

Knowledge Mobilization as a Tool of Institutional Governance: Exploring Academics' Perceptions of "Going Public"

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Article abstract

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Knowledge Mobilization as a Tool of Institutional Governance: Exploring Academics' Perceptions of "Going Public"

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Abstract

In Canada there are growing discussions concerning the role of publicly funded universities and the impact of academic research. The integration of neo-liberal practices and market rationalities place pressure on universities to "go public" in order to demonstrate relevance and accountability. Researchers are encouraged or even required to engage the public through knowledge mobilization activities. Our study provides an empirical analysis of knowledge mobilization in order to understand its perceived impact on public criminology, and more broadly the production and dissemination of criminological research. We argue that the institutional shift toward knowledge mobilization is perceived as a tool of institutional governance to demonstrate organizational accountability that shapes the production and dissemination of criminological knowledge.

Résumé

Au Canada, il y a des plus en plus de discussions sur le rôle des universités financées par les fonds publics et l'impact de la recherche universitaire. L'intégration des pratiques néolibérales et des rationalités du marché

exerce une pression sur les universités pour qu'ils «se rendent publics» afin de démontrer leur pertinence et leur responsabilité. Les chercheurs sont encouragés ou même obligés d'engager le public à travers des activités de mobilisation des connaissances. Notre étude fournit une analyse empirique de la mobilisation des connaissances afin de comprendre son impact perçu sur la criminologie publique, et plus largement la production et la diffusion de la recherche criminologique. Nous soutenons que le changement institutionnel vers la mobilisation des connaissances est perçu comme un outil de gouvernance institutionnelle pour démontrer la responsabilité organisationnelle qui forme à la fois la production et la diffusion des connaissances criminologiques.

Introduction

Through its promotion of “unfettered free market policies and practices,” the rise of neoliberalism over the past several decades has had a profound impact on Canadian universities (Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012, p.2). Neoliberalism has led to the expansion of economic rationality within academe wherein research is commodified as a marketable product (Langan & Morton, 2009; Mount & Belanger, 2004). Further, academic institutions are no longer the primary producers of research, with corporations, think tanks, government entities and non-profit organizations conducting their own research (Davies, Nutley, & Walter, 2008). Operating within a globalized and economically austere climate means that universities must fight harder than ever for their positions as society's producers of knowledge and face more competition for a dwindling supply of public funding (Levin, Aliyeva, & Walker, 2016). In response to a threatened identity, universities now seek to legitimize their position in society by emphasizing their public value, with research being treated as a commodity to be marketed for public consumption (Baez & Boyles, 2009).

Baez and Boyles (2009) argue that the growing emphasis on public accountability shapes the way research is conducted within universities (see also Raddon & Harrison, 2015). For example, in order to secure federal government funding for research, academics must explicitly state how their research will be translated and mobilized by publics outside of the academy. Researchers in Canada are increasingly required to provide a knowledge mobilization (KM) plan in grant applications. According to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC, 2017a), KM is “an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of activities relating to the production and use of research results including knowledge synthesis, dissemination, transfer, exchange and co-creation and co-production by researchers and knowledge users” (para. 4).¹In spite of widespread institutional efforts that encourage engagement with publics outside of the academy (see, for example, Morton, 2011; Phipps, 2012), existing research identifies a number of barriers that prevent researchers from actually engaging in the practice of knowledge mobilization, such as the institutional structure of academia and lack of support and recognition for KM activities (Brady, 2004; Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016; Sa, Li, & Faubert, 2010; Walker, 2008). However, less attention has been given to the way in which KM is perceived and understood within the academy and to its impact on the research process.

To address this gap in knowledge, we used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to analyze the way academics, research facilitators, and university administrators define KM and perceive it to shape the production and dissemination of criminological

knowledge. From our analysis, we highlight the pressure on academics to demonstrate public accountability through KM activities. Further, we identify how Canadian academics perceive knowledge mobilization to be largely a tool of institutional governance for demonstrating organizational accountability.

Neoliberalism within Academic Institutions

The past 20 years have borne witness to significant economic and political reforms that have changed the academic landscape. The adoption of neoliberal values within universities has become commonplace both in Canada and globally (Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012; Saunders, 2010). Neoliberal rhetoric dominating economic discussions in Canada in the 1980s promoted fiscal responsibility and posited that government spending should be reduced wherever possible in order to decrease federal and provincial deficits (Horn, 2000). Because, as Horn (2000) notes, “universities are suspected of wasting money, of devoting too much time and money to impractical subjects and research projects, and not enough to giving students the skills needed to function in a high-tech labour market” (p. 169).

Further complicating reduced funding for universities is the increased competition that academic institutions face in their position as knowledge producers. Where “ivory towers” were once seen as the primary producers of knowledge, academic research now faces competition from a plethora of others, including think tanks (both privately and publicly funded), that may encroach on one another’s territory (Delanty, 2001). In other words, the adoption of neoliberal principles and market rationalities within academia has created an atmosphere “akin to survival of the fittest” (Levin et al., 2016, p. 166). This competitive environment means that universities must now work hard to legitimize their position as knowledge producers in order to receive public funds (McQuarrie, Kondra & Lamertz, 2013).

Public Accountability and the Commodification of Research

One of the ways universities seek to legitimize themselves as knowledge producers is through the demonstration of public accountability. Universities in Canada and around the world are adopting rhetoric that denotes their pledge to bettering the lives of not only students but also of the greater public(s) and the communities they operate within (Walker, 2008). Raddon and Harrison (2015) describe the increasing push for universities to foster relationships with the public as a “neoliberal transformation of post-secondary education” (p. 135).

The pressure for universities to be accountable to the public has trickled down to individual academics. Academics must now explicitly demonstrate how their work will be of value to the greater community (Baez & Boyles, 2009). This requirement is apparent on grant applications, requiring researchers to identify their intentions to engage in knowledge mobilization. In addition, the push toward demonstrating research value is seen through the establishment of KM networks across Canada. Networks, such as Research Impact (2017), seek to “maximize the impact of university research for the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and health benefits of Canadians” (para. 3).

KM literature and initiatives emphasize the collaborative and interactive knowledge exchange process that occurs between knowledge producers and users during KM activities (Davies et al., 2008; Phipps, 2012; Phipps & Shapson, 2009). In this sense, KM is a multidirectional process rather than a linear dissemination of knowledge from the

academy to the community (Davies et al., 2008). This conceptualization is reflected by the Canadian Tri-Council granting agencies, describing knowledge mobilization as “the reciprocal and complementary flow and uptake of research knowledge between researchers, knowledge brokers and knowledge users” (SSHRC, 2017b, para. 31).

Each of the Tri-Council granting agencies in Canada (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [SSHRC], Canadian Institute of Health Research [CIHR], and Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council [NSERC]) have made KM an explicit priority, requiring researchers to identify and, in some cases, quantify their research outputs. The integration of KM by federal granting agencies in Canada reflects a broader trend of neo-liberal practices within academia. Market forces have pushed “national governments [to] seek return on their investments in research” (Meagher, Lyall, & Nutley, 2008, p. 163), which translates to mounting pressure on universities and academics to demonstrate research value in order to retain government funding.

Barriers to Knowledge Mobilization

While there is a push for researchers to engage in knowledge mobilization, existing research identifies a number of institutional barriers that inhibit the public mobilization of academic knowledge, including an enduring institutional reward system prioritizing more “traditional” outputs (Currie, 2007; Sprague & Laube, 2009), problems with articulation and synthesis of research findings among non-academic audiences (Feilzer, 2009; Mopas & Moore, 2012; Uggen & Inderbitzin, 2010; Young, 2012), and a lack of institutional support for KM activities (Barreno, Elliott, Madueke & Sarny, 2013; Sa et al., 2010). As literature indicates, institutional support for KM is vital to successful engagement in KM activities, yet it is lacking across many Canadian universities (Barreno et al., 2013; Phipps & Shapson, 2009).

Some institutions have begun to address this deficit by allocating resources to establish services and centres dedicated to facilitating KM activities. For instance, York University has a KM Unit that offers “strategies that connect researchers and research users to enhance research utilisation” (Phipps & Shapson, 2009, p. 214). Similar services are available at the University of Victoria, University of Guelph, Wilfrid Laurier University, and other academic institutions across Canada. While these efforts signal an increase in institutional support for KM, they do not address the fact that most universities still prioritize “traditional” outputs such as publications in peer-reviewed journals and the acquisition of external research grants when awarding promotions and tenure to faculty. For instance, a report from Engaged Scholarship, a formal partnership between eight Canadian universities dedicated to increasing community-engaged scholarship, reviewed institutional support for KM-related activities and concluded that “growing expectations of community engagement have not yet been fully matched by a growth in institutional supports for community-engaged scholarship, including professional recognition” (Barreno et al., 2013, p. 5).

While many universities claim support for KM, a lack of professional recognition for KM activities indicates that this support is only partial. Further, many federal granting agencies require KM outputs to be detailed on grant applications, yet follow-up or accountability for pursuing public engagement is lacking (Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016; Sa et al., 2010). As such, it has been suggested that this element of the funding application (and research process) “may be more cursory than constitutive and more ambiguous than

stable” (Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016, p. 3). Regardless, the institutional emphasis on KM “modif[ies] the ways in which academics approach research and behave as researchers” (Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016, p. 3).

Using public criminology as an exploratory example, we sought to understand the “neoliberal institutional ecology within which criminological research is now being produced, validated, and appropriated (or ignored)” (Wacquant, 2011, p. 441) through the perceptions and experiences of academics, university administrators, and research office facilitators who are navigating the institutional push for knowledge mobilization. While much has been researched on the commercialization of academia, less is known—particularly in the Canadian context—about the ways in which neoliberal philosophies are adopted in practice by researchers.

Methods

This research began as part of a criminology graduate qualitative research methodology course. At the time, the department had created a fourth-year undergraduate course entitled “Public Criminology.” This lecture series featured academic researchers from across North America presenting on a range of topics related to crime and justice. Attendance was open to all students and the general public, providing a forum for broader community exposure and engagement with academic research. This course was developed within the context of the institutional climate outlined above—marked by growing attention to the transmission of academic research findings to the broader public(s).

We sought to explore how participants perceived and understood their engagement with public criminology, and with public engagement more broadly. Public criminology provided us with an exploratory example of how academics make sense of their experiences with public research dissemination, and how KM initiatives at the policy level shape the research dissemination activities of academics. We were interested in understanding how academics, university administrators, and research office personnel defined, perceived, and engaged with the new KM initiatives of federal granting bodies and post-secondary institutions. In order to explore academics’ perceptions and experiences, we triangulated qualitative document analysis with in-depth interviewing (Bowen, 2009). These data sources allowed us to explore how those within the academy made sense of changing institutional requirements for KM, and to situate these experiences within the formal institutional structuring of KM initiatives and granting agency requirements, explicated in documents and webpages.

We collected and analyzed documents that included (1) grant and funding documents from the major federal granting agencies (SSHRC, CIHR, and NSERC), and (2) Canadian university mission statements, excluding francophone universities to avoid translation errors. While these documents provide context for the institutional framing of knowledge mobilization, as Hodder (1994) points out, “meaning does not reside in a text but in the writing and reading of it” (p. 704). Thus, we supplemented our document analysis with the experiences of those who must make sense of these changes in their organizational environment (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004; Bowen, 2009; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Specifically, we conducted 24 convergent interviews (Dick, 1990) with 17 tenure-track and/or tenured academics (of various ranks) working in either criminology or sociology departments in 10 Canadian research universities. We also interviewed three university

administrators, which included a dean and two associate deans, and five university research facilitators/knowledge mobilization officers working in university research offices at four different universities. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

We employed convergent interviewing (CI) (Dick, 1990) and analyzed the data through a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). CI “is a form of in-depth interviewing and preliminary interpretation in which the process is highly structured, but content is left less structured or is cyclical in nature” (Driedger, Gallois, Sanders, & Santesso, 2006, p. 1148). We met weekly to discuss analytic insights and to “converse on the key priority issues using a continuous and iterative refinement of method and content” (Carson, Gilmore, Gronhaug, & Perry, 2001, p. 85). These meetings provided a space for us to develop a unified epistemological and ontological understanding (Mauthner & Doucet, 2002; Seale, 1999). Interviews continued until agreement was “reached, disagreements explained, and no new issues [were] forthcoming” (Driedger et al., 2006, p. 1148).

Both CI and constructivist grounded theory prioritize the emergence of themes from the data itself, while allowing for a constant comparative process wherein pre-existing concepts (such as neoliberalism) may be explored in terms of their fit with emerging themes (Charmaz, 2006; Driedger et al., 2006). We conducted coding and analysis simultaneously to maintain our common epistemological and ontological understanding (Driedger et al., 2006). We conducted an initial line-by-line coding of the university mission statements and three interview transcripts to identify recurring and dominant themes and concepts. In initial analyses we saw themes of institutional pressure to engage in KM, with simultaneous concern about risk and reputation. Based on our initial coding of the documents and analytic insights from CI, we developed a list of focused codes. Using NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software, we engaged in focused coding of the transcripts. We each coded three transcripts separately and then met as a group to discuss any agreements and disagreements to ensure inter-coder agreement was reached (Sanders & Cuneo, 2010).

Following our focused coding, we individually and collectively engaged in analytic memoing (Charmaz, 2006) and concept mapping (Daley, 2004). During this phase, we met regularly to discuss our memos and to collectively engage in concept mapping. Using analyst triangulating (Patton, 1999), we identified analytic themes and their interrelations. From this analysis we identified how the integration of neoliberal economic and political philosophies and practices are perceived to place increasing pressure on universities to demonstrate relevance and fiscal accountability by “going public.” Our analysis illuminates how researchers, university administrators, and research facilitators perceive knowledge mobilization to be largely an exercise of institutional governance for demonstrating accountability. These findings identify a broader tension between the goals of public intellectualism and the institutional push to go public.

Results

Anti-Intellectualism and the Production of Criminological Knowledge

During the data collection phase of this study, Canada had a Conservative majority government that was known for its “tough on crime” policies. For example, it enacted legislation that included longer periods of incarceration and the building of new prisons to deal with a perceived increase in criminal threats to the safety of individuals and commu-

nities (Safe Streets and Communities Act, 2012). These punitive measures came at a time when research showed violent crime was consistently decreasing (Piche, 2014). The disconnection between criminological research and the development of crime policy led to accusations of an anti-intellectual government. The following description by a researcher illustrates the experience and implications of anti-intellectualism:

We've been living in a conservative political climate...the way that we are spoken about in the media by politicians seems to be quite problematic. We are either dismissed or we're constructed as sitting in our ivory towers without doing anything...practical [or] relevant. (Interview 26)

This contempt for intellectuals and scientific research is perhaps best reflected in the words of former Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper when responding to reports of a foiled terrorist attack on Canada's Via Rail passenger train. During an interview on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Liberal Party leader, Justin Trudeau, was asked how he would respond to the Boston bombing if he were the prime minister (Bowman, 2013). Trudeau explained that he would look for the root causes of terrorism because until one could address the root causes, they could not understand nor address why people become involved in terrorist activities. Harper swiftly attacked Trudeau's stance and argued:

Our security agencies work with each other and with others around the globe to track people who are threats to Canada and to watch threats that may evolve. I think though, this is not a time to commit sociology. Global terrorist attacks, people who have agendas of violence that are deep and abiding are a threat to all the values that our society stands for and I don't think we want to convey any view to the Canadian violence other than our utter condemnation of this kind of violence. (Cohen, 2013, para. 2)

Instead of seeking to understand the systemic issues that may lead to radicalization, Harper advocated for harsher regulatory measures and practices, illustrating an anti-intellectual position toward the study of crime and its control. While one researcher discussed how the anti-intellectual government ignited his or her participation with community forums and the media, others perceived this climate as constraining. One participant explained:

Right now there is a huge culture of repression and censorship...you've got a prime minister who comes out and says "this is not the time to be committing sociology" when we're proposing that we give rational, reasoned thought to legislative policies. (Interview 1)

These quotes speak to the political context as partially driving the necessity for universities to demonstrate their relevance given its devaluation by the former government. In particular, they demonstrate the perception that the political context limited the degree to which social scientists were able to effectively disseminate their research publicly.

Economic Contexts and the Corporatization of the University

Operating concurrently with an anti-intellectual political context, Canadian society has been subject to growing discussions about the role of universities that has placed

higher education “under pressure to show [its] relevance” (Interview 25). The pressure to demonstrate accountability was keenly discerned by our research participants. As the following university administrator explains,

The Ontario provincial government is in the process of undertaking a massive review on the role of universities and colleges within the province...universities are no longer considered...to be these stand-alone institutions of higher learning, they are part of a larger process...and they have to be community supported in order to really...be viable. (Interview 12)

A prominent strategy for universities demonstrating viability was to frame themselves as connecting with and contributing to the broader community. This push toward community engagement is evidenced in many of the universities’ mission statements: “We connect people, ideas and experiences to change lives and the world... A university with strong partnerships, responsive to our alumni and the communities we serve” (Royal Roads University, 2017, para. 2). Another similarly described its mission to be “the leading engaged university, defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting edge research, and far-reaching community engagement... Being a world leader in knowledge mobilization” (Simon Fraser University, 2017, paras. 1–3). Universities are branding themselves as “community engaged” institutions “responsive” to the needs of the broader community. They identify their purpose as working to “serve” the community by mobilizing knowledge to “change lives and the world.”

Simultaneously, federal granting bodies have updated their objectives and requirements to reflect the perceived necessity of higher education engaging with the wider public. For instance, the “Guiding Principles for Access to Research Results” states that “publicly funded research should be as accessible as possible in order to maximize the economic, social, cultural and health benefits for Canadians” (Government of Canada, 2016, para. 1).

As a response to the increasing pressure to demonstrate accountability to the public, research granting bodies have integrated knowledge mobilization initiatives into all research grant applications. As the following Tri-Council grant administrator explains, the integration of knowledge mobilization initiatives into major grant applications is a way to “encourage academics to identify tangible results in order to demonstrate their impact because federal grants are dependent on public funds so we must be accountable” (personal communication, June 2014). In fact, pressures to demonstrate accountability have led granting agencies to “try to solidify and strengthen their operations, procedures and metrics and to take more of a corporate approach with academics...in order to be more cost effective, which has distanced us from the academic community” (personal communication with Tri-council grant manager, June 2014).

The necessity to demonstrate cost-effectiveness and implement a more “corporate approach” is indicative of wider organizational and administrative changes occurring across Canadian universities. Our participants largely relate these changes to the broader corporatization of the university. As one researcher explains, “The university has changed. It’s become a business, it’s about making money” (Interview 23). Similar sentiments were shared by a university administrator who noted that the university “is moving...toward the business model” because they are “being pushed that way by our government in order

to meet the fiscal needs of the province” (Interview 12). This largely resembles the disconnection highlighted by Walker (2008) when considering the balance of private and public interests. On one hand, an institutional shift toward the fulfillment of the “public interest” in engagement with the broader community has appeared. On the other, the invasion of the “private interest” through the corporate language of metrics and cost-effectiveness was also abounding within KM discourses. Overall, the political and economic pressures impelling universities to demonstrate value while being fiscally accountable are important for making sense of the production and dissemination of criminological research.

Our participants perceived and made sense of this shift as an exercise of institutional governance rather than as operating for the purpose of public enlightenment. This understanding drew from perceptions that (1) there exists a lack of institutional incentives and accountability for engaging in knowledge mobilization, and (2) that there are both organizational and individual risks associated with going public—particularly if the research is critical in nature. The perceptions of our participants reveal not only barriers for engaging in public dissemination but also concerns regarding the authenticity of the changing academic landscape.

Institutional Governance and Demonstrating Accountability

Similar to previous scholarship (Barreno et al., 2013; Sa et al., 2010), our participants identified a lack of institutional incentives for doing public criminology, despite the promotion of KM activities. They noted that public engagement “doesn’t count for much when you look at tenure and promotion or yearly merit increases. It sort of counts a lot less than things like publishing academic articles” (Interview 7). In fact, the lack of incentives and recognition for public engagement was cited by many participants as explanations for why they do not do public criminology, or why they did not do it prior to acquiring tenure. Though participants perceived outlining KM plans as necessary for acquiring grants, they continually noted the lack of institutional incentives for actually mobilizing their research so it is accessible to a wider audience. As one researcher noted:

There is a real contradiction that, on the one hand, we have funding agencies that appear to be supporting and in fact encouraging public criminology and, at the same time, we have institutions that continue to not recognize our involvement... so I think it [shows] that people are using the narratives or the scope of community research without necessarily being particularly committed to the community. (Interview 15)

Relatedly, when participants were asked about the institutional shift toward public engagement through the integration of KM, many perceived it as a “bureaucratic term not an academic term” (Interview 26) that has become just “another form to fill out” (Interview 32)—a “rhetorical exercise” (Interview 7) that, at the end of the day, means little. Another researcher explained:

I think that people who can write really well about it get the money. But then it doesn’t actually mean that it happens. I think that knowledge transfer and knowledge mobilization become little tick boxes to tick off, [granting agencies are] not coming back to check on me to see if I’ve done mobilization. (Interview 1)

This highlights how researchers have adopted the rhetoric of KM in order to acquire grants without necessarily changing their practices. Attention is also drawn to the lack of accountability associated with research mobilization. Researchers perceived the inclusion of KM on internal and external grants as “buzzwords” (Interview 28) that you write into your grant and then you “forget it” (Interview 20). As one participant explained, “It’s been business as usual to be frank, the only changes are when I’m writing the application” (Interview 23). Thus, participants largely made sense of the institutional shift toward knowledge mobilization as an exercise that is necessary for acquiring grants but not for changing practice.²

Public Criminology as Risky Business

In an effort to understand the perceived disconnection between the institutional push toward public criminology and simultaneous lack of institutional support and accountability, participants framed this contradiction within broader discussions of risk. For instance, one interviewee remarked:

I think universities like traditional public sociologists and criminologists because the public ones write books and go on lecture tours and they write articles. But when you’re doing organic [public criminology], you’re doing activism...you’re actually there with people helping them, trying to change the world. If they are a marginalized group challenging power it’s going to bring all sorts of pressure on the university, like, what is this person doing? (Interview 2)

Similarly, another participant explained:

The [university] certainly likes to see...you on the front page of the paper, in a good way, but not always...if you’re doing things that they would like to draw attention to and they don’t see as really hurting them, they love it, they love to see public intellectualism... If you are presenting it in a reformist kind of way...then they’re more comfortable than if you’re talking about revolution. (Interview 28)

As evidenced, institutional support for public criminology is perceived to be shaped by the type of research being disseminated. Research that could be regarded as too “critical” or “revolutionary” is viewed as having the potential to threaten the reputation of the university. This, in turn, could lead the public—who are potential funders and students—to question the quality and relevance of the university at a time when student recruitment and external partnerships are of prime importance. Thus, public dissemination is seen as a “double-edged sword” in the management of the university’s reputation (Interview 2).

The importance of good public relations for universities is clearly illustrated in the following quote by a research facilitator when discussing the risks of public criminology:

...one of our metrics is bringing in money and bringing in good PR for the university and creating positive community connections and our media and public affairs people would prefer that we stick with stories about research around Rubik’s Cubes, and things like anthropomorphizing recycling bins... So I think it’s a tension that’s going to evolve as the practice evolves...presently we are just trying to... get non-controversial research out there. (Interview 20)

Thus, public engagement that helps to facilitate “good PR for the university” and community partnerships was perceived to be encouraged, but only if it was “non-controversial research” (Interview 20). As one participant explains, while universities “encourage people now,” there is also another side to it:

The more serious side...is of course if you are bringing out information that is embarrassing to a corporate partner at the university...and of course, is posing problems for the government, or involves attacking a government program, then the university—that same university—becomes skittish of the publicity because they don’t want to bite the hand that feeds them...so that’s always been the case, but I would say that’s now even more so, because of this more fragile environment in which universities exist. (Interview 16)

If “non-controversial research” is understood to be privileged for dissemination, then an understanding of the institutional and political shaping of criminological work is especially important in this context.

While going public was perceived as posing risks for the universities, personal risks were also identified:

The institution in and of itself is conservative. That’s funded with taxpayer dollars which you know comes from the federal government, so I think that putting yourself out there and making statements that would be critical of powerful claims-making agencies...would put you in an awkward space because these groups could then put pressure on the institution...which could then make your life problematic. Things like being denied tenure, for instance, and I think that there are definitely dangers there. (Interview 7)

The quote above identifies perceived concerns and institutional risks associated with engaging in public criminology. This is an important finding because, even though none of the participants experienced personal risks of going forward, they all perceived that such risks exist.

We argue that perceptions—such as those outlined above—are important because they shape how people make sense of, and subsequently engage in, public criminology (Weick et al., 2005). If “going public” with critical research findings on powerful organizations is perceived to pose risks to the researcher, and by extension the university, what type of criminological knowledge is being produced and disseminated?

Conclusion

The influence of the neoliberal ideology on universities has long been recognized. However, this has largely occurred within discussions concerning the commodification of research and the push toward demonstrating the practice relevance of academic products (Langan & Morton, 2009; Mount & Belanger, 2004). What is less clear is how this ideology—and its close connection to reputation management—may shape these outputs for public use. Through examining the perceptions of academics, university administrators, and research facilitators with regards to the institutional promotion of KM, this study offers an exploratory example of how criminological knowledge is mobilized within the

“neoliberal institutional ecology” (Wacquant, 2011). The findings illuminate the far reach of fiscal accountability and market demands through their influence on the dissemination of particular knowledge in the realm of Canadian higher education.

From our analysis, we found that political and economic discussions concerning the role of universities has created pressure to demonstrate relevance and accountability. One way in which accountability is being demonstrated is through the integration of KM strategies in grant applications. The presence of this rhetoric in federal grant applications demonstrates the applicability of this exploratory study for universities across Canada. While KM appears to provide institutional support and incentive for activities like public criminology, upon closer examination, it is perceived by the research participants as an exercise of institutional governance to demonstrate accountability to the public, while not actually holding researchers accountable for publicly disseminating their work.

Similar to previous scholarship, participants identified a number of institutional barriers to KM, yet unlike previous findings, the perception of these disadvantages were more broadly conceptualized in terms of potential risks to the institution and the individual researcher (Brady, 2004; Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016; Sa et al., 2010; Walker, 2008). Our participants identified risks surrounding the public’s reception of criminological knowledge. Since few topics garner greater public interest and political concern than crime and its control, there are a number of vested – and often competing – interests in the way it is understood and managed. Our study provides much needed insight into the political, economic, and institutional shaping of the dissemination of criminological research. The perceptions of our participants suggest that if a researcher holds oneself accountable to knowledge mobilization, they understand that they will be faced with other barriers—whether it is the continued lack of institutional incentives for dissemination or potential risks to their reputation or that of their institution.

Finally, our findings raise concerns about the type of criminological knowledge being disseminated. If the information presented to the public is “too critical” or “too radical,” the university and researcher are perceived to be at risk for severe negative consequences. Thus, how one perceives and makes sense of these risks is argued to have the potential to shape the very production of criminological knowledge. This exemplifies Turner’s (2013) claim that “what emerges as ‘knowledge’ at any given time, in any given place, is contingent upon the context within which such knowledge is produced” (p.162). As market rationalities are privileged and the competition for minimal resources continues at universities across Canada, we must consider the socio-political context, its influence on the production of knowledge, and what exactly this means for controversial disciplines like criminology. 🍁

Notes

1. While authors like Davies, Nutley, and Walter (2008) have cited issues with terminology such as “knowledge mobilization” and “knowledge transfer,” we use these terms here because they are present in Canadian federal grant applications. However, we would like to acknowledge their argument that “knowledge interaction” better describes the complex and broad array of activities engaged in by academics and the public in such interactive knowledge production.
2. For an example of how accountability to KM may be enhanced, see the Research Excellence Framework (<http://www.ref.ac.uk/>), an evaluation framework that assesses the impact of research in the UK and distributes funding according to research excellence.

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