Public Criminology and Media Debates Over Policing

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ABSTRACT   *Public criminology is concerned with public understandings of crime and policing and public discussions of such matters by criminologists and allied social scientists. For the purposes of this paper, these professionals are individuals identified by journalists on the basis of academic credentials or university affiliation as those who can speak to crime matters. This qualitative study investigates media statements made by criminologists and allied social scientists following the 2020 murder of George Floyd with two questions in mind: How have they responded to debates over reforming, defunding, and abolishing police? What insight can these responses provide about public criminology more generally? I analyze statements offered by criminologists in news reports and on Twitter using Qualitative Media Analysis, an approach that emphasizes the processes through which discourse is presented to audiences. I argue that recent criminological debates in the media concerning the future of policing have exposed unresolvable tensions among scholars who engage in the practice of public criminology, suggesting that the public is not receiving coherent, authoritative messages about these issues. The findings also raise questions about public criminology and illuminate new concerns regarding scholarly expertise related to knowledge claims and credibility relative to social justice.*

KEYWORDS public criminology; policing debates; racial justice; media; qualitative media analysis

Introduction

The year 2020 saw widespread public movements for racial justice, with calls to eliminate systemic bias and racism from the criminal justice system in response to the police murder of George Floyd. This paper asks: How have criminologists and allied social scientists who produce knowledge about crime and its control responded in media to debates over the reform, defunding, and abolition of police? And relatedly, what insight might such responses provide about public criminology more generally? I answer these

questions by investigating statements offered by criminologists in news reports and on Twitter using Qualitative Media Analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), a type of ethnographic content analysis that focuses on a reflexive, immersive awareness of the communicative processes, meanings, and emphases contained in media documents. I argue that criminological debates concerning the future of policing following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 have exposed unresolvable tensions among various scholars who engage in the practice of public criminology.

Many of the widespread discussions about changes to policing were framed in relation to social justice, understood as racial justice, which concerns matters of fairness and equity in direct relation to policing and the criminal justice system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 120-124). Discussions about racial bias in policing were a recurring staple of news coverage across North America in 2020. The general theme across these reports was rather pointed: police and law enforcement are biased in their treatment of racialized people who are disproportionately subject to police violence and death. African Americans, for instance, accounted for 28% of people killed by police in 2020 in the U.S. despite being only 13% of the total population (Mapping Police Violence, n.d.). A database of deaths across Canada as a result of police action in 2020 reveals that Black and Indigenous people are disproportionately killed by police (Flanagan, 2020; Singh, 2020). Evidence further indicates that police violence is a leading cause of death for young, racialized people in the U.S. (Edwards et al., 2019).

While data across North America show the disproportionate police killing of racialized people, what *exactly* is to be done about police violence relative to the actualization of social justice is another matter entirely. Police reform is widely touted as the primary solution. The protests in 2020 against police violence, in which "defund the police" and "abolish the police" served as popular rallying cries, helped bring these important debates, previously located at the margins of public discourse, into mainstream news media discussions.

The findings in response to the first research question articulated above reveal that some scholars responded by injecting lived experience into the debates. In answering the second research question, the findings provide evidence of competing strands of public criminology, affirming the basic argument of this paper that contemporary media debates over police have exposed unresolvable tensions among various scholars who engage in the practice of public criminology. My argument contributes to the public criminology literature by spotlighting how social justice concerns are simultaneously advanced and undermined by contradictory public criminological interventions, a process that problematizes struggles for racial justice and the push for social change following the police murder of George Floyd. This research also contributes to scholarship on public criminology more generally by adding to the limited studies that investigate criminologists' media statements (see Richards et al., 2020) and by bolstering

evidence that criminology remains a divided discipline, particularly over how criminology should be done (Bosworth & Hoyle, 2011).

Criminology is not monolithic, nor has it ever been. The events of 2020, however, seem to have (re)exposed tensions in the different degrees of criminological commitment to social justice issues regarding the maintenance, promotion, and dissolution of forms of state-sanctioned violence. Public conversations in response to the social justice inspired events of 2020 have materialized into public debates ranging from calls for police reform to defunding and abolishing the police. Loader and Sparks (2011) suggest there are myriad ways in which criminologists and others under "allied banners" engage with publics about crime and related issues like policing, collectively understood as public criminology.

A brief overview of the public criminology scholarship is provided in the next section to situate my research questions in a foundational literature. Following that is a discussion of my methodological approach, which is theoretically informed by symbolic interactionism. Next, I present my findings, which empirically underscore the argument of this paper that contemporary media debates over police have exposed unresolvable tensions among various scholars who engage in the practice of public criminology. I conclude by buttressing my analysis with insights from critical race theory to showcase epistemological concerns that the data raise for public criminology debates.

Public Criminology

Public criminology is concerned with public understandings of crime, including how crime is discussed and subsequently managed (Loader & Sparks, 2011). It is generally understood as a particular approach to "doing" criminology, with a commitment to engaging in public education and debates about crime, rather than a particular theoretical perspective or methodological approach. While there is no universal agreement on the definition and scope of public criminology, it is generally regarded as an offshoot of public sociology, a cooptation of Alfred Lee's (1978) question, "knowledge for whom?" and Robert Lynd's (1939) query, "knowledge for what?" (Burawoy, 2005). The aim of public sociology is to engage with multiple and diverse publics about public issues (Burawoy, 2005). Criminology follows a "distinctive progression" similar to public sociology (Uggen & Inderbitzin, 2010, p. 179), although questions about what publics public criminologists aim to engage and how are often less clear (Piché, 2015).

Burawoy (2005) envisions public sociology as one distinct form of sociological practice that coexists alongside professional, critical, and policy sociologies. These forms of sociological practice vary in their commitments. The professional sociologist, for instance, embraces a neutral position consistent with the status quo, in the interest of careerism, whereas the critical

sociologist does the opposite by questioning the status quo. Both achieve these interests from the confines of the ivory tower. The policy sociologist serves market-based interests, and the public sociologist addresses the needs of publics by generating dialogue.

Following Burawoy's (2005) categorization, Uggen and Inderbitzin (2010) apply the same typology to various practices of criminology. The professional criminologist contextualizes the study of crime in a body of disciplinary knowledge. Policy criminologists apply theories of crime and methods to reduce and control crime. The work of professional and policy criminologists preserves the status quo by serving the interests of state institutions and therefore may perpetuate state violence and harm (Piché, 2015). Finally, critical criminologists aim to interrogate foundational questions about the meaning of crime for a scholarly audience. However, a basic feature of criminology that sets it apart from the discipline of sociology is its close relationship with criminal justice practitioners, which "makes some variants of public criminology more palatable" for criminologists (Uggen & Inderbitzin, 2010, p. 731).

Offshoots of public sociology have existed more-or-less as long as the discipline itself (Shrum & Castle, 2014). More recent attention to public sociology is credited to Herbert Gans, who coined the phrase in his 1988 presidential address to the American Sociological Association (Gans, 1989). Nevertheless, it was Burawoy's (2005) dramatic reinvention that sparked contemporary debates over public sociology (Gans, 2009) – debates that were subsequently "imported" into more recent criminological discussions (Loader & Sparks, 2011).

Central to envisioning any form of public criminology is an orientation to some type of public-facing knowledge mobilization to generate debates and dialogue around crime matters. Barak's (1988) "newsmaking criminology" is a related example. Barak suggests that newsmaking criminology concerns conscious efforts by criminologists to share their knowledge with publics and shape the presentation of crime-related news (see also Turner, 2013).

Others assert that public criminology entails more than shaping news and should also close the gap between public perceptions of crime and criminologically-informed knowledges by injecting evidence into public debates (Uggen & Inderbitzin, 2010) and, in some other circumstances, by speaking in a "prophetic voice" against state and corporate crimes (Kramer, 2012, p. 41; for a lengthier discussion of the ethics associated with taking a public moral position see Hanemaayer & Schneider, 2014).

While public criminology has been criticized for appealing to the state (Piché, 2015), others have cautioned against this limited view (Henne & Shah, 2020). Criminology is not monolithic, nor is its public face. For instance, while criminology can and does operate in coordination with or in the interests of state apparatuses, some criminologists also critique governments or state actors in media outlets.

As with public sociology, a common theme across the ideological and epistemological debates of public criminology is facilitating public dialogue. However, criminology remains a divided discipline (Bosworth & Hoyle, 2011) and concerns over the practice of public criminology is no exception. What public criminology is, who it serves, and how it is practiced and by whom, remain contested (Henne & Shah, 2020; Nelund, 2014; Piché, 2015; Ruggiero, 2012). Given these debates over public criminology, it is somewhat surprising that little research has empirically investigated who appears in the media, how often they do so, and what kinds of statements they make (Richards et al., 2020). Research also illustrates that social scientists use social media to engage the public and distribute materials in the public realm, but scholarship in this area remains underdeveloped (Schneider, 2014, 2015, 2017; Schneider & Simonetto, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). I address these gaps in the literature in what follows, but first turn to a discussion of my research methodology.

Methodology

Qualitative Media Analysis (QMA) is a useful method to answer the question of how public criminologists responded in media to debates over the reform, defunding, and abolition of police in 2020. It is an ethnographic immersive approach to media documents that emphasizes the process through which discourse is presented to audiences (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).[1] QMA is theoretically informed by symbolic interactionism, a perspective that maintains that social order is symbolically communicated, with media playing an essential role in the process. QMA is a particular type of ethnographic content analysis that focuses on a reflexive awareness of the communication processes, meanings, and emphases contained in documents. The study of media documents using this technique enables researchers to place symbolic meanings in context, but also to track the process of meaning-making and the influence meanings have on social definitions of categories like reform, defund, and abolish.

The method entails a 12-step process (see Altheide & Schneider, 2013, pp. 39-73). The researcher identifies the topic (step 1) and reviews the literature (step 2) and selected media documents (step 3). The next three steps create a data collection instrument or protocol. Step 4 involves listing identified variables or categories that emerged during steps 1-3; the identified variables are then tested against the data (step 5), and the protocol is revised if necessary (step 6). A sampling strategy is then utilized (step 7). The data are gathered using preset codes (step 8) and analyzed (step 9). Differences identified during the analysis stage are included in written summaries (step

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[1] For a detailed discussion of the "ethnographic" nature of this method, see Altheide & Schneider, 2013, pp. 23-37.

10), alongside typical examples (step 11). Data are compared and contrasted, and differences are integrated into a manuscript draft (step 12).

I focused on media formats in which claims made by criminologists and allied others appeared (steps 1-3). News media documents (i.e., mass media) served as the primary data source and Twitter (social media) as a secondary data source. News and social media formats as data sources are consistent with spaces in which public criminology occurs, in the traditional sense (e.g., statements provided to journalists and published in news media) and e-public criminology (e.g., posts made to social media platforms like Twitter) (Schneider, 2015). LexisNexis was utilized to collect news media articles as the "*primary documents*, which are the object of study" (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 7, emphasis in original). Searches of news media were conducted between May 25, 2020 (the date of George Floyd's death) and December 31, 2020. Data were downloaded and converted into searchable portable document format (PDF) datasets.

I focused on statements made by criminologists and "allied others" presumed to have academic or professional knowledge on the issue of policing (steps 8-9). As the protocol was developed and revised (steps 4-6), LexisNexis searched documents for "criminologist" and "police reform" (164 results, 700 PDF pages), "criminologist" and "defund the police" (89 results, 402 PDF pages), and "criminologist" and "abolish the police" (12 results, 47 PDF pages). Data analysis, aided by Adobe Acrobat Pro software, involved reading, sorting, and searching collated statements by criminologists across the collected news reports, which allowed me to identify key themes associated with reforming, defunding, and abolishing the police. Themes refer to "the recurring typical theses that run through the lot of the reports" (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 53). Subsequent searches of LexisNexis followed the same criteria with "professor" in place of "criminologist" so that allied scholars who engage with journalists about crime matters would also be included in retrieved data.

These additional searches produced *a lot* more data: "professor" and "police reform" (3,024 results, 16,674 PDF pages), "professor" and "defund the police" (1,677 results, 11,061 PDF pages), and "professor" and "abolish the police" (361 results, 2,254 PDF pages).[2] Some statements on Twitter were referenced in the collected news media documents. Data from Twitter served as "*secondary documents*," or those records about primary documents that "are at least one step removed from the initial data sourced by a researcher" (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 7, emphasis in original). Sampling of all data materials followed QMA's "progressive theoretical sampling" approach (step 7), or "the selection of materials based on emerging understanding of the topic under investigation. The idea is to select materials for conceptual or theoretically relevant reasons" (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 56).

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[2] Several opinion pieces I authored or co-authored on related policing issues were excluded.

While these data sets are very large, the PDF search function assisted with more quickly developing a deeper familiarity with the context of public criminology statements situated in coverage across multiple articles. The volume of these datasets was reduced to a more manageable size by aggregating the PDF files using Adobe's advanced search function to a line-by-line context. For example, an aggregated search of the largest dataset (i.e., "professor" and "police reform") for "professor" reduced 16,674 PDF pages of data to 665 pages of line-by-line context. Congruent with my research questions, these data were then carefully reviewed for names and supplementary data like title, rank, and position (e.g., associate professor of criminal justice, assistant professor of sociology), and published research like books or articles. Retrieved names of professors were then re-entered into the datasets for a more nuanced reading of select news articles for additional context and references to relevant secondary documents.

Findings

Reforming the Police

A theme in response to police reform across examined articles were remarks from scholars that situated policing in strictly historical terms, often referencing or discussing policing in the context of slavery, racism, and colonization. Such commentary usually seemed to suggest, directly or indirectly, that the policing institution and some of its practices (notably bias-based profiling) had not been reformed (i.e., changed), at least not relative to other related social, institutional, and governmental changes intended to remedy racial disparities and combat discrimination (e.g., affirmative action). An examination of the data revealed that, while police reform was understood generally to refer to corrections or changes to police practices, there was no one shared solution across reports among those scholars who agreed with, or argued in favour of police reform, or among those academics who offered tacit support. There were, however, numerous suggestions for reform touted by scholars with wide ranging academic expertise and across diverse disciplines.

Body-worn cameras were among the more popular suggestions and a frequently cited measure for realizing police reform. A thematic summary of the various remarks offered with respect to body cameras and police reform is illustrated in the following: "the big take-away from research on body-worn cameras is that their effectiveness depends on context and specific implementation, said Andrea Headley, an assistant professor at the John Glenn College of Public Affairs at Ohio State University" (Frolik, 2020). Professor Headley's statement and others like it are underpinned by the normative assumption of the necessity of police, a methodological position

that is consistent with Headley's existent research partnerships with police agencies.

Remarks by former police officers who had become academics were regularly included among the commentary provided by criminologists and allied others. Some of these statements by former officers were critical of any proposed or enacted changes to status quo policing, an indicator of their positioning, first, as former officer and, second, as an academic. As an example, consider the following report on the approval of the creation of a separate department to handle traffic enforcement in Berkeley, California:

> "Traffic stops are one of the most unpredictable and therefore dangerous duties of law enforcement. There is no such thing as a routine traffic stop and to perform them effectively and safely takes months of police training in and outside of an academy," said Frank Merenda, a former New York City Police Department captain who is an assistant professor of criminal justice at Marist College. Philip Stinson, a criminal justice professor at Bowling Green State University, called the idea an "overly simplistic plan that could have deadly consequences for unarmed traffic enforcement officers." (Har, 2020)

Comments invoking fear-based concerns about reforms, like perceived dangers to police or to the public in the form of spikes in crime, emerged as a theme usually where the "expert" was expressing criticism of police reform. However, what stands out in this example is the emphasis on Merenda's status as a *former* police officer, which is presented before his academic credentials. In other words, Merenda's police experience is only buttressed by his scholarly credentials. Philip Stinson (also quoted above) is similarly reported elsewhere as a former police officer. Not all former police officers turned academics were necessarily critical of police reforms, nor was their previous status mentioned each time they were quoted in media.

The point to stress is that personal experience here extends to scholarly expertise where academic credentials add value to lived experience. For example, remarks by Thaddeus Johnson, a Georgia State University criminologist and former officer with the Memphis Police Department, link former police officer status and life as a Black man:

> The reason I left the police force is everybody I arrested looked like me...There are a lot of Black officers who are conflicted like that: "My God, what am I representing, what am I doing?" […] As a Black man who has been on both sides of this, my God, I can see both sides of the suffering, but neither one can see the others because of their own suffering. (Jonsson et al., 2020)

Highlighting lived experience alongside academic expertise was not unique to former police officers. The theme of lived experience appeared in commentary on police reform provided by Black scholars regarding their own experiences with police as Black people. For instance, recalling her interaction with an officer who was called to a dispute with a parking

attendant, Delores Jones-Brown – a retired professor of law, police science, and criminal-justice administration at John Jay College of Criminal Justice – said that police see "Blackness first." The report continued:

> She said her husband of 29 years, a Black journalist from Philadelphia, has had such "negative experiences" with police officers over the years that he views dialing 911 as "a last resort." His motto is "Don't call the police to this house unless somebody's dying," Jones-Brown said. (Mahbubani, 2020)

Such experiences point to calls to defund the police that would reallocate resources away from law enforcement to subsidize social services that could respond in situations that do not warrant dialing 911 and summoning the police to otherwise non-life-threatening situations.

Defunding the Police

The conceptual distinction between reforming and defunding police was often unclear across news coverage, with discussions of both frequently appearing together in the same reports. Stories about the meaning of defunding and subsequent clarifications provided by criminologists and scholars are a clear indicator that defunding lacks a basic definition or shared public narrative. This lack of a unified understanding was a dominant theme across reports. Unlike statements about police reform, which were generally regarded as referring to change, a great deal of scholarly commentary concerning defunding the police focused on definitional issues. Words like "reallocation" and "reimagining" recurred in statements as attempts to clarify the meaning of defund. A few thematic examples help demonstrate the point.

When discussing a course he was co-teaching with his father, Peter Marina, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and retired police officer, said, "It shouldn't be called defunding the police, it should be called reallocating resources" (Vian, 2020). Other scholars stressed that the phrase did not mean eliminating police, as was sometimes understood by the public. Rather, the concept of defund simply referred to the moving of funds from police budgets to other social service providers:

> Associate professor of criminal justice Jennifer Gibbs explained that when people call to defund the police, they don't usually want to eliminate law enforcement altogether. Rather, activists want to reform the law enforcement system and reallocate most of its budget to programs like education and affordable housing. "For so long, we have been investing more and more resources toward punitive measures to address a lot of social problems," Gibbs said, "at the expense of social programs that would help prevent crime and the need for the criminal justice system." Although Gibbs hesitated to endorse the concept, she agreed it was a viable option. "The police are being asked to deal with any new social problem that comes up," Gibbs said. "Drugs, mental illness. All of these things

are coming to the public's attention, and because we don't have another 24/7 emergency response system to deal with all of these issues, they fall to the police." (Baker, 2020)

Here Gibbs provides a somewhat balanced perspective regarding defunding by bringing public attention to the ways in which funds could be reallocated. Akwasi Owusu-Bemphah, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, added: "the defund the police movement really is a call to remove funds from police budgets, not asking police to move funds within their budgets" (Thompson, 2020). In another news article, he clarified his approach, calling it "de-tasking" the police, suggesting that the "police are currently doing too much" and that "we want to scale back the work the police do, and associated with that would be a reduction in police funding" (Rankin, 2020). However, Owusu-Bemphah's remarks do little to add clarity to public understandings concerning the meaning of defunding, instead seeming to provide a discourse (de-tasking) that can be appropriated by police administrators to reify the need for police.

Others offered more direct assessments that outright dismissed defunding efforts. As reported in the *Toronto Star*,

> Laura Huey, a professor of sociology and criminologist, says the calls to defund police are occurring in a vacuum of evidence and policy… "There's little research to suggest that many of the social programs likely to be funded in place of police forces will do much to reduce the social problems that have become police matters [...] Because we don't have good, solid evidence on what could potentially work, everything's a trial, [and] this is a really risky thing to do when you don't really know what the hell you're doing." (Powell, 2020)

In 2015, Professor Huey founded the Canadian Society of Evidence-Based Policing (CAN-SEBP), the core mandate of which is to empower Canadian police agencies. The CAN-SEBP is aggressively pro-police, beginning from an ontological position that assumes the necessity of police for social order and of conducting research that privileges police perspectives and voices (Walby, 2021). CAN-SEBP members' interests with respect to funding and access for research are entwined with those of police, and CAN-SEBP regularly provides commentary that could be characterized as antithetical to social justice concerns, further underscoring the organization's position with respect to defunding the police.

Beyond definitional matters and the dismissal of defunding initiatives, some commentary, albeit less typical, took a decidedly more antagonistic and divisive tone, including remarks by academics who do not research police or criminal justice, or anything even tangentially related. As a standout example, Harald Uhlig, an economist at the University of Chicago, shared his thoughts about defunding the police on June 8, 2020 to his more than 8,000 Twitter followers, comparing those calling for defunding the police to "flat earthers."

The post generated subsequent news media coverage in *The New York Times* (2020) and elsewhere:

> Too bad, but #blacklivesmatter per its core organization @Blklivesmatter just torpedoed itself, with its full-fledged support of #defundthepolice: "We call for a national defunding of police." Suuuure. They knew this is non-starter, and tried a sensible Orwell 1984 saying, oh, it just means funding schools (who isn't in favor of that?!?!). But no, the so-called "activists" did not want that. Back to truly "defunding" thus, according to their website. Sigh. #GeorgeFloyd and his family really didn't deserve being taken advantage of by flat-earthers and creationists. Oh well. Time for sensible adults to enter back into the room and have serious, earnest, respectful conversations about it all: e.g., policy reform proposals by @TheDemocract and national healing. We need more police, we need to pay them more, we need to train them better. Look: I understand that some out there will wish to go and protest and say #defundpolice and all kinds of stuff, while you are still young and responsibility does not matter. Enjoy! Express yourself! Just don't break anything, ok? And be back by 8 pm.

Social media like Twitter offers the possibility for public facing scholars to be both the generator and interlocutor of dialogue. In this circumstance, Professor Uhlig's comments generated dozens of comments on Twitter and news media coverage. Consistent with the basic theme of scholarly statements concerning the meaning of defunding the police, some users on Twitter (including academics) also attempted to define the meaning of defund. As one illustrative example, Susie Symes replied to Uhlig's tweet: "Like in economics, there's a spectrum about what the term means, but broadly: reduce police budgets + spend the saved resources on improving lives in the community" (Symes, 2020). Another Twitter user offered the following suggestion to Uhlig's Twitter post: "End of Policing by Alex S. Vitale start reading this book then decide." Vitale's book is a key text regularly cited in response to abolishing the police, to which I now turn.

Abolishing the Police

Abolishing the police received the least amount of media coverage, likely because of its outlier status or "extreme" position, as it was described in some reports on the spectrum of solutions to policing. There was less discussion and direct support of police abolition from academics quoted in news reports, compared to reform and defund debates. Further analysis revealed that many of the abolitionist points made by criminologists and other scholars aligned closely with efforts to defund the police, making the gradual abolition of police the end goal of defunding. Statements of this sort were made as the hopeful outcome of defund and divest movements.

Alex S. Vitale, a professor of sociology and author of the 2017 book *The End of Policing*, was among the most cited scholars on the question of

abolishing the police and the most mobilized in support of calls to abolish the police. Professor Vitale's remarks below are illustrative of the position of gradual abolition, with an emphasis on harm reduction:

> No one is talking about a situation where tomorrow there is some magical switch and there are no police. What we're talking about is an interrogation of the specific things that police are doing which have caused significant harms, have reproduced race and class inequality in America and demanding that we replace policing solutions. Does that mean at the end of the process there are no police? Well, we don't know what is at the end of this process. It's about communicating with communities about what their needs are that have been ignored by government for generations now and demanding that they no longer turn those things over to folks whose tools for solving their problems are guns and handcuffs, coercion, and threats. (Isaacson & Amanpour, 2020)

Similarly, Patrick Sharkey, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University, had his remarks in a *Washington Post* article included in a *New York Times* opinion piece:

> Decades of criminological theory and growing evidence demonstrate that residents and local organizations can indeed "police" their own neighborhoods and control violence – in a way that builds stronger communities. We have models available, but we've made commitments only to the police and the prison system. (Bokat-Lindell, 2020)

Professor Sharkey here provides evidence-based recommendations in support of social programs that can work as alternatives to police, an assertion that directly contradicts Professor Huey's claims that evidence suggests otherwise (i.e., the need for police), thus revealing an incongruent ontological positioning between these two scholars.

Further analysis indicates that the language and theme of abolishing the police was often paired with statements provided by activists and abolitionists (less so scholars). "Activist" and "abolitionist" were identity markers not generally associated with professors in the examined data, at least not directly. But there were exceptions. As an example, consider Anup Gampa, an assistant professor at Harvey Mudd College in California, who told the *Student Life Newspaper* that he was "in full solidary not only with the call for defunding the police but to entirely abolish the police" (Engineer, 2020).

Unlike reform or defund, there were no conceptual issues regarding abolish terminology across reports, and thus abolishing the police was the most consistent and cohesive of the three responses to policing in 2020. Scholars pointed out that calls to abolish the police are rooted in the prison abolition movement. The prison abolition work of Distinguished Professor Emerita Angela Davis of the University of California Santa Cruz was sometimes cited. As one example, Tyler D. Parry, an assistant professor of African American and African Diaspora studies, claimed that, "Police abolition is inspired by the prison abolition movement. What a number of people, Angela

Davis among them, were in favor of is abolishing the prison-industrial complex" (Scavone, 2020). Ajima Olaghere, an assistant professor of criminal justice at Temple University explains:

> These institutions no longer work, so how do you fundamentally change them or turn them into something different? And I think abolitionists are calling for, in the case of policing, reduced dependency on and liberation from police because right now police are the gatekeepers to the criminal justice system as a whole – a system that is predicated on, and that imposes, retribution and deprivation […] We should have other institutions taking a larger and more proactive role in ensuring that we don't let people fall through the cracks. (Kochis, 2020)

A basic argument of this paper is that the more recent criminological debates concerning the future of policing have exposed some unresolvable tensions among public criminology scholars. All of this suggests that the public is not receiving a coherent, authoritative message about these issues, which can problematize struggles for social justice and the push for social change, among other concerns, to which I now turn in the concluding discussion.

Concluding Discussion

The movements for social justice in response to racialized police violence following the death of George Floyd put a spotlight on public criminology across much of 2020. The statements herein provided by criminologists and allied scholars, while not generalizable, do provide some empirical insight into the role that criminologists play in injecting criminological materials into public discourse. I now return to the first question introduced at the outset of this article: How have criminologists and allied scholars who produce knowledge about crime and its control responded in media to debates over reforming, defunding, and abolishing the police?

Public criminology cannot exist without expertise from professional criminologists. At the core of criminology, as has been asserted about public sociology, is the understanding that professional criminology provides both legitimacy and expertise for public criminology (Burawoy, 2005). One consistent finding about how criminologists responded in 2020 that cut across debates over reforming, defunding, and abolishing the police concerned matters of expertise.

The findings indicate that one's degree credentials, scholarly research and publications, and university affiliation collectively served as a baseline for the recognition and affirmation of research expertise across news media reports. This is unsurprising. However, the findings also reveal that criminologists and scholars responded by injecting their lived experience into these debates, drawing from encounters with police as racialized person, former employment in law enforcement, and sometimes both. This finding points to a burgeoning storytelling and counter-storytelling narrative turn that

adds "the notion of a unique voice of color" to public criminology, which is simpatico with critical race theory that builds "on everyday experiences with perspective [and viewpoint in an effort] to come to a deeper understanding of how" the public sees race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 11, 45). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), "the voice-of-color thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, American Indian, [Indigenous], Asian, and Latino writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know" (p. 11). However, in other circumstances, albeit less frequent, some scholars injected personal opinions unrelated to their expertise or lived experience, as was the case with economist Harald Uhlig's comments on Twitter.

What is at stake here is that the lived experiences of racialized scholars may be conflated by publics with the personal and irrelevant opinions of other scholars, which can possibly undermine advancements in racial justice. Nevertheless, critical race theory's narrative contributions to public criminology debates in 2020 are important and help advance our understanding of social justice related to criminal justice in that critical race theory has built "on the work of radical criminologists" and abolitionists who have collectively sought to draw attention to the racism baked into the entire criminal justice system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 120; Piché & Larsen, 2010; Saleh-Hanna, 2008, 2017). The finding that the narrative turn of critical race theory is flourishing in public criminology debates across 2020 seems to suggest that some of the core tenets of radical criminology are working their way into mainstream popular thinking, by incorporating social justice concepts related to policing and "by describing the changing nature of what is to be abolished" (Piché & Larsen, 2010, p. 391; see also Davis, 2005). The influence of radical criminology on critical race theory and 2020's narrative turn in public criminology is also a finding consistent with research that maps criminology onto other theoretical interventions (e.g., Ahmad & Monaghan, 2019). Future research might explore and further develop this matter as it relates to the literature on defunding the police and the police abolition movement.

In their book *Public Criminology?*, Loader and Sparks (2011) contend that there are numerous ways in which criminologists and others under "allied banners" engage with publics about crime and related issues, as demonstrated by the data above. The evidence in this paper seems to warrant the addition of an "antagonistic banners" categorization of scholars; statements provided by criminologists and other scholars in response to 2020's social justice movements were sometimes at odds, as was the case with questions over whether to reform or abolish the police, perhaps creating confusion among publics. When scholars like Patrick Sharkey and Laura Huey provide contrary statements about the same issue, with each citing authoritative "evidence" to support their position, who *exactly* is correct? While each scholar injected evidence into the debates over policing, it is Professor

Sharkey who arguably speaks in a "prophetic voice" concerning criminological interventions oriented at harm prevention, and thus is more consistently situated within a social justice agenda (see Kramer, 2012). The same could be said about remarks offered by Professor Alex S. Vitale. Furthermore, it has been suggested that Laura Huey and like-minded pro-police colleagues "ignore critical literature and ignore existing literature on the topic" (Walby, 2021, p. 4). Nevertheless, media narratives citing these conflicting perspectives provide public audiences with information that shapes their understandings of definitional claims, like whether defunding the police is better or worse or is or is not supported by evidence. But because "the definition of the situation ultimately lies with audience response," current research does not provide insight into the reception and lasting impacts of the legitimate and trusted expertise that criminologists offer publics (Altheide & Snow, 1979, p. 19).

The findings also raise additional questions about public criminology and expertise concerning knowledge claims and credibility. Reflecting on the issue of credibility, Becker (1967) noted in his 1966 Presidential Address to the Society for the Study of Social Problems that, "'Everyone knows' that responsible professionals know more about things than laymen, that police are more respectable and their words ought to be taken more seriously than those of the deviants and criminals who they deal with" (p. 242). Given the close relationship that exists between criminology and criminal justice, academics who invoke law enforcement experience may be taken more seriously as the "real experts" than racialized scholars who discuss their personal encounters with police, the nature of their academic credentials aside (Uggen & Inderbitzin, 2010, p. 734). While there has been a lack of diversity in public criminology, the findings presented here suggest there is a growing array of voices being represented in the media as experts on policing and crime (Uggen & Inderbitzin, 2010). Despite this move toward greater inclusivity, there is a danger in privileging of one form of lived experience (police officer) over another (racialized identity), and future research should explore this important and less understood knowledge credibility issue in public criminology.

Returning briefly to my second research question, what insight might scholarly responses to 2020's movements for social justice provide about public criminology more generally? The topic of policing generated numerous, what we might call criminology-esque statements from a wide range of scholars across an array of disciplines. The data reveal that significantly more commentary was offered by academics under allied/antagonistic banners than was by "official" criminologists, as defined in media reports. The evidence also reveals that criminology-themed statements across reports frequently offered incongruent frames that both appealed to the state (reform) and were in opposition to it (abolish).

This paper then provides evidence of competing strands of public criminology (public criminologies), adding confusion to public

understandings of criminology and related advancements in social justice. At a minimum, what these collective empirical observations seem to indicate is a continued blurring of already loose disciplinary boundaries. They also speak to broader concerns about the nature of public criminology (or criminologies) – what it is exactly, and who it speaks to – thus complicating the realization of social justice as it relates to public criminological interventions. Future research might investigate how allied scholars (i.e., not criminologists) are engaging with crime and related issues with broad public appeal and reach, such as policing, with an eye to how the loosening of disciplinary boundaries might impact the advancement of social justice concerns.

A shortcoming of this research is that it is limited to an analysis of statements made by criminologists in media. Media data in this study highlight the unresolvable tensions that exist among scholars who engage in the practice of public criminology. So future research is necessary to identify and further delineate the different epistemological, ontological, theoretical, and methodological approaches and commitments of public criminologists to provide more insight into the individual motivations that underscore public criminological interventions. Lastly, future research might take grassroots organizing and other efforts that draw on public criminology tactics into consideration to better understand the tensions among scholars who engage in public criminology.

This exploratory research project contributes to the limited but growing scholarship that investigates public statements made by criminologists and other social scientists. It remains necessary to explore public criminology as it develops in media. The findings here are not intended for generalization. Nevertheless, the materials herein add some necessary insight to our understandings of public criminology and provide a few directions for future research.

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