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The Carnival Mirror and Institutional Forms of Deviance: A Reflexive Paper Assignment

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General Properties

The reflexive paper assignment presented here calls on students to reflect on their own family and/or personal experiences in order to answer the question, “From where does the greatest harm arise?” *In The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison: Ideology, Class and Criminal Justice*, Reiman and Leighton (2010) make the case that the criminal justice system presents to us a carnival mirror-like image of what causes the greatest harm to society. The criminal justice system, through its policies and procedures, leads the public to conceive of a typical sort of crime committed by the typical criminal. The typical crime is thought to be person-to-person, violent, and most often carried out by a male who is assumed to be black, young, and urban. In opposition to this distorted, carnival mirror like view, Reiman and Leighton lay out four (4) true causes of harm largely ignored by the system of criminal justice. They are, 1) the harm of workplaces; 2) the harm of healthcare; 3) the harm of environmental pollutants, and 4) the harm of poverty. When students write a reflexive essay on the sources of harm they’ve encountered and share their findings in class, their belief in the typical criminal/typical crime as a source of harm is challenged. Institutional forms of deviance and white-collar crime, not black, young, urban males, come to be seen as the most common sources of harm.

Learning goals

- 1- Students will come to appreciate the harm caused by institutions not normally thought to be deviant.
- 2- Students will begin to question the widely held assumption that great harm in society is caused by the “typical criminal,” a young, urban, black male.

Learning assessments

- 1a- Written papers will be used to assess this goal.
- 2a- Written papers and classroom discussion can be used to assess this goal.

Students were given several days to write a small paper, two to three pages in length, assessing harm that has come to their family or person. Following Reiman and Leighton we expect to hear stories of persons harmed by pollution, the workplace, poverty (however unlikely among a population of college students), and the medical industry. An important second component to the exercise is the classroom discussion starting on the day papers are due. The simple prompt, “Who would like to share their findings?” was enough to get the ball rolling in each case of our running the exercise. If students are at first reluctant to participate we recommend instructors to ask, “Has anyone known, or have you yourself been the victim of financial fraud?” One can expect several hands to rise. The same can be said for workplace injury, pollution, etc. When students see that their responses are indeed part of a larger category, we find that they become more eager to share their findings. Generally the instructor should limit her/his interference as not to appear to be biasing the discussion. Some students will likely be skeptical, even after earlier class time spent covering the basic concepts of harm reduction, white-collar crime, and so forth. The focus should be on the data, in this case student reports of harm. Students’ responses collectively point to harm caused by institutions and corporations.

One student stated the following. “I enjoyed the use of examples from my own life to reflect the carnival mirror. Many other students also have had their own experiences with this corporate deviance. That made it evident how much of this deviance there is. Discussing our findings was a good way to really show that point.” The content of the discussion itself is where learning goal number one is most directly addressed.

Learning goal number two calls for students to question the widely held assumption that the typical criminal is the greatest source of harm. This goal is achieved primarily in the analysis of the discussion itself. First the sheer lack of student reporting on harm caused by the typical criminal serves to at the very least, cast doubt on the assumption that they are the greatest source of harm. Second, the enormity of harm caused by institutions, corporations, and poverty found by students will make “street crime” associated with the typical criminal seem much less impactful. Instructors can wrap up the discussion by asking students if they were surprised by the findings, and if so why? A student stated simply, “before I would have explained the typical criminal as someone who was poor, black, young, and male, but now I have a different outlook.”

Key words

White-collar crime; deviance; harm reduction; writing exercise; discussion

Assessment Prompt

Choose one option below and prepare a short paper. The paper should be two to three pages in length. You are not expected to do extensive academic research. Your Reiman text should be your primary guide but make sure to cite any other sources (newspapers, website data, academic articles, etc.) you may use. Be prepared to discuss your findings in class.

Option #1

Corporations are legal creations capable of great harm, as evidenced by your reading and the ENRON film. Select a corporation of your choosing and make the case for removing its corporate charter on the grounds that it undermines to the public good. In order to achieve this you will need to convince the reader that your corporation is a deviant actor. Convincing the public that a corporation should be abolished will take some creativity on your part. After all, we’re all accustomed to fearing the typical criminal committing the typical crime.

Examples/ideas for option#1

General Electric made 14.2 Billion dollars in profit in 2010. But they didn’t pay any taxes in the US that year. In fact they claimed a tax benefit of 3.2 Billion. Explore why. I’ll bet you will find some deviant corporate behavior. Discuss the harms caused to society when corporations manipulate the system in such a way.

Do a Google search of corporate fines. Explore some of the rule/law breaking that led to the fine for a specific corporation. You might then make the case that the fine does not discourage the harmful corporate deviant behavior. And/or you might discuss corporate behavior that is not subject to punishment, but should be. (Hint: Find corporate deviance by asking how the corporation would behave if it was a friend of yours).

Option #2

In short, Reiman's *Carnival Mirror* is such because the system of criminal justice reflects back at us a flawed vision of what really causes us the greatest harm among potential threats. The notion of *crime* invokes a certain image with the *typical criminal* as the perpetrator. This option asks you to make an assessment of harm that has come to you and your family. You may find that the typical criminal has in fact caused you and your family the greatest harm. Or, if Reiman is correct, you will see that institutions and corporate actions cause the greatest harm..

Examples/ideas for option#2

The majority of cancer in the U.S. is due to environmental factors. If cancer has been a cause of harm in your family see if you can, from the type of cancer, develop a link to a certain environmental cause. (Note for example that New Jersey is not referred to as the "cancer state" out of the coincidence. Corporations willfully polluting the air has contributed to the cancer rate and killed countless people).

Back pain is common among laborers. Carpel tunnel syndrome affects many office workers. Mental health issues plague many in labor force who do boring and monotonous work proscribed by the capitalist class. Investigate in detail the harm caused your family member in the workplace. What conditions led to the harm and how could they have been avoided?

PROCEDURE:

For the Students:

Once the assignment is passed out in class we ask the students to read over the document before discussion of the paper.

For the Instructor:

Timing

Culton uses the activity during the 11th week of classes. In the previous week he discusses white collar criminality and concludes discussion of chapter two of *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*. By this point in the semester some time has also been taken to discuss white-collar criminality, harm reduction approaches to drug criminality, and privileged deviance more generally, all from the course text. Students, by this juncture, are sufficiently aware of these general concepts. Culton asks students offer an honest assessment of harm that has come to themselves and/or their families.

Muñoz introduces the paper assignment during the fourth week of classes as a way of providing ample time to finish the assignment. The paper itself is not discussed again until the ninth week of class when the topic of ethnomethodology is discussed. Although not a perfect connect to the material it is during this week that Muñoz discusses how some researchers collect data “internally” (ethnomethodology, autoethnography) where they are the subject and explain that the paper itself is an exploration of how students can think about the paper and course reading connects to their lives.

Suggestions: As you might imagine it helps to demonstrate to the students in transitioning between an example from their own experience and how they might connect it to the assigned text.

We typically introduce the general topic of the book, why this is an important area for reflection, and how the paper will highlight and connect their experiences to the text. The next step is to ask for general questions about the assignment in order to get a sense of what students understand about what is required. The questions typically involve providing more guidance on who the subject is. Here the instructor should restate that the students are the subject. The student is reflecting on an event or process that happened to them or with one of their family members. Other questions usually involve how to include the text in the paper. The instructor should be prepared to help the students “fit” the examples they are providing to match a portion of the text that would help best explain that example.

The Takeaway/Wrap-Up

On the day that the papers are due the students are eager to report their findings. We ask for volunteers and we find is that students begin to volunteer one after the other to discuss what they discovered. Patterns tend to form in their responses. Harm due to workplace injuries, financial fraud, and botched medical procedures are commonplace.

POSSIBLE PITFALLS:

There may be students that have not experience harm as explored in the exercise nor no anyone in their family that has. In these situations we allow students to branch out and find someone that has. We allow them to conduct an informal interview of their experience. It is possible that some of the experiences that the students have decided to write and divulge may be traumatic and lead to the manifestation of emotions. Instructors should be aware of the possibility and check-in on students.