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Relational perspectives in criminological research in Germany, Austria and Switzerland: A snapshot of current trends

‘Why network research?’: that was the title given to a conference organised by the Schader-Stiftung and the German Association for Network Research (DGNet). Hosted in the German city of Darmstadt in early March 2020, the meeting saw an impressive range of topics discussed over just under 80 speaking slots. With the exception of a presentation delivered by an interdisciplinary team from Heidelberg University titled ‘Network research and terrorism prevention’ [Netzwerkforschung und Terrorismusprävention], criminological themes were not covered – or at least did not appear in the published programme. By the same token, talks referencing network research were also few and far between at the 16th Conference of the Society of Criminology, which took place in Vienna last year. In German, Austrian and Swiss criminology, the relationship between established criminology and network research seems akin to how some would relate to a new neighbour: you have spotted each other a few times from afar, but little else. Roughly two and half years ago, this state of affairs gave rise to the idea of taking action to improve the communication between the German-speaking criminology community and existing networks of criminological research. The approach is concerned with providing both criminological researchers and practitioners with relevant subject-specific information concerning methods and their prevalence. This issue of KrimOJ is one of the outcomes of these endeavours and I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have contributed.

Katrin Höffler and I wrote the first article in this issue, which is titled ‘Social Network Analysis in German-Speaking Criminology: Status Quo, Challenges and Potentials’ and offers readers an overview of the spread of social network analysis in German-speaking criminology. For this purpose, the paper presents the results of a literature analysis and an explorative survey on the awareness and use of network analysis among scholars and practitioners.

The second article, written by André Ernst and Sven Lenkewitz, is titled ‘Violence, Street Code Internalisation and the Moderating Effect of the Status-Violence Norm in German Schools’. This paper analyses data from the ‘Friendship and Violence in Adolescence’ study conducted in schools. Here a relational perspective aided the authors in clarifying whether violence in schools increases when violent behaviour is rewarded with status being bestowed upon the offending student by their peers. In concrete terms, the authors address the relationship between the students’ internalisation of the ‘code of the street’ (where violence is justified), their actual behaviour and the status bestowed by fellow students. On the one hand, the results confirm the finding that violence prevention requires an approach which (also) addresses students at the classroom and school level, as is the case, for example, in Dan Olweus’ Bullying Prevention Programme. On the other hand, the results can help better understand the dynamics and

interplay between violence and the reactions of others, and such findings could be fed into the specific design of intervention schemes. But have a read and see for yourself.

The third topic covered in this issue is communication in an outlaw gang, which is explored in Martin Neumann and Michael Möhring's paper titled 'Outlaw Gangs: Networks or Organisations?' The article bases its research on the findings of police investigations and examines where the gang should be placed on a scale that ranges from a rather unconnected, loose network with a small degree of organisation to a fairly close syndicate with a strict formal hierarchy. Through analysis of the available data, the authors are able to offer both an insight into the organisation as well as a comparison with the outwardly visible profile of positions and role allocation within the outlaw gang. The paper describes the network structure and the significance of individual actors, including in relation to the functional roles of their specific position within the gang. Gaining knowledge of this kind enables prosecution services to take certain steps during ongoing investigations, e.g. targeting reintegration or repressive measures at certain actors. This might be done to facilitate an individual's exit from criminal circles or to disrupt the illegal activities of certain groups.

The fourth article, written by Nicole Bögelein and Jana Meier and titled 'A Network Perspective on Radicalisation into Right-Wing Extremism. An Empirically Grounded Typification', examines the initial moments of the radicalisation process up to and including right-wing extremism. Their heuristic has been developed through an analysis of personal networks and the results of the research illustrate that there is not only one route into extremism. Human beings possess the will and the ability to respond and take a stance towards the circumstances, opportunities and risks they encounter (or that life sometimes throws at them). With this in mind, one could argue that no one is born a (right-wing) extremist. Yet the case examples presented in the article impressively illustrate just how challenging it can be to resist the influence of one's personal network and the inherent pull of socialisation and being part of a community. At the same time, the findings demonstrate the level of effort sometimes required to sustainably counteract the threat posed by extremist crime.

This edition of *Kriminologie – Das Online-Journal* | *Criminology – The Online Journal* brings together a broad range of criminological topics that demonstrate how valuable additional insight can be gained by adopting a relational perspective. As far back as a decade ago, Jana Diesner and Kathleen M. Carley (2010, p. 736) wrote about the role network analysis plays in criminological research in their article, which appeared in *Handbuch Netzwerkforschung* [A Guide to Network Research]: "The study and prevention of crime are essentially tasks that fall under information management; this includes the relevant methods, technologies and evaluations." To this end, network analysis can play a crucial role for suitable criminological issues and topics.

References

- Diesner, J. & Carley, K. M. (2010). Relationale Methoden in der Erforschung, Ermittlung und Prävention von Kriminalität. In Stegbauer, C. & Häußling, R. (Hrsg.), *Handbuch Netzwerkforschung*. (pp. 725-738). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

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