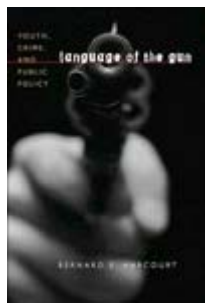


A Difficult and Necessary Path: From Youth Voices to Public Policy

A review of



Language of the Gun: Youth, Crime, and Public Policy

by Bernard E. Harcourt

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Reviewed by

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— The public and political discourse of policies and programs to reduce gun violence is rampant with vitriolic moral and legal rhetoric, less than rigorous research, and well-funded lobbying and public relations efforts, particularly by the National Rifle Association. The recent scientific review of such programs and policies by the National Research Council (2005)—*Firearms and Violence: A Critical Review*—concluded that there is insufficient evidence to support any single policy or program or set of policies or programs that will unequivocally reduce gun violence.

— However, there is solid evidence that a small group of programs do indeed reduce youth violence. These programs have been established to provide early prevention for the general population of children and youths and to reduce reoccurrences of violent behavior among chronically aggressive and violent youths (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001). Nevertheless, none has been identified as effective in specifically reducing gun violence. These evidence-based programs are generally based on an examination of the risk and protective factors for violence, which, in turn, are based on longitudinal studies and statistical models of trajectories leading toward serious youth violence (Loeber & Farrington, 1998).

Interest in and concern about gun violence among criminologists and public health professionals derive primarily from the fact that approximately two thirds of homicides in the United States are committed with firearms and that the percentage of firearm homicides committed by 14- to 24-year-olds is 15 percentage points higher than for adults 25 and older (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Furthermore, as medical technologies improve, the human and material costs of treating and rehabilitating victims of firearms are enormous (Cook & Ludwig, 2000).

Two key events in the past two decades have drawn particular attention to gun violence among youths. First, the homicide perpetration rate among youths more than tripled between 1987 and 1993, an increase that was driven nearly exclusively by firearm homicides by African American youths (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Several theories have been proposed for the rapid rise in gun violence, but none has been universally accepted. The second event was the rampage school shooting at Columbine High School in 1999. *Language of the Gun: Youth, Crime, and Public Policy* is an important and much-needed addition to the literature on guns and youth violence.

Bernard E. Harcourt, a professor of law at the University of Chicago, embraces the metaphor of "dirty hands" in this erudite, fascinating, and boldly reasoned volume to understand how public policies can be informed by the symbolic meanings attributed to guns by incarcerated youths. The pathway from listening to and trying to decode what the youths say about guns to establishing social policies requires, in his words, a "leap of faith" (p. 231) that is grounded in an ethical calculus. This enterprise is neither neat nor objective, just as all major life decisions are neither neat nor objective. This is a difficult book, drawing on a qualitative statistical analytic technique known as *correspondence analysis* (a graphic representation of data similar to factor analysis for quantitative data), philosophical traditions that posit fundamentally different assumptions about the nature of human action, and criminological traditions and orientations in understanding and seeking the causes of antisocial behavior. Harcourt appropriately advises the reader in his preface to "take this book slowly,

with an open mind and, perhaps, a generous touch. I urge you to quiet your impatience. I ask you to quell your immediate desire for proof. Take off your watch" (p. xiii).

The Interviews

▬ The data that ground Harcourt's analyses derive from interviews conducted by the author with 30 male youths at the Catalina School, a juvenile residential facility operated by the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections. The interviews focus on the symbolic meanings ascribed by the youths to guns, or, more precisely, the meanings as decoded by Harcourt. Close to 90 percent of the youths reported that they had possessed guns at some time in their life. All had been convicted of mid-level juvenile offenses, and many were serving time for repeated arrests. All fell within the 14- to 17-year-old age range, and, with regard to ethnicity, 43 percent were Hispanic, 40 percent identified as Anglo, 10 percent identified themselves as Native Americans, and 7 percent identified themselves as African Americans. Harcourt had tried to secure a larger sample of youths but was stymied by bureaucratic obstacles. He acknowledges that findings based on this sample cannot be generalized to delinquent youths throughout the United States or even, for that matter, to such youths within Arizona. Still, Harcourt does not address the effect of using a skewed sample beyond this initial recognition.

▬ Harcourt acknowledges the difficulty of interviewing for the purpose of rendering the symbolic meanings of the youths' discourse about guns. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, he began each interview with an *experimental free-association prompt*. In this case, the prompt questions were focused on photographs of three prototypical types of guns, each of which appeared familiar to the young people. Harcourt makes his first methodological assumption that the "free association approach offers better access to the youths' concerns, beliefs, desires, and fears than a more traditional approach" (p. 22). In a minor way, Harcourt falls into his first trap: He repeatedly argues that the assumptions underlying any methodology must be fully explicated and that such assumptions affect the nature of the results

obtained.

I advocate that we expose the hidden assumptions about human behavior that underlie our social science methods and that we openly evaluate these assumptions by assessing the price we pay when we decide to believe in any one of them. (p. x)

Yet he does not question the impact of this particular theoretical orientation. Nevertheless, he does not rely exclusively on the free association responses; he questions the youths about their own gun carrying and use, the context of their experiences with guns, their contacts with the law enforcement community, the means by which they obtained guns, and so on. From the excerpts that Harcourt quotes, the interviews appear to me to be richly textured and very moving.

The Symbolic Meanings of Guns

At the most fundamental level, Harcourt elucidates 19 primary meanings of guns from the free associations of the youths (interviews were coded for as many as five primary meanings). The meanings include protection, belonging, killing, fun, commodity, danger, and respect. From these primary meanings, the correspondence analysis yielded three clusters of second-order meanings: the action-protection cluster, the commodity-dislike cluster, and the recreation-respect cluster. Each cluster is defined and nicely illustrated through quotes from the youths that exemplify the cluster. Given the skewed nature of the population on which these analyses were conducted, similar analyses on a more representative sample of incarcerated youths, or at least a different sample of such youths, are essential to test the stability and reliability of these clusters. The parallel process with quantitative data is confirmatory factor analysis.

Aside from these first- and second-order meanings, Harcourt is struck by how intense the interviewees' reactions to the photographs are, noting that the attraction to guns often borders on the erotic. For these youths—the vast majority of whom live on the economic and cultural margins of society—guns represent a primary tool to avoid

being psychologically and physically victimized by peers and as a means to inflict retaliatory violence: "The notion of 'enemy' carries enormous moral weight. Guns are a way of evening a deadly score" (p. 97). Still, as Harcourt elucidates, many of the youths are conflicted about their felt need to carry and use guns and a contradictory desire to lead a conventional and "legitimate" life.

▬ Harcourt then analyzes the 19 first-order meanings in relation to various contextual domains: gun carrying, gang membership, drug selling, incarceration, and ethnicity. In general, these contextual analyses yield common sense associations, and, for the most part, the three initial second-order clusters remain. For example, frequent gun carrying and significant gang activity are closely associated with the action-protection cluster. Still, confirmatory analyses are needed to determine whether the associations are unique to this particular sample.

Philosophical Traditions and Underlying Assumptions

▬ In the second section of the book, Harcourt elucidates the underlying philosophical assumptions of what he deems the four major traditions in the social science: phenomenological (or existential), structuralist, practice oriented, and the performative. He defines and discusses each tradition in terms of its primary proponent: Jean-Paul Sartre (phenomenological), Levi Strauss (structuralist), Pierre Bourdieu (practice oriented), and Judith Butler (the performative). Although the latter two traditions are less well known, Harcourt's narrative proceeding from the phenomenological to the practice-oriented traditions is well reasoned and informative, and his choice to highlight these four traditions makes much good sense.

▬ The purpose of this section is to illuminate the taken-for-granted assumptions that are embedded in social science methodologies. These assumptions, or philosophical underpinnings, cannot be falsified, although each has its strengths and weaknesses and each emphasizes certain aspects of human behavior and motivation and de-emphasizes other aspects. The phenomenological tradition emphasizes

individual decision and meaning making; the structuralist tradition emphasizes the determinative power of systemic linguistic, cultural, economic, and institutional forces; the practice-oriented tradition emphasizes internalized and subculturally proscribed action and language (or cognitive) scripts; and the performative tradition emphasizes that identity is constructed jointly through actions, internalized scripts, and political and institutional forces. Each tradition provides an important perspective on how the young people expertly navigate the terrain in which they live and act. No single tradition fully captures the nature of the youths' experiences in relation to guns, nor do they fully render the motivational dynamics in possessing or using guns. Harcourt's point is that the selection of social science methodologies is not a scientific endeavor and therefore cannot be used as a scientific basis to formulate public policy.

▬ Each tradition is illustrated through quotes from the interviewees that demonstrate correspondences to each philosophical tradition. Harcourt's discussions of the four philosophical traditions are illuminating and fascinating (although tough going) and, I argue, a must read for graduate students in the social sciences. The choice of these four specific traditions serves as a heuristic for exploring the unscientific basis for adopting one methodology over the other. There is nothing wrong with this; however, other philosophical traditions and writers could have served his purpose equally as well—for example, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, Garfinkle's (1984) ethnomethodology, Bridgman's (1959) operationalism, or even John Locke's (1955) work on empiricism. My point is that Harcourt does not acknowledge that his selection of philosophical traditions is itself biased in that it is, perforce, only a partial listing of philosophical traditions that explicate human action; other traditions with different narratives could have been invoked. As Harcourt states,

there is no scientific purity. There are no clean hands in the relationship between law and social science. We cannot proceed deductively from social science models. Instead, we need to explore options and evaluate how they are going to affect us as contemporary subjects. (p. 172)

Implications for Public Policy

▬ The final section of the book addresses the question of how we can establish sound public policy in light of the messiness in deriving such policy from the social sciences. Harcourt does an admirable job of summarizing some of the most influential social science explanations of the causes of antisocial behavior and exploring the philosophical traditions on which they rest as well as the policy implications derived from them. Some traditions focus on individual decision making and individual deficits, some on social and economic circumstances and forces, some on peer interactions and the need for respect, some on law enforcement and judicial practices, and still others on child development and family dynamics. For some explanations, the link with policy is fairly direct, and for others it is somewhat tenuous. Again, I argue that these analyses are critically important for graduate students as well as professional practitioners. We tend to use and empirically test theories, but we typically fail to carefully reflect about the impact of the assumptions embedded in the theories.

▬ What stance does Harcourt take in relation to the establishment of sensible public policy regarding guns, youths, and violence? First and foremost, he urges that we ought to examine explicit ethical implications of each of our public policies. For example, he eschews policies that would increase or even primarily rely on incapacitation as a means to reduce violence: "I refuse to take the leap of faith that would condemn these youths to a life of incapacitation or damage control" (p. 230). For Harcourt, and for me as well, such condemnation ignores the harsh circumstances in which these youths grow up, ignores the hopes and capacities of these young people, and reinforces the hopelessness that so many of them feel. Policies must, according to Harcourt, be informed by nonjudgmental listening to the voices and motivations of young people who use and do not use guns. The ethical impact of such informed policies must then be carefully considered.

▬ Harcourt does very briefly relate what he has learned from his correspondence analyses of the youth interviews to suggest that nongang members, for whom the commodity value of guns is key, may

rationally respond to gun confiscation practices (without incarceration) and the provision of alternative opportunities (e.g., job opportunities and training), whereas gang members, for whom the action-protection cluster is paramount, may respond to practices that increase perceived safety through environmental changes, such as increased lighting, avoidance of high-rise housing complexes, better parenting practices, and conflict resolution programs as well as activities that promote prosocial, action-oriented group activities. This perspective, that no single policy can address the needs and circumstances of all youths, is important and has been largely ignored in policy discussions of gun violence. It is ironic that Harcourt's explication of and advocacy for specific policies are minimal, and the implications of his correspondence analyses in relation to policy recommendations are thin. At the very least, I think that a review of evidence-based programs, such as Multisystemic Therapy (Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 1998), that have been shown to reduce violence among those youths Harcourt interviewed would buttress his discussion of policy. Indeed, I would welcome Harcourt's take on this growing movement toward evidence-based practices. Additionally, I think it useful to examine and compare other approaches to youth violence that are similarly grounded in the voices of young people (although not specifically on guns). Bruce Jacobs's (2004) work on retaliatory violence and James Garbarino's (1999) analysis of interviews of youths who have been convicted of murder are examples of such work.

Overall, I highly recommend this volume to graduate students and professionals alike. It is an important book, one that forces each of us to examine the assumptions that underlie our work. Harcourt's work is a gift to the field, a work that stimulates, frustrates, inspires, and, most important, motivates us to think and read more.

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