

The Role of Criminology on the Global Stage: A Brief Essay¹

by

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The field of criminology seeks to understand and explain crime, with the subsequent goal of reducing the severity of its negative impacts. Like the field of medicine, this necessitates the need to develop both preventative and curative strategies, and to implement them widely, across virtually every aspect and dimension of society's public and private sectors.

We face a host of interactive and compounding challenges in these efforts, and there seem to be few if any answers at present. In this context, the field of criminology today is very much like the field of medicine 200+ years ago. There are seemingly insurmountable crime problems today, just as there were seemingly insurmountable health issues at the turn of the 19th century...small pox, bubonic plague, polio, consumption, scurvy. There was a significant amount of guesswork in medicine in that era, as there was very limited epistemological understanding, and an accompanying negligible body of knowledge regarding cause, consequence and cure. There were few valid diagnostic instruments or methodologies. There was a dearth of sound diagnostic capability or understanding, and consequently a paucity of consistent and effective treatment modalities. This allowed society to respond to illness and accident using crude, homespun, untested remedies, rather than effective, evidence-based options. In addition, even when new medical developments and procedures were found, they often ran afoul of political winds and public sentiment, and were cast aside. That is largely not the case today.

So what did medicine do to move from where it was then, to where it is now? Death has not and of course never will be eliminated, and yes, there is still guesswork in the field of medicine, but there is a substantial body of contemporary medical knowledge, much epistemological understanding, and a general communal embrace and acceptance of new medical developments and breakthroughs. As a result, many of life's serious diseases have been eradicated, and the negative impacts of illness and accident have been significantly mitigated in the aggregate. Life expectancy has more than doubled since 1800, and it is a markedly improved longevity. What accounts for this progress? A public health specialist would likely churn out half-a-dozen reasons, and yes, it's more than just advances in the field of medicine, of course. The field of medicine, however, has contributed significantly to contemporary human longevity and vitality. So I ask yet again, what did the field of medicine do to move forward as it has, and what can we in criminology learn from the strategic model medicine utilized to achieve those results?

The field of medicine, I propose, embraced a five-point strategy over the past two centuries:

1. It adopted a ubiquitous academic model. Schools of medicine have sprouted up in quality institutions of higher education the world over in the last 200 years.
2. It fully embraced the principle of connectivity in every academic context. A host of regional, national, and international professional medical-related associations have developed and flourished, and in a related sense, a myriad of medical journals developed by these entities publish the works of researchers the world over. The medical field has now moved to the point where there are immeasurable levels of interaction, collaboration, and exchange in every possible milieu, aided of course by the ease of contemporary travel and electronic communication.
3. It embraced an inter-disciplinary perspective and sought intellectual "consilience," conjoining diverse academic fields and areas of exploration in an attempt to seek etiological understanding and subsequently craft effective responses. It is not unusual today to see an article in a medical journal co-authored by researchers from a number of different disciplines from a number of different institutions and even from a number of different countries (per point #2).
4. It moved to an evidence-based evaluation standard.
5. It integrated new knowledge within both the scientific community as well as the public sector. Medicine succeeded in this effort by tailoring both message content as well as communication strategies to "match and then catch" divergent audiences.

We in criminology cannot and never will eliminate crime (see Durkheim), any more than physicians will ever eliminate death. We can, however, reduce the negative impacts of our contemporary crime challenges (just as medicine has mitigated the impacts of illness and accident) by adopting the same 5-point strategic orientation as did medicine some two centuries ago.

¹ A version of this essay, entitled "Rola kryminologii na arenie światowej: krótki eseji," is forthcoming in the Polish-language publication, *Biuletyn Wydziału Prawa Uniwersytet w Białymstoku* No. 63, 2017.

So where do we start? The first step, to me, is to embrace the ubiquitous stratagem - to markedly increase the presence of quality criminology/justice education programs in the colleges and universities of the world. If we wish to ultimately enhance social justice, heighten the sense of communal peace and security, and improve socio-economic stability, we start by growing and developing justice education programs in our higher education systems worldwide, and at home. It may take another generation or two to see justice education establish itself in some of the far reaches of the globe, and even longer to ultimately realize the complete impacts of this overall strategy, but I am convinced that it will work.

Great challenges lay ahead as we mutually respond to the inequities and injustices in the world around us. There are people to be fed, reefs and forests to be protected, life in all forms to be preserved, and wrongs to be righted in many spheres. By clinging to this proposed 5-point strategic model, we can improve the environments in which we live, and as a result, peace, justice and equity will be more frequent visitors to our homes, our neighborhoods, our nations, and our world.

Go to www.unl.edu/eskridge/Role of Criminology on the Global Stage 2.doc to read the full paper.

