The Isolation of Crime, Law, and Deviance from the Core of Sociology

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The study of crime, law, and deviance is considered to be an isolated subarea of sociology that draws upon but does not contribute to the core of the discipline. Subareas, the specific and substantive topics of sociology, may be expected to make less obvious and direct contributions to the core than do theory, methodology, social organization, and social psychology as the major areas of sociology. And within subareas, studies that are readily applied may be considered less integrated and contributory to the discipline than the more “pure” or basic science subareas. This analysis examines the relationships between areas, subareas, and the core of sociology; the subject matter of sociological subareas; the actual versus perceptual isolation of crime, law, and deviance studies from the core; and the meaning of contribution. Measurement of contribution is limited to a survey of Sociological Abstracts, the Cumulative Index of Sociology Journals, and the 1993 program for the American Sociological Association annual meetings. Comparing area and subarea publications and conference sessions suggests that, contrary to expectations, crime, law, and deviance research constitutes a significant portion of the available knowledge base. The perceived isolation of crime, law, and deviance from sociology may be explained by professional bias against applied studies of stigmatized populations.

There has been recent academic interest in the relationship between the study of crime, law, and deviance and the core of sociology (Jensen 1992; Berry 1992b; 1992d; Stitt and Giacopassi 1990; 1992; Liska 1991). Earlier analyses by Gibbs (1987), Wolfgang, Figlio, and Thornberry (1978), and Reasons (1975) and those of today express worry or complaint, as though the isolation is wrongly perceived or, if actual, should not be the case. If the function of sociology as a science is to measure and explain phenomena, then naturally it is disconcerting.

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to think that, on the whole or in part, our scientific endeavors fail to contribute to the core of the discipline and thereby fail to achieve and disperse helpful social truths.

It is uncertain whether the study of crime, law, and deviance is actually isolated from and not contributing to the core of sociology or whether the isolation is merely perceived. If the study of crime, law, and deviance is in fact isolated from the core of sociology, professional barriers against the study's acceptance as a "real" science may explain the more official rejection of crime, law, and deviance as, for example, journal articles and conference papers. If crime, law, and deviance is found to not be isolated but integrated and contributory, the reasons for perceived isolation may be the applied features of the study, presumed to preclude theoretical and other scholarly advancements, or the stigma associated with the subject matter of crime, criminal justice, and criminals (and other deviants), which tarnishes the image of this academic subarea (Jensen 1992).

Areas, Subareas, and the Core. Sociology covers a great deal of territory and is composed of many areas and subareas of study that contribute to the whole understanding of social phenomena. For example, we usually think of four major areas of sociology that provide the avenues through which we examine social phenomena. They are (1) global and specialized theories, (2) research methodologies represented by qualitative and quantitative techniques of analyses, (3) social organization, and (4) social psychology. Substantive topics of sociology, called subareas, describe particular social phenomena. They include the study of crime, law, and deviance; social stratification; gender; family; race and ethnicity; aging; mental health; education; and so on.

To advance our understanding of general social phenomena, substantive subareas of study may use theoretical perspectives, methods, social psychology, and organization as frameworks in which to couch arguments, to explain findings, or as a means to test propositions. Subarea studies may utilize areas as mere overlays or foundations for their analyses, making subarea contributions seem less obvious and less direct than area contributions to the core.

Subareas with direct practical application ("applied" sociology) might be among those subareas least expected to advance theory, generate and test new concepts, pave the way for methodological innovations, and make clear use of organizational and social psychological perspectives. Applied subareas include studies of mental health, gerontology, and criminology. Conversely, the more basic or "pure" science subareas, such as studies of social stratification and religion, may be presumed more likely to develop theory and improve methodology, and to apply social organizational and social psychological interpretations with directness, facility, and frequency.

The indicators of isolation from versus contribution to the core of sociology and the meaning of "core" are ambiguous and subject to disagreement. Contributions can take the forms of praxis, instruction, and scientific development; as such they can simultaneously benefit society and the discipline of sociology. In this analysis, subarea contributions to the core of the discipline is considered to

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