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The Quantitative- Qualitative Divide in Criminology: A Theory of Ideas' Importance, Attractiveness, and Publication

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research is published in criminology journals at a frequency far smaller than that of quantitative research. The question is 'Why?' After reviewing existing theories of the discrepancy, this article draws on the paradigm of Blackian sociology, Jacques and colleagues' theory of method, and Black's theory of ideas to propose a new theory: compared to quantitative research-based ideas, qualitative ones are evaluated as less important and therefore published less often in journals because they place the subject closer in cultural distance to the source and audience, though for that same reason they are also evaluated as being more attractive. Implications for criminology are discussed.

Introduction

The quantitative-qualitative divide is one of the most salient methodological issues in criminology.¹ Each method's prominence—or lack thereof—affects knowledge development; impacts the assessment and (dis)continuation of criminal justice policies and practices; and shapes scholars' publication success, tenure, promotion, and more. The scientific benefits and limits of quantitative and qualitative research have been described at great length (see, e.g., King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994: 46; Laub & Sampson, 2003: 251-2; Small, 2009). Some scholars maintain that both methods are good, albeit at different tasks: quantitative research is best for theory testing, whereas qualitative research is most useful for theory development. As such, the methods are not foes but rather companions. Another common camp holds quantitative research as being far superior due to its reliance on statistical inference. From this perspective, claiming both methods have value is like comparing a dollar to a dime.²

One way the quantitative-qualitative divide has become tangible is the respective prevalence of these two methods in criminology journals. Statistically speaking, qualitative research is insignificant in these outlets; far more articles are based on quantitative research (Buckler, 2008; Kleck, Tark, & Bellows, 2006; Tewksbury, Dabney, & Copes, 2010; Tewksbury, DeMichele, & Miller, 2005). Does this discrepancy simply reflect the scientific advantages of quantitative research over its qualitative counterpart or are other factors at work? The answer is important because it will help criminologists determine the actual utility of research methods and products by disentangling this evaluation from the social and psychological forces that may misshape judgment.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a new theory of why there is much more quantitative than qualitative research published in criminology journals. Toward that end, first existing explanations of the discrepancy are reviewed. That is followed with a description of the new theory's foundation: Blackian sociology (Black, 1995), Jacques and colleagues' theory of method (see, e.g., Jacques & Wright, 2008), and Black's (2000) theory of ideas. Then the new theory is presented. Finally, implications for the criminological enterprise are discussed.

The Discrepancy and Existing Theories of It

Quantitative research has demonstrated that qualitative research is published less often in criminology journals. For instance, Tewksbury, DeMichele, and Miller (2005) find qualitative research appeared in about six percent of articles published in five leading criminology journals, whereas nearly three-quarters of articles were based on quantitative methods (see also Kleck et al., 2006). This pattern also applies to less prestigious journals. Buckler (2008) shows that in top tier and lower tier journals, respectively, quantitative findings are roughly nine and six times more common. Perhaps the most comprehensive study is that of Tewksbury, Dabney, and Copes (2010). They analyze articles published between 2004 and 2008 in sixteen American and international criminology journals. Mirroring the results of other studies, they find approximately a tenth of articles are based on qualitative research. They also reveal, for one, “criminology” and “criminal justice” journals are largely similar in the rate at which they publish qualitative research; second, non-U.S. journals publish qualitative articles at a greater rate than do U.S. journals; and yet, third, qualitative articles comprise just a third of publications in even the most qualitatively-receptive journals. In short, qualitative research is published less frequently than quantitative research in criminology and criminal justice journals, at the top and lower tier, in the U.S. and other countries.³

A variety of theories have been proposed for why qualitative research is published infrequently in criminology journals relative to quantitative research. One is that qualitative research-based manuscripts are submitted less often to journals and thus have fewer opportunities to find their way into print (Buckler, 2008). If that is true then there is not necessarily a bias against qualitative research, as studies are perhaps being published in proportion to their submission rate.

The alternative position is that qualitatively-oriented manuscripts are harder to have accepted for many reasons. One such reason relates to the diminutive agreement among criminologists on how to appraise the execution and products of qualitative research (Buckler, 2008). Whereas quantitative methods have a mathematical basis, the proper way to collect, analyze, and present qualitative data is more up in the air (Small, 2009). This lack of consensus makes publishing qualitative research more difficult to the extent editors rely on unanimity in reviewers' positive evaluations.

Another reason why manuscripts based on qualitative research receive a rougher ride in the review process is its products are deemed less rewarding (Buckler, 2008; DiCristina, 1997). Many American criminologists, at least, espouse quantitative research because they prefer the systemization, precision, and objectiveness that goes along with it (Worrall, 2000), though sometimes those qualities are more illusion than reality (Best, 2001; Huff, 1954).

Tied to the above argument is that the origins and modern practice of (normal) science are grounded on a culture that prefers exact and predictable understanding because this facilitates control of everything from health to the economy and offenders (see Merton, 2002 [1938]). This cultural preference may help to account

for why quantitative research is published more often in criminology journals than qualitative research, as the latter does not provide numerical summaries and predictive probabilities (Worrall, 2000).⁴

Still another theory is that criminologists have latched onto quantitative research because they are attempting to mimic scholars in other fields who have achieved higher standing in academia and broader society (DiCristina, 1997). For instance, hard scientists (e.g., physicists, chemists) and economists are widely stereotyped as quantitative researchers who have produced more important insights into reality than criminologists and, therefore, are of higher status, which comes with greater salaries, funding, admiration, and other benefits. The theory goes that for criminologists to do the same they should adopt those more successful researchers' quantitative methods. Criminologists who do so are rewarded with acceptance letters; those who do not are punished with "I am sorry to inform you ...".

If quantitative methods are more rewarding in the aforementioned ways then why would any criminologist conduct qualitative research? Are they irrational or stupid? Though somewhat insulting, people have not been shy to affirm the latter by drawing, somewhat ironically, on their personal qualitative experiences. As said by one journal editor and criminologist interviewed by Buckler (2008):

People who are quantitatively trained tend to think that qualitative research is conducted by people who cannot do statistics and that when you have researchers who don't have any skills in any respect they do qualitative research ... In the Ph.D. program I completed, methods is statistics. Yes, there was an opportunity to take qualitative courses, but it seemed to me that they were taken by the people who were just overwhelmed by statistics and couldn't handle it. So they became qualitative researchers, by default. (p. 392)

The implication of the above is that the lack of qualitative research in criminology journals is attributable to this method being conducted by inferior scholars. It certainly does not help qualitative criminologists that most receive negligible training in their method. Studies of curricula consistently demonstrate that quantitative courses are required in far greater amounts and instructors spend substantially less time on qualitative research (Buckler, 2008; DiCristina, 1997; Sever, 2001; Sullivan & Maxfield, 2003). Thus, the latter method's humble place in the journal literature could be due to curricula being dominated by lessons in quantitative research.

As mentioned above, it could be that qualitative research is submitted to journals in smaller amounts and therefore published less often. That too would require explanation. Qualitative researchers argue their method takes more time, the outcome of which is fewer publications (Buckler, 2008; Pogrebin, 2010; Tewksbury, Dabney, & Copes, 2010). This effect is exacerbated by the somewhat contradictory sentiments that qualitative data is, from the collectors' perspective, too valuable to share, and, from another perspective, basically useless for secondary analysis (Wright, Jacques, & Stein, In press).

Potential evidence for the notion that qualitative research takes more time is derived from a study that quantified how often qualitative researchers publish in criminology journals; only 11 of 362 authors had three or more articles over a five year span, and the most productive author, Richard Wright, published only seven manuscripts (Tewksbury, Dabney, & Copes, 2010); this rate of publishing is small relative to that of quantitative researchers (Tewksbury, DeMichele, & Miller, 2005). Another suggestive finding comes from a separate study of scholarly productivity that concluded “[o]verwhelmingly, those at the tops of each rank”—referring to assistant, associate, and full professors—“rely primarily on quantitative methods” (Copes, Khey, & Tewksbury, 2012). Assuming that quantitative and qualitative researchers have similar “abilities” and work equally hard, the relative infrequency of publishing by the most prolific qualitative researchers suggests their method does take more time to profit from.⁵ To the extent criminologists arrive at that conclusion and concern themselves with the consequences of publishing (e.g., tenure, promotion) then it could be expected that they will choose to conduct quantitative research.

Qualitative research may not only entail more time per publication but also more risk. Qualitative criminologists have been threatened, stalked, robbed, and murdered for reasons stemming from their research with active offenders (see, e.g., Jacobs, 1998, 2006; Lee, 1995; Williams et al., 1992; Sluka, 1990) and prisoners (see, e.g., Athens, 1997: 133-6). This problem is not limited to offender-based research, as criminologists who “ride-along” with police—or even join the force—place themselves in one harrowing encounter after another (see, e.g., Moskos, 2008). With that said, being a qualitative or quantitative researcher is not inherently dangerous or safe; for instance, the mortality surveyors who went household to household in Iraq during wartime (Roberts et al., 2004) must have been in tremendous jeopardy. With that understood, it seems safe to assert that qualitatively-oriented criminologists—especially ethnographers—more frequently find themselves in compromising situations than do their quantitative colleagues, many of who need not venture outside their office to obtain valuable data. If criminologists perceive qualitative research to be riskier then they may be absolutely or restrictively deterred (see Gibbs, 1975) from conducting it, which, in turn, could result in fewer qualitative publications (see Jacobs, 2006).

Finally, it could be that the lack of qualitative research-based articles in criminology journals is due to a “snowball effect in reverse,” or what might be termed a “melting snowball.” The theory is that the quantity of published qualitative research further depreciates as any of the factors outlined above gains weight because each is likely to feed on the others. For instance, if criminologists increasingly deem qualitative research as less rational then it will be taught less, which will lead qualitative researchers to be less capable of producing valuable products, which will lead these scholars to be viewed as even lower in status, which will lead to fewer people adopting the method, all of which will lead to less research of this kind being disseminated and published. That is just one example of a melting snowball; there could be a variety of causal links between the various reasons for why so little qualitative research is published in criminology journals.

To summarize, criminologists have provided a whole host of plausible theories of why qualitative research appears infrequently in criminology journals. These theories include that it is infrequently disseminated; there is a lack of agreement on how to evaluate its worth; it is less rational because its products are less rewarding (in part signified by its absence in higher status fields), it is riskier to conduct, and not in line with a widespread cultural preference for predictability and precision; conducted by less capable scholars; not taught as much; and experiencing a snowballing effect in reverse.

Paradigmatic and Theoretical Foundation

This paper proposes a new explanation of why there is so little qualitative research by drawing on Blackian sociology, Jacques and colleagues' theory of method, and Black's (2000) theory of ideas, described in turn.

Blackian Sociology

Paradigms orient us toward what to study and how (Homans, 1967; Kuhn, 1977). There are a plethora of paradigms that could be used to theorize the prevalence of qualitatively- and quantitatively-oriented articles in criminology journals. Blackian sociology, or "pure sociology," is the approach adopted here. This paradigm is designed to explain social behavior as a function of social geometry (see Black, 1976, 1995, 1998). "Social behavior" is a catchall term that covers a variety of actions tied to wealth, community, organization, culture, and social control. Research methods and publishing are facets of culture.

How people behave is affected by the social status of and social distance between every actor involved in a case—i.e., "social geometry." An actor's social status is their place in a hierarchy; it increases concomitantly with gains in wealth, community involvement, organization, conventionality, and sophistication, or with less subjection to social control. Social distance is the intimacy and cultural similarity between two or more actors; more familiarity and similarity equates to closer social distance.

The goal of Blackian sociologists is to determine how variation in social status and social distance lead to patterned differences in social behavior. This framework has been used to explain a number of behaviors, including welfare (Michalski, 2003), medicine, and art (Black, 1998). As relates more closely to criminology, the paradigm has been used to study drug sales (Jacques & Wright, In press), predation (Cooney, 2006) and many types of social control, including law (Black, 1976, 1980, 1989, 1998; Cooney, 2009), vigilantism (Black, 1983; Cooney, 1998, 2009; Phillips, 2003; Phillips & Cooney, 2005), lynching, rioting (Senechal de la Roche, 1996), genocide (Campbell, 2010), and terrorism (Black, 2004).

The uniqueness of Blackian sociology stems from its breadth (described above) and, ironically, from what it omits (Black, 1995). For one, Blackian sociology is "pure" in that it does not attend to non-sociological concepts, such as emotions. Second, this paradigm is nonteleological, as it does not recognize a goal set. And third, it is less focused on persons than social life; in other words, it concentrates on variation in action rather than differences between individuals or groups. The scientific benefit of non-subjective, non-teleological, and

non-anthropocentric approaches is that they potentially increase the value of theory by making it more testable, general, simple, and original (Black, 1995).

Theorizing Method

Jacques and colleagues have sought to develop a sociological theory of method nested in the Blackian paradigm. In the first article of this kind, Jacques and Wright (2008) draw on their own and others' experiences in studying unincarcerated offenders to propose that criminals who have had more contact with recruiters and researchers—i.e., closer in relational distance—are more likely to be recruited for research, receive less remuneration, and provide more valid data. In a separate article, Jacques and Wright (2010a) used a similar analytic process to theorize that scholars have smaller odds of being violently victimized in the course of conducting research when they are closer in relational distance to offenders and recruiters.

In another line, those authors suggest that one form of social status, namely normative status, affects the research process. Normative status decreases as an actor is subjected to more social control; for example, criminals are of lower status when incarcerated rather than free. Jacques and Wright (2010b) theorize that unincarcerated offenders are less likely than institutionalized offenders to be recruited for research but—when they do participate—receive greater remuneration and provide more valid data. That theory was subsequently extended by suggesting lower status generally—not just normative status—has those effects; for example, offenders who are poor, unemployed, uneducated, or racial minorities are more likely to be recruited, remunerated less, and provide less valid information than persons of higher status (Jacques & Wright, 2010c). However, and somewhat paradoxically, there is also evidence to suggest that Institutional Review Boards are more disapproving of—i.e., apply more social control to—studies involving lower status offenders (Jacques & Wright, 2010d).

Within this body of work on theorizing method, the least amount of attention has been given to the effect of cultural distance on the research process. The one study to do so is that of Jacques, Lindegaard, and van Gelder (2011). Based on the latter two authors' fieldwork in South Africa and Argentina, respectively, they propose that cultural differences between researchers and participants affect what is said in interviews. Specifically, they theorize that as these actors become further in cultural distance, what is communicated by a participant increasingly reflects that individual's assumptions about the researcher's culture, decreasingly reflects the participant's own culture, and is stated in a more righteous language.

In the pages to come, this paper will contribute to the ongoing effort to theorize method by drawing on the concept of cultural distance and Black's theory of ideas to explain why qualitative research is published infrequently in criminology journals compared to quantitative research.

Theorizing Ideas

In the sociological sense of the term, an idea is a statement about the nature of reality that is said, written, or otherwise communicated (Black, 2000). Two ways that ideas differ are in importance and attractiveness. An idea's importance is the degree to which actors claim it is significant (in the non-statistical sense of the term), whereas attractiveness is the amount of attention it receives.⁶

Black's (2000) theory of ideas suggests how social geometry affects these qualities. The social geometry of each idea is comprised of its source, audience, and subject. The source communicates, or expresses, the idea. The audience receives the communication. The subject is what the idea is about. Black posits that an idea's importance and attractiveness are affected by the social status of and social distance between the source, audience, and subject. His propositions are outlined below.

An idea's importance increases as the social distance between the audience and source decreases; the source's social status relative to that of the audience increases; the subject's status decreases; and, is a curvilinear function of the source's and audience's social distance from the subject. This predicts, for instance, that the better acquainted are a student and professor then the more likely is either of their ideas to be deemed important when told to the other; but the idea of a professor told to a student is more likely to succeed than vice versa; and both of their ideas are more likely to be deemed important if they are about a low status stranger (e.g., a criminal) than a high status individual they both know well (e.g., another professor or police chief).

The attractiveness of an idea increases as the social distance from the source or audience to the subject decreases; and, the subject's status increases. This predicts that an idea about insects is less likely to be attractive than an idea about humans because the latter subject is higher status and also closer in social distance to sources and audiences.

To be clear, an idea's importance and attractiveness is not necessarily indicative of its actual scientific value (e.g., validity, falsifiability, generality, simplicity, originality). As Black (2000) puts it, "[t]he sociology of knowledge, including the sociology of science, implies nothing about whether any idea deserves special credibility or prestige" (p. 351, emphasis added).

A Blackian Theory of Methods' Publication Frequency

Black's (2000) theory of ideas provides the basis for an original theory of why there is less qualitative than quantitative research published in criminology journals. Before presenting this theory, however, it is important to explicitly address the question of what exactly is the dependent variable? In other words, how are "criminology," "journal publications," "qualitative research" and "quantitative research" defined? Sutherland (1937) gives the definition of criminology: the study of law making, law-breaking, and responding to law-breaking. Journal publications are peer-reviewed manuscripts that appear in periodicals. Answering the question of what are qualitative research and quantitative research may seem obvious, but in fact there is

disagreement on the topic. While people may define anything as they please, for a concept to be useful in research its definition must be clearly specified, as to do otherwise invites a host of problems revolving around misinterpretation (Homans, 1967; Popper, 2002 [1959]). Given that concern, this paper now turns to specifying a simple and general definition of qualitative research and quantitative research, which will be used in the theory to come.

What Are Qualitative Research and Quantitative Research?

A scientific research method is a strategy of collecting and analyzing data represented as concepts, which typically—though not always—are used as independent and dependent variables in theories. There are many ways to conceptually divide the broad concept that is “research method” into smaller parts. One is to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative methods; they are often defined by the kind of data collection procedures involved and objective of doing so. For instance, a report based on a workshop involving preeminent qualitative researchers concluded that their method consists of “in-depth, case-oriented study of a relatively small number of cases”; “seeks detailed knowledge of specific cases, often with the goal of finding out ‘how’ things happen (or happened)”; and for which “researchers’ primary goal is to ‘make the facts understandable’, and often place less emphasis on deriving inferences or predictions from cross-case patterns” (NSF, 2004: 10).

This paper takes a different stance. While qualitative research may be correlated with those procedures and goals, they do not distinguish it from quantitative research. The amount or depth of cases does not determine whether research is qualitative or quantitative; a single interview of one minute can be qualitative, for instance. Nor does the amount of detail on cases or the research focus (e.g., “‘how’ things happen”) define these methods; a study with few details on any topic can be qualitative or quantitative. And all scientific methods are tools for increasing knowledge because this is the goal of science (Homans, 1967; Kuhn, 1977) and thus a defining feature of all methods, quantitative and qualitative alike.

There are three key aspects of research methods: strategy; procedure; and, style. A strategy is a way of accomplishing a goal. A procedure is a way of facilitating a strategy. A style is a way of expressing something. What fundamentally distinguishes quantitative and qualitative methods is their respective style, as they have the same strategy and do not necessarily entail different procedures.

Research methods do not vary in strategy because all of them seek to increase understanding of reality by providing information that informs knowledge through the collection and analysis of data. And while there are many different kinds of procedures used to generate data, and some are highly correlated with quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g., random vs. snowball sampling), the procedure does not ultimately determine whether research is quantitative or qualitative. For example, qualitative interviews can be done with persons who are randomly sampled, and surveys can be done with persons who are snowball sampled.

What makes a method quantitative or qualitative is the style in which the data on a subject are communicated by researchers (i.e., the source) to an audience. Qualitative research employs a non-numerical language; quantitative research uses a numerical language. These two styles, to be clear, are best thought of as resting at opposite sides of a language continuum, not as a dichotomy. This is because every datum is originally in a qualitative form and, therefore, numbers simply reflect the amount of a qualitative property. In other words, quantitative research is based on qualitative data that have been translated into numerical form (see Tewksbury, 2009). For example, the survey question, “How many fights have you been in?” requires a respondent to first recall events from their life that fit some qualitative definition of “fight” and then sum the number of times involved in such an event. Put plainly, then, qualitative and quantitative research are distinguished and defined—at the most basic level—by the style in which their data are expressed: the former method has a non-numerical style, and the latter has a numerical style.

Research Styles as Cultural Distance

Words and numbers are symbols of a deeper, richer reality. Symbols are how actors communicate with each other. As detailed above, the essential difference between qualitative and quantitative research is they rely on, respectively, non-numerical and numerical symbols.

Now recall that social distance refers to actors' intimacy and cultural similarities, with more of either equating to smaller distance (Black, 1976, 1998). One aspect of cultural distance is language. For example, two people who only speak different languages, such as English and Dutch, are further in cultural distance than two people who speak the same language. There also are degrees of differences as evident by, say, how Chinese is less similar to English than Dutch because the latter two both partially evolved from German.

The use of different languages does not necessarily entail different ideas about the nature of reality. For example, the Dutch word for police is “politie,” but this word does not reflect or cause differences in what police/politie are in the U.S. and Netherlands; at a fundamental level, any given thing—or what Black (2000) refers to as a subject—“is what it is” regardless of what it is called.⁷ Yet it cannot be ignored that things are to some extent a social construction, or a cultural artifact (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This does not mean that the “thing” does not exist in any real way, as it certainly does on at least a physical level. What it does mean is that some portion of that thing's existence is inextricably tied to social life—a reality of its own (Berger & Luckmann 1967; Hacking 2000). Street offenders, for example, know what “police” means and what police are in the typical sense of the word but also call them insulting names such as “pig” that are indicative of a slightly altered conception laden with a normative evaluation of the police's role in the community. This example is intended to demonstrate that in studying a subject, it is important to distinguish between what the subject is at the fundamental level (e.g., police vs. politie) and the symbol/s used to represent that thing (e.g., police/politie vs. pigs).

The implication of the above is that an idea's content is somewhat separable from the symbol/s used to communicate the idea. Quantitative and qualitative research express ideas in different styles. What quantitative research requires is for qualitative data to be translated into numerical form. Because translation is key, it logically follows that qualitative and quantitative research "findings" can be the same despite being expressed in different styles. Stated differently, quantitative and qualitative research may arrive at the same conclusion about reality but use different symbols to state that idea. Of course these two methods do not always produce the same findings, but neither do quantitative researchers nor qualitative researchers always agree amongst themselves.

All of this is important because it suggests the style in which an idea is expressed may affect evaluations of its importance and attractiveness.⁸ With one exception detailed below, when a given idea is communicated in qualitative style it is closer in cultural distance to the source and audience than when expressed in quantitative style. The reasoning behind this assertion is practically all people communicate more often in words and depictions (e.g., body language) than in numbers. Though people use numbers when speaking and writing to each other, the vast majority of communication involves purely qualitative information (e.g., what to order at a restaurant; plans for the weekend; feelings about colleagues). Even among people who are quantitatively sophisticated, the vast majority of their communication takes a qualitative form; statisticians, for instance, do not speak in formula to their family and neighbors. The ubiquity of the qualitative style in day-to-day communication means that practically everyone is more familiar with it than quantitative communication. For that reason, to express an idea in a non-numerical fashion places it in more familiar terms—i.e., closer in cultural distance.

The exception—or rather the caveat—that proves the rule is the following: persons who do not speak the same language, such as an English and Dutch speaker, but who are both quantitatively trained will be better able to communicate with numbers because they are culturally closer in that regard than in written and spoken word. To be more exacting, then, a subject is closer in cultural distance to a source or audience when it is expressed in what is for them a more familiar form. Thus, a single idea about a subject is closest in cultural distance to a source or audience when communicated in a language with which they are familiar or, better yet, fluent; the idea is further in cultural distance when communicated numerically; and the idea is furthest away in cultural distance when expressed in a foreign language, assuming they are at least somewhat familiar with communicating in numbers.

The Theory

Recall that Black (2000) theorizes an idea's importance and attractiveness to be affected by the social status of and social distance between the source, audience, and subject. Because the fundamental difference between qualitative and quantitative research is the style of expression—a facet of culture—the theory presented below will focus solely on how ideas are affected by cultural distance to a subject. Black proposed two propositions that focus on this aspect of ideas' social geometry.

One of the propositions is that an idea's importance is a curvilinear function of the source and audience's cultural distance from the subject. Stated differently, Black proposes that an idea's importance increases as a subject becomes less culturally familiar to the source and audience up to a point when the cultural distance is so far as to diminish the idea's importance.

When combined with the conceptualization of qualitative and quantitative research presented above, this proposition helps to explain the prevalence of articles based on these methods in criminology journals. According to the above reasoning, persons should be found to evaluate an idea as more important when stated in a quantitative than qualitative style because the former is further away in social distance than the latter. Therefore, journal editors and reviewers are more likely to recommend publication of quantitative- than qualitative-based manuscripts reporting the same idea; see figure 1.

--FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE--

An important issue to quickly deal with is the role of curvilinearity in the above proposition. The argument here is that while quantitative research is more likely to be published in journals because it places greater cultural distance between the subject and audience or source, manuscripts written in a language with which these actors are not fluent puts the subject too far away in cultural distance and thereby undermines the likelihood of publication. This seems so self-evident as to require no data on the point. One example, then, should suffice: in the field's flagship journal, *Criminology*, quantitative research dominates; qualitative research is rare; but articles written in anything but English are nonexistent.

However, and as mentioned above, there is a paradox in which the most important ideas are also destined to be the least attractive. The second proposition of Black (2000) concerned with the source and audience's cultural distance from a subject posits that as it increases then an idea's attractiveness decreases. In other words, a source or audience will give a subject more attention when they are more culturally familiar with it. This proposition predicts that among persons who speak the same language, they will evaluate ideas as less attractive when stated in a quantitative than qualitative style because the former is further in social distance than the latter; see figure 2.

--FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE--

Black defined an idea's attractiveness as the amount of attention it receives (Black, 2000; see also Davis, 1971). One way to operationalize this concept is as citation counts. For instance, an analysis could compare the respective impact factors of articles based on quantitative and qualitative research; the proposition concerning attractiveness predicts that qualitative articles should have a higher citation rate. Unfortunately, no study specifies which kind of articles are more often cited, though the available evidence suggests that quantitatively-oriented articles are the winner because quantitative researchers are the most widely cited scholars (see Cohn & Farrington, 2011; Copes, Cardwell, & Sloan, 2012). This finding is indicative of two possibilities: the

proposition is wrong; and/or, an idea's importance is more important than attractiveness in determining its citation rate.

Yet a focus on journal articles could confound or hide the respective effects of importance and attractiveness on publishing outcomes. While both journals and books are part of the academic enterprise, it seems plausible to suggest that journal editors are more likely to publish important manuscripts even if they are unattractive because journals obtain prestige based on their impact factor.⁹ On the other hand, book editors are more concerned with sales—another measure of attention.¹⁰ They cannot afford to publish unattractive material because doing so can put the press in the red and out of business. Again, there is no available information on whether qualitative- or quantitative-based manuscripts are more often accepted for publication by book publishers or produce more sales. To my knowledge, the closest study of this kind is that of Gans (1999). His survey and analysis of best-sellers by American sociologists uncovered an important pattern: of the 56 titles that had sold over 50,000 copies at that time, “all or just about all of the books are jargon free” (p. 285), and

most of the books on the list are not empirical research reports, but, of those that are, ethnographies outnumber ... surveys by a considerable margin. This is not surprising since they are apt to be most readable, to emphasize narrative over abstractions, and to minimize quantitative analysis. Probably the book on the list with the most numbers is William J. Wilson's *Truly Disadvantaged*, but more completely quantitative studies have no chance in this competition; also, most are published as articles. (p. 286)

Reinterpreted, what Gans finds is that the books presented in the most culturally familiar style are bought most frequently. It seems unlikely that criminology books—some of which were on this list of sociological best-sellers—would exhibit a different pattern. Nevertheless, it is an open question as to whether qualitatively-oriented criminology book manuscripts are more often accepted for publication than quantitative ones, and whether the former group has better sales—and perhaps more citations too—than the latter.¹¹

Conclusion and Implications for Criminology

At academic conferences and in articles, some qualitative criminologists openly lament the infrequency at which manuscripts based on their method of choice are published in the field's journals. This is somewhat understandable. They see that persons like themselves publish far less often than quantitative researchers. They look at their vitas, feel inferior, and suffer the professional consequences, which include everything from low prestige, to low pay, to the denial of tenure and promotion. Rather than take responsibility for the low rate at which qualitative research is published, some of these scholars have opted for making excuses or, more specifically, for finding a scapegoat (Scott & Lyman, 1968). They claim to have difficulty publishing not because of their ideas' merits but rather due to the audience's malevolence, ignorance, or discriminatory disposition.

That theory could be valid. But before qualitative researchers scapegoat others, it would be wiser and more civil of them—or rather “us”—to reflect on three questions: (1) Is it problematic to the field that qualitative

research is published less often than quantitative research in criminology journals? (2) Have qualitative researchers made choices that reduced the frequency at which their research is published? And, (3) are there sociological or psychological factors that affect the rate at which quantitative- and qualitative-based manuscripts are published? Elsewhere, my colleagues and I suggest that “no” and “yes” are the answers to the first and second questions, respectively (Wright, Jacques, & Stein, In press).

As for the third question, this paper has proposed a Blackian theory of why there is less qualitative than quantitative research published in criminology journals. This theory was developed by first conceptualizing qualitative research and quantitative research as different styles of expressing ideas. Then it was suggested that because people mostly communicate in a qualitative style on a day-to-day basis, ideas are closer in cultural distance to the source and audience when expressed in that manner rather than quantitatively. Those notions were then considered in light of Black's (2000) theory of ideas, which, in turn, led to the theory that ideas are evaluated as more important when communicated in a manner that is further in cultural distance from (yet still comprehensible by) the audience or source. The implication of that theory is manuscripts employing the quantitative style of expression are more likely to be deemed important and thus accepted for publication in journals—yet perhaps less likely to be found attractive and published as books or widely read—because it places ideas further in cultural distance from the source and audience than does the qualitative style.¹²

Put more succinctly, this paper suggests that one reason quantitatively-based manuscripts are published more often in criminology journals is that they communicate findings in a less familiar manner than do qualitative-based manuscripts, which has the effect of making the former type seem more important. Whereas some scholars have argued that quantitative research is published more often because it is different from and better than qualitative research, the theory developed herein suggests there is more to the story. Quantitative research is undoubtedly better suited to some tasks than is qualitative research; the opposite is also true, in my opinion. But there are times when quantitative and qualitative research arrive at and communicate the same basic idea—i.e., posit essentially the same statement about reality. When that happens, however, these identical ideas will not be—according to the theory—evaluated as equally important, despite having the same content; rather, the quantitative version will be deemed more important, and the qualitative one as more attractive.

In closing, it should be pointed out that the potential of Blackian sociology for understanding the quantitative-qualitative divide extends beyond the theory focused on in the present paper. For instance, recall Black (2000) theorizes that higher status persons' ideas are more likely to be deemed important. A deducible hypothesis is that as quantitative or qualitative researchers gain status—such as prestige or sophistication—then their ideas, including those on how to do research, will become more successful (see, e.g., Collins, 2000; Mullins, 1973). Indeed, that assertion matches some of the existing explanations reviewed earlier as to why there is relatively little qualitative research published in criminology journals. One such idea is that criminologists have overwhelmingly adopted the quantitative method because they are mimicking scientists in higher status fields such as physics, chemistry, and economics (DiCristina, 1997). Another idea is that qualitative researchers are

perceived as less capable—including less sophisticated—and therefore their ideas are less successful (Buckler, 2008). These assertions and other social status- or distance-based explanations are subsumable under the Blackian umbrella.

In addition to developing theory—be it Blackian or another type—it is also important to test existing hypotheses. A few theoretically-informed research questions were raised in this paper: Compared to quantitative research, is qualitative research cited less frequently per article? Published more as books? Do those books receive more citations or sell more copies? And to what extent are these realities explained by social geometry or other factors? Are, for instance, citation and publication rates affected by social status and distance? Proportionate to the frequency at which each method is conducted and submitted for publication? Or the outcome of rational decision making, perceptual processes, (dis)agreement on standards of evaluation, discrimination, innate ability, hard work, or training? Among other ways, the theory proposed herein could be tested experimentally by holding constant the subject, source, and audience of an idea but varying its communication in a quantitative and qualitative style to determine if this difference affects evaluations of the idea's importance and attractiveness. All of these questions lend themselves to scientific analysis; in the immediate future, studies may want to take a quantitative approach because those findings will be evaluated as more important than qualitative ones, though perhaps less attractive.

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Figures

Cultural Distance & Importance

Cultural Distance & Interestingness

Footnotes

1. To reduce verbiage, the term “criminology” is used to refer to the broader field of “criminology and criminal justice.” [↵](#)
2. A third, less common, group maintains that quantitative research is little more than a misguided—practically impossible—effort to bring order where there is none; from this perspective, documenting and finding qualitative differences is the only reasonable pursuit. [↵](#)
3. Of course, not all criminology research is published in criminology journals. Research on crime and control also appears in journals focused on sociology, psychology, anthropology, geography, history, biology, and other disciplines/fields. To the authors’ knowledge, the rate at which qualitative criminology research appears in such journals has not been documented. Research on that topic may prove fruitful in shedding light on the quantitative-qualitative discrepancy. [↵](#)
4. Qualitative research does not make use of numerical data although it often does refer to what Goffman (1971) calls “occurrence qualifier[s]. Instead of making absolute generalizations or ones in statistical form”

the researcher “will assert that a given practice occurs among a set of individuals ‘routinely’ or ‘often’ or ‘on occasion’” (p. xxiii). [↵](#)

5. However, this finding could also serve as evidence that qualitative researchers produce relatively poor products and so publish in smaller amounts. [↵](#)

6. A third way ideas differ is in “scienticity”, meaning its falsifiability, validity, simplicity, generality and originality (Black, 2000). This aspect of ideas is not examined in this manuscript because scienticity, as Black views it, is a matter of fact, not evaluation (as are importance and attractiveness). [↵](#)

7. Words and numbers are things unto themselves; they gain meaning by being used to express specific ideas. Thus how people respond to the thing symbolized may affect and depend on what that thing is labeled, but it does not change the thing in and of itself. [↵](#)

8. A piece of information may be a raw datum or an interpretative finding. [↵](#)

9. Also, most journals nowadays are part of a consortium (e.g., owned by Sage) that sells journals as a bundle, to libraries at least, rather than individually, which deemphasizes any particular journal editor’s worry about sales. [↵](#)

10. The term “book editors” refers to persons responsible for selecting which single manuscripts to publish in book form; this term is not meant to include persons who compile book chapters for edited volumes. [↵](#)

11. Above, it is suggested that an idea’s importance and attractiveness affect whether it is accepted for publication as a journal article or book. Another possibility is that an idea’s importance and attractiveness is affected by whether it is published as a journal article or book, an idea I credit to an anonymous reviewer. In other words, ideas are evaluated as more or less important and attractive depending on the form in which they are published. While this possibility is beyond the present paper’s scope, it is worth noting that research on success in the art world shows bigger paintings—which are somewhat analogous to books—have been more likely to be selected for exhibits, receive prominent positions for display, and gain attention (Galenson, 2008: 68-9). If evaluators of art and criminology act in a similar fashion, the implication of the art example for criminology is that ideas on crime and control will be deemed more important and attractive when they are larger—as measured in pages. There is anecdotal evidence that such a pattern exists. For example, it is far more common for journals to devote precious pages to “book reviews” than to “journal article reviews”; the author-meets-critic sessions at academic meetings are dedicated to the discussion of books, not articles; and, criminologists tend to list books before articles on their vitas. [↵](#)

12. An important caveat is that because people are differentially experienced with quantitative research, there should be variation in how important and attractive they find quantitatively-expressed ideas. The concepts and theory proposed in this paper suggest that people who are more experienced with quantitative research

are, by definition, closer in social distance to quantitatively-expressed ideas and, therefore, will find them to be less important but more attractive. However, because practically all people—including the most quantitatively sophisticated—communicate more often in a qualitative than quantitative language, the general tendency among everyone should be to evaluate qualitatively-expressed ideas as less important but more attractive than quantitative ones. [↵](#)

13. [↵](#)