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Black Lives Matter in Criminology? Let's Prove It

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Katheryn Russell-Brown¹ 

Abstract

This essay examines the the academic journey—graduate school to full professor—of an African American professor of criminology and criminal justice. The essay discusses the how criminology and criminologists address race issues and offers a wish list of strategies designed to address problematic practices and racial pitfalls within criminology programs.

Keywords

academia, racial climate, criminology programs, mentorship, faculty relations, graduate school

Introduction

On her walk to a convenience store on Memorial Day, 2020, a Minneapolis high school student noticed there was a police encounter underway. She pushed record on her cell phone and began videotaping the incident. At the beginning of the incident, video footage shows a very alive George Floyd who had been pulled out of his car by four police officers. He asks why he is being arrested. At the end, Floyd pleads for his life, says he was not able to breathe, and calls for his children and his deceased mother. The video shows Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin with his knee pressed down on Floyd's neck for many minutes. Estimates vary, but by all accounts it was longer than 7 minutes (Walsh, 2020). This is a long time.

I have not been able to watch more than 20 seconds or so of this video. Over the years, I have seen countless videos and photographs of Black people being beaten, choked, kicked, and shot, as they begged for their lives. There is psychological trauma

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associated with seeing images of people and in particular people who look like you being tortured in public by agents of the state, or by people claiming to have been deputized to act on behalf of the state.¹

On the same day that George Floyd was killed, there was another high-profile racial encounter. The Central Park incident involved a Black man and a White woman. When Christian Cooper, who was there birdwatching, encountered Amy Cooper (no relation), he asked her to put a leash on her dog. She declined. In protest, Christian gave Amy's dog a treat and Amy called 911 two times and reported that a Black man was "threatening" her. After arriving on the scene and asking questions, police officers concluded that the incident involved a personal dispute and made no arrests. Christian Cooper was fortunate; it could have ended much differently.

George Floyd's killing, which occurred in the midst of what might be called a perfect storm—the Covid-19 pandemic, massive business shutdowns, and long-brewing racial unrest—managed to get people to pause, think and take action to support Black racial justice. The public reaction was massive compared with previous cases involving police killings of African Americans. Millions of peaceful protestors marched in America's streets and on four continents.

I believe the contemporary racial landscape offers an important backdrop to my discussion of the role race has played in my academic journey. I share these experiences in the hope that criminologists and the discipline of criminology will implement substantive race-related changes. I propose actions that criminologists can adopt if they take seriously the rallying cry, "Black Lives Matter."

(Leaving) Law School

In 1986, when I walked across the stage at the San Francisco Civic Center, I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. It was a tremendous feeling knowing that after 19 years of school—elementary, junior high, high school, college and law school—my formal education was complete. As well as my relationship with stodgy, ill-fitting caps and airless gowns.

That summer, I moved across the country, from Oakland, California to Montgomery, Alabama. I worked at the Southern Poverty Law Center as a Legal Fellow. Living and working in the deep South was eye-opening. All the book learning about jurisprudential theory, elements of crime, constitutional guarantees and rules of evidence, looked dramatically different in the real world. The SPLC cases I worked on covered a wide range, affirmative action, voting rights, lynching, and capital punishment.

First Teaching Position

After SPLC, I took my first teaching job, at Alabama State University (in Montgomery). Dr. Gregg Barak, who was chair of the criminal justice department, had encouraged me to apply. I taught criminal law, criminal procedure, evidence, and prisoner's rights. The 3/4 load was a lot, especially since these were all new courses. I

loved teaching but it was exhausting. Most of the time I was just a few pages ahead of my students. I felt an immense pride teaching African American college students and based on what some students told me, the feeling was mutual. It was also remarkable that here I was at an HBCU, in a criminal justice department, with four White male colleagues. I was the only Black person and the only woman in the department.

Beyond the challenges of being a new professor, I had a more pressing problem: my annual teaching salary of \$23,000 was barely enough to pay the bills. I had to find a second job. Thankfully, I found work at a local independent bookstore. My plan was to see if I could get placed on the tenure-track. That would be a semi-permanent position and provide a small increase in pay. Unfortunately, my request was denied. My law degree was insufficient to get me placed on the tenure-track in a graduate/undergraduate program. The rule didn't make sense to me, but I didn't know any way to get around it.

I felt I had found my professional home in college teaching. I was excited by my work preparing for class and class instruction. Now I had to seriously entertain a thought I never imagined I would consider again—returning to school. Dr. Barak encouraged me and said I would be able to “write my own ticket” with a law degree and a Ph.D. I decided to go for it and focused on programs on the east coast. After visiting some schools, I chose the doctoral program at the University of Maryland, College Park, twenty minutes outside of the nation's capital.

Back to (Graduate) School

I was surprised how much I enjoyed being back in school. There was a swirl of lengthy reading lists that included Karl Marx, Max Weber, Robert Park, Adolphe Quetelet, August Vollmer, Marvin Wolfgang, and Martin Luther King.

In the early 1990s, race was everywhere in the news, which made it an incredible time to study crime and justice issues. The nation was in the midst of the crack cocaine crisis.² Other events of the time included a bombshell report by the Sentencing Project (1990), finding that one-in-four Black men aged 20–29 were under the control of the justice system; Clarence Thomas's confirmation hearings; Anita Hill's testimony alleging sexual harassment by Thomas; Charles Stuart's racial hoax; Washington, D.C. mayor Marion Barry's arrest; and the videotaped police beating of Rodney King.

About midway through the first semester, I increasingly felt a gap between what I was learning in my doctoral program and what was going on outside the classroom. More to the point, I have very few memories of any discussions of race or racial history in any of my classes. Our readings and discussions offered limited engagement with historically rooted theoretical assessments that analyzed African Americans' racially disproportionate involvement in the justice system. In fact, we regularly considered and evaluated race. It was always one of the independent variables used in studies determining offending rates and patterns—and one of the variables frequently determined to be a significant predictor of offending. As to race, the research on street crime was clear: The rates of Black offending (and Black victimization) were

disproportionately high. So, even as we did not talk about race, we were talking about race.

The absence of critical engagement with race was a large part of what spurred my research interest on the topic. Most concerning for me was the silence around race in our analyses of criminological studies of crime: how race was framed, the research methods that were used and the research questions that were investigated, and researcher bias. In addition to the disconnect between the role of race in the curriculum and the role of race in the justice system, I also experienced several race-related incidents during my time in graduate school. Here are three vignettes.

Vignette #1

During my first semester of graduate school, there was a gathering for faculty and students at a professor's home. The house was lovely and well appointed. It was certainly a far cry from my living quarters, a 1940s efficiency in graduate housing. This faculty member's young child was present and after being introduced, I asked the child some friendly questions. After observing my brief interaction with his child, the professor looked at me and asked if I would be interested in being a nanny for his family. The professor then offered to show me the room in his home that would be my sleeping quarters.

This was so bizarre, it left me flabbergasted. I don't remember what I said. I kept going over what had just happened. I assumed the professor meant me no offense. But I could not imagine him making the same offer to a White student (male or female). Here I was, a professional woman nearly 30 years old, with a law degree and previous teaching experience. What did he see when he saw me? My friend Rosemary and I laughed about it, but it stung me deeply. I knew it wasn't my fault, but I still felt embarrassed. There I was at the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991).

Vignette #2

It was the final year of my program and I was in the throes of writing my dissertation. At the conclusion of what I thought was a normal conversation with a White faculty member in the department office, the faculty member swatted me on my butt with a rolled up piece of paper. It happened so quickly. What just happened? Did he just hit me on my butt? It didn't hurt, it didn't feel lewd, but it was highly inappropriate. I immediately reported the incident and several steps were taken to address the situation.

Vignette #3

After I had begun working on my dissertation, Dr. Charles Wellford, the department chair (and my dissertation chair), asked me to consider applying for the open position for Assistant Professor. It was a high honor to be asked by the chair to apply. This wonderful offer, however, placed me in an awkward position. If hired, my grad school

professors would become my peer group and members of my grad school cohort might become my students. Further, if hired, I would be the only Black tenure-track faculty member in the department.

After word got out, some White students started questioning whether I was qualified—If I was selected, would it be an affirmative action hire? I dismissed this as incredibly lazy thinking. Affirmative action, which I fully support, is specifically designed as a historical corrective. All things being equal, it promotes hiring the person from a racially underrepresented and historically disenfranchised group. Did these same students think it was okay that Maryland's criminology program, (considered the top program) had zero Black faculty? Did they think that there were no Black faculty who were qualified? For these students, they were apparently unable to see me as a qualified Black candidate. They did not see what expertise I could bring to the department. They did not see my legal background. They did not see my research focus on race. They did not see my focus on qualitative research methods and critical race theory.

I also heard questions about whether it was proper for a department to hire its own students. One faculty member told me directly that he was not going to vote for me because as a policy matter he didn't think departments should hire the students they had trained and mentored. He described that as "incestuous." Some years later, when the department considered hiring someone (White), who had received a Ph.D. from Maryland, that same faculty member had a change of mind and voted in favor of hiring that person.

Junior Professor

For the most part, my years as a junior professor were smooth. However, it was an isolating time, since I was pretty much left alone. I felt like I was being shunned. I was not invited by departmental colleagues to co-author publications, work on grants, or co-teach. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it allowed me to completely chart my own academic path. I chose race and crime. It also created lots of space for me to work with and learn from law professors, criminology scholars at other institutions, and professors in other departments at the University of Maryland.

It was in these early years as a junior professor that I began to study how race factored into centuries-long understandings and analyses of race, crime and the criminal justice system. I steeped myself in books, chapters, articles, data, and reports—material I had been previously unaware of. It felt like I was going after a second doctorate, one on race and crime. In particular, I was blown away reading books by Stephen Jay Gould (1981), W.E.B. Du Bois (1899), Gunnar Myrdal (1944), Oliver Cox (1948), Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1892), Charsee McIntyre (1993), and Derrick Bell (1992). I found my academic sweet spot in this this massive body of scholarship.

One of the things that struck me as I immersed myself in this history was the way in which Blackness was criminalized by name, such as Black crime, Black criminality, and Black-on-Black crime. To investigate this phenomenon, I wrote a piece titled

“White Crime.” In my reading, I had only come across the term one other time, in a piece by law professor Richard Delgado (1996). I submitted the article to top criminology journals. Each time it was rejected. What struck me most was the tone of the responses. Some of the reviews were angry and condescending. More than one reviewer thought that examining crimes committed disproportionately by Whites was a waste of time, since there was so much offending by Blacks, disproportionately speaking. Others noted that the field of white-collar crime was adequate to address any concerns about White criminality. The message was clear: there was no room or need for criminology to expand its analysis of Whiteness, criminality and deviance.

I reached out to Professor Delgado to see if he had any suggestions on how I might get the piece published. A few weeks later, he sent me a flyer announcing his new Critical America book series with New York University Press. At the bottom of the flyer was a handwritten question, “Would you like to write a book for our series?” Professor Delgado’s offer led to the publication of my first book, *The Color of Crime*. The third edition will be published in 2021.

Coping Strategies

The overwhelming majority of Black criminologists I know want to engage in research that will improve the overall conditions for Blacks within (and beyond) the justice system. This is not the only goal, but one that is salient. As I stated earlier, it is painful to study the racist history of the American criminal justice system and learn how cruelly your ancestors and people who look like you were treated simply based on their race. The history of the slave codes, slave patrols, Black codes, lynchings, Jim Crow, sundown towns, redlining, drug wars, and mass incarceration—to name a few—reveal a devastating picture of how Blackness has been used to signal deviance and justify violence and discrimination. It can be overwhelming to be tied to this history and study contemporary manifestations of these systems. As a Black person, it is not easy to research and analyze how Black bodies are shuttled in and out of the justice system. Engaging in scholarship that examines the operation of racialized systems is a constant challenge. Each of us has had to develop some specific coping strategies. Mine are not particularly novel, but they have helped me stay on track.

One of the most important has been establishing and maintaining lifelong ties with other African American criminologists. These criminologists, who I primarily met through annual conferences of the American Society of Criminology (ASC) and the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS), have played an essential role in my professional well-being. When I joined the ASC, there were only a handful of Black criminology professors and very few Black criminology students. We all knew each other. This was before the Division on People of Color and Crime (DPCC) (formed largely due to the efforts of Dr. Chinita Heard), was established. Over the years, Black criminology scholars have provided me with informal peer reviews, shared information on department openings, alerted me to research grants, and offered a much-needed sounding board.

Another resource is having an expansive base of kindred peers and mentors. As a junior faculty member, I developed close allegiances with faculty members outside of my department—scholars elsewhere on campus and scholars in other disciplines at other institutions. It gave me a chance to share, reflect and compare my experiences. As a junior faculty member, I did not hesitate to reach out to scholars whose work I admired. As noted above, I wrote to Professor Delgado. I wrote several letters to Professor Derrick Bell asking him for guidance, recommendations, and feedback. He responded to each one of my letters (and later wrote the foreword for one of my books).

Over the years, I have tried to develop strategies for responding to instances of racial inequity or unfairness within the department. Along the road to becoming a full professor, faculty members learn to stay quiet and choose their battles carefully, so they do not lose any of their privileges (e.g., preferred teaching schedule, summer funding, research funding, travel monies, sabbatical requests, and course offerings). For many full professors, including myself, speaking up to challenge the status quo is not easy. If I know that a faculty member of color has received poor treatment, I will say something. I will speak up if the short list of faculty to invite for a job interview has no people of color. Likewise, if I hear that students of color were slighted in a class discussion. Race matters in how we conduct our research, who we hire to teach, which students are selected for admission into our programs, which courses are offered, and the pedagogy used in the classroom.

Wish List

The stakes are high. As criminologists, our research and writing can impact how courts operate, how police officers do their job, how correctional institutions function, and how the public views offenders, victims and the criminal sanction. With this in mind, here is my wish list for what we can do as scholars and within the discipline of criminology and criminal justice, if Black Lives Matter.

1. **Integrate Race in the Criminology Curriculum.** Every criminology and criminal justice department should offer at least one course that focuses on race and crime, including the role race has played in the history of the discipline. To be clear, this could be a class on White Criminality, a course that looks at race, racism, and crime more broadly, or one with a specific focus, for instance a course that explores W.E.B. Du Bois's role in the development of the Chicago School (Morris, 2015). In this social moment, a course on race should be a standard offering in a criminology program. Beyond offering a race course, departments should identify ways to encourage and incentivize faculty members to integrate race across the curriculum, regardless of subject. Incentives **could include** course reductions, stipends, and credit on annual review forms.
2. **Formalize Service Credit.** Tenured and tenure-track faculty of color should receive formal credit for mentoring students. Students of color and students from marginalized communities typically seek out faculty of color in their departments for support and advice. The assistance provided by Black faculty

- can be very time consuming and should be formally credited as service (or given some other explicit designation). This particular type of service is not spread equally among the faculty.
3. Hire Black Faculty. Criminology departments need to do a better job of attracting, hiring and retaining Black faculty members, and ideally other faculty members of color. The number of Black criminologists have increased over the years, but there has been little change in the racial make-up of the top-ranked departments and authors in top-ranked publications (Chesney-Lind & Chagnon, 2016). This recommendation is offered with the caveat that “mere numerical inclusion of women and non-Whites within the academy does not necessarily mean better representation of these groups’ intellectual perspectives” (Chesney-Lind & Chagnon, 2016, p. 329).
 4. Create Measures for Long-Term Assessment & Accountability. Criminology and criminal justice departments should regularly assess graduate students’ experiences across race and gender (beyond grades and courses taken), such as whether students had opportunities to work on research projects, had external employment opportunities, whether they taught courses (if so, which ones), and whether they were assigned or had a faculty mentor. Exit interviews would be one way to gather this data. These data could help departments channel efforts and resources where they are needed.
 5. Address Departmental Racial Issues. At some point, a criminology program will experience a racial incident of some kind. Perhaps one sparked by an incident on main campus, a comment made by a student or professor, a concern raised about assigned reading material (or a reading that was not assigned), or something else. Steps can be taken so that when racial issues arise, criminology departments can more effectively and consistently respond. As businesses and companies around the globe have implemented trainings, workshops, and mini-courses to enlighten, expose and sensitize White people to race, racism, anti-racism and Black life, so too should criminology departments and organizations. This will not be a popular recommendation, some will want proof that these efforts improve a department’s racial climate (Bergner, 2020). However, what is the downside of having scholars, who directly and indirectly address issues of race in their work, more attuned to race issues that will come up in the classroom, in hiring, and in their research? A recommendation to read scholarship on anti-Black racism does not imply that any particular White person or groups of White people are racist. Rather, our collective goal should be to have departments, universities, the justice system, and state agencies that are anti-racist, not simply “color blind” (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019). This will take time and a lot of hard work.
 6. Read, Cite, and Assign the Work of Scholars of Color. Make a conscious effort to cite and assign scholarship by academics of color. Junior Black faculty members will benefit from the citation counts. To achieve this goal will take extra work and require reading scholarship beyond that published in the top-ranked criminology journals, such as *Criminology*, *Justice Quarterly*, and *Theoretical*

Criminology. In an analysis of which scholars receive the lion's share of citations in research on civil rights, Richard Delgado (1984) found that it was primarily White men, citing other White men. He states:

It does not matter where one enters this universe; one comes to the same result: an inner circle of about a dozen white, male writers who comment on, take polite issue with, extol, criticize, and expand on each other's ideas. It is something like an elaborate minuet. (Delgado, 1984)

It is easy to cite well-known criminology scholars (who are primarily White), after all it signals that you have read what the academic heavyweights have written. If more criminologists commit to reading the work of Black scholars and citing this scholarship when appropriate, this will help to upend discipline-wide norms on whose scholarship matters.

The six steps discussed above are just a few ideas. If Black Lives Matter to the discipline of criminology, to criminology departments, and to criminology scholars, then we will implement changes. We have an incredible amount of work to do. The undertaking is significant. It includes increasing the number of Black faculty in criminology programs (professors and students), increasing the number of race course offerings in criminology departments, and expanding the range of race-related research questions posed — let's build a new paradigm for our work.

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Notes

1. For instance, Ahmaud Arbery, a Black jogger, who was killed in February 2020, was chased down and shot by two White men who claimed they were carrying out a citizen's arrest. In 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman, who said he was acting as the leader of the Neighborhood Watch committee.

For the uninitiated, there may be significant value in observing photographs and videos to get a visual sense of our criminal-legal operating systems, such as policing, courts and prisons. In an 1861 talk, "Pictures and Progress," Frederick Douglass spoke of the impact that photographs could have on showing the diversity and dignity of Black life. <https://blogs.loc.gov/picturethis/2020/02/frederick-douglass-and-the-power-of-pictures/>

2. Based on news reports, the “young, Black men” were the primary menace. I later labeled this the “criminalblackman,” to describe this age-race-gender term that was referenced so frequently that it sounded like a single word (Russell-Brown, 2009).

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