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Policing: A Sociologist's Response to an Anthropological Account

When he was bored, which was rare, my father, a noted sociologist, would ask me apropos of nothing, "What's the answer?!"

If I were watching the Cubs on TV, the answer might be "clutch hitting" and a look that pleaded for him to leave me be. But if I wanted to really get my father's goat, I would say something like, "macro economic theory and regression analysis." Oh, he hated that one. But at least it started debate. The only answer that wouldn't satisfy him was the facile, "What's the question?" Questions are easy and plentiful, he would say, "Who needs questions when you have good answers!?" Answers are interesting. Answers describe and explain. It's like what's been said of country music: a good answer, like good writing, tells a story.

Before reviewing Kevin Karpiak's article "The Policeman," I was in dour spirits. I had just finished reviewing an article for another journal filled with jargon, stats, and too many words. Statistical regressions are nothing more than homely correlations dressed to the nines. Though perhaps it was simply above my level of intellect, inaccessibility masked what I believed to be a great lack of insight. I questioned the future of academia in general as well my ability to be a fair judge.

Too many in the Ivory Tower cling to the belief that research and academic writing must conform to a "scientific" format. In leading criminal justice journals, only 10 percent of articles with empirical data reported these data in qualitative form (96 percent reported data in quantitative form; see Buckler 2008). What a shame. There's nothing wrong with being tenured and respected in our field, but quality writing is more art than science. To be relevant, writing need not be – indeed should not be – rooted in a limited model of "hypothesis, replicable experiment, findings, discussion." Aping quantitative science is not the answer. Imagine if all poetry had to conform to the structure of a haiku. Though beautifully expressive imagery can come from a 5 – 7 – 5 syllable structure, 122 years later nobody would remember "Casey at the Bat" if it were written like this: mighty casey swings – oh two two on down by two – no joy in Mudville.

Of course anthropologists may be far less enamored of the "hard sciences" than we in sociology and criminal justice. But academic writing hardly improves as one moves toward the "softer" sciences. I have been known to hold the rather unpopular belief that anthropologists succeed in making the most fascinating topics dull. But there's plenty of blame left for other disciplines. Economists doubt the very existence of anything

that can't be quantified. Too many sociologists look up to these economists with unrequited love. Even ethnographers have issues. A chapter from my ethnographic book was rejected for publication in an ethnographic journal because (among other things) I included numbers and even, heavens to Betsy, a policy recommendation or two. One reviewer wrote, "I can't see how in any shape or form that this is ethnography or has anything to do with ethnography." Oh, snap! Apparently by banging at the gates of this Parthenon, I risked bringing down the whole academic acropolis.

Good writing doesn't have to be light or pander to undereducated masses. To paraphrase Duke Ellington (or at least an expression often attributed to him), "there are just two kinds of writing: good writing and the other kind." In order to be read (and who among us writes for sheer compositional joy alone?) writing needs to be good; people won't read the other kind. The more jargon and sociobabble we anthropologists, sociologists, and ethnographers spew out, the more we strive to define ourselves as literate scribes in an academic temple, the more irrelevant we become. It's to our shame as writers and academics that the average Malcolm Gladwell *New Yorker* piece is more thought provoking than 95 percent of journal articles. If we can't explain ourselves to others in a style both illuminating and interesting, we won't and don't deserve to be taken seriously. This leaves the masses – and the mass of policy makers – no choice but to worship the false idols of the "best" scientific methods. Rational-choice macroeconomic theory immediately trickles down to my mind.

In my own research experience, I learned (ironically in an experiment replicated and failed daily) why it's so damn hard for police officers to shut down a drug corner (Moskos 2009). Of course I am not the first to "discover" the failure of the drug war, so I had to present my research in some novel way. Certainly I had one obvious hook: I was a "cop in the hood." But as an academic writer this brought its own disadvantages. I needed to tell a story but had to do so without traditional characters (pseudonyms would not sufficiently protect the anonymity of my squadmates). So instead I rely heavily on isolated and somewhat sensational (but by no means atypical) quotations. For instance one officer told me, "If it were up to me, I'd build big walls and just flood the place. Biblical like. Flood the place and start a-fresh. I think that's all you can do." When I asked this black officer how his belief differed from the attitudes of white police, he responded, "Naw, I'm not like that because I'd let the good people build an ark and float out. Old people, working people, line 'em up, two by two. White cops will be standing on the walls with big poles pushing people back in" (Moskos 2008: 70). This was five years before Hurricane Katrina.

But quotes can only go so far. Thanks to graduate school, I am acutely aware of what is expected from a sociology book from a prestigious academic press. A book without "hard data" will be dismissed by some snotty sociology graduate students kvetching about "selection bias." But hell, maybe they have a point. I "knew" that the few officers who made the majority of arrests in my squad weren't necessarily better cops. But wouldn't it be nice if I could prove that their quantitative "production" was simply due to their focus on "bullshit lockups"?

A simple correlation is the most advanced statistical concept that a normal person can reasonably be expected to understand. My inclusion of limited quantitative data is not meant to alienate readers (or draw attention to my quite rusty quantitative methods) but to bridge academic fields and expand readership. So I gathered and crunched some numbers and “discovered” that, indeed, different discretionary activities were highly correlated with each other but not at all with more important felony arrests. These numbers were both expected and reassuring but, as is often the case, didn’t tell the real story. The primary motivation for arrests was not some crime-fighting ideal but money. In areas with public drug dealing, people get locked up because officers want court overtime pay. “Court is like our heroin,” one officer said, “it’s just something we need!”

It is one thing to write about a “massive number of arrests”; it is better to say there are 20,000 annual arrests in a district with 45,000 people. And while it is easy to mention 50 murders a year; it is far more powerful to combine this with census data and to drop this bomb: men in Baltimore’s Eastern District have an 11 percent chance of being murdered before they’re 35.

But despite these “gee whiz” stats, my loyalties are firmly qualitative. So in my book, I offer this mea culpa defense:

Some will criticize my unscientific methods. I have no real defense. Everything is true, but this book suffers from all the flaws inherent in ethnographic work and some, perhaps, of gonzo journalism. Being on the inside, I made little attempt to be objective. I did not pick, much less randomly pick, my research site or research subjects. I researched where I was assigned. To those I policed, I tried to be fair. But my empathy was toward my fellow officers. Those next to me became my friends and research subjects. My theories emerged from experience, knowledge, and understanding. In academic jargon, my work could be called “front- and backstage, multisited, participant-observation research using grounded theory rooted in symbolic interactionism from a dramaturgical perspective.” If you understand that, congratulations. It means you went to grad school in qualitative methods. But I’m not going to write that because I can’t even say it with a straight face. And if I did write that way, very few would read it. [Moskos 2009: 6–7]

I hope people read Karpiak’s article. I found it unorthodox for anthropology. As more of an essay than a presentation of original research data, there was little as a reviewer I could criticize or suggest in the ways of alternative methods. But it’s original and thought provoking, and the heady discussion is never dull. The selected quotes from contemporary fieldwork (alas, I’m not even cited) show the role of ethnographer and policeman in a new light. Most importantly, at some gut level, I liked it. The style of writing is brisk and strong. I’m all for sound and progressive arguments, but style is the key to good writing. I just wish more academics would worry about the *Elements of Style* as much as they obsess over the whims of anonymous reviewers and straitjacket themselves with journal orthodoxy.

When asked “What does America want of sociology?” sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh gave an answer that could just as easily apply to anthropology, “Frankly, I don’t think America cares about sociology. And, unless we change our conventions, our writing, and our relationship to the public(s), I’m not sure they should.” (2009: 219). That’s an answer my father would have loved!

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