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Keynote Address
Rethinking Intervention: Consciousness, Solidarity, and Hope
as Criminological Principles

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What do I mean by “rethinking” intervention, and why do I think it matters?

For a very long time, I’ve found myself deeply conflicted about the role of rehabilitation, or “treatment,” in a progressive vision of justice. Like a lot of other criminologists on the Left, I’ve rejected the conservative idea that there’s nothing we can do to help people who “offend” to turn their lives around for the better—and so all we can do is lock them up and essentially forget about them. It’s hard to overstate how much that argument fed into the growth of mass incarceration as our main response to crime in the United States—or the magnitude of the waste of human potential this has represented. And so I’ve felt it’s very important to kick back against the idea that “nothing works,” and I’ve done that. On several occasions I’ve looked hard at the evidence on various kinds of intervention programs and argued that some things *do* work—at least a little and that investing in those things is a lot better use of our resources than doing what we’ve been doing. I’ve been buried up to my ears in that research literature again recently (Currie forthcoming), and I’d make the same argument today.

But that’s not the whole story.

As I said, I think that the defense of the idea of rehabilitation, within limits, is necessary and correct. But the limits are very real. And in the haste to fight back against the conservative argument, we have sometimes fallen by default into supporting programs that we

shouldn’t support—or at least lumping all kinds of things together in our defense of what works, without asking too many questions about what some of those interventions actually involve. And maybe even more importantly, we haven’t put much energy into thinking harder about what a genuinely progressive approach to intervention would look like—and how we would deliver it (Currie 2008).

Some people on the progressive side, of course, would say we don’t need to think about that question—and would probably scratch their heads when I bring it up as an issue. There is a strong and enduring current of “non-interventionism” on the left - a sense that if we just got the state and its justice system off people’s backs, everything would be okay. But I don’t think that view will cut it in the face of today’s realities.

Last year in Oakland, California, more than 100 people lost their lives to violence, almost entirely people of color, mostly young, who were killed by people very much like themselves. Progressive people around the world were rightly appalled by the spectacle of over a thousand people, very disproportionately black and poor, who died in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. But violence, mostly concentrated in the same kind of communities, has taken a toll in lives equal to several *hundred* Katrinas over the last generation. And beyond the death toll, there is the pervasive victimization by violence that doesn’t kill you but that makes your life scary and intolerable. There are many places in the United States

where girls and women are afraid to go out of their houses to school or work for fear that they'll be attacked by men. But then again, they may also be afraid to stay *in* their houses because they're afraid they'll be attacked by the men who live there.

In the face of this situation, to me, simple nonintervention is not an option, morally or politically. People really do engage in behavior that is destructive, predatory, and exploitative—as well as often self-destructive. They do things that violate the most basic human rights, dignity, and security of other people, and that can accumulate, over time, to destroy the social fabric of whole communities. They engage in behavior that's fueled by values that go against what most of us progressives believe and that we couldn't in a million years support. And in the process lives are destroyed—both those of victims and those of perpetrators. In the hardest-hit communities in the United States it's safe to say that *most* people are scarred in one way or another by the experience, or the threat, of violence.

That's true also, to a lesser degree, in other advanced societies, and it's true in spades for some of the most afflicted countries of the developing world—like Mexico, or Brazil, or Venezuela, or South Africa—where violence is considerably worse than it is in the United States. In all of these places, there are plenty of people who don't really care very much about the resulting damage, because it mostly happens to people whose lives are considered expendable. But that can't be *our* position. Instead, I think that we, as progressive criminologists, need to come up with strategies of intervention that unflinchingly confront the reality of violence and predation, but do so in ways that fit our progressive values and our democratic aspirations—strategies of intervention that mesh with our vision of the kind of societies we want to build. Part of that strategy has to involve creative efforts to change the hearts and minds of the people who are doing the damage, or are likely to in the future.

That's of course only *one* part of a larger progressive strategy against violence and predation. Another part of the progressive response surely has to be structural: we need to affirm that without broader social change addressing the glaring social deficits in the communities I'm talking about, nothing else we do will get very far. So we need to keep insisting on job policies and antipoverty policies and a health care policy that's real, on economic development policies that distribute the gains from growth more equitably, and more. But that's not the only realm we need to work on. The kind of predatory global capitalism we now live under has deep cultural and psychological effects as well as structural and material ones. We need to work on that level as well. We need, in short, to work with the people who are doing the violence, or "at risk" of doing it; we need to intervene. That puts us squarely up against the question of what we want intervention to accomplish—want intervention to *mean*.

I don't think we want it to mean just the extension of the kinds of things we now do in the name of treatment or rehabilitation. Again, I'm not suggesting that nothing good now happens in this vein. There are some good programs that are worthy of our support: I've written about them, and so have others. But too much of what's now offered up as rehabilitation, or treatment, or as preventive work with high-risk people, is at best not enough, at worst bogus and even scary. Too much of it falls under the heading of what I call "conformist" intervention. By that I mean that ultimately what it's about is trying to help people we deem to be at risk, or who have already gotten involved in the justice system, *fit in* to the existing society around them.

Conformist intervention is about getting people to accept the usually fairly bleak conditions of life that have put them at risk, or turned them into "offenders," in the first place. It teaches them to locate the source of their problems mainly, if not entirely, in themselves. So "rehabilitation" comes to mean channeling vulnerable people into chronically marginal and stultifying lives. We then measure the "success" of these efforts in quite minimal and essentially negative ways: they commit fewer crimes, do fewer drugs or different drugs, and maybe get (at least briefly), some sort of job. Even if the job is basically exploitative and short-lived, their future options are slim and their present lives are still pinched and precarious, we still count that as all good.

But the problem with this kind of intervention is twofold. One, it doesn't really work—at least not very well, and not very reliably. Two, even to the extent that it does work, it fails the test of living up to anything approaching a genuinely progressive or democratic vision of what we want peoples' lives to be. These two things are connected. Much of what I'm calling conformist intervention, even when it's done right—implemented thoroughly—is still "thin" intervention. At best, it aims for relatively minor changes to what are very often deeply disadvantaged, stressed, and troubled lives—lives that may have been stripped of meaning, purpose, and opportunity. It makes no attempt to alter any of the larger surrounding circumstances that shape those lives for the worse. So it's actually fairly miraculous that these kinds of interventions "work" as well as some of them sometimes do.

That kind of intervention can't address the most powerful forces affecting the lives of the people it is designed to help. It also can't *inspire* the people whose values and behavior we want to change, and therefore can't offer a compelling alternative to the lures of street crime, or of drugs. It can't reliably counter the devastating sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness that often overwhelms people with the kinds of problems and the kinds of circumstances that often get them in to the justice system in the first place. The rewards offered by simply accepting your place in the society around you, with its meager opportunities, its gutted social supports, and its corrosive everyday stresses, are also not enough to

compete with the pull of the predatory, profit-oriented individualism that animates the drugs/crime nexus in the U.S. and around the world today. That helps explain why even reasonably good, well-intentioned programs often don't make much difference in most peoples' lives or behavior. To counter those things you need something much more compelling. You need a transforming vision that can take offenders outside themselves, take them beyond their immediate troubles and beyond that regressive and predatory culture that often enmeshes them, that can provide a larger sense of meaning and purpose that can inspire and mobilize them.

Against that kind of "conformist" intervention, I want to counterpose what I call "transformative" intervention: intervention designed not to try to fit people into the existing society around them, but to involve them in the process of transforming themselves by working to *challenge* the conditions that now diminish and distort their lives. Transformative intervention involves helping people to move beyond the individualistic, often exploitative, often uncaring, cultural orientations that now suffuse their communities—and our society as a whole—and to begin to relate differently to themselves, to those around them, and to the larger community (and the planet). Through this process, they grow an alternative way of looking at the world and their place in it that, among other things, will be less violent, less predatory, and less exploitative.

What are the elements of the kind of alternative way of looking at the world I'm talking about? I think it might have three fundamental themes or fundamental principles; I call them consciousness, solidarity, and hope. By "consciousness" I mean the understanding that their troubles and frustrations, and the troubles and frustrations of those around them, have causes *outside themselves*—are rooted in the systemic injustices and deprivations that are inflicted on them by the society around them. Consciousness, in this sense, is about gaining the understanding that the things that make you angry, the things that make you desperate, have a lot to do with your particular location in a society where life chances and supports are profoundly shaped by race, class, gender, and age. Put another way, it's the capacity to recognize that it's no accident that the population of our prisons and our youth institutions comes overwhelmingly from certain places and not others. It's no accident that in the community you live in there are only crummy schools, and not much health care, and not many real jobs—but a lot of "law enforcement." It's the ability to absorb the lesson that the real 'enemy' is not your own inner flaws, or your girlfriend, or the other guys on the next block, but the social arrangements that put all of you at risk.

Note that this principle runs exactly counter to the one that so often dominates our current approach to intervention and rehabilitation. The models of intervention that you now mostly find in our systems of social

control—in juvenile institutions or drug treatment, for example—usually urge people to locate the source of their troubles in themselves: in the "bad choices" they've made, in their lack of personal responsibility. They are taught not to "externalize" their problems, as the mental health people say. But I'm saying "externalizing" is precisely what we should encourage. The beginning of transformation lies in doing what C. Wright Mills (1959) talked about when he spoke of the importance of linking "private troubles" with "public issues." Nurturing that ability to link their private angers and despairs with malfunctioning or negligent or exploitative institutions is absolutely central in helping people to move beyond their immediate problems and beyond individual solutions, to think about how those problems are embedded in larger social structures, and to begin to think about how those structures might be challenged.

The second principle is closely related to social consciousness: it's what I call "solidarity." By that I mean that you come to see those around you—the kid in the other gang, for example—not as a natural enemy who is somehow "other" and irrevocably on the wrong side, but as someone who is actually very much like you, and whose life is shaped and constrained by the same larger forces. That other kid is not an implacable enemy or competitor whose disrespect toward you has to be met with a violent response in order to preserve your own standing and security. That other kid is, at least potentially, your brother or sister—your potential comrade in arms in common action against the real sources of your problems.

Solidarity, in other words, is about the recognition that you're in the same boat with others around you—not just people in your own gang or your own block, but a much wider circle or circles of people all facing similar deprivations and injustices, even if they are a different color, or gender, or speak a different language, or live on the other side of town. As a corollary, it requires recognition that, if you really want to attack those injustices and deprivations at their source, you will need to work *with* those others, not against them in a kind of Hobbesian war of each against all. Again, to me this is crucially important because it goes directly against the predatory individualism—the "me first" attitude—that so powerfully suffuses American culture in general, and in fact suffuses contemporary capitalism around the world. This orientation is one that leads people to view each other as targets rather than comrades—as opportunities for material or sexual gain rather than as members of a common and respected community.

That sense that you're on your own in a pervasive struggle against others around you is fostered by the bleak conditions of life in many American communities and is absolutely fundamental to the way many people who wind up in the justice system think about the world. I remember very vividly how enormously saddened I was once when I was interviewing a sixteen year old girl who was a fairly

major drug dealer back at the height of the crack epidemic in California in the late 1980s. She told me how slowly but surely as she grew up she had come to realize that “you for your own and your own self only.” She had come to learn that nobody was going to help her—not family, not friends, certainly not any public agency-- and the beginning of wisdom, even of responsibility, was to understand that and to learn to become good at taking matters into your own hands.

One of the best descriptions I know of the way in which these attitudes have spread is in the work of Simon Winlow, Steve Hall, and Craig Ancrum (2008) in their book *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture*. They look at communities in the North of England that used to be solidly working class places—places that may have been poor, but still had a deep-rooted ethos of collective solidarity born of the common experience of industrial work. When that was lost because of de-industrialization, the predatory individualism of consumer capitalism rushed in to fill the cultural vacuum. And that’s a culture that facilitates people thinking that it’s perfectly OK to rip off others in the community with impunity and without remorse.

Solidarity as a way of orienting yourself to the world involves a new kind of conception of responsibility. It’s not the same as the mantra of personal responsibility that dominates the way we think about social issues in America. It doesn’t say you are responsible, and you alone, for your troubles, or that you’re solely responsible for fixing them—which is what most therapeutic interventions in and out of the juvenile and adult justice systems now tell you. But it does say that you’re part of a larger community, or set of communities, and that you have responsibilities to those communities just as they do to you. Part of the responsibility of the larger community to you is to treat you as a full-fledged human being with rights to security, opportunity, and dignity. You then have a responsibility to insist on the same rights for everyone else, and to practice that principle in your own life.

Nowhere is this principle of solidarity more important than when it comes to gender. The hard fact is that the culture of predatory individualism that now suffuses many of the most violence-ridden communities, both in this country and around the world, is also typically a profoundly sexist culture that routinely denigrates and exploits women and at the extreme makes it virtually impossible for women to live their lives, in the home or on the street, without more or less constant fear. Here too, nonintervention is not a serious option. Challenging that culture is urgent and imperative, and would strike an enormous blow against violence around the world.

The *third* principle of what I’m calling “transformative” intervention is what, at the risk of sounding a little hokey, I call “hope.” Hope might at first blush seem like a fairly unusual criminological concept, but I think it’s actually central both in understanding the

roots of crime and understanding how it might be enduringly prevented—in progressive ways. Hope is important because in its absence people can feel as if what they do or don’t do doesn’t matter, that consequences are not very important. It can also breed a focus on short-term personal gain and comfort as opposed to making the harder effort to become a fully contributing member of a larger community. Hope, in the sense I want to use it, is the opposite of the sense of hopelessness and not giving a damn that I think are such central parts of the mind-set that breeds violence and self-destruction.

When I talk about the importance of hope, I don’t mean hope in the superficial sense of the power of positive thinking—the belief that if you just have a positive outlook on life than everything will be just fine. I use it in the sense that Vaclav Havel, the former Czech president and writer who passed away recently, once put it—which has really stuck with me ever since I first read it. Havel makes a distinction between hope and “optimism.” He says optimism is the belief that everything is going to be OK, that all will work out for the best. Hope, on the other hand, is “an orientation of the spirit” (1991, p. 181)—the conviction that you know what the right path is and that you can strive to make things happen that you believe need to happen: that you can work to realize your values and that this work will matter.

Hope in that sense is closely related to the social consciousness I talked about before. It’s rooted in the understanding that the conditions around you—conditions that you’ve come to understand have a lot to do with the way you’ve been hurting yourself, or hurting others—are not inevitable facts of nature but are human creations and are at least potentially changeable through your own actions in concert with others. Hope doesn’t presume that doing this will be easy, but that common action against the forces that are distorting your life and destroying your community is possible, that it’s a worthy thing to dedicate yourself to and that it can make a difference.

Again, this is very different from the Darwinian notion that you are responsible for taking on your own problems in isolation from others—that if you just make the right personal choices you can live a happy life—which is often a set-up for failure and subsequent despair. It’s a way of affirming that working to create a different kind of world for yourself and others can provide a transcendent sense of meaning and purpose—a sense that may have been very hard to find before. If you have that sense, it can be an enormously important source of motivation and resilience, and can get you through a lot. If you don’t have it, life can become very bleak and purposeless very fast.

Without that sense of meaning and purpose, you can fall into what I called, when I was studying middle-class adolescents who’d gotten in big trouble, a sense of “carelessness”—the bone deep feeling that you really don’t care what happens to you or to anybody else. Father Greg

Boyle, who founded Homeboy industries in Los Angeles to provide work and community to gang youth, similarly talks about the “lethal absence of hope” in the places they come from. The absence of hope is lethal because it puts you in a frame of mind in which anything is possible, no matter how destructive or self-destructive, because there is insufficient reason *not* to do it. Without hope in this sense, all courses of action become equally meaningful—or equally meaningless.

So those are three central themes in what I call transformative intervention. Again, you’ll notice that they run parallel to, but in complete opposition to, the principles of what I call conformist intervention. Where this vision of personal transformation centers on nurturing the social and political awareness of people who have typically been systematically deprived, neglected and exploited, the conventional, conformist approach aims to promote *unconsciousness* about those conditions, a kind of willful blindness toward the forces that shape your life. Where the transformative approach stresses working collectively with others to change those external conditions, the conformist model urges people to look inward and to regard looking outward as an excuse. Where the fostering of a sense of hope and collective aspiration, collective challenge to life as it now is, is central to what I’m calling transformative intervention, the conformist model encourages acquiescence and lowered aspirations, the acceptance of constricted lives and shattered opportunities. As one kid I interviewed in a drug program once said to me, parroting what the program had taught him, “The world don’t change for you; you change for the world.” The message of transformative intervention is: you can—and should—change the world, and in the process you’ll change yourself.

These three principles are themes, rather than strategies. They’re about the kind of worldview that I think we want intervention to encourage, to nurture. By themselves they leave unanswered what might be considered the tougher questions of how to translate those principles into practice—and who can or should do that? Since I’m going to run out of time, let me just close with a couple of thoughts.

These ideas aren’t completely new, of course, and somewhat similar ideas have been put into practice before—especially in the movement around education and social justice. My own thinking on this has been influenced by the great Brazilian education theorist and advocate, Paulo Freire (1970), and Freire’s ideas, or ones along similar lines, have been a big influence on people both in the U.S. and elsewhere who have tried to introduce a social justice orientation in the schools. Tim Goddard and Randy Myers (forthcoming) have recently written eloquently about some American examples of alternative schools committed to a vision of social justice. There’s a

lot that criminologists can learn from the schools and social justice movement and a lot of useful collaboration that may be possible.

There are also some specific ideas about youth involvement in the community that I think can fit very nicely with the principles I’m talking about. One is to get “at risk” youth involved in mapping the social deficits in the communities they live in—charting the lack of good schools, the absence of accessible health care, the overpresence of law enforcement, the lack of jobs or the loss of them, the overwhelming impact of the prison system. Kids who might otherwise be going off on each other or nodding out can be enlisted to gather information—by doing interviews, collecting institutional data, taking pictures, all of the above—that describes the patterns of neglect and exploitation that impinge on their lives.

We can also do what’s essentially a critical education curriculum for kids who are coming out of institutional custody—or at risk of going in: something that doesn’t at all resemble the frequently bogus “education” that kids in trouble now most often get, if they get anything at all.

There are a lot of possibilities. The point is that as criminologists we need to begin thinking harder about them than we’ve done before, and begin to develop the kinds of concrete interventions that align with our best values.

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