WESTERN CRIMINOLOGY REVIEW
http://wcr.sonoma.edu

Online citation: Hepburn, John R. 2013. "Get Dirty." *Western Criminology Review* 14(1):1-5. (http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v14n1/Hepburn.pdf).

Keynote Address: Get Dirty
WSC Conference, 2013, Berkeley, California

John R. Hepburn
Arizona State University

Keywords: primary data collection, research context, research methods, research practice

As I reflect upon my academic career, one constant over the span of more than 40 years is that I have been actively involved in collecting original data. My initial ventures occurred while I was a graduate student. As a master's student, I spent the better part of three months sitting in the offices of the Chicago Police Department's homicide bureau while I collected thesis data from stacks of manila folders containing large and disorganized paper files on every case of homicide that had occurred during the prior year. While my interest was in the information contained in the files, the detectives were more than eager to provide a young novice with graphic and sordid stories about the homicides they were working at that time. As a doctoral student, my dissertation research required me to conduct surveys of juveniles and interviews of both the teachers and parents of those juveniles, but it was the many weeks spent interviewing inmates in a nearby prison as part of my research assistantship that set the foundation for the kind of research that would characterize much of my career.

When, in response to the 1971 Attica prison inmate uprising and violent reprisals by the State Police, the New York Department of Correctional Services sought to establish a formal mechanism to hear and resolve inmate grievances, I was fortunate as a second-year Assistant Professor to head a small research team tasked with the process and impact evaluation of the new Inmate Grievance Resolution Procedure. For three years I made bi-weekly visits to the prison facilities for men at Auburn and Attica, as well as the women's facility at Bedford Hills, to conduct focus groups, interview officers, interview and survey inmates, and obtain official records. Before concluding that effort, we expanded our scope to include inmate grievance resolution procedures at maximum security prisons in Columbia, South Carolina and Canon City, Colorado.

My next major journey into prisons was to study the impact of a state's change from indeterminate to determinate sentencing policies on prison management and the control of inmates. Working with Lynne Goodstein and Doris MacKenzie, we wanted to know the extent to which, if at all, the inability to offer the prospect of early release based on "good time" and/or parole to community supervision decreased inmate program participation and increased inmate misconduct, as well as to ascertain whether any functional alternatives to good time credits and parole had emerged to maintain order. Over a two-year period, I made visits to prisons in Connecticut, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri and Pennsylvania to interview prison administrators, line officers and supervisors, to conduct focus groups with inmates and staff, and to survey both inmates and officers.

Since then, I have collected primary data in prisons and jails in Arizona and other states on a variety of topics, each requiring negotiated entry, focus groups, surveys of officers and/or inmates, and interviews with higher-level command staff and administrators. Topics included inmate misconduct, inmate classification systems, security threat group management, the bases of power and the structure of authority among correctional officers, the diverse effects

of the institutional climate on correctional officers, the use of force against prisoners, and the deterrent effects of pink underwear, chain gangs and other unique aspects of county jail incarceration on post-release recidivism.

Intermittently, I engaged in original data collection in collaboration with adult probation departments. As with institutional corrections, these efforts to study salient issues of community corrections required negotiated entry, pouring through case files that only recently have become automated, interviews and/or surveys of probation officers, and interviews with probationers who met some criterion of our research. Over the years, I have focused these efforts to the study of convicted sex offenders, youthful offenders, probationers exiting residential drug treatment programs, female drug offenders, drug court participants, and probationers who were eligible for early release from supervision.

Whether the original data were collected in prisons or probation agencies, a common denominator of these efforts over the past forty years is that this kind of research is time consuming. It takes months to negotiate entry, to prepare and pretest the interview and survey instruments, to design and then adapt sampling methods to the unique conditions encountered in the field, and to collect, automate and clean the data. Panel studies requiring repeat observations over time were worse, of course, and larger studies require extensive staff hiring and training, as well as the management and replacement of staff over time. Even more taxing of our time are the long-term observational studies, such as those by Barbara Owen (1998). Regardless of methodologies, funded research comes with its own demands on the researcher to submit the proposal and await a funding decision and, if funded, to maintain the budget, to submit quarterly and final reports, and to meet as needed with grant managers from the funding agency.

Another factor common to the collection of original data in institutional and community corrections is that our research methodology is not as "clean" as we might like. Textbook methodologies quickly evaporate when confronted by the realities of prison organization and operations. The limitations, challenges, and problems to be solved when doing research in correctional settings have been discussed knowledgeably already (see, for instance, Fox, Zambrana, and Lane 2011; Lane, Turner, and Flores 2004; Marquart 1986; Megargee 1995; Trulson, Marquart, and Mullings 2004). My point here is to assert that the heavy investment of one's time and the methodological challenges and limitations encountered in collecting original data, while at times frustrating, also create learning experiences that provide qualitative insights about criminal justice agencies and organizations. These insights are not a direct part of the research question, but nonetheless they add substantively to the researchers' understanding of the organization and its personnel. My own research experiences have enriched my work life and my appreciation for the efforts that go into research in corrections. Researchers often encounter apathy, or more likely active and passive resistance, and even hostility, toward the research and the researchers who are viewed, at minimum, as an unwarranted disruption to the routine, or worse, as creating problems of order and control. For what? For a study that the administration and staff often believe will portray the prison and its officers unfavorably and raise sympathy or public support for the hapless inmates and their conditions of confinement.

GETTING DIRTY

Primary data collection requires that we leave the relatively sanitized and disinfected environment of the university and the clean routines of our offices to enter into the world of those we study. Through primary data collection, we glimpse the setting of our research, hear the sounds of the prisons, inhale the smells of the jails, observe the passing of rule violators and rule enforcers alike. We observe everyday activities, we "feel" the levels of tension, mistrust, and hostility, and we gain insights into the complexities of the relationships within the organization and among its personnel. We celebrate the fact that we emerge from the correctional agency or police department with both the data we sought and a greater knowledge and understanding of the working and living conditions of those we are studying.

In doing this kind of research, whether in corrections or some other specialty area, we are getting dirty. The "dirty" part of the task has many facets. One is the often-cited statement that original data collection enables the researcher to get his or her hands dirty – that is, to be in the natural setting of our research subjects and research questions, coming into direct contact with the sights, sounds, and activities of the places and people we study, and obtaining sensory information that will provide meaningful context for our study. Getting dirty also involves methodologies that often are less than the idealized versions advanced in textbooks. But, getting dirty is not the same as being dirty! And, getting dirty by virtue of our efforts to collect original data does not transform the task of original data collection into dirty work!

Recently, I overheard a discussion in which a colleague urged doctoral students and assistant professors to avoid any involvement in primary data collection. On the surface, this may be good advice to someone beginning an academic career. If the goal is a consistent rate of publications that, over time, sums to a very large number of publications and a high H factor for citations, then that goal is not well served by conducting one's own research. On the contrary, it is made more difficult by any or all of the elements of doing original research -- if nothing else, by the amount of time that must be invested.

Upon further reflection, however, my reaction is two-fold. First, original data collection may require that we get

our hands dirty, but it is the essence of our discipline. It is the basis by which we advance the state of knowledge: original research uncovers and discovers, especially within the framework of qualitative research that leads to induction of hypotheses and grounded theory; original research forces us to operationalize theoretical concepts; original research permits us to test theoretical-derived hypotheses; and original research provides the basis for evidence-based practices and policies. And, let's not forget that today's original data collection is a necessary step for tomorrow's secondary analysis of these data and for subsequent inclusion of the findings in a provocative and summative meta-analysis.

My second reaction is that there may be another message, a sub-text, if you will, buried in this admonition to young scholars. This other message is more than a cautionary observation that primary research, that getting dirty, can impede one's ability to publish and gain national prominence. Instead, this other message, whether intended or not, raises questions about social identity and professional hierarchy. At its worst, it is a noxious and delimiting issue, one that is both sinister and insidious in its assumptions. It is in response to this other message that I focus the following comments. I offer these comments not as an accusation but as a cautionary note. My comments are intended only to point out that getting dirty in the collection of original data should not be, and we should not let it be, misconstrued into dirty work.

DIRTY WORK

Reflecting on the horrors that occurred in German concentration camps during World War II, the sociologist Everett C. Hughes (1962) asked how otherwise ordinary and civilized people could do such work. He concluded that those pariahs who do the dirty work of society are really acting as agents for the rest of us, and, as a result, we "give a kind of unconscious mandate" to people who are assigned to do our dirty work "to go beyond anything we ourselves would care to do or even to acknowledge" (Hughes1962:8) Following on this work, Lewis Coser (1969) extended the focus from the concentration campus of World War II to include American prisons, mental hospitals, and what he referred to as the dirty work of Southern law enforcement officers. He observed that society "requires for its operation the performance of certain roles whose existence its members can admit only with difficulty. Though 'good people' may be convinced that these roles are 'necessary' they will nevertheless, in the ordinary course of events, try to shield themselves from detailed knowledge about them" (Coser, 1969:101-102).

Since then, the concept of dirty work has been extended to a variety of other occupations and professions, most notably a variety of sex workers—prostitutes, exotic dancers, phone sex workers, and the clerks who provide sales in sex shops. Other occupations that engage in dirty work, according to some analyses (see Simpson, Slutskaya, Lewis and Hopfl, 2012), are morticians, bail bonds men and women, prison guards, garbage collectors, migrant agricultural workers, gynecological nurses and home care workers. What is common is that this kind of work is socially stigmatized. Dirty work is the opposite of clean work, and clean work is good work. The concept of clean work creates boundaries that separate the pure from the contaminated.

Dirty work takes place in an unsavory environment, in a contaminated workplace. According to Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), the "contamination" of the workplace may be the result of physical taint (e.g., dirty or dangerous working conditions), social taint (e.g., regular contact with unsavory or socially stigmatized persons), or moral taint (e.g., engaged in morally questionable work). Dirty workers cannot distance themselves from the taint of the workplace and, therefore, cannot avoid the social stain and stigma that derives from the work. Dirty work is the work of those at the lowest end of the social hierarchy and those at the margins of society. Often, dirty work is gendered, classed, and raced. The overarching conclusion from current studies of dirty work is that the often low or marginal status of dirty work, the overtones of immorality or social stigma associated with such work, and the desire by many to avoid it creates social divisions, or a social hierarchy (see Davis 1984; Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss 2006; Simpson et al. 2012).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR CRIMINOLOGY AND ITS PRACTITIONERS?

Goffman (1963) noted that dirt has the potential to create stigmatizing conditions such that workers who are stained by their proximity to dirt, or to dirty work, are tainted and disqualified from full social acceptance. That is, the negative qualities associated with dirt are projected onto those who do dirty work, creating for those workers problems of identity management and social validation. This can create not only personal problems for them in terms of coping strategies to deal with stigma at work, but also structural problems for career advancement and professional recognition. As criminologists, and within (1) the context of criminology as a profession, (2) the social organization of the discipline, and (3) the hierarchy of values and worth, then, we need to remain alert to messages that would stigmatize and marginalize the work of original data collection and to those efforts that would under-value and debase those who engage in original data collection. If doing this kind of research is dirty, then I argue that we need to embrace the dirt but not the conceptualization of dirty work!

Identity is relational; identity is negotiated. If "getting dirty" is being equated to "being dirty" then we need to cast, or to recast, the "getting dirty" aspect of the original

research endeavor in alternative terms—in more affirmative terms—to create and maintain a positive identity for the work and the worker. When we frame, or reframe, the work to give it a positive value, we can better appreciate the importance of this work, the magnitude of the task, time and effort involved in conducting this work, and its centrality to the discipline. We need to refocus from the stigmatizing to the credentialing or the crediting. Insofar as they apply to original research in criminology and criminal justice, we need to separate the concepts of "getting dirty" and "being dirty."

In conclusion, getting dirty must never be confused with doing dirty work, lest we relegate original research to the margins of our profession. I urge doctoral students and assistant professors, as well as all others, to get in the trenches, to tackle that task of original data collection, and to get dirty. But, simultaneously, please be mindful that getting dirty is not the same as being dirty. Collecting original data is not dirty work; on the contrary, collecting original data is the lifeblood activity of the discipline.

References

Ashforth, Blake E. and Glen E. Kreiner. 1999. "'How Can You Do It?': Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity." *The Academy of Management Review* 24(3):413-434.

Coser, Lewis A. 1969. "The Visibility of Evil." *Journal of Social Issues* 25(1):101-109.

Davis, David S. 1984. "Good People Doing Dirty Work: A study of Social Isolation." *Symbolic Interaction* 7(2):233-247.

Fox, Kathleen, Katheryn Zambrana, and Jodi Lane. 2011. "Getting In (and Staying In) When Everyone Else Wants to Get Out: Ten Lessons Learned from Conducting Research with Inmates in Jails." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 22(2):304-327.

Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. NY: Simon & Schuster.

Hughes, Everett. C. 1962. "Good People and Dirty Work." *Social Problems* 10(1):3-11.

Kreiner, Glen E., Blake E. Ashforth, and David M. Sluss. 2006. "Identity Dynamics in Occupational Dirty Work: Integrating Social Identity and System Justification Perspectives." *Journal of Organization Science* 17(5):619-636.

Lane, Jodi, Susan Turner, and Carmen Flores. 2004. "Researcher-Practitioner Collaboration in Corrections: Overcoming Hurdles for Successful Partnerships." *Criminal Justice Review* 29(1):97-114.

Megargee, Edwin I. 1995. "Assessment Research in Correctional Settings: Methodological Issues and Practical Problems." *Psychological Assessment* 7(3):359-366.

Marquart, James W. 1986. "Doing Research in Prison: The Strengths and Weaknesses of Full Participation as a Guard." *Justice Quarterly* 3(1):15-32.

Owen, Barbara. 1998. *In the Mix: Struggle and Survival in a Women's Prison.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Simpson, Ruth, Natasha Slutskaya, Patricia Lewis, and Heather Hopfl. 2012. "Introducing Dirty Work: Concepts and Identities." Pp. 1-18 in *Dirty Work: Concepts and Identities,* edited by R. Simpson, N. Slutskaya, P. Lewis, and H. Hopfl. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Trulson, Chad R., James W. Marquart, and Janet J. Mullings. 2004. "Breaking in: Gaining entry to prisons and other hard-to access criminal justice organizations." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 15(2):451-478.

About the author:

John R. Hepburn is a Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. He has extensive research experience on contemporary issues of corrections. One focus of his research is offender re-entry into the community, in which he studies the effects of individual risk factors and criminal justice organizational structures and processes on the offender's future social and criminal outcomes. The other focus of his research is the sociology of the prison as a complex organization, with particular attention to the effects of the structure and culture of the prison on its inmates and staff.

Contact Information: John R. Hepburn, Arizona State University, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 411 N. Central Ave. Ste. 600, Phoenix, AZ 85004. Phone: 602-496-2353; Fax: 602-496-2366; Email: John.Hepburn@asu.edu.