strategies that can begin to dismantle the inherent biases that seep into our courses, curricula, and criminal justice systems.

Acknowledging our own Biases

The work necessary to make criminology antiracist begins with acknowledging personal biases and how they impact our teaching. Acknowledging our own racism requires self-awareness and self-critique (Kendi, 2019; Phillips et.al., 2019). One way to start doing this is to take an implicit association test. The aim here is to conduct self-analysis to identify the assumptions that guide our thoughts and understand how these assumptions shape our social interactions, our research, and our teaching (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2011). Equipped with the knowledge of how to engage in continuous self-critique and self-work, we can provide students with the tools to do the same, all while modeling active antiracist habits. It is important to note that bias control is only a partial reform strategy that requires analogous work on dismantling institutional and structural white supremacy (Petersen, 2019).

Revising Courses and Curricula

Our courses and curricula need revision. Criminology cannot be a part of the social apparatus that re/produces social and racial inequalities. This must begin with broadening how we define crime and reflecting on the purpose of our criminological imagination (Michalowski 2016; Young, 2011). Crime, as a concept, needs to be examined beyond its state-defined fetters to include willful social harms, such as racism, sexism, economic inequality, police brutality, imperialism, and xenophobia. This means that engaging in a search for the causes and solutions to “crime problems” as defined by the state and stimulated by public concern are limiting; they set us up as accomplices of historical forms of oppression. Therefore, state-prohibited crimes and state authorized mechanisms for its control should be transformed from unquestioned frames for determining the foci of criminological inquiry into problematized consequences of wider patterns of social relations and social structures that shape both the production of social injury and our understanding and treatment of it. (Michalowski, 2016, p.194).

Our courses must cover relevant literature accurately and extensively. This must include a critical review of the material that we were taught as students in order to assess how it perpetuates systems of injustice. For instance, why is DuBois not identified as one of the first American criminologists (Gabbidon, 1996)? We need to recognize and actively teach our students to recognize the racialized undertones of various criminological theories and paradigms. We need to teach our students to question why so much criminological research relegates race to no more than a demographic characteristic, ignoring the historical context and the structural impact that race has on lived experiences (Phillips et.al., 2019). We need to actively engage students in discussions on the origins and impacts of policies. This critical approach needs to be mirrored across both core and elective courses – from Introduction to the Criminal Justice System, Criminological Theories, Research Methods, White Collar Crime, Juvenile Delinquency and Juvenile Justice, to Corrections, Law, Policing, and Crime Mapping. The more we model critical pedagogy to our students, the more competencies our students will have in: distinguishing between fact and opinion, looking outside the box for solutions to complex social problems, and feeling empowered to take on the battles of racial justice in their own circles of influence. This means that students need to understand that justice is most often achieved in networks outside of the criminal justice system, in education, health, housing, and the environment.

Our curricula need to represent criminology as a discipline that addresses institutional, structural, and cultural racism. Criminology is grounded in Eurocentric traditions that are implicitly colonizing; the discipline needs to be decolonized (Saleh-Hanna, 2017; Barak, 1991). This requires a democratization of what we teach through the inclusion of non-White and global criminologies. This requires rediscovering non-western approaches, such as the use of African restorative justice traditions and philosophies of non-violence (Omale, 2006; Agozino, 2010). Such a reimagining of the criminology curriculum should begin

with the classes we insist our students take as core requirements, a selection which signals our priorities as an academic community. Courses such as Race, Class, and Gender; Community Organizing; Government and Politics; and History of Oppression are just some examples of the critical knowledge areas that should be mandated for all Criminology and Criminal Justice students. In addition, we need to broaden the subjects we offer at all institutions of higher education; Crimes of the Powerful, Environmental Justice, and Global Crime are just some of the subjects that offer potential for democratizing Criminology. If we as educators do not take on this challenge, we are complicit in the status quo that persists.

Amplifying Minoritized Voices

The amplification of minoritized voices requires that White faculty make space for the expertise of Black and Brown colleagues without expecting faculty of color to take on the extra labor of educating others on racism. Within our courses, this can be done by using materials that represent the scholarship, research, and firsthand experiences of people of color that can help fill the gaps left by mainstream textbooks. Faculty must take it upon themselves to find the resources and to regularly utilize the work published by Black and Brown colleagues, including documentaries, TedTalks, and podcasts that can be incorporated into class discussions and reflections.

In addition, institutions of higher education need to ensure that the ‘ivory’ tower is diversified (Alexander & Arday, 2015). If criminology wants to reflect the needs of a diverse and globalized community and meaningfully address issues of racial injustice, hiring diverse faculty members is essential. This will enhance the expertise of departments and broaden dialogues beyond Eurocentric and “orthodox” criminologies, while also centering voices of Black and Brown faculty.

Incorporating High-Impact Learning Activities

In addition to learning through lectures and discussion, assignments and activities need to enhance students’ critical and analytical thinking skills, especially as they broach the systemic racism within the criminal justice system. High-impact learning activities go beyond reviewing and memorizing material; they encourage students to dig deeper and connect with material on a personal level. Students are expected to grapple with significant, problematic issues of racism in the system, while exposing them to various perspectives to ensure their thinking is challenged and enhanced. Kuh (2008) notes that high-impact learning is effective in encouraging communication amongst classmates and faculty, while enabling students to apply their knowledge to assignments that are more meaningful than typical assessments (exams, theoretical papers, etc.).

Coursework should aim to provide students an opportunity to critique, analyze, and improve the tools, policies, and programs that exist and exacerbate structural racism. Assignments that allow students to identify the historical biases that remain inherent in the practices and policies of our criminal justice system will further their direct knowledge on the origins of today’s disparities. Once students gain the skills to recognize biases, they can then strategize ways to implement reforms. For instance, when studying correctional practices, students need to understand the use of disproportionate sentencing and the disenfranchising of Black political voices. This can be accompanied by discussions of alternative correctional practices used around the world, such as restorative justice.

Developing Community Partnerships to Engage Students in Hands on Learning

Community based learning is an activist approach to learning, where students learn by working alongside community partners. These partners conduct bottom-up work to implement positive change in their communities. There are many organizations advocating for reform in the various areas of the criminal

justice system and related institutions, such as education, housing, and mental health. Faculty should augment the work that is already being done by these organizations by incorporating their mission and values into the classroom. Examples of community partners well suited for criminology and criminal justice courses include (but are not limited to): community activists, advocacy groups, immigration advice centers, civil rights organizations, non-governmental organizations, shelters, coalitions, K-12 schools, after-school programs, and summer camps. Faculty should actively seek out partners that work to reduce systemic racism, while also purposefully addressing the needs of the underserved communities.

These community partnerships provide opportunities for students to experience theoretical material in a real-world setting. Many community agencies seeking to make positive changes, such as serving historically underprivileged youth, assisting justice involved individuals, and reintegrating populations, are underfunded. Students can serve to fill the voids and needs of these agencies to ensure that critical work is being done whilst simultaneously helping them develop skills to become future change-makers. These types of projects provide students with an array of tangible learning opportunities, like advocating, conducting evaluations, and researching.

Community based learning projects challenge students “to develop a range of intellectual and academic skills in order to understand and take action on the issues they encounter in everyday life” (Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006, p. 3). This type of learning provides students with eye opening experiences that they may have not encountered as a result of their varying degrees of privilege. This hands-on level of civic engagement and direct activism will create a lasting impression on students, often much more than mere lectures and discussions. Such experiences are often accompanied by critical reflection about their career goals and their role in the future of our communities.

Ultimately, as we advance the field of criminology, we must make our courses and curriculum actively antiracist. Many criminologists have already begun this work, however, it is high time for us to reach a critical mass, we all need to take on the mandate. The strategies identified here are just the beginning of the work that needs to be done. As a collective, we need to dismantle the pervasiveness of structural racism and white supremacy so that we and our students are equipped to bring about the change that is needed. There may be times faculty become uncomfortable raising these issues in a classroom setting, but this needs to be overcome. Discomfort is temporary, the continuing and lasting effects of systemic racism are not. Changing criminology and criminal justice pedagogy and actively confronting disparities is necessary and starts with us, the faculty. It’s time for us to shift our focus from ‘criminal’ to ‘justice’.

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