

The Uses of, and Technology for International Surveys

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Does criminology need international research?

The answer depends on our “**philosophy of the enterprise.**” Some approaches to our work render comparative data irrelevant while others view it as central.

Does criminology need international research?

Many scholars have, at one time or another, parsed our discipline into various zones, approaches, or philosophies.

And , like most other issues, there is no agreement about the accuracy of these various categories.

Does criminology need international research?

Nevertheless, I want to identify at least one division that appears to be of great significance, appears to have an approximately equal contemporary following, and largely determines the potential import of data from other countries.

Contemporary criminology's two main foci are, what I call, “**theoretical Science**” and **Social engineering.**”

Social engineering involves the application or acquisition of knowledge to address practical problems.

It encompasses:

- a. Policy work in which programs are developed or advocated for minimizing or managing crime.
- b. Evaluation work in which the effectiveness of various approaches or programs are assessed and
- c. More abstract thinking in which the logical bases of social life and crime management strategies are critiqued.

Most social engineering is *ad hoc*-the object of attention is the immediate situation, often in localized space.

Ad hoc foci require thinking about whether the crime in the local situation is caused or predicted by given factors and whether given crime management strategies will work there. For this approach, it is irrelevant whether or not crime might be caused or influenced by something else in a different context or whether a given crime control is likely to work in another place

And, when assessing the effectiveness of some program or approach already in place, the question is not whether and under what conditions such programs might work, or why they work or not, but instead the question is **whether it works in the place where it is already operative.**

Finally, broader critical thinking, though it may identify abstract notions that transcend place, nevertheless must be applicable to the here and now if it is to get a hearing and play a role in social engineering.

For a good portion of scholars in criminology, then, having international data available is not a high priority.

Indeed, it is often viewed as a distraction or hindrance.

A common response is:

“So what, if Russians (Greeks, Bangladeshi, Japanese, or whomever) do this or that, or if theories like general strain, social support, etc. do or don’t explain those patterns of behavior or only work in certain circumstances. We want to know what causes crime in North Carolina (or Nebraska) and what North Carolinians (or Nebraskans) can do about it. We do not particularly care what causes crime in Russia (Greece, Bangladesh, Japan, etc.) or to know what Russians (Greeks, Bangladeshi, Japanese) can do about it.

Theoretical science, on the other hand, has as its main objective the explanation of crime-relevant phenomena.

Most scholars who identify themselves as “theoretical scientists” believe that good explanations are imbedded within general theories that answer questions of “why” and “how” in abstract terms that permit application to, or derivation of, concrete explanations of specific phenomena.

Whether theories, or the concrete explanations they yield, are adequate is believed to rest ultimately on predictive ability (not prophesy, but statements of inter-relationships among two or more variables).

Hence, theoretical scientists look to research assessing whether hypotheses derived from general theories hold up to empirical scrutiny.

Moreover, it is accepted that theories must be modified in light of empirical findings in order to move closer to adequacy.

Though general theories are stated in abstract terms they can lead to derivations of applications to specific circumstances (*at least, ideally*).

General theories are also assumed to be universal in application, though good theories always contain contingency statements that specify the conditions under which casual forces apply with greater or less strength.

The goal of theoretical science, then is to build general theories that are:

1. Applicable in all circumstances (provided the appropriate contingencies are specified) and in all places and all times, and
2. Are confirmable and have been verified through multiple tests (necessarily in many circumstances).

Clearly, then, **theoretical science** not only tolerates tests using data from many contexts; it **requires it**.

Hence, international research is absolutely essential because it allows tests of the universality of general theories and it provides inputs that allow modifications of general theories to better account for the phenomena of interest.

Yet, we don't have many tests of important theories using data from other countries, especially non-Western ones. The data we criminologists do have is mainly from U.S., Western Europe, and eastern Asia.

Late in my career I have turned much of my attention to helping fill that gap. In my view, which is rooted in the philosophy of theoretical science, criminology must generate better general theories, and it must provide more challenging tests of various formulations.

Ultimately, of course, theoretical science strives to integrate its various theories into even more comprehensive accounts.

I contend that practicing theoretical science is not only necessary for building knowledge but it is also necessary for successful social engineering. Problems can best be solved if there is an adequate general theory from which diagnoses and remedies can be derived.

To get to that point, we absolutely need international data to aid in the back and forth of theory-building through testing and modification.

An appeal for more cross-national research is not new. So called “internationalists” have long argued for international research but have usually suggested that it is fundamentally **different from conventional research**-perhaps even requiring a unique methodology (logic of inference), sometimes called comparative research, and usually being **highly descriptive** in content.

In my view, research using data from different cultural contexts is not something strange, unique, or to be set apart as a distinct approach to criminology.

It is simply research, using the same methods and approaches as any other research aimed at theory testing.

Yet, applying standard methodologies in unusual contexts does require some accommodations, There are challenges in applying certain methods in areas where such research is rare and where local cultures may not provide the background of public expectations.

In the past few years I have been conducting random sample, household surveys in unusual places, and have learned through experience some important lessons that I hope to pass along to you today so that you can help answer my call for theory testing in a wide range of contexts more easily than otherwise.

What experience can I draw on concerning foreign surveys?

I and “my team” (Ekaterina Botchkovar, Olena Antonaccio, and Jon Brauer, with the help of Maria Kranidiotis and Zaki Islam) have now conducted several surveys in foreign countries, only one of which could be considered a “Western or Western oriented” context.

They include:

1. One non-random street survey in Niznhi Novgorod, Russia (approximately 200 cases)

2-4. One set of three simultaneous random household surveys in:

- a. Niznhi Novgorod, Russia (500 cases)
- b. Lviv, Ukraine (500 cases)
- c. Athens Greece (400 cases)

5-7. One set of three simultaneous random household surveys in:

- a. Dhaka, Bangladesh (500 cases)
- b. Lviv, Ukraine (500 cases)
- c. A rural area in the Lviv region but at least 40 km from Lviv (373 cases)

8. In addition, Botchkovar, Antonaccio, and your own Lori Hughs (a former student of mine), have conducted a household survey with separate samples of many areas (neighborhoods) within Lviv and Niznhi Novgorod using the technology we have developed.

9. Finally, Olena Antonaccio (a Phd student of mine) conducted a survey of school children in Lviv for her dissertation work.

10. I also tried to do a household survey in Armenia and got up to the on-site pre-test stage but ultimately had to end it without collecting any data, for two reasons I will explain later.

Finally, I am in the mid-stages of

(1) a longitudinal survey in Bangladesh, with a two year follow-up , and including a rural and urban sample. This work is to be done with your own Jon Brauer.

(2) in the early stages of a survey of an urban and rural area in Turkey, in collaboration with Abdullah Cihan, a new Assistant Professor at East Carolina State University whom I met at San Houston State University where I delivered a similar address as I am giving here.

How did I get into doing surveys in foreign countries?

1. happenstance

a. Katya's dissertation

b. Olena's follow-up

c. Zaki's work

2. Discovery that it is possible to collect good data in many foreign countries

3. Amazingly, the realization of how inexpensive it is relative to conducting similar surveys in the U.S. (8 to 10 dollars per interview vs 150 to 600 dollars per interview)

Yet, there are practical problems that must be solved.

1. IRB approval (now work in foreign countries must not only pass muster of your local university IRB, but must also be approved by an IRB in the country where the research is to be conducted).

*Do foreign countries have IRBs? Do they even know what IRBs are? How do we find out?

*When IRBs do exist, they are usually connected with medical institutions such as hospitals or clinics and therefore not really appropriate to social science.

How can we guarantee that data collected in a foreign country will not be confiscated and misused by local police or sold by individuals hired for the project?

(this is a particularly salient for former Soviet Republics)

If there is an IRB in the locale, how do we arrange for a review without compensating local reviewers (prohibited by the rules of IRBs)?

One must then arrange for an ad hoc IRB without financial compensation. In my case, I promised to do something for the local university, such as come back to give a seminar, present results to local groups, or come back to teach adjunct when I get a sabbatical.

2. Writing a contract

Most universities require contracts to be done by a university office specializing in legal requirements, which do not always mesh with requirements in foreign countries (example: which court system will adjudicate disputes if the terms of the contract are not met?)

2. Writing a contract, continued

Does your contracting office have anybody who can translate the foreign language or must the contracts be in English? If they are in English, how do we know they are being interpreted correctly in the foreign country?

Solution: Usually the foreign survey organizations want your business bad enough that they will capitulate in any disagreements about the contract... but you must be prepared to shut it down if necessary. (which is what I did in the case of the Armenian survey)

3. Are there professional survey organizations in the country you wish to survey? Or, if not, is there a pool of trained personnel you could find and organize to conduct the survey?

Solution: I personally would not attempt a survey unless there were a professional organization with which to work.

The good news is that, amazingly, many countries do have such organizations and often, if not usually, the employees have undergone survey training in the U.S.

How to find them? Internet search, and seeking help from your foreign consultant.

4. Are there cultural peculiarities that must be taken into account in planning surveys or in wording items? (Example: from Katya's experience with the election and the problem of apartment dwellers in Russia and Ukraine)

Solution: You must have at least one consultant who is native to, or extremely familiar with the country to be surveyed, and who speaks and writes both English and the language of the site very well, and who understands the issues you are addressing and the jargon of criminology/sociology.

The consultant must keep an eye on the survey organization in its everyday operation.

The consultant must identify taboo subjects or words, which differ from one country to another.

5. Correct translation. How do we know it is right?

Solution: Prepare the instrument in English, have the consultant translate it into the native language, then have a separate translator, who does not know the intent, do a back translation. You, then, must examine the back translation to see that it corresponds with the original English. If not, then some adjustment needs to be made.

6. Pre-test. At what stage: when the items are first being formulated or after the instrument is nearly complete? Can one get accurate time estimates from pre-tests? Can one judge understanding? How many pre-test interviews? Is pre-testing a multi-step process? How much pre-testing to build into the contract?

Solution: I favor pre-test near completion of the instrument, with sufficient numbers of subjects to judge patterns of responses to get hints at problems. There must, however, be flexibility to alter the instrument on the basis of the pre-test.

7. How to overcome anxiety about anonymity? How serious is such anxiety, anyway?

Solution: In addition to the usual guarantees of anonymity, particularly sensitive items are answered privately by respondents in questionnaire format out of the sight of the interviewer and returned in a sealed envelope with only a number for identification.

8. What to do about illiterate respondents?

Solution: interviewers must be trained to assist the respondent with the “private, questionnaire part” and must establish trust (must be specified in the contract and special training provided for such instances).

9. Inspiring participation.

Solution: financial incentive, not so large it induces too much cooperation but large enough that it makes it worth the respondent's effort

Interestingly enough, our respondents were usually interested in the survey because it was new to them and they wanted to participate.

10. How to check accuracy?

Solution:

- a. compare your results with any other sources of information about the subject matter (census, government documents, police reports, UN documents, observations by visitors or journalists familiar with the area).

- b. look for patterns of consistency or inconsistency within the survey itself. (For instance, does the person's answer to one question imply a given answer to a later one and how often is expected consistency observed)

Solution, continued:

c. Compare with similar surveys in other parts of the world. If inconsistencies are found, they can be explained in terms of local cultural features?

Such checks convinced us that our data are remarkably good-contrary to the assumptions of many.

11. What about sampling, call-backs, and calculating response rates?

Standard sampling can be used. But, finding a specific person at each target poses problems unless one can afford large numbers of call backs and can pay extra for night work.

People may not be at home, the interviewer may not be able to get past security guards in apartment houses, some may be fearful of strangers at the door, etc.

The biggest problem is finding people at home-many are at work, out shopping, away on trips, etc.

Multiple call backs can boost target acquisition but becomes expensive.

Solution: random replacement from an initially randomly selected replacement pool. How much substitution did we use? (65-70% random replacements)

Is the final sample, therefore, actually random? How much distortion is there? How much does it matter?

Do criminologists ever have strict random samples?
Does it make any difference for testing universalistic arguments?

Does response rate once targets are located compensate for low target location rates? What is response rate anyway? How often are they reported in journal articles? When they are reported, do authors explain how it was calculated?

Conclusion

My “philosophy of the enterprise” convinces me that data from many different cultural contexts is essential.

My experience convinces me that collecting such data, at least of the survey type, is both feasible and practical, and that such data are as good as those collected anywhere. Moreover, conducting surveys in foreign countries is quite economical compared to doing such surveys in the U.S. or Western Europe.

Therefore, I urge you to think about enriching our science by drawing on or conducting survey in many other countries.