Not Falling Prey to the “Myth of Methodology”: Naturalistic Inquiry into the Nature of Violence (Review)

Ryan E. Spohn
University of Nebraska at Omaha, rspohn@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/criminaljusticefacpub

Part of the Criminology Commons

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Criminology and Criminal Justice Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.
BOOK REVIEW

Not Falling Prey to the “Myth of Methodology”: Naturalistic Inquiry into the Nature of Violence

Ryan Spohn

University of Nebraska-Omaha

The Creation of Dangerous Violent Criminals (2nd)


Upon its release in 1989, the first edition of The Creation of Dangerous Violent Criminals represented an explanation of violent behavior that went against the grain of most mainstream criminological theory and methodological approaches of the time. Whereas most theories of delinquency and crime targeted general criminality as the behavior to be explained, Athens’ focus was heinous violent crime. Relatedly, data for testing mainstream theories often stemmed from large samples relying on surveys of self-reported acts of less serious forms of criminality. In contrast, Athens’ data were gleaned from in-depth interviews of a small group of violent offenders and a comparison group of nonoffenders. Finally, the methodological approach dominating criminological research was positivism, whereas Athens adopted the method of “naturalistic inquiry.” Athens identifies the most important contrast between these methods which, in his opinion, is that positivists do not require firsthand knowledge of the subject matter at hand, while his research relied on engagement with violent criminals during the interviews, a naturalistic inquiry process that requires researchers to “get their hands dirty” (p. xx) and gain firsthand knowledge of violent criminals.

Athens spends considerable effort in the introduction and the afterword of this new edition of his classic book explaining the paradoxical nature of his theory of “violentization” in the modern field of criminology. On one hand, the book has achieved significant milestones, such as being continuously in print for more than 30 years and finding a place in many leading textbooks. On the other hand, however, Athens admits that the book and his theory have never truly become a
standard in the criminological mainstream. He suggests that his work has been the target of blistering criticism, including accusations that it is deterministic, ignores substantial sex/race/class differences in serious violent behavior, is based on questionable interview methods, and is difficult to operationalize. For readers desiring a more comprehensive understanding of the method and interactionist perspective that resulted in his theory of violentization, the afterword is a must-read. However, given the opportunities to update the second edition of the book with new personal insights, as well as reflecting from the knowledge that has emerged from the discipline in the last three decades, I found myself wondering why much of this content was not integrated into the relevant portions of the main text.

This updated edition includes numerous refinements to Athens’ original theory of violentization. For example, the overall developmental process of becoming a violent criminal is more centrally conceived around the notion of “domination,” and numerous stages of the theoretical process are correspondingly relabeled consistent with this notion. In addition, a new stage labeled “violent predation” is added to the model to describe a final condition under which individuals self-reflexively internalize that others view them as violent “monsters,” and that reversing course from their violent lifestyle is no longer a reasonable option. Another refinement is an enlarged typology of violentization that includes a third stage of advancement through the process of becoming a violent actor. Finally, the scope of the theory has been expanded from not only describing the process of becoming violent, but also explaining violent acts, as well as describing the nature of communities where violent criminals are frequently found.

The primary value of this work to me is its emphasis on the agency of violent persons, the importance of their interpersonal encounters (past, present, and future), and the realization that our most serious, violent offenders frequently suffered serious forms of victimization that contributed to their violent behavior. That being said, there are numerous reasons why Athens’ methodology and the organization of the book would be critiqued by mainstream criminologists. For example, academics welcome the familiar structure of identifying the research
problem, reviewing extant literature, explicitly identifying research questions or hypotheses, describing the methodology, analyzing relevant data, discussing findings, and providing conclusions that integrate findings into existing knowledge and theory. Athens not only rejected a positivist approach, but also excluded most of these common conventions. Although I highly value the richness of case study research and qualitative research based on interview methods, Athens’ naturalistic inquiry approach ignores too many principles designed to safeguard the integrity of the scientific enterprise. For example, the reader is provided little insight into the individual subjects and their stories. Data from the narratives that support the theory drive the theoretical development, but negative cases, if they exist in the narratives, are largely ignored. Rigorous methods of small sample analysis are available, including Ragin’s (1987) comparative method, but Athens does not identify a formal process for deriving causal processes from interview content. Moreover, I was surprised to find that the subjects’ narratives are not the verbatim words of the subjects, but rather recreations from Athens’ memory. Tape recorders were not used and notes were not taken during the interview process. The narratives that form the foundational data for the ensuing theory were reproduced from memory by the theorist, leaving one to ponder the extent to which Athens’ preconceived notions entered into the narratives themselves. Scientists prefer not to “take my word for it” when it comes to the integrity of research methodology, and it is a stretch to believe that the true meanings ascribed to the subjects’ behavior survived the dual recall processes of (1) the subjects’ retelling of past, often traumatic experiences, and (2) the author’s recalling of these stories from his memory of the interview content. At the very least, Athens should have been more explicit about the process, rather than suggesting that emphasizing methods, over the results, is perpetuating a “myth of methodology” (p. xxi).

REFERENCES
ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Ryan Spohn is the Director of the Nebraska Center for Justice Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where he performs statewide and local research and evaluation activities targeted at improving the performance of Nebraska’s criminal justice and corrections activities. His areas of research include the areas of juvenile delinquency, families, victimization, and processes of the criminal justice system. Dr. Spohn has published in numerous sociology and criminal justice journals, including Criminal Justice and Behavior, Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, Criminal Justice Review, Social Forces, and Victims and Offenders.