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The Blind Men and the Elephant: A Parable for Crime and Justice

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INTRODUCTION

I am very pleased to be here and I want to thank Paul Brantingham and the Western Society for inviting me. When Paul asked me to make this presentation, I readily accepted and then, an hour or so later, I thought, "What do I have to say that would justify your time here today?"

I thought about that for the next few months. I looked at the theme of the Conference, "Crossing Boundaries: Increasing Knowledge," and remembered what Paul told me when he invited me. He said something to the effect of, "You have done so many things in this field, crossed so many boundaries" Of course, what he meant was, "You apparently can't keep a job."

Anyway, here I am. And I do have a message, something that I have thought about for a long time. That is why we in criminology and criminal justice—whether as academics or practitioners—cross so few boundaries. Of course, I am making some broad generalizations. For in this audience, I see many who have a broad perspective of what we are and what we do. Yet, many in criminology and criminal justice seem to view the world of crime and justice as the Blind Men viewed the Elephant in the ancient Chinese parable. Do you remember the story?

Four Blind men stand by an elephant. None had ever seen an elephant and all wanted to understand it. The first man felt of the elephant's tail and declared, "An elephant is like a rope." The second, felt of the elephant's leg and argued, "No, an elephant is like a tree." The third blind man, running his hands along the elephant's body, said, "I think an elephant is like a wall." Finally, the fourth man, grabbed the elephant's trunk and jumped back in fear, "It is obvious," he said, "An elephant is like a snake." The blind men argued heatedly among themselves, but none of them knew what in reality an elephant looked like.

APPLYING THE PARABLE PERSPECTIVE

We might apply this analogy to our understanding of crime and criminals and of the criminal justice system. It applies to the system because of narrow perspectives and entrenched biases of many criminal justice professionals. Having spent 20 years in the criminal justice system as a correctional counselor, drug and alcohol counselor, probation officer, parole officer, chief probation officer and parole commissioner, I have observed this narrow focus first hand on many occasions.

All of us have heard the old bromide about the criminal justice non-system. And it is true. Each element of the system (police, courts and corrections) appears to operate in a vacuum, seldom considering the issues and problems facing the others. Police agencies that refuse to cooperate sometimes even work against each other, for example, local vs. state, federal vs. local and state or county vs. municipal police. It has become a familiar theme in the entertainment media—the tension between the FBI and local authorities—between the police and the courts.

Another boundary in the criminal justice system is the failure to move beyond the familiar dichotomy of treatment vs. punishment – rehabilitation vs. retribution. This is the most basic and the oldest of criminal justice issues. Recall the 19th century clash between the rehabilitation focus of the Pennsylvania Quakers and the punishment orientation of the Calvinists of New York. This conflict has raged unabated for 200 years.

What should we have learned in that time? Simply, that human behavior, including criminal behavior, is hugely complex and that no one strategy will be effective for all. Yet, the boundary persists. It persists at the societal level as we vacillate between paradigms – 30 years or so with an almost exclusive focus on treatment, followed by another 30, which stresses punishment. It also exists at the micro level in

the philosophy of individual actors. I refer to this single-minded devotion to a criminal justice philosophy as the "bullet-proof mind."

While working as a federal probation officer, a federal judge once said to me, "I don't care what the circumstances are, never give me a sentence recommendation in a drug case other than the maximum penalty." A prison supervisor who told me, "I don't want to hear any of that namby-pamby rehabilitation crap. These people are animals." Another judge whose opposite approach was, "I don't believe there are any bad boys," while sentencing a 19 year old soldier to five years for firebombing his commanding officers home and killing his wife and baby.

When I became a member of the Parole Board in Texas, I was one of three members. One was a former district attorney from a small county in West Texas. He voted to deny parole on most cases, while the other member, a former newspaper reporter and community activist, voted to parole in virtually every case. In each case—the parole board members, judges and prison supervisor, acted in terms of a pre-conceived bias—they only saw one part of the elephant.

Last year, Leanne Alarid, at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and I edited a corrections text, which we entitled *Correctional Perspectives* (Roxbury 2001). The concept, which I must admit was all Leanne's, was that when trying to understand crime and punishment, there is no reality, only perspective. In this book, we chose 12 correctional issues—institutional crowding, correctional rehabilitation, gangs, violence, privatization, capital punishment, etc. and looked at those issues from three perspectives: that of an academic, that of a practitioner, and that of an inmate.

As we gathered and selected the materials it became very obvious to us that in many, if not most, instances, the realities of prison life as we perceived them, were not realities from the point of view of other observers. Lucien X. Lombardo, who wrote the Foreword to our book, made the following observation:

Readers should situate themselves in the middle of the correctional world using each perspective as a filter and counterpoint to the others. In this way, a more realistic and complex understanding of the human dilemmas that are at the base of correctional policy and practice can emerge...the choices we as a society and polity make, and the perspectives we use to make these choices, will be better understood by paying attention to what everyone brings to the table of experience.

We should not limit ourselves to narrow one-sided views (Alarid & Cromwell 2001, p.xii)

If the criminal justice system tends to wear blinders to alternative perspectives, the academy is no less guilty. Perhaps we as scholars are the most culpable, for our stated, universally agreed upon mission and goal is to *seek the truth*. But, too often, it is the truth as we see it, and woe be to the person who disagrees.

I am reminded of a story of a man who played the cello. He sat around the house day in and day out sawing on the cello. One day his wife asked him, "How is it that other cello players move their hands up and down the neck of the instrument, playing different chords and notes. You never move your hand and always play the same note." He replied, "My dear, they are looking for the right one. I have found it." Many of us suffer from the same problem—we have found it and have no need to look further. We tend to create dichotomies on the basis of methodology and theoretical perspective, as well as on the basis of academic vs. practitioner.

In a paper recently published in *ACJS Today* entitled "Confessions of a Quantitative Criminologist," Karen McElrath, of Queen's University in Belfast, Ireland, described how she was trained as a quantitative researcher and how she was taught to disdain qualitative research. She related how, in the latter semesters of her doctoral studies, she took a qualitative research course because she had taken all the quantitative courses available. "I remember how bored I was," she wrote. "I approached the readings with skepticism because I had already made up my mind. I had no interest whatsoever, in using qualitative methods. I not only dismissed it, but silently mocked qualitative studies and those who used them" (2001, p. 3).

Karen then went on to discuss how she and a colleague at Queen's received a research grant to study the life styles of Ecstasy users. The funding agency made it clear that they expected a qualitative approach. She and her colleague got up to speed on qualitative methodology and began her research. She wrote:

The benefits of using a qualitative approach were immediate and far reaching. A quantitative approach would never have provided us with the non-linear sequence of drug use patterns and the multidimensional reasons for desisting from drug use. Nor would a quantitative approach have been able to reveal the relationships between Ecstasy use and

Catholic-Protestant interactions in an extremely divided society (2001, p. 3).

She suggested that we as scholars put aside our defensiveness about methodology but to be true to the goals of scientific inquiry, using the methodology which best answers our research questions. She cites David Bayley's speech at ACJS over 20 years ago, in which he called for an end to "methodological narcissism" or "methods for methods sake" (Bayley 1978, p. 287) and she concludes with "the true challenge is to develop expertise in both approaches, to recognize the circumstances for which a particular tool would be most beneficial and to have the courage to use it (2001, p.)" That is truly crossing boundaries in research.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES IN THEORY

But what of theory? Of all the issues that we struggle with, the cause of crime is perhaps the most troublesome. There is an old saying that when you give a child a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail. So it often is in the academy. When I was in graduate school, we classified professors by their theoretical orientation. So and so is a Marxist, another is a learning theorist, and another is biological. We quickly learned that even considering a Marxist analysis with the biologist or vice versa was akin to an academic death sentence with that professor.

One of the most impermeable boundaries in theory is that between the social and biological paradigms. For many criminologists, even the thought of considering a biological origin for crime is unthinkable. Those who venture into this domain are often criticized and even demonized for their temerity. A few years ago, strident protests from within our discipline caused the National Institute of Justice to cancel a scheduled and funded conference on biology and crime. Political correctness gone wild!

The emergence of integrative theories is encouraging, but criminology remains fragmented by ideology. A recent study showed that there were no less than 23 theories listed by participating criminologists believed to have the most empirical support. This suggests that the cause of crime is a complex issue calling for a range of explanations. However, too many of us cleave to one approach to understanding crime and tend to disparage others. The practice of refusing to seriously consider a theory because it is not consistent with our own worldview is short sighted and unscientific.

In a recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education (October 9, 2001) Steven Sample, discussing leadership, suggests that most people are binary—they categorize things as good or bad, black or white, friend or foe. He argues that a good leader

needs to be able to see shades of gray inherent in a situation. This technique of "thinking gray" might also be applied to understanding crime. Sample states:

Thinking gray is an uncommon characteristic, but it is one of the most important skills that we can acquire. Its essence is this: Don't form an opinion about an important matter until you've heard all the relevant facts and arguments.

He goes on to quote F. Scott Fitzgerald who observed that the test of a first rate mind is the ability to hold two opposing thoughts at the same time while retaining the ability to function (2001).

I might add to Professor Sample's argument, "Once you have formed an opinion, remain open to new ideas, new data and the possibility of other explanations." Also, be aware that every theory not only tells us what to look at, but also, by implication, what not to look at.

Paternoster and Bachman (2001) caution that if a theory holds that criminal conduct is behavior rationally chosen after weighing the pros and cons inherent in the act, it implies that there is little reason to consider the influence of broken homes, dysfunctional families, or chemical imbalances. It implies that these variables are not relevant and thus do not require much consideration.

Thus, the theory informs us that it is only necessary to feel the elephant's trunk in order to know what it looks like, then all elephants will be described as "looking much like a tree."

Paternoster and Bachman (2001, p.8) also observe that implicit in every theory are the personal preferences, and personal assumptions about human nature of the theorist. "A theory may be accepted and rejected, enjoy professional popularity or anonymity, in part because of what we may not like about what it implies about things like the essence of human nature or what it suggests we do in the world to reduce crime."

Perhaps this explains why policy makers so seldom consider criminological theory when enacting legislation. Todd Clear in his ACJS Presidential Address last year (2001, p.725) pointed out that "no legislature dealing with the field of medicine would ever pass any legislation without consulting the American Medical Association," and yet seldom do criminal justice policymakers look to those of us who study crime before enacting legislation.

Why do you suppose that is? I would argue that it is because we are so fragmented and that theory in criminology is too idiosyncratic, too tied to the worldview of the theorist, and thus violating the basic tenets of scientific inquiry. Certainly, no physical or

natural science is so subject to the social and political orientations of the scientist.

The challenge for criminologists should be to construct theories of crime, requiring a description of the physical, biological, psychological and social risk factors associated with the emergence of criminal behaviors among particular individuals and groups in society. Perhaps the greatest boundary of them all might be to consider reevaluating how we theorize about crime and criminals.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES IN POLICY

In a recent paper, Tom Bernard (2001) argued for an end to the falsification process and competitive testing of theories—stating that no theory had been falsified in 100 years—and for a focus instead on integration based on a risk factor approach. The essential question, he argues, should be, “Which variables are related to crime and in which ways?” By doing so, theory becomes relevant to policy making. “Looking at theories in terms of location of independent variation and the direction of causation draws attention directly to the cause of crime and what can be done about it” (p. 344).

David Farrington (2000) spoke of the desirability of the risk factor paradigm in his 1999 Presidential Address to the American Society of Criminology. The risk factor approach is a perfect example of the theme of this conference— “Crossing Boundaries to Increase Knowledge.” This paradigm has been used for years to deal with cancer and heart disease, as well as a wide range of other illnesses. As Farrington stated, “...the identified risk factors for heart disease included smoking, a fatty diet and lack of exercise. These can be tackled by encouraging people to stop smoking, to have a more healthy, low-fat diet and to take more exercise” (p. 1).

This approach—in both medicine and criminology— “highlights the policy implications of the theory by focusing upon what the theory proposes as a cause of crime” (Vold, Bernard and Snipes 2002).

Before I conclude, I’d like to cite an example of boundary crossing that has evolved through the creativity and innovation of members of this organization. The boundary they traversed is one of the least crossed—that between the academic world and the criminal justice system—that between theory and practice.

Environmental Criminology theory formulated by Paul and Pat Brantingham focuses on the role of the physical environment and criminal events. Environmental criminologists are concerned with where and when crimes occur—with the social and physical characteristics of crime sites. They examine the movements that bring the offender and target

together at the crime site and, and ask about the perceptual processes that lead to the selection of crime sites and the social processes of ecological labeling (Brantingham and Brantingham 1981).

Using environmental criminology theory as the basis for his research, one of their students, Kim Rossmo, developed a criminal investigation strategy, which he calls geographic profiling. This unique and creative investigative strategy has been unbelievably successful in identifying and apprehending serial offenders all over the world. As a law enforcement officer in British Columbia, Kim did not brush off theory as an academic exercise with no real contribution to make to his job as a criminal investigator; he crossed that boundary between practitioner and scholar.

Last year, I included environmental criminology in my graduate theory course at Wichita State University. I required my students to read several of the Brantingham’s papers. When the course concluded, one of the students, a police detective, came to my office and told me that he had recently been assigned a burglary to investigate. He had no leads and was about to write the burglary off as unclearable when he remembered the Brantingham’s paper on Nodes, paths and edges in *Environmental Psychology* (Brantingham & Brantingham 1993).

He began to apply the theory. He noted that there was a middle school near the burglary (a node) and realized that a sidewalk (a path) that ran by the school passed the home (another node) of a juvenile with an extensive record. The burglary had been committed between the noon hour and 5:00 PM. Perhaps around 3:00 immediately after school. Follow-up investigation proved the juvenile was the burglar. My detective was amazed. Theory did have relevance in the real world, but only because he was willing to consider that it might.

That is what is meant by the theme of this conference—Crossing Boundaries and Increasing Knowledge. However, it can only happen if we become more tolerant and open to new ideas, to the possibilities inherent in the work of those with whom we might not now agree, and to consider the true complexity of human behavior as we develop criminal justice policy. We must be open to new and innovative ways of thinking about and doing things. Otherwise, we will always be feeling the tail or the trunk or the leg of the elephant and believing with all our heart that we understand what an elephant is.

Thank you

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