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Exploring the criminology curriculum

Kelly J. Stockdale and Rowan Sweeney

Abstract

There are calls across Higher Education to address deep structural inequalities with specific concerns that the marginalisation of certain voices (female, colonised, non-western and LGBTQ+) has influenced and distorted the production of knowledge in relation to key criminological topics and issues (Agozino, 2003; Cunneen and Rowe, 2015; Connell, 2007).

This article presents initial findings from a pilot study exploring the curriculum of a new criminology Bachelor of Arts degree programme at a post-92 English University. It provides a timely starting point, given the proliferation of HE criminology courses in the UK, and suggests there is both increasing pressures to develop course material and over-familiarisation and acceptance of dominant narratives in criminology. This paper serves as a call to action to critically engage with the sources used: in so doing we put forward a simple 'inclusivity matrix' that can be used both when designing curricula and for teaching critical information literacy.

Keywords

higher education, neoliberalism, decolonialising the curriculum, race, gender.

Introduction

There is much interest in Higher Education (HE) to decolonise the curriculum (see, for example, Arday and Mirza 2018), to challenge gender inequalities (Maher and

Thompson 2001; Doherty and Manfredi 2006; Sagaria 2007), to widen participation (Archer, Hutchings and Ross 2005; Hinton-Smith 2012), and to be pedagogically intersectional (Case 2016; Berger and Guidroz 2009) in order to act against perpetual repression of traditionally marginalised voices within curricula. Whilst it is commonly recognised that criminology is an academic discipline which fundamentally seeks to understand and incite positive change to the inequalities and injustices experienced by vulnerable and marginalised social groups (Davis 1998; DeKeseredy 2010), criminology arguably continues to be a masculinised and Western dominated discipline despite considerable growth in the research, publications and perspectives of individuals from diverse socio-economic, geographic and demographic backgrounds (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988; Barbet 2007; Howes 2018). The tradition of the discipline has caused marginalisation of certain voices (female, colonised, non-western and LGBTQ+) and as a result has influenced and distorted the production of knowledge in relation to key criminological topics and issues (Cunneen and Rowe 2015; Connell 2007). Although the importance of traditional criminological perspective and theorists should be recognised, it is also vital to consider the multiple perspectives and narratives relevant in global and contemporary societies concerning criminological issues.

Over recent years campaigns aimed at questioning university course content have gathered pace with student resistance questioning 'Why Is My Curriculum White' (Salami 2015). The 2009 National Union of Students' Black Students Campaign surveyed 938 Black students, finding that 42 per cent did not believe their curriculum reflected issues of diversity, equality, and discrimination (NUS, 2011). Research shows UK universities are making slow progress on equality, particularly in relation to staff and student representation (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018) and the retention and progression of staff into senior roles: there were only 25 black women and 90 black men among the 19,000 professors in 2016 -17 (Adams 2018).

Whilst there are attempts to foster greater attention to the dynamics of race and racism within criminology itself: including the recent founding of the British Society of Criminology (BSC) 'Race Matters Network' - indeed, the 2019 BSC conference to which this paper was presented was a call for 'how criminologists might address issues of power, marginalisation, intersectionality and justice in the 21st Century' - deep-rooted inequalities that are present across many aspects of academia are

present within the discipline. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within which Western discourses on criminology are produced have, despite policy making i.e. through Athena SWAN Charter 2005 and Race Equality Charter 2016 in the U.K, failed to address structural inequality - particularly in relation to race (Bhopal, 2019). The structural racism within HEIs is further exacerbated by the embedded racism and colonialism within criminal justice institutions. Agozino (2013) argues that criminology as a discipline has failed to address the issue of race due to the discipline itself being complicit in imperialism. He states criminology has 'served colonialism more directly than other social sciences' (p.1). Criminology largely stems from an aim to academically examine institutions which centre on social control (Cohen 1988), therefore as such criminal and social institutions, now and historically, rest on the perpetuation of racial difference and exploitation within society – therefore it is difficult to remove criminology from colonialism due to its subject matter (Moore 2016; Davis 2003; Agozino 2013).

It is important for academics to understand and teach authentically, and with recognition for historical and contemporary biases. Criminological thinking is informed by the realities of prevailing conditions, therefore, authenticity involves consideration of factors which impact criminological and social phenomenon: authentic thinking ensures that understandings are not developed in isolation but are grounded in reality and are inclusive of diverse perspectives (Freire 1970: 50). Information used within the curriculum, to provide insight into specific criminological topics, is the information students use to construct knowledge about such topics. Knowledge construction is fundamentally linked to power relations due to the inherent interconnection between knowledge and power (Foucault 1980; Mader 2012). If criminology students are potentially not being encouraged to consider certain sources or viewpoints when learning or writing about an area of criminology, then it is unlikely that the knowledge construction of criminological topics will develop in a way shaped by authentic and/or diverse voices. Thus, the power of such voices will continue to be reduced and be largely incapable of informing criminological thinking.

Criminology and Higher Education

Criminology is arguably the quickest developing academic discipline in the United Kingdom (Bowling and Ross 2006; McLaughlin and Muncie 2013). The number of

criminology degree programmes has grown at an unprecedented rate which has arguably had both positive and negative impacts on the discipline and related teaching at universities (UCAS 2019; BSC Learning and Teaching Network 2019; Garland 2011). This growth shows no sign of abating with a Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) search for available 'criminology' undergraduate programmes showing continued increases with 906 courses offered by 130 providers in 2019/20 to 1116 courses offered by 154 providers in 2020/21 (accessed 04/09/19). At the same time the discipline of criminology has transformed due to numerous factors, including: significant increase in number of degree programmes at universities, increased scope of subject matter, growing requirement for criminal justice practitioners to have relevant degrees, and intensification of concerns regarding employability as a subject in neoliberal Higher Education (UCAS 2019; BSC Learning and Teaching 2018; PEQF 2016; Garland 2008; Barton et al. 2010).

Criminal justice and HE, and thus criminology, exist and for the last three decades have evolved within a swiftly transforming world (Garland and Sparks 2000; Garland 2001; Brown 2011). The cultural transformation in line with the core values of neo-liberalism, such as privatisation and deregulation, have arguably complicated education, particularly in universities which have increasingly been impacted and influenced by the pressures of marketisation (Frauley 2005; Tombs and Whyte 2003). Barton et al. (2010) suggest that universities are market competitors in relation to external funding and student recruitment which are factors influenced by the courses and disciplines a university offers as well as its facilities and recovered employment rates of past students. In accordance, arguably academic knowledge has become 'commercialised and commodified' (Walters 2007: 7). The commodification of HE through increased government control of academic institutions impacts autonomy of research, teaching, and curricula (Ericson 2003; Garland 2011; Serrano et al. 2018).

The commodification of HE within such economic and social conditions has significantly changed the type of value students place on a degree. A university degree has come to be understood as an 'investment' instead of a means of social, intellectual or personal growth (Barton et al. 2010: 38). Walters (2007) argues that the focus of academic knowledge is its ability to be exchanged, as opposed to its

educational value and respective empowering, enlightening, rewarding potential for an individual. Barton et al. (2010) stress that fundamentally this change in the functionality of universities and academic education has negative implications for subject curriculum content and significantly damages critical scholarship and the development of critical thought in undergraduate students (Furedi 2004).

Indeed, the transactional nature of HE which is influenced by neoliberal values arguably impacts the way a subject is taught as well as students' perspectives on the function of a degree. The commodification of university education realistically impacts the way in which students are taught often due to pressures out of the control of academic staff. 'The "banking" concept of education' accounted by Freire (1970: 44-59) provides an effective example to illustrate teaching related issues which often materialise within profit driven HE institutions. Freire addresses the passive nature education can often take with the educator 'filling' students whom take the form of 'containers'; in this sense education has a depository manner rather than being focused on narration or contextualisation in order to develop critical thought (1970: 45). Freire (1970) highlights that prescribed reading can play an important role in the character of education which is offered to a student: on one hand it supports the notion of passive learning and banking education, on the other hand if used correctly, it has the potential to inform and humanise topics in a way which brings to life, and to mind, a variety of previously concealed voices. Thus, the use of varied and representative literature within education enables topics to take on a less abstract form and encourages students to hopefully become further engaged rather than passive (Freire 1970). This example is further fitting to the context of commodified HE because Freire (1970) asserts that blame should not be passed to a specific educator for teaching in a 'banking' manner, rather it is a problem of structure. Diverse, intersectional and critical curriculums, pedagogic and teaching approaches require preparation time and the financial backing of staff to develop which is often limited within neoliberal university departments.

Accordingly, the curriculum should be designed with critical information literacy in mind (McCluskey-Dean, 2019). Coonan et al. (2018: 3) note that information literacy goes beyond thinking critically; that it allows us to make balanced judgements about sources of information used and by engaging in this way citizens are empowered to 'develop informed views and to fully engage with society'. However, the current focus

on information literacy often focuses either on specific elements of formal HE or presents it as a skill for 'employability': this is often to the exclusion of the 'real world' and ignores the value of information literacy to social justice (McCluskey-Dean, 2019). Indeed, building on Bourg's (2014) address to Duke University Libraries 'neoliberalism is toxic for higher education...research libraries can & should be sites of resistance', Beilin (2015, online accessed 04/09/19) argues that: 'information literacy instruction should resist the tendency to reinforce and reproduce hegemonic knowledge, and instead nurture students' understandings of how information and knowledge are formed by unequal power relations based on class, race, gender and sexuality'. Although the commodification of HE impacts the development of critical thought in countless disciplines, Barton et al. (2010) assert that it is acutely apparent and harmful in the case of criminology (Serrano et al. 2018).

Methods

This pilot study looked at the composition of the core reading list submitted for validation of a new criminology undergraduate (BA) programme at a post '92 university. The university, a former teaching college with a 175-year history of teaching and education, was accredited as a University in 2006. The criminology degree launched September 2016 and the data here represents the core reading lists put forward for the course validation and the full reading lists submitted to the librarian for each initial year that module ran. One hundred and four core texts were submitted as part of the validation process, with approximately five texts submitted for thirteen core modules and nine optional modules covering the full degree programme from Year 1 to Year 3. Following the initial analysis of this data, further research on the full reading list for two core first year modules: 'Key Concepts for Criminologists', and 'Fundamentals of Criminological Theory', and two specific second year modules (also core modules) on Ethnicity, Crime and the Criminal Justice System and Gender, Sexuality and Crime were analysed. Analysis did not include any additional readings discussed in lectures or additional sources used or suggested by academic staff.

Data from these reading lists were imported into an Excel spreadsheet; data included the module name and code, year of study, and if it was a core or optional module. If multiple authors contributed to a text they were coded individually as 'first,

second, third etc. author'. Texts were coded in relation to the gender, race, and where possible the sexuality of the author as well as intersections of these – i.e. black female professors. These were coded via publicly available information on the author gleaned from internet searches including biographies, institutional webpages, and online profiles.

In addition to the reading list analysis focus group research was also conducted with students across the degree programme. The research took part at the end of the academic year with n=8 students (6 from first year, 2 from third year) taking part. Further research is due to take place in throughout 2019/20, however, this initial pilot study gives an insight into how students engage with reading lists and also puts forward findings from this pilot testing of an 'inclusivity matrix' that can be used by staff and students to help encourage critical information literacy.

As an exploration of texts and students' perceptions of the authors who had written the texts this unfortunately meant using and applying labels as a starting point for broader discussion. Gender as male, female, and non-binary to include a spectrum of gender identities was incorporated into the matrix. The term Black Minority Ethnic or 'BME' was used throughout this research and published findings as it is a commonly used term in HE (Advance HE, accessed 21/11/19). However, we recognised the limitations of the terms used and sought to put them into context across the focus groups.

This article presents the initial findings from this research. Further papers are forthcoming which provide more detailed analysis of the full reading list data, as well as more in-depth analysis from student focus groups as we explore the use of the 'Intersectionality Matrix' as a pedagogical tool to embed critical information theory.

Results

Core Criminology Curriculum

In relation to gender over two thirds (70.27%) of the 104 core readings put forward for the BA criminology course reading lists submitted for validation had a male first author. Less than a third were female (29.81%). Only 6% of first authors across these core readings were BME (two females, four male). Analysis by year group

highlights the issue further: there are no BME first author texts across first year readings submitted for validation. It is not until the second year and a specific core module on 'Ethnicity, Crime and the Criminal Justice System' that BME first author texts feature – with four of the core texts for this specific module written by a person of colour. The other two texts written by BME academics feature in 'Quantitative Approaches to Research' second year core module, and one text in a third-year optional module 'Terrorism, State Crime and Political Violence'.

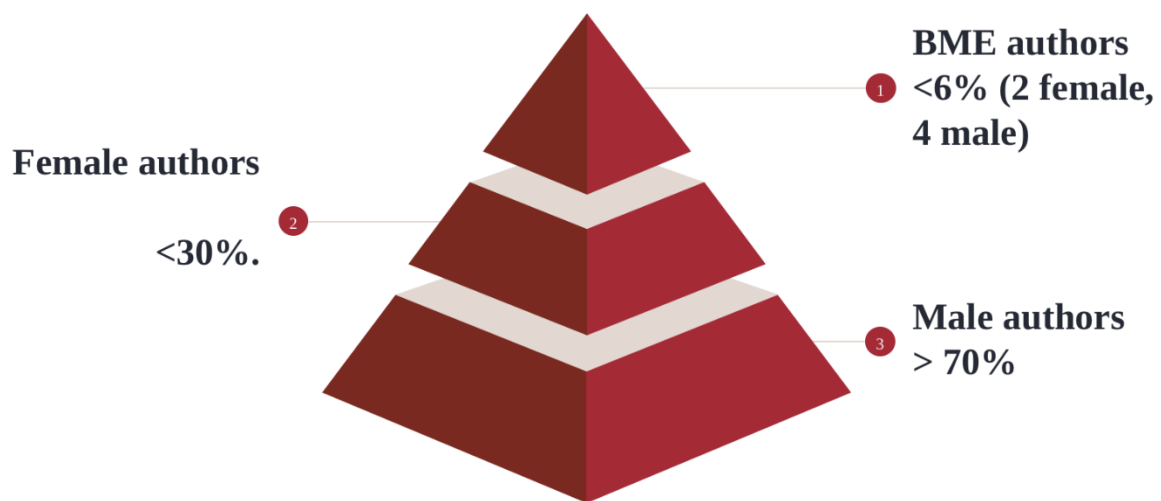


Figure 1: Authorship of core texts (based on the first author)

Gender and Race Divisions

The gender divide was more pronounced across specific modules; here we see that female first authors predominately featured across two specific modules: 'Gender, Sexuality and Crime', which contained four female first authors, and one male author; and a third-year optional module of 'Sex Work' where all five texts had female first authors. Many (7 of the 22 modules) had no female authors on the core reading put forward for the validation of the programme. These included the first-year core module on 'Fundamentals of Criminological Theory', second year core modules on 'Working with Criminology' and third year optional modules such as 'Philosophical Aspects of Criminological Theory'.

Due to the lack of female and BME authors in the texts put forward for validation a detailed full reading list for two core first year modules were analysed in further detail. 'Key Concepts for Criminologists' contained 27 readings (19 essential readings and 8 recommended readings), this comprised 25 male first authors, and two female first authors. All authors in the reading list for this module were white. Both texts written by female first authors were recommended, not core texts. 'Fundamentals of Criminological Theory' had 21 readings (16 essential, and 5 recommended), reading list analysis showed 17 male first authors, two of which were BME, and four female white authors. The two modules that had higher representations of female and BME authors were second year core modules: Gender, Sexuality and Crime had eight readings in total: one white male author and seven works authored by female authors - one of these being 'Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics' by bell hooks (1991). Ethnicity, Crime and the Criminal Justice System had three male authors, one white; and two female authors, both of whom are BME.

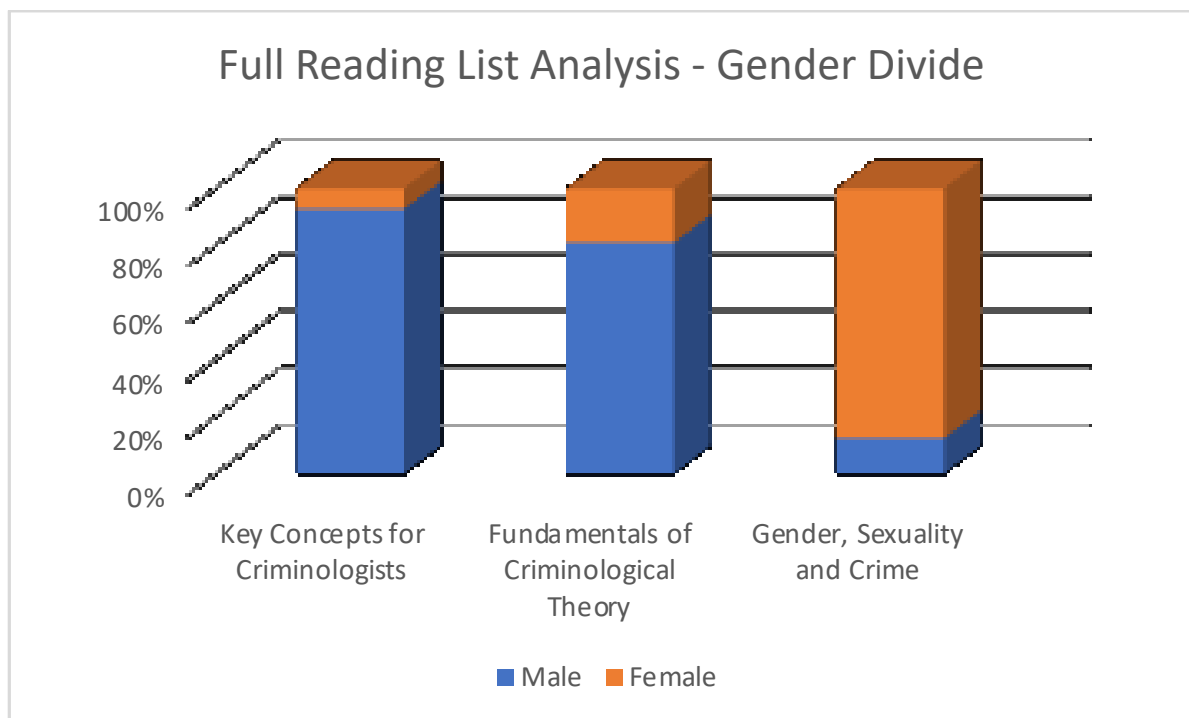


Figure 2: Full Reading List Analysis of Core 1st Year Modules by Gender of First Author

Data from the full reading list analysis of these two core first year modules is displayed in Figures 2 and 3 alongside the second-year core modules on ‘Gender, Sexuality and Crime’ and ‘Ethnicity, Crime and the Criminal Justice System’ as a comparison. These highlight how traditionally marginalised voices are confined to discussions on gender and race and are not fully incorporated across mainstream criminology.

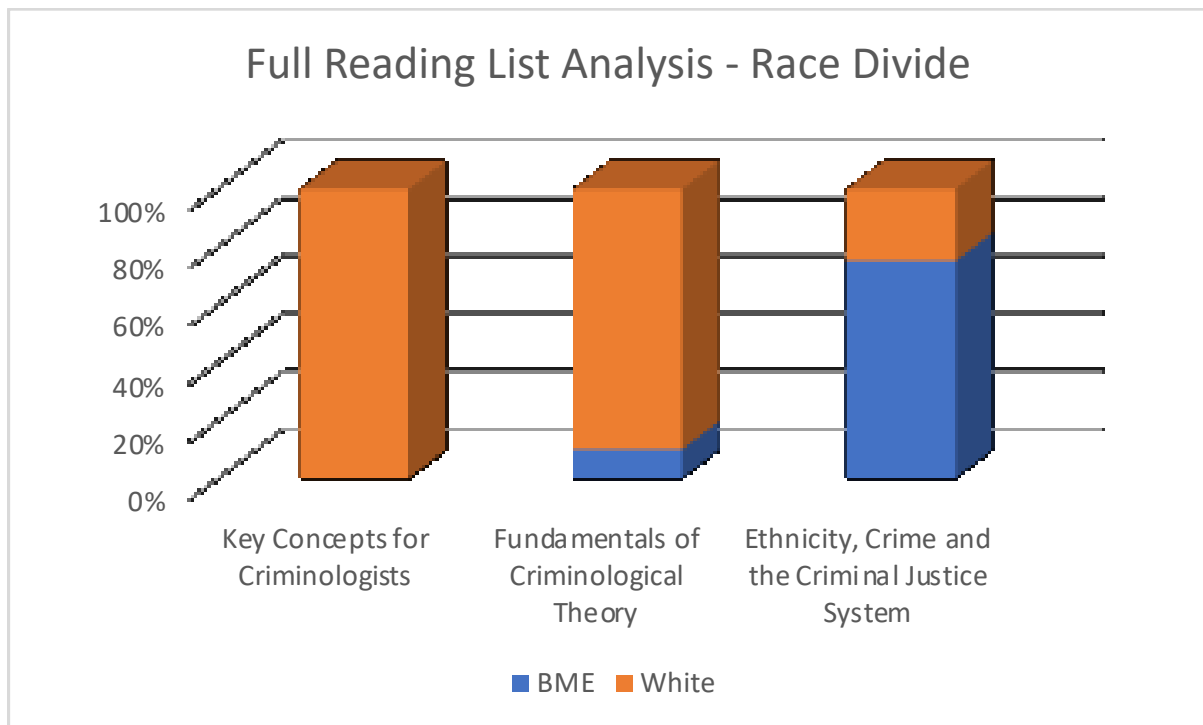
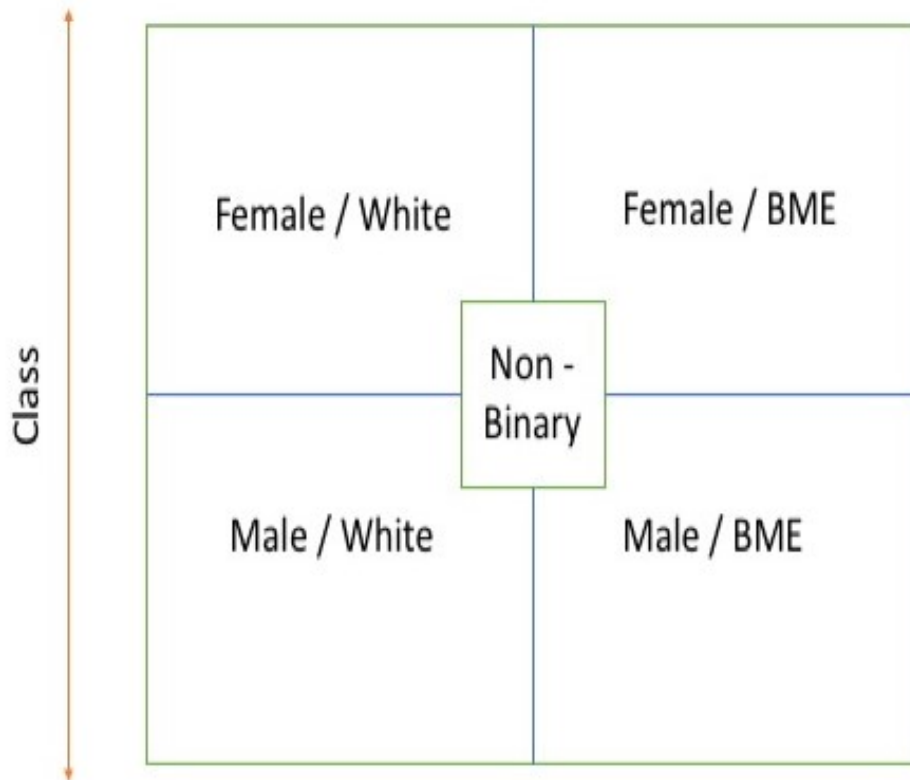


Figure 3: Full Reading List Analysis of Core 1st Year Modules by Race of First Author

Proposing a model for critical information literacy

The second part of this project explored how students engaged with the curriculum. Students were asked as part of their focus group to name any criminologist whose work they had read, or who they knew of from class/peer discussions. These were written on separate ‘post-it’ notes for each author, no further information of categorisation was given. Students were then presented with the ‘intersectionality matrix’ (Figure 4) and were asked to place the post it notes on the framework based on their knowledge or belief of the author’s race, gender, and class. The matrix is designed to highlight intersections of these: therefore, the results from the initial pilot studies showed a significant gap with few students being able to name any female academics, and no female academics of colour. The visualisation of the authorship

from a group of students which clearly sat in the White/Male section of the matrix prompted much discussion and reflection from the students.



1

Figure 4: Intersectionality Matrix

Students were initially surprised – the matrix allows students to experience what was a palpable ‘aha’ moment. Although one third year student was not so surprised:

R: When you look at this, how do you feel about it now that it’s mapped out?

P: Not surprised at all, well not at all, because I know there’s load of female researchers and everything ... just because I do think it all feels it’s dominated by white males or it used to be. The perception of it is that it’s usually white males. Even though there’s a lot of female researchers ... I just think the ones you remember more are the white males, yeah. You don’t really think, you

don't hear of many black researchers; I know that's like ... you don't really hear about them that much. [Focus Group 2, Participant 1]

Students want to be inspired by the work that they read. They want to hear from marginalised voices and understand different viewpoints:

"I'll definitely be looking more into female and more non-binary people... people from different ethnicities 'cause I think that is what could make an assignment a bit more enjoyable... I know that when I hear a female criminologist, I tend to be like 'oh oh female', then it's a bit more inspiring you like want to read up more on it ... in our head it's hard to think of it like this but when it's shown in front of you, you kinda like 'oh ok'. You don't actually understand it until it's shown to you ... apart from doing some research I wouldn't have thought about it... but now looking at it in person I can see that yeah, it's, we need a bit more, uh, variation. [Focus Group 1, Participant 1]

Students were able to see the benefits of using this matrix and understood why it was important to think about the sources they were using when formulating their ideas:

It'd be nice to be able to have different people's opinions and different people's backgrounds in your essays. They might have been through different research and different things. Especially maybe talking about the topic of police or something... a male and female, or a male and non-binary gender would obviously have different experiences... but because we mostly know just white male... criminologists it's hard to get this more broad opinion. [Focus Group 1, Participant 1]

Discussion

Analysis of these criminology reading lists highlights the deep-rooted structural gender and race inequalities facing the discipline. The number of criminology courses is rapidly expanding but our research, although of a small scale, highlights that rather than an opportunity for re-evaluation and revolution a 'traditional' white and masculine curriculum is being put forward – and validated. Therefore, whilst academics may provide a range of texts and reading resources within each module there are few, if any, drivers to produce a diverse curriculum. Worryingly, from the

core texts put forward for validation, it is possible for a student to not encounter one scholarly text with a BME academic as first author until their second year of study. BME works are then largely confined to a single module on 'Ethnicity, Crime and the Criminal Justice System'. The same is true, to a slightly lesser extent, in relation to gender. Few female academics of colour feature across whole the curriculum.

One of the key things this research shows is the importance of 'Gender' and 'Ethnicity' modules. Yet there appears to be a move across some criminology courses to replace, or combine and condense, these. Indeed, arguments for social justice and equality cannot be taught in one 'race' or one 'gender' module but must be embedded across a whole curriculum - individual modules run the risk not only of tokenism but of a 'tick box' approach where race and gender *is* discussed but predominately in a specific module. Whilst a full review of the criminology curricula should have critical information literacy at its heart (and therefore feature a range of voices across the whole criminology programme) there ought to be a genuine concern that the curriculum as it stands does not support this. The range of voices that are required to enable authentic thinking, particularly when considering the variety of context specific topics and experiences inherent to criminology, means that limited diversity within criminology curricula as evidenced from our findings hinders realistic construction of criminological thought.

Yet the inclusion of a range of voices is important for our students. Minni Salami (2015) writing for The Guardian explores student's resistance towards 'their predominantly white, predominantly male curricula', asserting that universities have a fundamental role in shaping ideas and policies; in fostering a culture of justice and equality – but that universities can only do this if they, themselves, are just and equal. Salami encourages the reader to consider the power structures of knowledge: one of the specific examples she uses is from criminology, questioning why 'Angela Davis's complex body of work on the social justice system has not influenced contemporary philosophical studies on prisons in the way Michel Foucault's work on the same topic has'. As criminologists we need to address this discrepancy and ensure our curriculum is not biased: yet despite the calls to decolonialise the curriculum and address gender inequalities new criminology courses offer first year core module such as 'Key Concepts for Criminologists' which feature only two

(white) female first author texts, with no BME first author texts. Nearly 93% of the readings given to students on this module are white and male.

Initial feedback from the pilot study highlights that students want to know more about a wider range of voices and experiences and would value a more representative curriculum. Many remarked that they had just never thought about it before, and it was not until readings were mapped on the 'intersectionality matrix' that they could see the disparity, with the authors/academics they named predominately sitting in the white/male category. The 'intersectionality matrix' is therefore a useful pedagogical tool. It provides an opportunity for students to engage with the history and development of ideas and thinkers in relation to their individual histories impacted by socio-economic and political relations of time periods and locations in order to promote interactive and humanised learning.

It is also important to note that the curriculum does not only affect students, but also staff in HE. Jason Arday (2018) talks in detail about his experience of being a black man and navigating the white academy. Similarly, Addison's work explores what kind of identities fit in at work in HE - performances of gender and class are important in higher education, reproducing inequalities in times of austerity and neoliberalism (Addison, 2016). She argues that aspects of identity can be inscribed, resisted, and negotiated by certain people in certain places, helping some to 'get ahead' whilst fixing other people in place as always marginal and a 'detraction' from the competitive HE brand (Addison 2012; 2016). One key element to HE brand is that of impact and influence, something measured by publication in high ranking journals and the citation factors of those publications – as Graham et al's (2019) research shows there is significant disparity in relation to gender. By not being critically engaged with our use of scholarly works in our teaching (and writing) then we are compounding the issues faced by marginalised groups in HE.

Conclusion

Criminology is an academic discipline which largely considers the processes of criminalisation, social control and criminal justice. Although, criminology has an inherent connection to state power due to its subject matter (Garland 1992, 2011), the consequences of this relationship are often problematised and challenged by the

different epistemological strands within the field. Critical thought is constant and imperative to the disciple (Cohen 1988), similarly it is asserted that critical pedagogy and teaching is central to the criminology curriculum (Serrano et al. 2018; Barton et al. 2010). It is argued that the development of a criminological imagination (Barton et al. 2006; Mills 1959) is vital to ensure that criminology students can consider subject matter effectively. Through critical pedagogy and teaching the criminological imagination is enabled which supports students to recognise and counteract powerful narratives, relating to race, class, and gender hierarchies, which influence social problems and injustices by promoting marginalisation of voices (Barton et al. 2010; Barton et al. 2006; Freire 1970). In so doing, the critical criminological imagination supports students to become empowered to work against the oppression of themselves and others, as well as developing useful transferable skills (Ellsworth 1992; Redhawk Love 2008).

The increased scope of criminology's subject matter, and its growth at universities across the UK, provides vast potential for the further development of criminology curriculum and its approach to teaching and learning in opposition to the difficulties brought by the contemporary commodified HE context (Hoyle and Bosworth 2011). Application of critical pedagogy and teaching within the discipline through a curriculum which is representative of the multiple and intersecting voices that exist in relation to criminological matters fundamentally supports the pursuit of social justice (Hoyle and Bosworth 2011). This is important to the discipline, the current socio-economic and political character of contemporary society, and to criminology students' development to become informed and active citizens.

Working towards a more international, diverse, and representative curriculum is key to the development of critical thought and the pursuit of social justice. Particularly in the case of criminology diversity and authenticity in the curriculum provides increased opportunity for students from all backgrounds to engage with content creatively enabling understanding, awareness, passion, and 'authentic thinking' to dynamically develop (Freire 1970: 50). Development of diversity and intersectionality within the criminology curriculum can speak to the need to counteract the reproduction of harmful discourses and processes which often exist within both criminology and HE. By building on existing action to encourage critical representative inquiry among criminology students through curriculum content, the

discipline's current endeavours to counteract problematic structures could significantly increase.

Many academics have called for increased attention to be given to the varying voices and perspectives within the criminology curriculum. Yet findings from this research indicate that endemic structural issues go beyond the institution: new criminology courses are neglecting, and hindered from, utilising the opportunity to design their new curriculum with intersectionality, representativeness, and innovation at heart. A critical pedagogic approach informed by the inclusion of multiple voices can reduce tokenistic sentiments which often exist in the curriculum, and further act towards preventing the curriculum from enabling problematic and harmful discourses about crime, punishment, justice and oppressed social groups to be continually reproduced (Christie 1977:1, 2010; Hoyle and Bosworth 2011). Intersectional and critical pedagogy and teaching (Case 2016; Freire 1970; Berger and Guidroz 2009) to strengthen social justice in HE and criminology drive this research and our position. The research serves as a starting point to examine our curricula, and to encourage our students to critically engage with the sources they use. It is only from this point that we can begin to change ideas in order to act against oppression - as Freire (1970) argues this is not only about conscientization itself but meaningful practice.

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