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New directions in feminist understandings of rural crime

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ABSTRACT

In the early to mid-1990s, Patricia Gagne's work on woman abuse in the Appalachian region of the United States (U.S) sparked contemporary feminist interpretations of rural crime and social control. Nevertheless, the flames did not emerge until the latter part of the last decade, with the publication of a spate of scholarly books, journal articles, and chapters. These feminist contributions enhance an empirical and theoretical understanding of rural criminality and societal reactions to it, but there are still key gaps in gender and rural crime research. The main objective of this article is twofold: (1) to briefly review the extant feminist literature on rural crimes and societal reactions to them and (2) to suggest new directions in the development of a feminist rural criminology.

1. Introduction

Criminology is urban-biased and few people know this better than the contributors to this issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies*. Actually, rural crime consistently ranks among the least studied social problems in criminology (Donnermeyer, 2012). This interdisciplinary field, however, was not always urban-centric, even though it did first develop in countries of Europe and North America, which were among the first to industrialize and whose urban populations became the majority after the start of the 20th century (Weisheit et al., 2006; Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2014). It is beyond the scope of this piece to describe how and why criminology took a sharp urban turn after the 1950s, but it is easy to conclude that, on top of marginalizing the plight of rural people, the abstracted empiricist nature of the discipline, at least in North America, "has expanded on a level which would have surely astonished" C. Wright Mills if he were alive today (Young, 2011, p. viii). Mills was a radical U.S. sociologist at the peak of his academic career and he coined the term *abstracted empiricism* in his 1959 seminal book *The Sociological Imagination*. This type of "so what? criminology" now dominates criminology and involves doing a-theoretical, quantitative research on relatively minor issues and presenting the findings in a highly unintelligible fashion (Currie, 2007). The late pioneering critical criminologist Jock Young (2004) labeled this approach "voodoo criminology." Critical criminologists emphasize not only social and economic inequality in society, and its effect on crime, but also gender and race differences in victimization and offending (DeKeseredy, 2011a; DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz, 2012, 2014).

The expansion of feminism throughout the social sciences would have also amazed Mills (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2013). In fact, a growing cadre of feminists are chipping away at criminology's urban, positivist Bastille and produce "cutting edge" theoretical, empirical, and policy work on the gendered nature of certain crimes in rural contexts. The main objective of this article is twofold: (1) to briefly review the extant feminist literature on rural crime and social control and (2) to suggest new directions in the development of a rural feminist criminology. It is first necessary, though, to define the terms *rural*, *feminism*, and *gender*.

2. Criminological definitions of rural, feminism, and gender

2.1. Definition of rural

Not all rural communities are alike and defining the concept *rural* is subject to much debate (Websdale, 1998; Wendt, 2009; Donnermeyer, 2012). Even so, following DeKeseredy et al. (2007) and Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2014), a nominal conceptualization of rural is offered here. Rural communities are places with small population sizes/densities, areas where people are more likely to "know each other's businesses" and "come into regular contact with each other" (Websdale, 1995, p. 102), and they are locales that exhibit variable levels of what Sampson et al. (1998, p. 1) refer to as *collective efficacy*. This means "mutual trust among neighbors combined with a willingness to act on behalf of the

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common good, specifically to supervise children and maintain public order".

No assumptions about collective efficacy in rural contexts should be made because it can facilitate some types of crime while constraining other forms of offending (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2014). For example, DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009) found that many rural Ohio men who abuse their intimate female partners depend on male friends and neighbors to support their hurtful actions even while they count on the same people to help prevent public crimes (e.g., vandalism, burglary, etc.), which to them is acting on "behalf of the common good." There is a system of social practices that dominates and oppresses rural and urban females alike, but it operates differently in rural places. While some men in urban vicinities report adversarial relationships with police, violent men in rural communities are more likely to be protected by an "ol' boys network" (Websdale, 1998). Referred to as "mateship" in Australia (Wendt, 2009), many rural battered women know that the local police may be friends with their abuser, and officers may refuse to arrest on the grounds of friendship (Zorza, 2002; DeKeseredy and Joseph, 2006; Rennison et al., 2013). Note, too, that one of the key risk factors for violence against women in rural areas is *patriarchal male peer support* (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2013; Hall-Sanchez, 2013, 2014). This determinant is "attachments to male peers and the resources they provide that encourage and legitimate woman abuse" (DeKeseredy, 1990, p. 130).

In rural parts of Ohio and other states, such as Kentucky, as well as in Australia and Canada, there is also widespread acceptance of woman abuse and community norms prohibiting victims from publicly revealing their hurtful experiences and from seeking social support (Krishnan et al., 2001; Lewis, 2003; DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2008; Brownridge, 2009; Wendt, 2009; LaViolette and Barnett, 2014). Moreover, while urban abused women encounter may barriers to service, rural women by comparison have fewer social support resources (Lohmann and Lohmann, 2005; Merwin et al., 2006; Barnett et al., 2011; Ragusa, 2013; Rennison et al., 2013), and those available cover very large geographic areas (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2009; Logan et al., 2004, 2005). Rural women face additional barriers, including geographic and social isolation and inadequate (if any) public transportation (Lewis, 2003; Logan et al., 2006). Another factor exacerbating rural women's plight is being uninsured. What's more, rural women are less likely to be insured than are urban and suburban residents (Mueller and MacKinney, 2006; Patterson, 2006), which restricts their access to physical and mental health care services (Basile and Black, 2011).

2.2. Definition of feminism and gender

Defining feminism is a challenge but one thing all feminist scholars agree with is that "feminism is not merely about adding women onto the agenda" (Currie and MacLean, 1993, p. 6). Here, offered is Daly and Chesney-Lind's (1988, p. 502) definition because it is one of the most widely used and cited conceptualizations in the criminological literature. Feminism is "a set of theories about women's oppression and a set of strategies for change." Nevertheless, it is incorrect to paint all feminists with the same brush because there are at least 12 variants of feminist criminological theory (Maidment, 2006; Renzetti, 2012, 2013). Yet, all feminists prioritize gender, which should not be confused with sex even though both terms are often incorrectly used interchangeably (DeKeseredy, 2011a). These two concepts are related but are not the same. Gender is commonly defined as "the socially defined expectations, characteristics, attributes, roles, responsibilities, activities and practices that constitute masculinity, femininity, gender identity, and gender expressions" (Flavin and Artz, 2013, p. 11). Sex, on the other hand, refers to the biologically based categories of "female" and "male" that are stable across history and cultures (Dragiewicz, 2009). For instance, throughout the world, men commit most of the violent crimes, but many societies have much lower rates of violence than those of the U.S., the Russian Federation, or Columbia (Krug et al., 2002; Currie, 2009, 2012). Hence, if "boys will be boys," they "will be so differently" (Kimmel, 2000), depending on where they live, their peer groups, social class position and race/ethnicity, and a host of other factors (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2010; Messerschmidt, 2014).

There are consistent sex differences in crime that are heavily influenced by dominant gender norms (Schur, 1984; DeKeseredy, 2014). Consider, too, that men and women may commit the same crimes, but for different reasons. For instance, men typically steal as a means of "doing masculinity" and they tend to "pinch" goods like iPhones and tools, items that are not necessary for their survival (Messerschmidt, 1993; DeKeseredy, 2000; Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2013). On the other hand, women steal items that are lower in monetary value but are useful to them as mothers, homemakers, or for feminine appearances (e.g., clothing, groceries, and makeup). They also write bad checks mainly to get these goods. Likewise, most women who defraud the government do so because they and their children cannot afford to live on minimal welfare payments or wages accumulated from "pink ghetto" work (e.g., a server in a restaurant) (Barker, 2009; Morash and Yingling, 2012).

Feminists remind us that analyses of crime rates, regardless of whether they are in rural, suburban, or urban communities, that rely on the variables "male" and "female" cannot tell us much about gender, the socially constructed and normative set of meanings attached to these categories (Renzetti, 2013). This distinction is one of the primary contributions of feminist perspectives to the social sciences (Dragiewicz, 2012). Research that asks perpetrators and survivors about the nature of violence between intimates finds that both say much about gender. For example, rural violent men talk about threats to their masculinity when their intimate female partners try to leave them (DeKeseredy et al., 2007; DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2013), whereas women talk about the normative expectations that abusers use to justify their violence (DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz, 2007).

Critically examining the role of gender in crime and other social problems does not mean that all feminists only examine women's experiences. True, given that women's issues have historically been excluded from mainstream criminological work, many feminists prioritize women's experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. Even so, there are feminists who study femininities and *masculinities* (Renzetti, 2013). A central argument of feminist masculinities theorists is that there is no simple standard of being a man that guides all male behavior, including crime (Messerschmidt, 1993; Polk, 2003; Messerschmidt and Tomsen, 2012). Masculinities theorists who study crime contend that, for many men, crime and violence are viable techniques for performing and validating masculinity. Still, these scholars recognize that the decision to commit certain crimes is affected by class and race relations that structure the resources available to accomplish masculine identity (Messerschmidt, 2005, 2014).

For example, many poor young men, regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds, cannot effectively establish masculinity at school through academic advancement, participation in sports, or involvement in extra-curricular activities (Messerschmidt, 1993). This problem results in some boys experiencing status frustration, dropping out of school, and creating a subculture with other boys who share this frustration (Cohen, 1955). This subculture grants members status based on accomplishing gender through violence and other illegitimate means (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2005).

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