

Doctors outwith borders: reflections on academic activism and influence

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This is a subjective, reflexive piece on academic activism and influence. It is based on a recent presentation, where I was asked to share from my experiences at a [Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research \(SCCJR\)](#) PhD conference with postgraduates from the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Stirling, Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian. Aspects of this blog may depart from commonly held social scripts and typecasts of activism. Also, some more iconoclast stories of active involvement in seeking to reduce the use of prison and minimising the risks and harms of life behind bars I've decided not to tell here, out of respect for not exposing others (including those who work as public servants) involved.

Personal reflections on activism and influence

Before moving to Scotland, I did a Masters and a PhD in Criminology while concurrently working in a vibrant Sociology department at the University of Tasmania in Australia. For me, like others, this was far from a cloistered season; I was actively encouraged and employed to do a variety of things *other than* my Masters and PhD. Conversing with diverse people outwith academia – from courts and in drug rehab to community groups, the press and politicians – became normal early on, and was modelled by senior academics. A baptism of fire came as a 22-year-old Masters student, arguing a position in a co-authored article on boy racers and dangerous driving behaviour which piqued the attention of national media at a time of contested policy decision-making. This process underscored the value of seeking advice from wise sounding boards (including a supportive Head of School and comms folk in the University's media unit). It also meant discerning which requests to say no to, and which issues not to engage with.

I learned to enjoy opportunities to inform and influence, with integrity. And the opportunities continued to arise, publicly and privately/in confidence. I vividly remember a conversation with a senior manager in an insurance company, essentially asking questions about whether they should insure people with criminal convictions and asking me to explain current knowledge on risk of re-offending and desistance. Human rights and anti-discrimination laws also peppered my comments! I wasn't credited or remunerated in this instance; no media, MP's or 'public' communication involved, yet I was heard and it felt like precisely the type of issue and conversation I'd trained to be able to contribute to.

In 2013, I worked with a law academic, Dr Jeremy Prichard, to write an evidence-informed briefing paper for the State Parliament to inform decision-making on whether to legalise voluntary euthanasia and assisted dying. Jeremy has written about [elder abuse and coercion in relation to 'a right to die' and 'mercy killings'](#). Our position was one of active public opposition to a paper proposed by two influential politicians, as a precursor to a Bill and conscience vote. We wrote a narrative literature review specifically for Members of Parliament in the spirit of fostering more vibrant and nuanced democratic debate, to transcend polarised simplicities of being for or against *the idea* of assisted dying. Critically, the Bill didn't rest on a clear definition of terminal illness to be eligible. In our paper, we fact-checked and critiqued a range of issues in their paper, from medical and bioethical issues, to criminological and sociological issues (e.g., potential for elder abuse and coercion, feminist perspectives on gendered power dynamics and risks of assisted dying, the concerns of mental health and disability advocates, and reviewing international evidence from places where it's legal). This wasn't a case of two isolated crusading academics on an illiberal mission; throughout the process, we sought advice from

university colleagues and met informally with people from different parts of civil society, listening and learning, questioning, provoking debate. Conversely to us, other academics from our university publicly supported the Bill.

I also responded to [media requests](#), went on radio, and wrote a newspaper editorial urging more critical reflection and democratic debate regarding mental illness, disability and the collateral consequences of the proposal to legalise assisted dying, approaching a newspaper in a key marginal electoral seat to publish it. Our contributions got a lot of visibility quickly. We were invited by MP's to the public gallery of the Parliament to watch the debate and conscience vote, which ran into the evening. Their passionate speeches in support and in opposition to the Bill were evocative, dignified and well informed. Many of the MP's who opposed the Bill cited our briefing paper in their speeches. The end result? The Bill was defeated. Our briefing paper has been (and is being) used in other forums and jurisdictions.

Sometimes our moral and political convictions and participation in social movements may or may not have direct links with our research, academic CV, institutional affiliation, or disciplinary field. Sometimes they amalgamate facets of our lives and intellectual commitments in hyphenated or hybridised ways. As a migrant and the daughter of a migrant and as an academic who has worked on an EU-funded cross-national comparative research project (involving frequent border-crossings!), I hold strong thoughts and feelings about racism, xenophobia and colonial ideologies, as well as immigration, borders and freedom of movement. I don't directly research these things, but they affect me and move me. There is a protest sign in my office which accompanies me on out-of-hours trips to George Square for peaceful protests against xenophobia in politics, inhumanity in immigration policies and treatment of refugees – gatherings at which I've encountered numerous colleagues and students from different Scottish universities.

The cogent contributions of antipodean Criminology and Sociology colleagues on [Southern Criminology](#) (Carrington, Hogg and Sozzo, 2016), [Indigenous statistics](#) (Walter and Andersen, 2013) and [Indigenous Criminology](#) (Cunneen and Tauri, 2016) inform how I think and teach on punishment and penal histories, and constructions of 'crime, race and ethnicity.' They also implicitly influence how I navigate power, diversity, ethics and recognition in research. Self-discipline and self-critical reflection is needed regarding who we want our research to 'help', how, why, the histories and power dynamics of epistemology and language, and the extent to which others find our contributions helpful.

Influence with integrity, reflexively

Academic activism and influence shouldn't be quixotically portrayed as intrinsically good merely because it is publicly engaged, nor as routinely resultant in happy endings. Our silences or lack of acknowledgment of long waits or failed endeavours of academic activism aren't helpful. In my presentation with SCCJR PhD researchers, I was intentional in mentioning disappointing examples of shared endeavours to which I'd committed time, but which came to little or no avail. Academic activism isn't easy, it carries risks and it can come with a sense of costliness preceding victory or failure. The suddenlies of amazing breakthroughs and high-profile attention or support coexist with the quotidian hard graft of conserving hope, patience and other precious resources in waiting and working with others towards desired changes. Burnout, hard emotional labour or vicarious trauma are worth naming for those in a performative line of work prone to workaholism, faced with a myriad of urgent issues and human suffering, needing redress in febrile politicised atmospheres and precarious conditions. To collaborate and care deeply should not be conflated with a self-sacrificial saviour mentality.

In speaking with the PhD researchers, I also offered cautions, with practical examples, about how influence is not unilateral. Reflexivity is essential in navigating the attractive pulls of 'the gate-keepers, the gold and the glory': with 'gatekeepers' symbolising access, power, pressure, and connections; 'gold' meaning money and

resources; and ‘the glory’ speaking of attention, ambition, recognition and promotion. There’s nothing wrong with these things in and of themselves, but they must be approached thoughtfully. How *we* might benefit from taking part in activism or influence is good cause for thought. The road to impact-seeking instrumentalism or pontificating personality cult vanity politics may start with good intentions and good causes. Even when rooted in integrity, ethical empirical concerns and a humanitarian impulse, our credentials and involvement may decorate and legitimate the motives and actions of others less ethical.

In the session with PhD researchers, we ended with a participatory reflective activity of making manifestos about our core convictions, areas of (in)justice we are passionate about, our hopes for actively being part of change, as well as our ‘not negotiables’ – the things we will not be or do in that process.

Supporting cultures of academic citizenship

In something of a harbinger on ‘[Sociologists talking](#)’, Les Back (2008) warns against academic excellence and entrepreneurial influence characterised by ‘prestige without value’, metrics, ‘arrogant certainty’, ‘knowledge that does little to nourish,’ and ‘disciplined instrumentalism with hyperpolitical posturing that dwells in the delusion that we transform the world simply by making pronouncements about it.’ Instead, Les Back (2008) champions academic kindness and being ‘an exponent of [the politics of kindness](#)’ (Back, 2016), epistemological humility, commitment to listening and dialogue with ‘receptive generosity that both hears and speaks,’ and ‘telling truth to and about ourselves.’ Hear, hear.

Ethical and, indeed, effectual academic activism and influence is prudently anchored in *academic citizenship and service*, in a civic commitment to justice and human flourishing. For criminologists, this means a commitment that may transcend a narrow focus on *criminal* justice. In speaking with the SCCJR PhD researchers and in writing here, I argue for a critical need to build stronger cultures of support and solidarity for academic citizenship and service – valuing academics who listen well and are socially engaged, locally known, politically brave and principled, who have backbone and exert influence for social and civic purposes – be it speaking truths to power and rapid responses alongside others in the short-term, or bearing witness and offering solidarity alongside others in the long-game of pursuing justice and change. An inspiring example which comes to mind is that of Professor Phil Scraton, alongside the brave families of Hillsborough victims and their supporters in a harrowing 27-year fight for truth and justice.

A passion for becoming better *social* scientists or *public* intellectuals is not so much about the ascendancy of the (unhelpfully worded) impact agenda per se, nor is it offered unaware of apt critiques of public criminology (Loader and Sparks, [2010a](#), [2010b](#); c.f. an excellent piece by Ruggiero, 2012, ‘[How public is public criminology?](#)’). Nonetheless, I am suggesting that in some but not all cases, our work and, indeed, our lives can be enriched by participatory public engagement, including in social movements. Excellence in *published* criminology and sociology can be nourished and reciprocally influenced by a calibre of *public* criminology and sociology, knowing and being known by diverse citizens, publics and parliaments, working to build better futures and more just and civil societies, together.

In the UK like elsewhere in the West, there remains, as Elif Shafak [has poignantly written, a need to stop denigrating public intellectuals](#), and a need for academics and others to tackle complacency, jealousy or self-consciousness, to go outwith borders to speak up and speak out more often. Meaningful influence rarely abides in esoteric echo chambers. Insularity, indifference or inaction are not desirable outworkings of sociological and criminological imaginations, nor are they noble uses of academic freedom, time, voice, capital or power. For me, citizenship and a civic commitment to justice looks like something.

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