



## Critical Realism and Feminist Criminology: Shall the Twain Ever Meet?

**Claire M Renzetti**

University of Kentucky, USA

### Abstract

This article assesses the commonalities and divergences between critical realist criminology and feminist criminology. Using Roger Matthews' (2014) construction of Critical Realism as discussed in his book, *Realist Criminology*, the article first notes that critical realists have largely overlooked or dismissed feminist criminology, despite the potential synergy between the two perspectives. The article then identifies three major areas – (1) epistemology and research methods; (2) a critique of essentialism; and (3) commitment to culturally competent and client/community-centered interventions – in which the perspectives share similarities, while distinguishing the differences in each area as well. The article concludes with an invitation for dialogue between critical realists and feminist criminologists.

### Keywords

Left Realism; Critical Realism; feminist criminology; epistemology; essentialism; intervention.

*Please cite this as:*

Renzetti CM (2016) Critical realism and feminist criminology: Shall the twain ever meet? *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 5(3): 41-52. DOI: 10.5204/ijcjsd.v5i3.325.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. ISSN: 2202-8005

## Introduction

Left realist criminology is credited with giving Marxist and critical criminologists, especially the 'new criminologists' or Left idealists of the 1960s and 1970s, a much-needed wake-up call by arguing that street crime and its effects must be taken seriously rather than being cavalierly dismissed or romanticized as proletarian rebellion against capitalist oppression. As Left realists pointed out, the typical street criminal is not a contemporary Jean Valjean stealing so starving family members may eat, or a Robin Hood seeking to redistribute private property from the wealthy to the poor. Though most offenders known to the police are certainly poor, they also typically prey on other poor people. Individuals living in low-income households not only have the highest arrest rates, they also have the highest victimization rates, more than twice the victimization rate of those living in high-income households (see, for example, Harrell et al. 2014). With work that began appearing in the mid-1980s, Left realists such as Jock Young, John Lea (Lea and Young 1984), Elliott Currie (1992) and Roger Matthews (Matthews and Young 1986; Young and Matthews 1992) emphasized the significant consequences that living in disadvantaged, high-crime neighborhoods had on residents. But, while they urged criminologists to take street crime seriously, Left realists also distanced themselves from conservative Right realist crime control policies that favored 'getting tough' on offenders with longer and harsher prison sentences, the reinstatement of chain gangs, and militarized policing. In fact, Left realists have expressed concern about the cost of more sweeping and repressive crime control practices, since it is the working class and the poor who bear a disproportionate burden of financing our expensive but inefficient legal system, often through taxes or funding cuts to social programs (Matthews 1987: 377).

At about the same time that Left realists were urging critical criminologists to take crime seriously, feminist criminologists were issuing a similar call, to criminologists generally, and to the 'new criminologists' specifically. As I document elsewhere (Renzetti 2013), Marxist feminist, radical feminist, and socialist feminist criminologists in the 1970s and 80s pointed out the conspicuous absence of an analysis of gender in most criminological research, including the research of many critical criminologists. For example, in *The New Criminology*, considered by many to be the groundbreaking book in critical criminology, authors Taylor, Walton and Young (1973) completely ignored the relevance of gender or the need to analyze offending by women and girls. At the same time, feminists drew attention to the gendered nature of criminal victimization and the vulnerability of women and girls to certain crimes such as sexual assault and intimate partner violence, crimes also largely ignored by critical criminologists (Gelsthorpe and Morris 1988; Klein and Kress 1976; Naffine 1996). Not only were these crimes neglected in mainstream and critical criminological research, they also were not given appropriate attention by the criminal legal system, which tended to blame victims and leave perpetrators unaccountable (Caringella 2008; Hague and Malos 1993; Radford and Russell 1992; Schechter 1982). Feminist criminologists, therefore, called on the discipline, as well as the criminal legal system, to take crimes by and against women and girls seriously.

Given what strikes me as an obvious compatibility between Left Realism and feminist criminology (see also Carlen 1995), it has been with some dismay that I have watched the two perspectives develop more in parallel than synergistically. To be sure, there is a small group of feminist Left realist criminologists, including Walter DeKeseredy and Martin Schwartz, who are perhaps best known for drawing on Left Realism to explain crimes committed 'behind closed doors by patriarchal, abusive men' (DeKeseredy 2011: 38) What sets feminist Left Realism apart, as articulated by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2010), is the foregrounding of gender and an analysis of how gender intersects with race, social class, sexual orientation and other social locating variables, to shape both offending and victimization.

As DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2010) point out, despite several revisions, Left Realism has remained gender blind. Unfortunately, Roger Matthews (2014) continues that tradition in his

book, *Realist Criminology*. In *Realist Criminology*, Matthews first traces the historical development of Left Realism and discusses the need for a broadening of the perspective so as to respond to 'the deepening crisis in criminology' with 'an approach that is theory-driven while being evidence-based' (Matthews 2014: 29). In Chapters 2 and 3 of the book, Matthews lays out the essential tenets of critical realist – the most recent iteration of Left realist – theory and methodology, drawing on the work of various critical social scientists, including Archer and Bhaskar (for example, Archer et al. 1998). Throughout the book, he clearly and carefully distinguishes critical realist criminology from other (that is, positivist, liberal and idealist) criminologies, offering provocative insights along the way that will likely stimulate debate and may ultimately enrich criminological theorizing and research. But although he devotes considerable space to comparing and contrasting Critical Realism with other criminological perspectives – indeed, this is a primary enterprise of the book – Matthews discusses 'the impact of feminist criminology' in just four pages (Matthews 2014: 9-12), largely dismissing it with the claim that, 'Over the last decade or so ... feminist criminology, like feminism in general, has lost much of its radical impact and has gravitated toward liberal feminism, focusing increasingly on specific issues rather than engaging in wider debates about patriarchy and gender inequality' (Matthews 2014: 12). Such an assessment suggests a shocking lack of familiarity with contemporary feminist criminological perspectives in particular, and with contemporary feminisms more broadly. In the pages that follow, therefore, I will discuss what I consider to be a few of the most significant developments in feminist criminology and worldwide feminist movements, and identify the potential benefits to Critical Realism were critical realist criminologists to engage more collaboratively with their feminist colleagues. First, however, several points of clarification are needed.

### **The current state of feminist criminology**

According to Matthews (Matthews 2014: 9), 'there is some uncertainty about exactly what is meant by "feminist criminology"'. An obvious question in response to this claim is uncertainty for whom? Although there is diversity within feminist criminology, and several forms or 'brands' of feminist criminology have developed (see Renzetti 2013 for a discussion of several), I think Matthews' assertion would likely come as a surprise to the majority of feminist (and maybe even some nonfeminist) criminologists. Despite the diversity of feminisms in criminology, there are several general theoretical principles that form the core of feminist criminology. (1) Gender matters. Gender should not be treated simply as a control variable in criminological research because the social world and all the institutions that comprise it are gendered. (2) Gender is socially constructed, and the gender categories that are created are typically differentially valued in any social setting, which results in gender inequality. (3) Gender inequality, though, *intersects* with other inequalities, including racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism, to form a *matrix of oppression* (Collins 2000) that impacts the everyday lives of women and men, including their risk of criminal victimization and offending and their treatment as 'clients' or employees of the criminal justice system, as the case may be (Burgess-Proctor 2006). (4) But feminism is not just a theoretical framework; it is also a social movement. Feminist criminologists are scholar-activists, whose research informs collective action with the goals of eliminating gender oppression and other inequalities and promoting equity. Feminist criminologists strive to develop evidence-based knowledge that empowers individuals and groups to act to change behaviors and conditions that are harmful or oppressive. In sum:

... feminist criminology is a paradigm that studies and explains criminal offending and victimization, as well as institutional responses to these problems as fundamentally gendered and that emphasizes the importance of using the scientific knowledge we acquire from our study of these issues to influence the creation and implementation of public policy that will alleviate oppression and

contribute to more equitable social relations and social structures. (Renzetti 2013: 13)

I write this confident that individuals who identify as feminist criminologists agree with these basic principles of the paradigm, even though there is no single, unitary feminist perspective in criminology; no one, true feminist criminology. That many feminist criminologists offer various riffs on some or all of the tenets I have presented does not indicate, though, that we are uncertain what we mean by feminist criminology.

Likewise, Matthews' assertion (Matthews 2014: 12) that in the past ten years 'feminist criminology, like feminism in general, has lost much of its radical impact and has gravitated towards liberal feminism, focusing increasingly on specific issues rather than engaging in wider debates about patriarchy and gender inequalities', would come as a surprise to most, if not all, feminist criminologists. To be sure, many feminists, including feminist criminologists, have chosen to focus their research and activism on specific issues; addressing various forms of violence against women throughout the world is one example of concentrated feminist research and activism that has been ongoing for more than just the past decade. Nevertheless, this research and activism have largely been shaped by, and have taken place within, the context of heated feminist discourses not only on patriarchy and gender inequality but also in relation to globalization, human rights, and international law, conflict and peacemaking (Barberet 2014; Flavin and Artz 2013). Moreover, the impact of this research and activism is measurable (see, for example, Boba and Lilly 2009; Caringella 2008; Kenney 2013; Renzetti 2015). While some of the outcomes might be described as liberal feminist – and I am well aware that this branding is derogatory in Matthews' radical circles – I doubt the women, men and children who have been the beneficiaries care much about such labels.

It is true, as I (Renzetti 2013) and others (for example, Barberet 2014) have pointed out, that feminist criminology has not succeeded in transforming mainstream criminology, just as Matthews shows critical realist criminology has so far failed to do as well. But Matthews appears to be unaware of the state of contemporary feminist criminology; much of what he presents as feminist criminology was published more than two decades ago. Without detracting from the contributions made by the feminist criminologists whose work he discusses, it is nonetheless the case that there have been significant developments in feminist criminology in the intervening years (Barberet 2014; Renzetti 2013).

As I read *Realist Criminology*, I was struck by the number of missed opportunities to identify potential connections between Critical Realism and feminist criminology. On p. 108, Matthews suggests that a constructive way for overcoming the differences between theoretical perspectives – here he is discussing cultural criminology and Critical Realism – and attempting a successful linkage of the two approaches 'would be to begin identifying some points of agreement that could usefully be developed'. In the pages that follow, I adopt this method to explore some of the issues Matthews raises in his book that appear ripe for mutually beneficial dialogue and collaboration between critical realists and feminist criminologists.

### **Feminist criminology and critical realist criminology: Some common ground**

As I noted above, based on my reading of *Realist Criminology*, I see multiple areas of common ground between feminist criminology and Critical Realism. Given space constraints, however, I will discuss three that I consider as having the greatest potential for cross-fertilization of theorizing and research: (1) epistemology and research methods; (2) a critique of essentialism; and (3) commitment to the development of interventions that are, to the greatest extent possible, culturally competent and 'client' or community centered.<sup>1</sup> I will discuss each of these in turn, highlighting both the strands of commonality between the two approaches as well as their points of divergence.

*Epistemology and research methods*

I have chosen to begin with epistemology and research methods because I see them as foundational. They underlie what we know and how we come to know it; they are the basis of knowledge construction. I also begin by asking readers to indulge me by accepting as given that feminist criminologists strive for the 'joined up' approach that Matthews identifies as necessary for a 'viable public criminology': an approach that 'connects theory, method, and policy in a coherent manner' (Matthews 2014: 52). Given my earlier discussion of the core principles of feminist criminology, I do not think this is too much of a leap of faith for readers.

In Chapter 3, 'The Problem of Method', Matthews offers a cogent critique of 'cookbook criminology', various forms of empiricism (abstract, functional, inverted), and the tendency of mainstream criminologists to rely heavily on statistical analyses and manipulation to determine causality with reference to a phenomenon of interest. He concludes that statistical analyses, regardless of the rigor of the logic underlying them, are 'primitive tools as far as explanation is concerned ...'. Indeed, 'sophisticated' statistical analysis is often used to compensate for conceptual weaknesses' (Matthews 2014: 62). Moreover, he notes, statistical models, though they are frequently used to predict various outcomes, may fail miserably at predicting the direction of future trends. In place of traditional positivist epistemologies and methods, Matthews calls for a commitment to 'naturalism and engaging in the lived experiences of subjects, since there is a need to establish a congruity of meaning between researchers and their subjects, combined with a need to understand their experiences, emotions and aspirations' (Matthews 2014: 108). He discusses ethnography as an example of such a naturalistic approach to data collection.

Matthews' critique of positivism and his advocacy of more naturalistic methods are certainly familiar to feminist criminologists. From the outset, feminist researchers have rejected the positivist scientific model of 'establishing mastery over subjects ... demanding the absence of feeling, and ... enforcing separateness of the knower from the known, all under the guise of "objectivity"' (Hess and Ferree 1987: 13; see also Kenney 2013; Naples 2003; Reinharz 1992; Renzetti 1997). Instead, feminist researchers have called for research built on the principle of reciprocity between the researcher and the research participants. This requires the researcher to discard the traditional research practice of establishing and maintaining relational distance from study participants. Notice, for example, that feminist researchers typically use the term research *participants* rather than research *subjects* when referring to people in their studies. This is much more than a semantic shift; it reflects one aspect of the feminist principle of reciprocity: research should not be something that is 'done to' those who agree to be studied. Rather, the research process establishes a relationship between the researcher and study participants in which participants give the researcher their time and information (that is, data) and the researcher, in turn, should give something back to those they study. Feminist participatory research designs, in which those being studied are actual collaborators on the project, exemplify reciprocity taken perhaps to its greatest lengths (see Jaffe, Berman and MacQuarrie 2011; Renzetti 1997). But reciprocity on the part of researchers may involve something as simple as engaging in self-disclosure by answering personal questions that research participants may pose to them; suggesting resources and other information that may be helpful to specific study participants; or providing comfort when participants become distressed, given that participants in criminological research are often revealing private, sometimes traumatic lived experiences to a stranger (that is, the researcher) (see Bergen 1993; Campbell 2001; Campbell et al. 2010; Renzetti and Lee 1993).

Also in support of naturalistic inquiry, feminist researchers strive to adopt an empathic stance toward the participants in their studies. In practice, this means that, instead of imposing pre-established response categories or their own words or ideas on research participants, feminist researchers try to give participants a greater and more active role in guiding the direction of the

research and attempt to understand the phenomena they are studying from the participants' points of view; that is, participants' emotions, values and lived experiences (Naples 2003; Renzetti 1997). 'Emotion work', most feminist criminologists would no doubt agree, is endemic to research grounded in feminist epistemology and methods (see Campbell 2001; Renzetti and Lee 1993).

The feminist emphasis on reciprocity and empathy in research obviously lends itself well to qualitative methods, such as ethnography, as discussed by Matthews. But feminist epistemological principles do not preclude the use of quantitative methods, including complex statistical analyses, and feminist researchers value 'multiple ways of knowing' (Jaffee et al. 2011). Many feminist criminologists are perhaps less mistrusting of quantitative methods *per se* than Matthews appears to be, but I think another piece of common ground is that both feminist criminologists and critical realists are wary of how numbers, devoid of theory, may be used to justify inequality or oppression, or to devalue or trivialize a problem, particularly a problem that disproportionately affects marginalized groups. For instance, if the numbers aren't big enough or the *p* value doesn't reach statistical significance, a problem may be dismissed as minor or inconsequential. As Jaffe and colleagues (Jaffee et al. 2011: 1164) point out, 'there is nothing inherently problematic with quantitative methods, but instead the problem lies with how statistics have been used ...'. At the end of the day, the decision to use quantitative or qualitative methods or a mixed methods approach, which feminist researchers have pioneered (see, for instance, Campbell, Patterson and Bybee 2011), should depend on 'the purpose of the particular study, the questions being asked, and the type of change sought' (Jaffee et al. 2011: 1164; see also Matthews 2014: 67-70).

This last phrase from Jaffe et al. (2011) also highlights a point of convergence between feminist criminology and Critical Realism; Matthews' emphasis on the need for a 'joined up' approach in which theory is tied to method, and both are tied to policy in a coherent way, is congruent with feminist criminology's commitment to purpose-driven research (Miller 2011): that is, research that informs policy and produces knowledge that may be used for the development of more just and equitable social relations and institutions. Matthews, in fact, touches on this commonality on p. 42 when he notes that '[f]eminist criminologists have shown the way in working in and against the state to change policies on such issues as rape, domestic violence and sex trafficking ... In addition, feminists have drawn attention to the gendered and patriarchal nature of state institutions, practices and policies ...'. Unfortunately, he fails to elaborate further, even though there are multiple specific cases, both within a single country and cross-nationally (see Barberet 2014; Kenney 2013; Richie 2012), that he could use to not only flesh out this point, but also to demonstrate the compatibility between feminist criminology and Left Realism in this area. Moreover, these cases speak to Matthews' concern regarding the mistakes criminologists usually make when trying to communicate their research to non-academic audiences: 'The problem with a great deal of contemporary criminology is that it is either not presented in a way that makes it accessible to politicians and the general public, or that the policies presented are less than convincing' (Matthews 2014: 27). Feminist criminologists and other feminist researchers, particularly those addressing the problems and policies Matthews identified on p. 42, have disseminated accessible research briefs and summaries of key findings, along with their practice and policy implications, through clearinghouses, research centers and researcher-practitioner partnerships (see, for example, [www.vawnet.org](http://www.vawnet.org); see also Jordan 2011). Indeed, one may argue that feminists 'have shown the way' on this front as well.

#### *A critique of essentialism*

In comparing Critical Realism with cultural criminology, Matthews (2014: 108) notes that the two approaches share a 'mutual distrust of the overly rationalised conception of man [sic] in rational choice theory ...'. Chapter 4 of *Realist Criminology* offers a thorough critique of rational choice theory.<sup>2</sup> My reading of the chapter brought to mind black and multiracial feminists'

critique of essentialism. Essentialism is the assumption that 'fixed characteristics are attached to bodily identities' (Kenney 2013: 1), such that all members of Group A basically think and act the same, whereas all members of Group B, while thinking and acting the same as one another, think and act fundamentally differently from members of Group A. The black and multiracial feminist critique of essentialism developed in response to what these theorists labeled 'hegemonic feminism'; that is, feminism that regards the experiences, attitudes and values of white, middle-class, heterosexual women as the normative standard, and foregrounds gender differences and gender inequality (specifically, men's dominance of women), while downplaying or ignoring differences within genders as well as other subordinating statuses based on race and ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, age and physical ability (Baca Zinn 2012; Collins 2012; Yuval-Davis 2012). But the argument is not simply to be cognizant of diversity; rather, one must analyze the differences in power that are attached to these diversities. Black and multiracial feminists emphasize both power relations embedded in socially constructed differences and how the intersection of these differences 'mutually construct one another as unjust systems of power' (Collins 2012: 19); that is, interlocking hierarchies that operate both at the institutional (macro) level and through everyday (micro) social interactions.

Although the black and multiracial feminist critique of essentialism and the matrix of domination framework were developed by feminists of color, they are applicable to all groups of women and men, because everyone experiences privilege and oppression, advantages and disadvantages, resulting from intersecting inequalities (Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill 1996; Burgess-Proctor 2006). At the same time, no one is completely determined or controlled by these inequalities; everyone has some degree of agency. Thus, people's simultaneously held multiple statuses and identities will result in members of a specific group facing both common and divergent challenges, to which they may sometimes respond in a similar or unified way, and at other times in very different ways (Collins 2000; Potter 2006).

Matthews' critique of rational choice theory points to the perspective's erroneous essentialism:

Rational choice theory's enduring problem, however, is that not all people act in the same way when placed in the same situation and exposed to the same temptations or incentives. To explain these variations would require an understanding of individual agency. Thus, the ultimate limitation of rational choice theory is that it is too one-dimensional and does not adequately capture the complexities of social life. People act out of habit, jealousy, friendship, loyalty and sympathy as well as self-interest. (Matthews 2014: 83)

Few, if any, feminist criminologists would disagree with Matthews' argument. But many feminist criminologists would extend it, maintaining that, in addition to the various motivations Matthews has listed, one must consider the privileges and constraints of people's social locations and the power relations attached to them. Although elsewhere in the book Matthews discusses the significance of social class as well as power, and the structure and agency debate, these social relations are presented as de-gendered and, for the most part, de-raced. Even when discussing Philippe Bourgois' (1996, 2003) work, in which Bourgois himself emphasizes the importance of gender, race and class relations in understanding drug dealing, drug use, violence and their consequences for residents of impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, Matthews overlooks the significance of the intersectional nature of Bourgois' analysis in favor of the cultural and ethnographic dimensions of it.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, although a critique of essentialism offers some common ground for critical realists and feminist criminologists, the intersectional framework that was developed by black and multiracial feminists in response to this critique does not seem to have attracted the attention of critical realists, or at least not Matthews.

*Interventions that 'work'*

Matthews maintains that 'interventions are likely to work only to the extent that they connect with the sensibilities and propensities of the subjects to whom they are directed' (Matthews 2014: 108). Like other Left realist criminologists, he decries the Right realist crime control policies that extol getting 'tough' on crime. At the same time, he is vociferous in his criticism of 'radical liberalism' and its frequent accompaniment, 'liberal pessimism', which claims that crime is getting worse, crime control is getting more repressive, and there is little anyone can do about either. The challenge, Matthews correctly states, is how to balance criminal justice intervention against security, crime control against vulnerability to victimization.

Matthews is surprisingly sanguine in his discussion of recent developments in crime control strategies. He notes a shift from *reacting* to crime through a 'top-down, state-centered hierarchical model of control' to a greater focus on *preventing* crime; responding to offenders in more flexible and informal ways (for example, forms of restorative justice); and instituting "'smarter" forms of regulation' (Matthews 2014: 153) that involve choice, personal responsibility, self-governance and greater public participation in the criminal justice process. Although he recognizes that these new forms of crime control have the potential for negative or repressive outcomes, his tone is unmistakably optimistic: 'These increasingly participatory methods of governance and changing forms of state power create new possibilities for engaging in progressive practice' (Matthews 2014: 153). And he attributes, to some degree, the recent 'crime drop and today's declining focus on crime related issues' to 'these changes in the culture of control' (Matthews 2014: 153).

Feminist criminologists share Matthews' position that interventions that are responsive to the needs of those to whom they are directed – that is, interventions that are culturally competent and 'client' or community centered – are those most likely to produce positive outcomes. As I stated in my introduction, feminist criminologists, like Left realists, urged other criminologists and the criminal legal system to take crime, especially the violent victimization of women and girls, seriously. Their activism on this issue resulted in legislative reforms and changes in police and prosecutorial responses to crimes such as intimate partner violence and sexual assault, of which Matthews also takes note. More recently, however, feminist criminologists, especially those who use an intersectional framework, have identified the negative consequences of some of these policies and practices, particularly for communities of color. Like Matthews, they have called for more flexible and informal, less hierarchal and punitive, more community-controlled and less state-controlled interventions for responding to at least some types of crime (for example, Ptacek 2010; Richie 2012).

I believe, however, that many feminist criminologists would be more tempered in their optimism regarding some of Matthews' observations. For instance, feminist criminologists are more circumspect in their interpretations of the much-lauded crime drop, since the crimes of sexual assault and intimate partner violence to which women and girls are most vulnerable are notoriously underreported. Moreover, feminist criminologists would likely balk at Matthews' (2014: 146) assertion that '[c]ertain forms of fear can be functional, in as much as it serves to increase vigilance and the taking of precautions. The opposite of fear may not be fearlessness but recklessness ...'. For most women, being vigilant and taking precautions are a routine part of everyday life. Despite precautions, they may still be victimized, often by someone they know and trust. To suggest they may not have been vigilant or fearful enough smacks of victim-blaming. Feminist criminologists would also scrutinize Matthews' (2014: 146) claim of 'a decreased fear of crime and an increased sense of safety,' and ask, 'For whom?'. There is a large body of research documenting variations in fear of crime by gender, race, social class, age, sexual orientation and ability. Indeed, an intersectional analysis of fear of crime would be helpful before such sweeping generalizations are made.



An intersectional analysis would also likely reveal significant differences in support for various types of interventions, including neighborhood watch programs and local monitoring committees. Hegemonic cultural constructions that equate dangerousness with black males may produce violent, even lethal outcomes if a member of this group is spotted as 'out of place'. The case of Treyvon Martin immediately comes to mind. Similarly, an intersectional analysis would likely show that in many communities of color there is deep skepticism regarding a shift from a less punitive, state-controlled criminal justice system to one characterized by greater choice and community control. Of course, the deaths of black men at the hands of police in US cities such as Ferguson (Missouri), New York, Chicago and Baltimore had not occurred when Matthews published *Realist Criminology*. But such brutality is hardly new; it is simply more public due to video cameras and social media. In short, feminist criminologists, but particularly feminist criminologists who use an intersectional framework to understand criminal offending and victimization as well as responses to both, may deem Matthews' take on shifting crime control strategies a bit Pollyannaish.

### **Conclusion**

In his book, *Realist Criminology*, Roger Matthews assesses the development of contemporary criminology, noting the current dominance of administrative criminology and liberal criminology, but pointing to the failures of both in adequately explaining and effectively responding to crime. He sees the immediate challenge to criminologists as developing 'a coherent and useful intellectual and epistemological approach' that joins theory and method, values and policy, to construct a viable public criminology (Matthews 2014: 26). He presents Critical Realism as the answer to this challenge, and throughout the book he distinguishes Critical Realism from other criminological theories, although he identifies those, such as cultural criminology, with which Critical Realism has some arguable affinity. Though feminist criminology is mentioned for having made several contributions to the discipline, it is quickly – and, I have emphasized in this article, erroneously – dismissed as having 'lost much of its impetus' and 'radical impact' (Matthews 2014: 11, 12). I found Matthews' short shrift of feminist criminology puzzling, since I saw potential similarities between it and Critical Realism. In this article, therefore, I have identified three major areas of common ground between the two approaches: (1) epistemology and research methods; (2) a critique of essentialism; and (3) commitment to the development of interventions that are, to the greatest extent possible, culturally competent and 'client' or community centered. I have pointed to the similarities of the two perspectives with regard to each of these areas as well as to their differences or disagreements.

In light of this discussion, is collaboration between critical realists and feminist criminologists possible? In my view, the answer to this question depends largely on critical realists. After all, it is they who have dismissed feminist criminology, not vice versa. In fact, some feminist criminologists have attempted to develop a feminist Left realist criminology in order to remedy Critical Realism's persistent gender blindness (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2010). And so, I conclude this essay with an invitation to Roger Matthews and other critical realists to join me and other feminist criminologists in a dialogue on our commonalities and divergences, keeping in mind that such an endeavor can only be productive if it is entered into with genuine openness, mutual respect and a collegial spirit.

*Correspondence:* Dr Claire M Renzetti, Professor of Sociology, Department Chair, Department of Sociology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA 40506. Email: [claire.renzetti@uky.edu](mailto:claire.renzetti@uky.edu)

- 
- <sup>1</sup> In looking at Matthews' comparison of cultural criminology and Critical Realism, for instance, I see two other areas in his list that I think are also compatible with feminist criminology: (1) recognition that neither crime nor deviance is 'reducible to individual motivation or opportunity but is created, to some extent by the modes of regulation directed towards it' (2014: 108); and (2) 'commitment to the development of a critical or radical criminology that problematizes notions of crime and deviance' (2014: 108). A detailed exploration of these compatibilities, however, must be saved for another article.
- <sup>2</sup> Matthews also discusses routine activities theory, which he faults for many of the same fundamental weaknesses as rational choice theory, but he adopts routine activities theorists' distinction between the two perspectives: rational choice theory focuses on the content of decisions, whereas routine activities theory examines the situational contexts that set up the various options that are the basis of the decisions. For a feminist critique of routine activities theory, see Schwartz and Pitts (1994).
- <sup>3</sup> Other excellent examples of feminist criminological research utilizing an intersectional analysis include Nikki Jones' (2010) *Between Good and Ghetto* and Jody Miller's (2008) *Getting Played*.

## References

- Archer M, Bhaskar R, Collier A, Lawson T and Norrie A (1998) *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*. London: Routledge.
- Baca Zinn M (2012) Patricia Hill Collins: Past and future innovations. *Gender & Society* 26(1): 28-32. DOI: 10.1177/0891243211426873.
- Baca Zinn M and Thornton Dill B (1996) Theorizing difference from multiracial feminism. *Feminist Studies* 22(2): 321-331.
- Barberet R (2014) *Women, Crime and Criminal Justice: A Global Enquiry*. London: Routledge.
- Bergen RK (1993) Interviewing survivors of marital rape: Doing feminist research on sensitive topics. In Renzetti CM and Lee RM (eds) *Researching Sensitive Topics*: 197-211. Newbury Park, California: SAGE.
- Boba R and Lilley D (2009) Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) funding: A nationwide assessment of effects on rape and assault. *Violence Against Women* 15(2): 168-185. DOI: 10.1177/1077801208329146.
- Bourgois P (1996) *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourgois P (2003) Crack and the political economy of social suffering. *Addiction Research and Theory* 11(1): 31-37. DOI: 10.1080/1606635021000021322.
- Burgess-Proctor A (2006) Intersections of race, class, gender, and crime: Future directions for feminist criminology. *Feminist Criminology* 1(1): 27-47. DOI: 10.1177/1557085105282899.
- Campbell R (2001) *Emotionally Involved: The Impact of Researching Rape*. London: Routledge.
- Campbell R, Adams A, Wasco S, Ahrens C and Sefl T (2010) 'What has it been like for you to talk with me today?' The impact of participating in interview research on rape survivors. *Violence Against Women* 16(1): 253-261. DOI: 10.1177/1077801209353576.
- Campbell R, Patterson D and Bybee D (2011) Using mixed methods to evaluate a community intervention for sexual assault survivors: A methodological tale. *Violence Against Women* 17(3): 376-388. DOI: 10.1177/1077801211398622.
- Caringella S (2008) *Addressing Rape Reform in Law and Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Carlen P (1995) Women, crime, feminism and realism. In Naffine N (ed.) *Gender, Crime and Feminism*: 429-446. Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth Publishing Company.
- Collins PH (2000) *Black Feminist Thought*, 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.
- Collins PH (2012) Looking back, moving ahead: Scholarship in service to social justice. *Gender & Society* 26(1): 14-22.

- Currie E (1992) Retreatism, minimalism, realism: Three styles of reasoning on crime and drugs in the United States. In Lowman J and MacLean B (eds) *Realist Criminology: Crime Control and Policing in the 1990s*: 88-97. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- DeKeseredy W (2011) *Contemporary Critical Criminology*. London: Routledge.
- DeKeseredy W and Schwartz M (2010) Friedman economic policies, social exclusion, and crime: Toward a gendered left realist subcultural theory. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 54(2): 159-170. DOI: 10.1007/s10611-010-9251-8.
- Flavin J and Artz L (2013) Understanding women, gender, and crime: Some historical and international developments. In Renzetti CM, Miller S and Gover A (eds) *Routledge International Handbook of Crime and Gender Studies*: 9-35. London: Routledge.
- Gelsthorpe L and Morris A (1988) Feminism and criminology in Britain. *British Journal of Criminology* 28(2): 93-110.
- Hague G and Malos E (1993) *Domestic Violence: Action for Change*. Cheltenham, Gloucestershire: New Clarion Press.
- Harrell E, Langton L, Berzofsky M, Couzens L and Smiley-McDonald H (2014) *Household Poverty and Nonfatal Violent Victimization, 2008-2012*. Washington, DC: Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, US Department of Justice.
- Hess B and Ferree M (1987) Introduction. In Hess B and Ferree M (eds) *Analyzing Gender*: 9-30. Newbury Park, California: SAGE.
- Jaffe P, Berman H and MacQuarrie B (2011) A Canadian model for building university and community partnerships: Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children. *Violence Against Women* 17(9): 1159-1176. DOI: 10.1177/1077801211419097.
- Jones N (2010) *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner-city Violence*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Jordan C (2011) Building academic research centers to advance research on violence against women: An empirical foundation. *Violence Against Women* 17(9): 1123-1136. DOI: 10.1177/1077801211419086.
- Kenney S (2013) *Gender & Justice: Why Women in the Judiciary Really Matter*. New York: Routledge.
- Klein D and Kress J (1976) Any woman's blues: A critical overview of women, crime, and the criminal justice system. *Crime and Social Justice* 5(Spring/Summer): 34-49.
- Lea J and Young J (1984) *What is to Be Done About Law and Order?* New York: Penguin.
- Matthews R (1987) Taking realist criminology seriously. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 11(4): 371-401. DOI: 10.1007/BF00728740.
- Matthews R (2014) *Realist Criminology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Matthews R and Young J (eds) (1986) *Confronting Crime*. London: SAGE.
- Miller J (2011) Social justice work: Purpose-driven social science. *Social Problems* 58(1): 1-20. DOI: 10.1525/sp.2011.58.1.1.
- Miller J (2008) *Getting Played: African American Girls, Urban Inequality, and Gendered Violence*. New York: New York University Press.
- Naffine N (1996) *Feminism and Criminology*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Naples N (2003) *Feminism and Method*. New York: Routledge.
- Potter H (2006) An argument for Black feminist criminology: Understanding African American women's experiences with intimate partner violence using an integrated approach. *Feminist Criminology* 1(1): 106-124. DOI: 10.1177/1557085106286547.
- Ptacek J (ed.) (2010) *Restorative Justice and Violence Against Women*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Radford J and Russell D (1992) *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*. New York: Macmillan.
- Reinharz S (1992) *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Renzetti CM (1997) Confessions of a reformed positivist: Feminist participatory research as good social science. In Schwartz MD (ed.) *Researching Sexual Violence against Women*: 141-143. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.
- Renzetti CM (2013) *Feminist Criminology*. London: Routledge.
- Renzetti CM (2015) Stories of research to reality. *Social Science Space*. Available at <http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2015/06/stories-of-research-to-reality-claire-m-renzetti/> (accessed 22 February 2016)
- Renzetti CM and Lee R (eds) (1993) *Researching Sensitive Topics*. London: SAGE.
- Richie B (2012) *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence and America's Prison Nation*. New York: New York University Press.
- Schechter S (1982) *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement*. Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press.
- Schwartz M and Pitts V (1994) Toward a routine activities theory on campus sexual assault. Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences*: 8-12 March. Chicago, Illinois.
- Taylor I, Walton P and Young J (1973) *The New Criminology*. New York: Harper Colophone Books.
- Yuval-Davis N (2011) Dialogical epistemology—An intersectional resistance to the 'Oppression Olympics'. *Gender & Society* 26(1): 46-54. DOI: 10.1177/0891243211427701.
- Young J and Matthews R (eds) (1992) *Rethinking Criminology: The Realist Debate*. London: SAGE.