Ontology, epistemology, and irony: Richard Rorty and re-imagining pragmatic criminology
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What is This?
Ontology, epistemology, and irony: Richard Rorty and re-imagining pragmatic criminology

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Abstract
In this article I apply Richard Rorty’s view of pragmatism to contemporary criminology through the lens of ontology and criminological theory, epistemology and methodological decision making, and irony in the neo-liberal academy. Although pragmatism in criminology is often used to refer to practical criminal justice suggestions drawn from conservative theories of criminology, in this article I argue that this singular use is an affront to pragmatism’s philosophical pedigree. Consonant with pragmatism, this article includes practical suggestions about how Rorty’s approach can be adapted to teach criminological theory, advance mixed methods research, and acknowledge the dangers inherent in careerist criminology.

Keywords
Epistemology, irony, methods, modesty, ontology, pragmatism, Richard Rorty, theory

Introduction
Untangling pragmatism’s influence on criminology is a complicated endeavor. As a uniquely American philosophic tradition, pragmatism links theory and practice and draws on the work of many, including Charles S Pierce, William James, John Dewey, George Hebert Mead, and Richard Rorty (Gross, 2008). Criminologists were inspired by Mead’s symbolic interactionism, a perspective that integrated Dewey’s view that...
knowledge arose from an adaptation of people to their environment. This influenced ethnographic work at the University of Chicago and led to numerous studies of crime and deviance that remain canonical. Pragmatism again emerged at the University of Cambridge. Sir Leon Radzinowicz (1966: 101; Cottee, 2005) interpreted it to mean that criminologists ought to treat “each problem as it arises and in its particular context, instead of approaching them all on the basis of some single general principle”.

Pragmatism is most often associated with the voluminous writings of the late Richard Rorty (1979, 1998). Rorty focused on reconstructing established ways of thinking through conversations designed to improve our lives and practices (Shusterman, 2012: 169). His approach is of emergent interest within theoretical criminology (Wheeldon and Heidt, 2007; Wheeldon et al., 2014). Many constitutive criminologists have advanced critical explorations of crime through “replacement discourses” to challenge inaccurate and sensationalized portrayals of crime in the media (Arrigo and Milovanovic, 2009; Henry and Milovanovic, 1996). However, conceding that multiple views exist can create doubt. In an era of insecurity, manufactured or otherwise, theories that promote polices designed to manage risk will inevitably be favored (Hope and Sparks, 2000). As a result, it is perhaps more common to view pragmatism as a convenient philosophic means to justify “correctionalism” and a focus on practical (as opposed to critical) criminal justice policies (Cohen, 1974). As others have noted, theories of crime control that offer administratively useful categories of crime are often used to justify policies that view punishment as the best means to correct behavior (Haggerty, 2004).

In this article, I propose reclaiming the term pragmatic criminology to create the conditions by which truth claims can: (1) be subjected to more rigorous scrutiny; and (2) better assess the theory/practice problem—in which the role of human agency in undertaking action is neither presumed nor ignored. Based on previous work (Wheeldon et al., 2014), I apply Rorty’s pragmatism to focus on three main lines of inquiry: his ontological cynicism (Rorty, 1987); epistemological skepticism (Rorty, 1979); and intellectual modesty (Berube, 2008). I argue that Rorty’s pragmatism can promote a more deliberate and iterative approach to inter-subjectivity, justify new criminological thinking based on how we teach criminological theory and research, and expand how we think about crime, harm, and social control.

Of specific interest is the extent to which Rorty’s pragmatism can be used to examine the worrying rise in ego-driven expertise and the sometimes-serial inability to engage in reflexivity and self-searching introspection within the criminological community. This article is organized to present a summary of Rorty’s pragmatic project, and apply it to criminological theory, methods, and other developments in the field. I consider some caveats and complications associated with my approach in this article and conclude with some ideas about how these complications might be resolved.

**Understanding Richard Rorty’s pragmatism in criminological terms**

traces Rorty’s shift from a philosopher secure in the Anglophone analytic tradition to one more comfortable in the twists and turns of linguistic game play of comparative literature. Ultimately Rorty rejected contemporary philosophy’s efforts to discover universal truth, mocked assumptive epistemic certainty, and warned of the lethal self-confidence that results from the veiled insistence that one set of purposes is naturally worthier than any other:

If pragmatism is of any importance … it is because accepting a pragmatist outlook would change the cultural ambience for the better. It would complete the process of secularization by letting us think of the desire for non-linguistic access to the real as hopeless as that for redemption through a beatific vision. Taking this extra step toward acknowledging our finitude would give a new resonance to Blake’s dictum that “All deities reside in the human breast.”

(Rorty, 2007: 119)

Bjorn Ramberg (2000: 351–352) summarizes Rorty’s effort to break the grip of analytic philosophy as based on two problem-defining assumptions. The first is the Kantian notion of the “philosophy as the mirror of nature” or the idea that the quest for knowledge involves assessing the accuracy of subjective interpretations of the objective world. The provenance of analytic philosophy, the view that there is a world “out there” requires contesting knowledge to understand and order the subjective capacities people rely upon to describe this objective reality. The second assumption is older and based upon the Platonic conviction that there is one mind and a linguistically independent and literal description of the world that scientists, philosophers, and theologians use to profess Truth. Rorty’s pragmatism is based on his doubt that these two pillars have done much to advance social progress or the means by which people can understand or empathize with others (Rorty, 1989).

Rorty’s pragmatism, while based in part on ontological skepticism and epistemological cynicism, is best summarized with reference to the ironist. Ironists are those who recognize arbitrary historical conditions of their own assumptions, thoughts, and beliefs. This recognition is based on the idea that the use of terms, concepts, and methods do not have an intrinsic nature based on some universal external truth. One’s vocabulary is the result of a social context and developed to suit the needs of a particular community of people. On this view, the defense of any one vocabulary as final is folly. Old descriptions must give way to newer more socially useful ones. This may involve critiquing old orthodoxies and/or embracing new ways of thinking, describing, and presenting issues of social concern. For Rorty, critique must always serve socially useful ends by pointing toward alternative accounts that offer more comprehensive and applicable positions (Rorty, 1991).

Addressing four decades of Rorty’s detailed and dense expositions, arguments, and replies is not possible in one article (nor 10). My goal in this contribution is to consider Rorty’s basic premise that people progress when they remain skeptical of the siren song of universalism via logical positivism, and focus on grounding postmodern, anti-foundationalist critiques into practical, realistic, and achievable goals (Rorty, 1999a). Of interest are the parallels between his project to challenge the constricting “ontotheological” power of past philosophic approaches and contemporary existential concerns about the state of criminology (Agnew, 2011).
Rorty’s focus on language, and the power of representation and re-description, might be seen alongside the development of constitutive criminology (Henry and Milovanovic, 1996). This approach, not unlike Rorty’s, attempted to answer the postmodern critique by pursuing a more critically reflexive approach to criminology based on philosophical concerns and critiques about the unquestioned role of positivism (Arrigo and Williams, 2006). Recent efforts have sought to apply French postmodern theories to law, criminology, and social justice (Arrigo et al., 2005) and to challenge penology and punitive practices by offering a means to re-think how expectations shift and are shaped by those who judge and those who are judged (Arrigo and Milovanovic, 2009).

While consistent with Rorty’s view of the fluid nature of language and need for more critical conversations, initial offerings were criticized as inaccessible, lacking formal theories, and disinterested in defining methods by which to test and validate their analysis (Wheeldon and Heidt, 2007). Instead criminology has been overcome with the second of Rorty’s contributions. For Haggerty (2004), criminal justice policies have been shaped by a punitive conservative ideology and often focus on practical and politically palatable crime prevention strategies based on environmental criminology, rational choice theory, and routine activities theory (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1984; Clarke and Cornish, 1985; Cohen and Felson, 1979).

Based on these developments, Hope and Sparks (2000: 179) have argued that criminologists “need to ask whether there is a necessary homology between certain preventative practices and certain forms of politics and modes of urban governance.” However, it may be a mistake to forsake the term pragmatic just because some theories have influenced the criminal justice system in ways others have not (Wheeldon and Heidt, 2007). The use of “pragmatic” as a criminological slur disregards its philosophic provenance. Rorty’s sustained critique on the notion of universal truth was balanced by his interest in conversation as a means to focus on efforts that can result in productive, useful, pro-social outcomes. Pragmatic solutions to philosophic dilemmas required abandoning traditional notions about truth and confronting the logical fallacies associated with traditional appeals to authority.

By rejecting singular epistemological assumptions about any course of inquiry, and replacing these traditions with others more likely to lead to tolerance and freedom, Rorty’s project raises questions about ontology, epistemology, and methodology that still resonate. In the remainder of this article, I consider to what extent Rorty’s pragmatism can offer a useful philosophical basis by which to understand emergent calls for unifying criminology (Agnew, 2011), expand methodological approaches (Maruna, 2010), and make sense of existential criminological concerns (Wheeldon et al., 2014).

**Applying Rorty’s pragmatism: Ontology, epistemology, and irony**

Pragmatism’s enduring legacy is based on a resistance to the description of new problems using established orthodoxies (Gross, 2008). It might be applied to criminology through the lenses of ontology, epistemology, and irony.
Ontology, criminological theory, and human nature

[Criminology suffers from] … a “newness fetish,” which is driven by a belief that criminology has generated bodies of theory and research of steadily increasing quality and creativity over time.

(Bursik, 2009: 6)

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Knowledge … [is] what we are justified in believing … [and] justification is a social phenomenon rather than a transaction between a “knowing subject” and reality.

(Rorty, 1979: 9)

Richard Rorty (1987) offers a set of ontological dichotomies that divide humanists and scientists. He has presented these in various ways over the years. For example, some include: objective versus subjective; fact versus value; knowledge versus opinion; truth versus pleasure; hard versus soft. Scientists, he argues, have continuously claimed the higher realm for themselves, while humanists have unsuccessfully tried to measure up by establishing their own “rational” criteria for justifying their “softer” approaches. Rorty (1991) updates this view and argues that we all ought to reject dogmatically authoritarian assertions about truth, goodness, or science when based on ontological claims about the unknowable nature of existence. While truth may exist, for Rorty, its establishment is based on the quality of the justification provided, and its value based on the social utility of the precepts.

One way to understand ontology is the distinction between essentialism and representationalism. Essentialism is the Platonic idea that there is an objective and defined set of attributes for any person, place, or thing necessary to understand its identity and function. Representationalism, on the other hand, is the philosophical position that the world we see in conscious experience is the result of an often-unique internal representation—a virtual world, perhaps, based on subjective experience. Rorty proposes a solution to this division. Pragmatic rationality sees truth as whatever results in productive, useful, pro-social outcomes at that moment after listening to: “as many suggestions and arguments as you can” (Rorty, 1987: 46). By remaining open to the next idea or a more comprehensive position, to be true is to allow that while one description is the best we have at the moment, “somebody may come up with a better idea” (1987: 44).

The task of the intellectual then is to promote ontologically flexible thinking that rejects the appeal to religious or scientific authority as a means to define truth. Instead the goal is to promote approaches that allow us to empathize with others and refine, deepen, and expand our ability to think of people in morally relevant ways (Rorty, 1989). For Rorty this involves moving back and forth between the universal responsibility to reduce suffering and the recognition that people understand, represent, and engage ideas based on an ever shifting vocabulary. He argues that the idea that set propositions can be universally applicable is suspect. Adopting Rorty’s view may require a fundamental reconsideration of the application of techniques drawn from natural science when applied to social matters to account for what has been called the liquid nature of reality in late modernity (Bauman, 2000).
A recent call to consider the connection between ontology and criminological theory has focused on the assumptions about human nature embedded within many theories (Agnew, 2011). The hard lines between hedonistic accounts of human nature on the one hand, or altruistic accounts on the other make little sense. The value of either depends on the context to which they are applied. In the place of a unified theory of crime, Rorty might be used to acknowledge that numerous theories, at different points in time can be used to serve various socially defined values. Within criminology then, the choice of ontological starting points and assumptions about human nature should be seen as inevitably political. Defining people a priori as naturally selfish in need of control or naturally social in need of opportunities cannot but shape the outcome of any project designed to offer a criminological truth claim (Wheeldon et al., 2014).

The recognition that criminological theories often serve difficult ontological assumptions requires deeper thinking about how to engage students. One means may be a renewed emphasis on teaching the social, historical, and cultural dimensions to criminological theories. In recent work, my colleagues and I have tried to apply the Wagner–Berger Model of Theory Growth to criminology (Heidt, 2012). While this model originated in sociology, it incorporates ideas from the philosophy of science literature including the work of Kuhn (1962), Lakatos (1970), and Popper (1959, 1963). Instead of conceiving of contemporary criminology based on theories born in the context(s) of the past, the question becomes how well these theories describe and explain issues of social concern today. We have argued that explicitly connecting theories with their underlying assumptions about human nature can serve to demystify them and better account for their outsized role in criminology (Wheeldon et al., 2014).

The assumption that people are hedonistic, self-interested, and engage in rational actor models of decision making (Agnew, 2011) has justified an approach to criminal justice which prioritizes the administration and management of crime and criminals (Haggerty, 2004). The shift from a focus on the causes of crime to the acceptance of its inevitability logically leads to attempts at improving the efficiency of the criminal justice system (Wilson, 1975), and supplants more contentious goals (Garland, 2001). Understanding this shift is essential for students. The recognition that social bonding theory emerged as a desire to return to a simple “father knows best” conception of the family unit, and a pre-race conscious society can help to problematize fundamental assumptions which underlie the current justice system.

To clear up the ontological confusion that can arise from the interdisciplinary nature of criminology, one approach is based on seven key steps to guide criminological thinking. Requiring students to learn about the interconnected nature of criminological theories by locating them in the social context in which they emerged can be connected to Rorty’s rejection of ontology, and his adoption of ironism. Presented in Figure 1, this model can assist students to explore criminological theory not from a recitation of key propositions, nor as a foil to identify variables to be easily operationalized. Instead, it focuses on considering in a step-by-step manner how various criminological theories might be justified as socially valuable, while not downplaying the history, assumptions, and practice-based complications.

The seven-step model presented in Figure 1 still takes as its reference point the value of criminological theory and the potential for specific propositions to help us understand...
and describe the world. However, it provides a means to begin to problematize theories by demystifying their emergence and development. Whatever the social utility of such an approach in the classroom, Rorty’s ontological skepticism is deeply intertwined with deep epistemic doubt.

**Epistemology, pragmatism, and abduction**

Criminology is today crippled by its own methodology, its potential for analysis and critique lost within a welter of survey forms, data sets, and statistical manipulations. Worse, criminology has given itself over to a fetishism of these methodologies.

(Ferrell, 2009: 1)

So-called methods are simply descriptions of the activities engaged in by the enthusiastic imitators of one or another original mind—what Kuhn would call the “research programs” to which their works gave rise.

(Rorty, 1998: 10)

Rorty argues that modern epistemology is an attempt not only to situate efforts to understand the world in a set of assumptions, but also to legitimate the view that philosophy exists to obtain knowledge by the methodological interrogation of nature (Rorty, 1979). The danger is the false certainty in one method or another when this or that approach appears to yield “progress.” Cartesian-based epistemology tries to avoid over confidence by allowing that doubts may be raised about any set of empirical claims. This, of course, requires a commitment to falsifiability and inferential humility, sometimes at odds with careerist concerns in the modern academy (Laub, 2004).
The trouble is that recent criminological efforts have not embraced doubt in a meaningful way. The vast majority of articles in the field’s leading journals are based on statistical manipulations of massive amounts of data compiled from secondary sources (Ferrell, 2009). Mined for interesting and publishable findings, data are “cleaned,” and outliers are explained away. Instead of testing a hypothesis emerging from an in-depth and critical literature review, computer programs allow one to instantaneously identify numeric correlations that account for more statistical variation than other possible combinations. Once discovered, literature reviews and methods can simply be written around whatever findings are most likely to lead to publication. More striking, perhaps, is the lack of any acknowledgment of these post hoc approaches, the ontological or epistemological assumptions implicit within these designs, or the limitations associated with numeric-only analysis (Wheeldon, 2012).

Rorty suggests this failure of scientific skepticism might be connected to the limitations of the Cartesian conception of doubt. Critics contend Descartes failed to distinguish between what is objectively “given” by nature and what is subjectively “added” by the mind and thus is inappropriate for contemporary epistemological dilemmas (Ramberg, 2009). Rorty (1979: 171) advanced the linguistic critique of Quine and Sellars to situate his view that knowledge is better seen as “a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature.” Thus we ought to converse, justify our beliefs, confront cruelty, and better understand not what is “true” but what is practically possible within a defined time and place. For Rorty, we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification underlying a set of beliefs.

Committing to one epistemic vocabulary that is judged best able to uncover truth is, Rorty argues, akin to claiming we can evaluate tools for their ability to help us get what we want done. Is the hammer, the saw, or this small pair of scissors better—in general? Questions about usefulness can only be answered, Rorty points out, once we give a specific substance to our purposes. One tool may be better depending on the project at hand. This view offers a means to understand the emerging recognition of the value of mixed methods research (Wheeldon, 2010). Greene and Caracelli (1997) have highlighted a number of purposes or justifications for mixing methods. Some uses include: to test the consistency of findings obtained through different instruments; to clarify and build on the results of one method with another; and to show how the results from one method shape subsequent methods or research decisions (Wheeldon and Ahlberg, 2012).

Still slow to emerge in criminology (Agnew, 2011; Maruna, 2010; Sampson, 2012), mixed research designs and approaches require an alternative epistemological framework (Morgan, 2007). A variety of views on this paradigmatic issue have been suggested (Greene et al., 2001; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Methodologically, pragmatism has emerged as a common alternative to the either/or choice of positivism and constructivism (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Instead of either relying on deductive reasoning and general premises to reach specific conclusions or inductive approaches that seek general conclusions based on specific premises, the debate about the existence of objective “truth” or the value of subjective perceptions can be usefully sidestepped. Mixed method pragmatists assert both that there is a single “real world” and that all individuals have their own unique interpretations of that world (Morgan, 2007).
On one view then, abductive reasoning provides an innovative means to generate possible research outputs, while at the same time building and refining existing theories and approaches (Tomiyama et al., 2003). In this way, tentative explanations and hypotheses emerge through the research process itself based on the expertise, experience, and intuition of researchers (Schurz, 2002). Through this abductive approach to reasoning, tentative explanations can be tested both theoretically and empirically. As Morgan (2007: 71) suggests, through an iterative approach of moving “back and forth” between induction and deduction, one can convert observations into theories and then assess those theories through action. In this way, understanding is based on shared meaning and can benefit from some of the different approaches to social science research outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Approaches and issues in social science research.

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<th>Quantitative Approach</th>
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<th>Mixed methods approach</th>
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<td><strong>Epistemological starting point</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Connection of theory and data</strong></td>
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<td>Inductive</td>
<td>Abductive</td>
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<td><strong>Relationship to research process</strong></td>
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<td>Subjectivity</td>
<td>Intersubjectivity</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Type of inference based on the data</strong></td>
<td>Generality</td>
<td>Context</td>
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**Ego, irony, and updating your moral software**

Today “career concerns” are center-stage in the field—for example, publication counts, citation counts, the amount of external funding generated, departmental rankings and so forth are the new measures of intellectual impact and scholarship.

(Laub, 2004: 3)

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There is no activity called “knowing” which has a nature to be discovered … there is simply the process of justifying beliefs to audiences.

(Rorty, 1999b: 36)

Those who have read some of Rorty’s voluminous contributions might be surprised by the suggestion that his pragmatism could be a useful basis for thinking about ego, modesty, and humility. Rorty has offended many, from conservatives and analytic philosophers to Marxists and feminists alike. Those associated with the intellectual Left were often shocked by Rorty’s unique interpretations of past work to justify his views about the nature of a democratic and progressive future (Shusterman, 1994). His critics are numerous (see Brandom, 2000) and have provoked exchanges that both clarify and complicate. According to Dutton (1990: 234), “While there is a feeling of settled positions,
there is no hint of dogmatism, but rather a sense of opinions hard-won through years of argument and meditation.” James Conant (2000) suggests Rorty’s replies to critics are often marked by “a common mood and tone. The mood is one of weariness, of have heard it all before, and the tone is one of forbearance, of wishing the topic, under discussion, were more interesting” (Conant, 2000: 269).

Before turning to how pragmatism might offer a means to rethink modesty, it may be useful to consider why modesty matters within contemporary criminology. In recent years senior scholars have decried the limits of criminological creativity (Laub, 2004), the complexity of applying evidence (Clear, 2010), and the failure to address the persistent problem of race (Tonry, 2008). In addition, the recognition of criminology’s general historical illiteracy (Bursik, 2009) might be seen alongside the failure to take seriously the consequences of accepting unquestioned and sometimes unconscious theoretical assumptions (Agnew, 2014). Despite this recognition of the limits of criminological knowledge, there is a pervasive belief that only one sort of research matters. In a review of 95 published articles in Criminology between 2010 and 2012, less than a tenth used the qualitative or mixed method approaches. These findings appear consistent over time. Between 1951 and 2008 only 11 percent of articles appearing in the field’s top peer-review outlets were qualitative (Dooley, 2010: 63–65). Agnew (2011) argues criminology would do well to embrace more qualitative and mixed method designs.

As has been demonstrated over and over, mental mindsets result in rigid thinking (Heuer, 1999). Once adopted, few break out of these conceptual frames to appreciate other perspectives (Wagner, 1992). In any social milieu certain individuals within groups emerge as especially persuasive (Janis, 1982), including academia (Klein and Stern, 2009). Of some interest is that this sort of cognitive rigidity is common for many caught up in the criminal justice system (Wheeldon et al., 2013). The need for modesty in any pragmatic approach to criminology is based in part on the subject matter of discipline. Crime control is conceived as a public good and a core function of a democratic state (Dooley, 2010). The tendency to view criminological research as a means to offer definitive solutions to ameliorate the crime problem lends itself to numeric analysis and perpetuates the “correctional stance” within criminology (Cohen, 1974: 16).

In Rorty’s terms, one must fight against the view that one’s individual ontological, theoretical, epistemological, and methodological preferences are self-evidently superior. The modesty at the root of his pragmatism is based on the recognition that even the strongest argument phrased in one’s present vocabulary can neither overcome nor dissolve the potential that better arguments may emerge in the future (Berube, 2008). Embracing philosophic pragmatism demands acknowledging the limitations associated with engaging in one approach over another. It requires accepting that past experiences are connected to future actions (Feyerbend, 1978). This involves revisiting older ideas about the value of deliberate reflection about how interests, interactions, and beliefs can influence our research decisions (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

In criminology, this might be especially important when researchers undertake evaluations of projects that they themselves developed and/or delivered. The danger is that correctionalism has had the perverse result in criminology of promoting the production of specialists instead of scholars. In such an environment, claims of knowledge and appeals to self-evidence may become tied to ego-driven efforts to produce, for example,
ever more assessment tools to categorize offenders, or justify treatment programs under the guise of “cognitive behavioral training.” These programs may lose their evidentiary integrity when mandated in correctional facilities. When academic expertise gets conflated with financial incentives or careerist concerns, it can overwhelm scholarly modesty. Self-serving certainty may displace the recognition that all attempts to fashion a just society are provisional, revisable, and subject to change (Rorty, 1998).

This may be the result of structural problems in the neo-liberal academy, and not simply the immodesty of one scholar or another. When scholarship depends on a singular definition of “expertise,” adopting the path of least resistance may look like good common sense. However, for those keen to borrow from the medical lexicon, drawing upon what is known as the “differential diagnosis” may be useful. The process of considering alternative explanations is an essential part of medicine. It requires health care professionals to systematically review other possible causes for an underlying symptom to round out any comprehensive medical opinion. Perhaps criminologists who seek to adopt the medical model should consider these protocols as a cognitive standard of care worthy of emulation (Wheeldon, 2012).

Such an approach would demand more introspection and reflection and might usefully be connected to the resurgent interest in philosophy of individual integrity and personal honor (Appiah, 2010). Recent efforts in the natural sciences have bolstered the benefits of ignorance and even stupidity as the basis for knowledge growth (Firestein, 2011; Schwartz, 2008). It may also require accepting that social scientists do best when they remain open to the possibility that there is always the chance they were wrong, or made an error of one kind or another. For Rorty it requires we open ourselves to conversation of all sorts, but perhaps especially to those who expand our sense of human possibility. These include novelists, historians, poets, ethnographers, and philosophers who can help us “reprogram ourselves—to update our moral software” (Rorty, 2006).

Pragmatism and justification: Debating criminological theory and practice

There is nothing deep down inside us that we have not put there ourselves.

(Rorty, 1982: xlii)

In the spirit of pragmatism, where all thought is for action, applying Rorty to criminology requires more than simply satirizing what has been called an unreadable postmodern critique on the one hand, and an anti-intellectual correctional stance on the other. Using Rorty’s ironic imperative to promote a pragmatic approach to criminology requires rethinking how we teach theory, acknowledge methodological limitations, and embrace modesty in both. It means considering practical techniques for those interested in engaging in this process, all the while acknowledging caveats and counter evidence.

Building on Rorty’s ontological and epistemological skepticism is his view that justification should replace the competitive process of discovering one truth. Instead, he argues that the problems of society require that multiple descriptions of the world be leveraged to solve contemporary problems (Rorty, 1979). Instead of truth, philosophy
ought to focus on the quality of justification provided for taking one view over another. Rorty (1999b: 33) states that:

we should give up the idea that knowledge is an attempt to represent reality. Rather, we should view inquiry as a way of using reality. So the relation between our truth claims and the rest of the world is causal rather than representational. It causes us to hold beliefs, and we continue to hold the beliefs which prove to be reliable guides to getting what we want ... there are lots of ways to act so as to realize human hopes of happiness. The attainment of such happiness is not something distinct from the attainment of justified belief; rather, the latter is a special case of the former.

On this view, Rorty provides a means by which truth claims can be subjected to more rigorous philosophic scrutiny by better rooting and justifying more imaginative efforts (Agnew, 2011; Maruna, 2010; Young, 2011). As I have argued above, this might mean a more deliberate effort to locate theories in the socio-cultural milieu, and historical period in which they arose. Likewise, theory testing could benefit from the use of multiple methods, combined in ways that offer more than an uninspired choice between numeric and narrative analysis.

The largest question perhaps is to what extent Rorty’s focus on conversation can benefit the discipline itself. Some might worry that Rorty’s view of justice as consensus might undermine criminology’s interdisciplinary vitality (Brisman, 2012). It is in line with Rorty’s ironic imperative that one should attempt to apply Rorty’s practical efforts to root liberal humanism’s focus on freedom to criminology in an era of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2012), the ever changing culture of social control (Garland, 2001), and the growing militarization of domestic law enforcement (Balko, 2013).

One reply is that applying Rorty requires a deeper commitment to a criminological debate and dialogue in both theoretical and methodological terms. While the ultimate outcome of any such conversation is unlikely to appease everyone, fostering agreement around the terms by which it can occur allows socially useful epistemic authority to emerge (Gieryn, 1999). This means abandoning appeals to tradition and authority as the sole basis for decision making, and engaging in an attempt to persuade others based on better arguments. One tripartite model of argumentation encourages statements of fact based on empirical research, statements of value based on a clear moral or ethical orientation, and statements of policy based on practical suggestions about what might be achieved on the ground (Wheeldon et al., 2013).

One answer may be re-imagining debate and dialogue in a criminological context. Practically, it is the social aspect of organizing these debates that matters, and not necessarily their outcome. To embrace the potential for integrative dissent to promote intellectual debate (Collins, 1998) those who are naturally inclined toward quantitative or numeric analysis can be assigned to argue for the proposition and vice versa. By modelling a process of constructive reflection through debates, junior and senior scholars alike could be encouraged to argue against their own personal perspectives. By bringing this commitment to the criminological classroom and conference hall, to twitter and other online forums, pragmatism offers a justification for scholars to explore the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches through a socially useful, robust, and perhaps more humble intellectual exchange (Wheeldon et al., 2014):
It is a modest goal—suitable, no doubt, to those who think modestly about things like human goals; but perhaps Rorty wanted, above all, and with good reason, to teach us how to traffic in modesty. (Berube, 2008: 33)

Critics, caveats, and considerations

Whatever the value of applying Richard Rorty’s pragmatism to contemporary criminology, there are a number of outstanding questions to consider. One objection might be related to Rorty’s proper place within the contested pragmatic canon (Gross, 2008).\(^5\) Another concern centers on what might be called Rorty’s truth/power problem.\(^6\) While both are worthy of consideration, they require a detailed exploration beyond the scope of this article. In this section I consider pragmatism’s own social and historical context, the limits of traditional epistemologies and methodologies to meaningfully move beyond old descriptions, and my own use of Rorty to advance what I have called pragmatic criminology.

On the first question, some Rorty scholars might object that my use of Rorty’s anti-foundationalism cannot be credibly used to teach criminology theories, each of which offer a series of propositions about the world. For example:

Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind— … The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by describing activities of human beings—cannot.

(Rorty, 1989: 5)

The point, however, is that “descriptions of the world” depend on the time and place those descriptions arose. Thus, applying the step-by-step approach (outlined in Figure 1) can help uncover how and why such descriptions emerged and to what extent they remain viable.

It may be useful to apply this approach to pragmatism itself. Few recall that in the economic uncertainty of the 1930s Eugene Debs, representing the Socialist Party of America, was a serious contender for the Presidency. The New Deal emerged as a compromise to avoid European-style socialism while promising progressive incremental change within the US’s capitalist framework. It is hard to view as coincidental the appearance of pragmatism at a time when liberalism needed to be “made safe for the masses by curbing its rapacious individualism” (Shusterman, 1994: 393).

To promote Rorty’s “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism” (Rorty, 1991: 197–202) as a means to re-imagine criminology might look to some as an effort to return to the very relentless individualism Dewey’s pragmatism was meant to displace. For Shusterman (1994: 395), while Rorty claims Dewey’s lineage, he prioritizes negative liberty, protecting one’s own private projects, and the power of self-realization over other more communal goals. Thus, while both offer a piecemeal approach to social reform, Rorty appears to abandon Dewey’s insistence on societal problem solving. Such an approach may fail to meaningfully engage alternate descriptions and diverse voices to get at truth (hooks, 1990), and instead hold out the promise of some political middle ground while papering over more contentious structural concerns (Cohen, 1974; Hall, 2012).
In criminological terms this could mean efforts to reinvigorate pragmatism are destined to return once more to individualistic accounts of crime and criminality that play into assumptive notions of good/bad and right/wrong. Those who advocate control over care and punishment over rehabilitation have historically captured such conceptions. It is worth noting that the application of left realism in the United Kingdom, while couched in language pragmatists would recognize, was manipulated and co-opted in part because it failed to properly define the mechanisms by which social utility and practical action could be achieved (Wheeldon and Heidt, 2007: 319–320). While the past is no guarantee of the future, efforts to apply pragmatism to contemporary criminology cannot credibly proceed without acknowledging this worry (Wheeldon and Heidt, 2012).

Another concern might be my suggestion that mixed methods offers a means to apply pragmatism through research. While mixed methods may be seen as a practical epistemological move, it might be argued that it cannot exist without accepting the underlying legitimacy of numeric and narrative categories of data collection and analysis. On this view mixed methods still retrenches old epistemic vocabularies, while rejecting the immodesty of presuming one tradition is always better than another. The assumption that existing categories remain valid reifies rather than explodes the application of scientific methods to human problems, as Rorty favored. For example:

James and Dewey, alas, never made up their minds whether they wanted just to forget about epistemology or whether they wanted to devise a new improved epistemology of their own. In my view they should have opted for forgetting. (Rorty, 1994: 59–60)

One practical benefit of mixed methods, consistent with Rorty, is that it requires justification at each stage of the research process (Morgan, 2007). In pragmatic terms, mixing methods in research can continue to rely on traditional data collection, analysis, and presentation while providing a means to investigate alternative forms of intuitive and abductive connections between theory and data (Wheeldon, 2010). Using Rorty to reject either/or approaches to research can create space for researchers to focus on the value (and power) of various re-descriptions and creative efforts beyond narratives and numbers. One such approach is based on a broad view of what might be called visual criminology (Wheeldon and Harris, 2013).

The recent visual turn in criminology applies both to documentary photography and the ethics associated with visual representations of harm, suffering, and violence (Carrabine, 2012), and to the phenomenological process of painting whereby embracing the cycle of creation, interpretation, and re-creation can spark a new means of interrogating meaning (Lippens and Hardie-Bick, 2013). Another more mathematically predisposed approach, presents policy graphs as visual depictions of systems of causal relationships to advance policy translation integrate the theoretical and policy arms of criminology (Sampson et al., 2013). In practical terms, visually presenting material may assist to break out of the confines of traditional data collection and analysis, or as Rorty (1979) might say: resist the folly of using old language to describe new problems.

Finally, my attempt to apply Rorty’s pragmatism in this article may ultimately be judged as unsuccessful. I have framed his anti-ontological positions and epistemological skepticism as key conceptual tools to help people overcome mindset biases. I have also...
tried to point to the power of pragmatism to address ego by requiring that justification become the default procedure and expectation in theory, research, and practice. Some may remain unconvinced by my use of Rorty. Concerns might be based on similar critiques raised by those who suggest Rorty’s use, interpretation, and appropriation of philosophers and other pragmatists are disingenuous. Just as Rorty traced many of his views to Dewey’s humanist politics by concentrating only on those aspects of Dewey’s with which he agreed critics might suggest I am guilty of the same.

This view may fail to appreciate the focus in Rorty’s pragmatism on language, vocabulary, and comparative literature. Rorty embraces an approach to re-interpretation in which attempts to precisely portray other thinkers and writers is less important than utilizing past work to advance new and socially useful ends. Rorty’s reply to these concerns is one that I adopt here. The goal should be to find the best way to justify one’s view, as opposed to attempt to develop a comprehensive account that can claim absolute fidelity to a view presented in the past. To prioritize one view of truth over other more practical (and pressing) accounts amounts to adopting the exact opposite approach that Rorty spent most of his life advocating.

The test of my application of Rorty to contemporary criminology must be judged not on the extent to which Rorty’s philosophy is faithfully and/or consistently applied. Instead, the success or failure of this appropriation must be based on whether it is likely to advance socially useful practices, expand perspective taking, encourage flexible thinking, and prove productive both in the classroom and within criminal justice agencies.

**Conclusion**

Although pragmatism in criminology has been used to refer to practical criminal justice programs drawn from conservative theories of criminology, previous so-called pragmatic efforts may have been incomplete. My application of pragmatism to criminology is based on the idea that Rorty offers a means to understand why theory, research, and practice ought to be subjected to more rigorous philosophical scrutiny, and always explicitly acknowledge and assess the theory/practice problem. This article has applied Rorty to contemporary criminology through the lens of ontology, criminological theory, epistemology, and methodological decision making. It suggests Rorty’s irony serves as a means to confront egoism in the careerist academy.

While Rorty’s approach can be adapted to teaching criminological theory, to advance mixed methods in criminology, and perhaps to rethink the ego, there is more to say on the links and complications inherent in any pragmatic criminological project. This includes exploring on what basis pragmatism offers a philosophically sound way to vigorously contest certain criminal justice practices, while assisting to develop others. Future work might also consider the debates between Rorty and Jürgen Habermas and the value of revisiting older Deweyian notions about the value of communal action. This requires comparing models of debate and dialogue, and situating, experimenting, and exploring in more detail how conversation can lead to socially useful public policy reform. Rorty’s pragmatism combines ontological skepticism with a relentlessly practical imperative and offers a flexible means to justify a number of developments in contemporary criminology. While questions remain about the ultimate value of Rorty’s
pragmatism to criminological theory and practice, it is worthy of further exploration, application, and imagination.

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1. More recent efforts have arguably been more successful (Arrigo and Milovanovic, 2009; Arrigo et al., 2005). Connecting constitutive theory, penology, and practice to auger a revolution in how to think about offenders represents an important example of socially useful “re-description” given the tens of millions of Americans with a criminal record.


3. For example Dooley (2010: 77) reports Robert Sampson’s concern that some scholars are today engaging in the atheoretical practice of “variable stacking”, an approach criticized decades ago (Sampson and Laub, 1991).

4. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009: 89) provide a useful overview of abductive reasoning. First proposed by Charles Pierce and associated with generating a plausible hypothesis based on patterns in data, it was later applied to qualitative analysis before being explicitly linked with mixed methods research (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009).

5. Some suggest Rorty is a “neo-pragmatist”, and holds views very different from others such as Pierce who refuse to situate pragmatism outside the epistemological orientations of modern philosophy. Susan Haack (1993) argues Rorty’s efforts to abandon the basic concepts of traditional epistemology are symptoms of a vulgar cynicism. Hilary Putnam (1981), along the same lines, argues one cannot claim that some beliefs are justified, if there is no universal means by which to define justification.

6. Rorty’s view of the fluid and fragmented nature of truth appears to leave little means to challenge those who abuse their authority, power, or influence. Conant (2000: 268) argues Orwell’s (1949) dystopian vision in Nineteen Eighty-Four concerns the loss of truth, reason, and rights. On one reading of Rorty, these should not count as loss. Big Brother, who relies on Orwellian double speak may be nothing to fear if subsequent action is based on adequate consensus. Recent admissions about the nature of state surveillance and the unwillingness of a “liberal” administration to challenge senior officials who patently lied to Congress have returned the spotlight to the role of propaganda in US democracy. Rorty’s views could allow double speak if and when those who favor such a strategy show it serves some socially useful outcome.

References


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