



Critical Teaching Column

Now More Than Ever: Reflections on Teaching Hate, Hate Crime, and Hate Groups

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The current historic and political moment presents a unique opportunity; and dare I say, responsibility for criminologists to engage with teaching about prejudice, bias crime, and organized supremacist groups. The campaign and election of the 45th president has emboldened public expression of bigotry, acts of intimidation and violence against people and groups based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity in a manner that is unprecedented in the post-Civil Rights era. Teaching these concepts can be laden with a number of pitfalls for critical criminologists that serve to legitimize inadequate analyses, reinforce the power of the state, and propose inadequate solutions. In this column, I provide an overview of the “Sociology of Hate” course with particular attention paid to the manner in which critical analysis is embedded in the analysis of material and course content. The course is effectively divided into four sections: 1) the sociology of prejudice, 1) bias crime, 3) organized “hate” groups, and 4) strategies for opposition.

The Sociology of Prejudice

The sociology of prejudice would be seemingly straightforward given the discipline’s history in the 20th century of challenging biases. However, a classical understanding of prejudice often focuses on individual-level cognitive biases and functionalist analyses. The initial weeks of the course helps students interrogate prejudice at the individual level through a discussion of stereotypes and person-to-person acts of discrimination. This approach is largely social psychological and interactionist focusing on meaning and interpretation, but begins to sow the seeds of structural and systemic analysis by contextualizing stereotypes and prejudices in existing systems of power and structural practices of patriarchy and white supremacy, especially. The structural approach is expanded by discussing the functions of prejudice: psychological, economic, and political (Levin 2008). An orthodox approach would end at this stage and continue onto bias crime; reinforcing the dominant, liberal notion that bias is simply a set of psychological predispositions that serve social functions and can be resolved with a series of attitudinal changes that result in/from policy changes.

Instead, my course asks students to think beyond individual psychology and basic functionalism and engage with a structural and systemic analysis of individual bias. Bias isn’t simply a product of “bad socialization” or “negative attitudes,” it is the micro-level manifestation of complex systems of power that intersect in unique and challenging ways. By focusing specifically on racism, this course challenges students to think beyond individual prejudice. George Lipsitz’s

(2006) concept of “the possessive investment in whiteness” serves as a means of exploring how structure can both be a product of bias and operate independent of individual bias. The systemic understanding is demonstrated using Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) critique of color-blind racism as a product of the “racialized social system.” Each of these texts demonstrates that systems of power have structural impacts regardless of individual bias, and that bias simply serves to reinforce these systems in everyday, micro-level interactions. Thus, the concept of prejudice moves from an individual-level analysis into a greater structural context. This is especially crucial given that the core narratives of color-blind racism are consistently repeated in mainstream media discourse and used to shield conservative politicians from accusations of racial bigotry (as well as misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and the list goes on).

Bias Crime

This section of the course begins with an orthodox approach of statistical analysis and interpretation. The FBI’s UCR Hate Crime statistics are used to begin a conversation about the core systems of power in American society and how they operate. Students are often unsurprised by victim data that indicates that bias crimes motivated by racial animus are most often committed against African Americans or bias crimes motivated by homophobia are most often committed against gay men; but they are surprised to find that when it comes to religion, it’s anti-Semitism that motivates bias crime, even in an era of public Islamophobia and xenophobia. This generates an opportunity to discuss the history of these systemic biases and the role of conspiracism in motivating action.

Students’ perceptions are further challenged when we unpack the data itself. Errors in reporting become evident as we look at state by state data; noting that many states report zero hate crimes despite their history of racial bias and discriminatory practices. This analysis allows for a critique of both the process of data collection and the role that law enforcement and the CJ justice system serve in maintaining systems of power rather than protecting populations who may be “vulnerable” to attack. This serves as an opportunity to further critique the orientation of the Justice Department as a whole and what exactly is meant by the administration’s commitment to law enforcement.

Analysis of hate crime then turns to motivation utilizing Levin and McDevitt’s (2002) three part model: thrill, defensive, and mission. Because thrill crimes committed by individuals who are unlikely to be “hardcore hatemongers” (Levin 2008) are the most common form of bias crime, students must reflect on how motivations are embedded into normative cultural practices and groups dynamics for white, heterosexual, often Christian men. Discussion of mission crimes, which are motivated by a desire to eliminate the targeted group (or at least the immediate members under attack), has the greatest potential for critiquing the current social and political climate. Given the public support of the current president and his administration by organized supremacists and the administration’s maneuvers to reorient law enforcement toward Islamophobic and xenophobic border and immigration enforcement; the context has been set for a dramatic rise in mission motivated bias crimes.

An orthodox approach to the discussion of bias crime has the potential to legitimize law enforcement and the CJ system as agents of protection of individual rights and the safety of

targeted communities. However, as noted above, their actions often contradict these aims. Furthermore, this discussion offers an opportunity to critique the punitive logic embedded in the current CJ system. Because most bias crimes are committed by relatively young men who have little ideological commitment or formal movement affiliation, incarceration may in fact serve to drive them deeper into supremacy than restorative justice processes that focus on healing and restitutive work with the community impacted by their actions. Discussion of responses to bias crime can serve as a means of challenging concepts of mass incarceration.

Supremacist Groups

It is clear that the 2016 election and its outcome have reinvigorated and empowered supremacist movements and actors. Relatively obscure figures such as Richard Spencer and Matthew Heimbach suddenly became media stars promoting a repackaged version of neo-fascism tailor made for the millennium. However, much of the mainstream discourse is ill-informed, anachronistic, and counter-productive. This section of the course serves to debunk much of the dominant understanding of such groups through an in-depth analysis of the actual landscape of the supremacist movement. Students come to understand that what is often presented as a monolithic entity in media portrayals and liberal discourse is a complex movement with its own internal factions and dynamics.

The core of this analysis based on an expanded typology that I developed which focuses on the ideological influences and activities of organizations and individuals in the supremacist movement. Using this model, I originally identified three sectors of the movement: 1) political, neo-fascist and other racist right political parties and ideological factions; 2) religious, a complex mosaic of spiritual beliefs ranging from Christian Identity to Satanism that justify supremacist beliefs; and 3) youth cultural (or subcultural/countercultural), a series of subcultural practices that incorporate fascist and neo-fascist ideology and symbols into their aesthetic (Berlet and Vysotsky 2006). A revised version contains two additional sectors: 4) intellectual, a series of formal and informal scholars and research institutes that serve as the incubator of movement ideas and frames; and 5) criminal, gangs and other formations for whom supremacy is a marker of “outlaw” status and a means of organizing inside and outside of correctional institutions. By presenting these unique ideal typical sectors of the movement, this section of the course demonstrates not only the complexity of what is often an oversimplified movement, but also the way in which different sectors interact with power and the state. For example, elements of the political, religious, and intellectual wing actively utilized the presidential campaign and current policy positions to gain media attention and engage in movement recruitment. Many of the dividing lines between the racist right and Republican Party politicians have been blurred through the incorporation of dog whistle rhetoric into their campaigns (Klein 2012). Conversely, subcultural sector members utilize these political shifts in the mainstream to legitimize their own ideological positions and actions (Vysotsky and Madfis 2014). By understanding the complexity of the supremacist movement, students better understand the threat that it poses and the challenges to democracy and movements for social justice posed by the existing political climate.

Strategies for Opposition

A course such as this would be incomplete without providing some framework for opposing the structures, systems, and movements that it analyzes. I use a four part approach to summarizing the approaches to combatting prejudice, bias crime, and organized supremacist groups: 1) education, 2) legislation, 3) intervention, and 4) confrontation. Each of these is further divided into radical and mainstream approaches to further encourage engagement that pushes the boundaries of normative structures whenever possible.

Educational approaches seek to provide information to interested individuals about the concepts covered in this course. Mainstream approaches can range from the purely academic to liberal oriented “tolerance” programs based on the “contact hypothesis” (Levin 2008). Such approaches view bias and related problems as rooted in the “ignorance” of the individual. More radical approaches can range from educational programs that directly confront individual complicity in patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and any number of systems of oppression to the efforts of militant anti-fascists to “out” members of supremacist groups to their community. Such radical approaches therefore either seek to confront the systemic nature of biases or directly serve as a countermovement force to populist organizing, which gives them their radical orientation.

Legislative approaches take the form of state intervention on behalf of historically oppressed communities. This section discusses the strategies the state has taken to remediate past injustices and to protect communities against bias crime. Because these strategies are explicitly part of the dominant structure of power, there is no radical approach in this section.

Intervention is most often applied to discussions of individuals who are vulnerable to recruitment by supremacist organizations. The mainstream approach often takes the form of attempts to incorporate potential recruits into normative social activities. These can take the form of education approaches above to gang intervention programs by schools or law enforcement. More radical versions involve the kind of cultural work performed by anti-fascist activists, which presents a counter-ideology to potential recruits and attempts to frame resistance to supremacy and bigotry as authentically countercultural.

Confrontation is probably the most controversial section of the course. The mainstream approach to confrontation is rooted in the social psychological position that individuals involved in organized supremacist movements are engaging in attention seeking behavior. The strategy to confront them, then becomes one that emphasizes “community unity” while simultaneously attempting to draw attention away from supremacists. This is most evident in the counter-rallies organized by some communities away from the site of supremacist events. Such rallies seek to confront bigotry through “positive” community events demonstrating multiculturalism and a commitment to protecting vulnerable populations. Radicals take a much more “direct action” approach through immediate confrontation with supremacists. This is most visible in public counter-protests where violence becomes part of the strategy, but more often occurs outside of most people’s everyday experiences in the subcultural spaces that supremacists and anti-fascists often occupy or share.

By ending on this note, students are given a sense of hope and a broad an overview of the myriad means by which the issues covered can be acted upon. Despite students often reporting that such

a course is “depressing,” ending on strategies for opposition gives them inspiration to take action in their own lives and communities.

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