

# Justice, Crime, and Deviance 2013: Challenging Norms and Critiquing Policy

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The first annual “*Justice, Crime and Deviance: Regional Graduate Research and Networking Conference*” was held on Saturday April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU) in Brantford, Ontario.

This interdisciplinary conference was initiated and organized by co-chairs Nicole Schott and Zoey Jones, Laurier Brantford Criminology Masters students, with guidance and mentorship from our organizing committee: Dr. Lauren Eisler and Dr. Thomas Fleming. The conference would not have been a success without the support from our abstract committee: Dr. Debra Langan, Dr. Andrew Welsh, Dr. Lauren Eisler, and Dr. Marcia Oliver, our invaluable graduate and undergraduate volunteers, and our generous sponsors: the Graduate Program in Criminology, the Department of Criminology, the Office of the Dean, the Criminology students’ Association, the Graduate Students’ Association, and the Stedman Community Bookstore at WLU. Collaboratively we strove to build a platform for graduate students to share and receive feedback on completed and ongoing research endeavours related to justice, crime, and deviance, while also providing valuable peer-networking opportunities.

The morning started off with support expressed in the opening remarks by Becca Carroll, Dean of Students at WLU, followed by our first keynote speaker, Dr. Jeffrey Wong, a clinical and forensic psychologist who ignited discussion from an impassioned audience after his presentation on youth justice legislation and the rehabilitation of young offenders. Throughout the day, we showcased the research of 17 M.A. and Ph.D. students from McMaster University, the University of Western Ontario, the University of Guelph, the University of Toronto, McGill University, and WLU Brantford and Waterloo Campuses in the format of paper, poster, and video presentations. The major areas of graduate research were organized and delivered within four thematic sessions titled: Deviance and Representation, Governance and Social Control, Youth and Crime, and Gender and Policy. Throughout the day, one of our volunteers maintained a live twitter feed (using the Twitter account @JCDLaurier and hashtag #JCDLaurier) which generated enthusiastic and engaged tweets and retweets. Over lunch, local dignitaries including Phil McColeman, MP for Brant, the Hon. Dave Levac, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario and MPP for Brant, and His Worship Chris Friel, Mayor of the City of Brantford, shared their thoughts on the importance of our conference to Laurier University and the Brantford community and expressed their thanks to the organizers and conference participants. Our last talk, presented by our second keynote, Dr. Stacey Hannem, an Assistant Professor at WLU, maintained the enthusiasm of the audience through drawing on her experiences with the Canadian Criminal Justice Association’s Policy Review Committee and discussing the role of the critical criminologist in shaping public policy. The unwavering engagement felt throughout the

\*Authors are listed in alphabetic order.

conference continued on well into the evening; students, professors and guests were able to network and continue discussions during a dinner social.

The conference included 16 presentations delivered by a mix of Masters and Ph.D. candidates from the following programs: Criminology, Sociology, Communications Studies, and Criminology and Sociolegal Studies. Two major themes emerged from the presentations: 1) research questions and methods of addressing research that challenged representations of deviance and the status quo, and 2) research that drew attention to systemic and policy issues in Canada and abroad. We will highlight the key contributions from specific presentations that fall within these two major themes and conclude with the implications of the research discussed.

### Challenging Representations of Deviance and Status Quo

Although the presenters covered diverse topics and were from different disciplines, the challenging of dominant understandings of deviance and the presenting of methodologies that push the current state of affairs in justice, crime, and deviance research was a common theme throughout the conference. For example, Josh Hissa used the case of Lulzsec's fifty day hacking spree to illustrate, and dispute, the construction of criminality around the web collective Anonymous. Through developing a framework that views Anonymous as a modern Trickster Collective, Hissa countered dominant narratives of criminality, allowing for the actions of the group to be perceived as legitimate acts of dissent instead of criminal acts. Similarly, Nicole Schott's research on public responses to Tumblr's new policy that censors pro-ana/mia (supporting anorexia/bulimia) content online, questioned the taken for granted understandings that have been propagated by the medical/psychological model. Her analysis deconstructed the problematization of pro-ana/mia at the individual level and developed conceptual frameworks that allow for alternative understandings and responses to the 'deviant' phenomenon.

Zoey Jones shared a reflexively rich analysis of emotion work and the issues around self-disclosure that she experienced during her exploratory study involving in-depth interviews with clients of sex workers. Her research exposed an integral, yet often not discussed part of qualitative methodology. Through a group paper and poster presentation, first year M.A. students Samantha Kolpin, Carla Lopez, Nicole Schott, Justin Szeto and Tim Wykes along with their course supervisor/principle investigator, Dr. Debra Langan, presented a research project that explored students' (mis)use of technology in the classroom from the students' perspective. Not only did this research challenge the current literature that has focused on faculty's perceptions, the research project was collaboratively conducted as part of a course requirement: a progressive approach to complementing teaching and learning with publishing and scholarship. Meagan Suckling's video presentation challenged conference attendees to look past the status quo and sensationalist perceptions of the Russell Williams case and ask: 'how do visual images that circulate in the news contribute to the conversation of criminality?' Suckling's YouTube video presentation and research challenged contemporary methods of both conducting research and the method of delivering that research at academic conferences.

Saoussan Askar discussed the hetero-normative tone of legal discussions that involve HIV infected patients and argued, against the grain, that the criminalization of HIV/AIDS in Ontario can be understood as a mechanism of social control. Not only did Askar challenge the validity of the stereotyping and prejudice that individuals impacted by HIV/AIDS endure, she also highlighted systemic problems within the Canadian Criminal Justice System policies. Derek Cooper shared an

analysis of his ethnographic research on Canadian hockey's violent subculture that forced his audience to place hockey fighting under the criminological gaze. Similar to Askar, Cooper questioned the appropriateness and fairness of how the Canadian Criminal Justice System constructs criminality. The presentations discussed above, especially Askar's and Cooper's presentations, also drew attention to systemic and policy issues, which is the second theme that emerged throughout the conference.

### Challenging the State: Government, Policy, and Social Control

Askar and Cooper questioned the appropriateness and fairness of how the Canadian Criminal Justice System constructs criminality while Hissa, Schott, Jones, Langan et al., and Suckling deconstructed and challenged representations of deviance. These seven presentations were complemented by five others that showed a recurring interest in challenging the criminal justice system and related policies; this interest was prevalent amongst both presenters and conference attendees. The question and answer period after these presentations generated lively discussion.

In an effort to identify and unpack methods of social control exercised during protests, Alison St. Hill's poster focused on the changing face of surveillance (enacted by the state) and counter-surveillance (enacted by protesters) at the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011. She found that protesters utilized mobile surveillance technology with web-based participatory media (Web 2.0) to "resist social control techniques, to subvert state and media storylines, and to document events regarding police use of force" ("Justice, Crime, and Deviance", 2013, p.32). St. Hill's critical consideration of the Occupy Wall Street protests documented and analyzed existing challenges to surveillance-related policy.

While St. Hill identified active areas of state-based social control, Ryan Lafleur's afternoon presentation discussed a more abstract, ideological analysis of state-citizen interaction in the penal system. Based on conditional sentencing introduced in Bill C-10, the *Safe Streets and Communities Act*, Lafleur showed how political motivations and punitive ideologies influence the Harper government's relationship with prisons and the criminal justice system in Canada. Lafleur stated that this "punitive turn" exists alongside conflicting ideologies present in the Canadian criminal justice system.

Reflecting Lafleur's identification of conflicting ideologies, Jeffy Katio and Zeljko Bavcevic analyzed corruption indicators on the global stage and the disconnect between the purpose of corruption indicators and the effect. They argued that Transparency International, an NGO with a Corruption Perception Indicator, constructs a narrow and unnecessarily exclusive definition of 'corruption'. In addition, Katio and Bavcevic showed that even this organization is not without governmental power, and they argued against the existing, biased calculations of corruption which have negative real-world effects on the countries to which they are applied.

The last student presenter of the day, Naomi Sayers, reflected on Canadian legal approaches to both sex work and human trafficking. Sayers described Canada's deeply flawed approach to Indigenous women in sex work and as victims of human trafficking; she argued that we cannot conceptualize these issues as if they are separate from colonialism. Sayers shared Susan Hawthorne's argument that "both the land and women's bodies have suffered colonialist intrusions" and therefore attempting to deal with one aspect without the other cannot fully address the crucial issues faced by Indigenous women.

While these presentations focused on challenges to the criminal justice system and/or the associated policies, one other included relevant challenges in a more peripheral manner. Jacqueline

M. Kutt's presentation, which highlighted her methodology in an ongoing research project and her initial contact experiences with 'at risk' youth, sought to challenge the notion of 'at risk' and the associated impact on homeless or street youth. In addition, her research will examine the human labour embedded in interactions between those accessing non-profit services and the people who provide these services.

Lastly, there was one presentation that provided intriguing analysis outside of the two prevalent themes. Jessica Sutherland outlined her quantitative analysis of fear of crime and compared two Toronto samples, homeless street youth and high school youth. Her findings indicated a gap in the literature on fear of crime versus victimization history, and also identified that female youth across both samples had almost identical levels of fear of sexual assault. Sutherland's study presented intriguing implications for existing and future fear of crime research.

Aside from the graduate student presenters, the *Justice, Crime, and Deviance* conference was honoured to host two keynote speakers, Dr. Jeff Wong and Dr. Stacey Hannem. Wong spoke at the outset of the conference and utilized his knowledge as a clinical and forensic psychologist to explain and critique youth crime legislation. His analysis particularly focused on special needs young offenders, such as those who exhibit mental illness during the commission of a violent offence or multiple offences. Wong evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the Youth Criminal Justice Act and called for a more rehabilitative focus, rather than a punitive one. Hannem concluded the conference with the second keynote presentation, which was titled "Policy, Politics, and Public Criminology: Critical Engagement in a Neo-Liberal World". Hannem drew on her experience with the Canadian Criminal Justice Association's Policy Review Committee to discuss the relationship between research and policy, providing a much-needed practical reflection on this process for the many graduate students who intend to one day influence change.

## Discussion

The results of this conference clearly showed the value of peer sharing and networking opportunities. For one, many presenters and attending students expressed gratitude at the opportunity to share their own work, practice presenting in a formal environment, receive engaged discussion and feedback from the audience, and witness their peers do the same. In addition, these emergent themes indicated shared commonalities across different programs and universities that will support future research endeavours.

The *Justice, Crime, and Deviance* abstract committee did not actively seek out these challenging research initiatives and we take the emergent themes as encouraging glimpses into the future of disciplines that study justice, crime, and deviance. Cultural, social, political, legal, academic, and procedural aspects of social and legal life in Canada were examined, challenged, and discussed in depth. The graduate students who shared their research at this conference represent a diverse group in a variety of disciplines from a multitude of universities; they are evidently approaching their academic and personal worlds with challenging, questioning, and inquisitive minds, open to and seeking out areas that need to improve.

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