

[Home](#) | [Job Search](#) | [Career Strategies](#) | [Business](#) | [Entrepreneur](#) | [Web](#) | [Money](#) | [Education](#) | [Network](#) | [International](#)

Advancing Women in Leadership Online Journal
Volume 19, Fall 2005

[AWL Journal Home](#)

[Current Volume](#)

[Archives](#)

[Call for
Manuscripts/Guidelines](#)

[[Journal Index](#)]

A Pedagogy of Awareness: Death Education as an Introduction to Social Consciousness
Dr. Linda L. White

I have been teaching a senior level college course entitled Death and Dying - off and on - for more than ten years. At my university it is a philosophy course, though it is multi-disciplinary and could be taught in other departments as well; it is taught around the country in departments of sociology, psychology, health sciences, and religion. I began teaching this course as a result of a tragic loss in my own life. I wanted to bring to others what I had learned as a consequence of that experience and my own exploration through the territory of *grief and loss*. It seemed to me at the time that most of us are unprepared to deal with some of the blows that life may deal us - especially in contemporary America - and some basic foundational knowledge in this area could enable people to function better in times of crisis than they might without this information.

When I began teaching the course, I saw it as a fairly straightforward engagement with the issues as outlined in the text I used. Some of those topics, as listed in the table of contents are: "Attitudes Toward Death: A Climate of Change; Perspectives on Death: Cross-Cultural and Historical; Learning About Death: The Influence of Sociocultural Forces; Facing Death: Living With Life-Threatening Illness; Survivors: Understanding the Experience of Loss; and Suicide" (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2002, pp. v - xii). Since I had specialized in the area of death and dying - including loss and its many meanings and responses - during my graduate work in clinical psychology, I found those topics thoroughly interesting and relatively uncomplicated to develop within the course.

I sought the guidance of others who had taught the course prior to that first semester, particularly the literature in our library. I found that most experts recommended an approach that enlisted both the intellect and the emotions of the students - either by itself was seen as incomplete and inappropriate (Corr, 1978; Kastenbaum, 1977) . These same sources also suggested encouraging the students to look at themselves as individuals and also as members of the larger society (Anderson, 1972; Corr, 1978; Kastenbaum, 1977). Though I have to admit to leaning over too far in one direction or the other occasionally, I have tried to maintain this balance of perspective and approach through the years.

In those first few semesters, in addition to the excellent text referenced above, I also assigned outside readings, book reviews, and even an assignment called a "deathography." The authors of the text suggested this last writing assignment in which the students give autobiographical accounts of their encounters with

death up to that point in their lives. It is a reflective writing assignment and includes their reactions to the relevant experiences as well as how they see it affecting them today. Although it was time-consuming and often difficult reading and evaluating these written deathographies, it became for me one of the highlights of the semester. I believe it may have been these deathographies that opened my mind, and my heart, to the infinite possibilities inherent in this course.

A bereaved person's ethnicity is determined not only by the person's country of origin, but also by who he says he is, what he does, with whom, and how he feels about it....Ethnicity entails, among other things, the use of a cultural system to make sense of the world, including its sufferings. (Eisenbruch, 1984, p. 324-325)

I found this quote from an ethnographer while doing cross-cultural research in loss and grief. I realized later that, even though it only mentions ethnicity, it applies to all of us in other ways. How we make sense of our suffering, and how we weave it into our lives, is a big part of who we are. Reading the deathographies was telling me who the students were, as well as telling them who they were and where they were and how far they might have come since a previous loss. Over and over again I was told how much they learned from doing the assignment, even though many of them didn't really want to do it initially - students rarely welcome writing assignments, I have found, especially one that might be difficult.

I found that some of the students hadn't experienced much loss by the time they came to college, but others had lost a host of family and friends. I also realized that some of them were totally unable to engage with reflective material at all - that in itself told me something about them. Others poured out their experiences and the related emotions to me. I often found myself in tears reading through them, such was the depth of emotion and commitment to the assignment. Although I graded them for content and mechanics, I often felt it a sacrilege to do so. I still experience such a sense of profound privilege that many of them trusted me to the extent they did, and still do.

Along with the subjects I outlined above, there were others in my text that were somewhat more difficult to grapple with: medical ethics, including access to medical care; the law and death, including physician assisted suicide; life after death, including one's religious beliefs; AIDS, including its transmission and our initial response; war, past and present; violence, and all its dimensions; and the death penalty - brutality or appropriate response? These were issues that brought out our partisanship and our individual differences in ways that threatened to disturb class unity. Should I simply gloss over them? Should I lecture only, seeking and accepting no questions or opinions other than my own? It would have been easy to lose myself in the sheer magnitude of the material in our textbook - 652 pages of text and indices! I have to admit to doing so initially, except for minimal discussion. However, as I gained experience in the course, and continued to read in the field, I realized I could no longer teach in that way.

The following will serve to illustrate my transformation over time due to those experiences I had in the classroom, both as teacher and student. I will outline first how a seemingly harmless classroom discussion shifted my perspective radically and sent me searching for new answers to old questions. Next, I will show how that search led me back to graduate school and provided the underpinnings for my current perspective on a host of life and death issues that I cover in the teaching of Death and Dying. Though the connections between these theoretical underpinnings and my current practices in Death and Dying may not seem apparent initially, I will make the connections as the paper develops. I have come to believe that the most important thing I do is provide an environment in which my students can examine some of their assumptions about life and death. More and more this has come to mean encouraging them to grapple with a number of social justice issues within the field of Death and Dying. I cannot provide them the answers, but I do attempt to offer them the awareness they need to ask the right questions, and, hopefully, eventually find the answers for themselves.

A Major Change in Perspective

This turning point in perspective began for me about two years after I began teaching Death and Dying (D&D). I have described the incident to others many times, and I can still remember the essence of that moment as if it happened yesterday. It had been disclosed in the news the night before that a young woman's (Susan Smith) children were not abducted as she had reported, but she had killed them instead. Some of the students in my class (not a D&D class) couldn't wait to discuss it and tell me how they would punish her. The methods they devised were varied and inventive, and all quite punitive - they almost seemed to be competing for how much they could make her suffer. One very kind young man, a good student I had really enjoyed up to that point, told us in very deliberate terms how he would tie her in a car and drive it into the water and watch her die the same way she killed her own sons. The expression on his face spoke volumes. I stood there in horror as this proceeded, slowly shaking my head at the display of raw violence I was witnessing, and realizing that few, if any, of them would ever associate their behavior with violence.

I did see it as violence, and still do - this need we have to punish and judge harshly. It reminded me of a section of our text that I had read and remembered, but not internalized as deeply as I probably should have, a table of "factors favoring violence" (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2002, p. 475) taken from a book called *The Psychology of Death* (Kastenbaum & Aisenberg, 1976). The two factors in the table that I see applicable here are (1) Anything that physically or psychologically separates the potential killer from the victim, and (2) Anything that fosters perceiving people as objects or as less than human. As long as we can separate ourselves completely from others and see them as much less than we are, we can envision and even plan all manner of violence against them. Most of us do not carry out the violence that we imagine. We confine it to such verbal exercises instead; but the point is, for me, that we are still able to visualize it and believe in its suitability. If we can plan it and speak of it, then under the right circumstances, perhaps we can carry it out. That is what bothered me and caused me to perceive violence as multi-dimensional.

Because of that incident, the natural role of violence in the field of death and dying, and my growing conviction that most of us misunderstand violence, I began to review as much of the literature on violence as I could in the next few years, followed by a return to graduate school. After reading volumes of material for three years, I decided that prudence dictated establishing tangible proof of my scholarship. In some respects, the research I had conducted throughout that three-year period laid the foundation for what I did during my doctoral program. Whenever possible, I returned to the subject that most fascinated me, violence and its alternative, non-violence. As it turned out, the avenues that opened up to me during my doctoral program served to fuel my convictions about violence, enlarged it considerably, and gave me theoretical foundations for my principles. Chief among these were critical and feminist theories, which became the underpinnings of my work in many respects. I even found compelling support in the literature for a strong link between these two theoretical models, to which I will refer later.

Theoretical Underpinnings

My first revelation came during a course in educational epistemology wherein we learned of other models of research besides the prevailing logical positivism. There are, within education, at least three models of inquiry, each asking different questions and often suggesting different methods of research (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). While I was quite familiar with the positivist paradigm, and the questions it poses, two other models, the interpretive and critical, were new to me. While the positivist model might be used to ascertain if some entity or construct exists, such as depression or anxiety, or if a program is effective in combating some malady. For instance, the interpretive paradigm seeks to know how, not merely if, a particular entity exists and operates within some sector of society or within individuals.

An example of the first paradigm might be examining a program to determine if it is effective in changing the attitudes and adjustment of juvenile delinquents; this is often called *outcome research*. Following along

with this same area of inquiry, interpretive research might be used to establish how the program works from the differing perspectives of the people involved, both counselors and juveniles. As valuable as these two models of research are, especially taken together, there are those who find them incomplete for the tasks of inquiry. Hence, the birth of the critical paradigm.

Critical Theory

Critical theory has its origins in German philosophy, particularly the work of Hegel, Marx, the Frankfurt School, and more recently, the writings of Jurgen Habermas (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982; Giroux, 1982; Merriam, 1991). The Frankfurt School was made up of a group of talented historians, sociologists, and philosophers who worked loosely together from the late 1920s, locating for a time in the United States (fleeing Nazi Germany), and then eventually relocating in Germany. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse were the primary representatives of the Institute for Social Research where these critical theorists began their work (Giroux, 1982; Seidman, 1994).

The goals of the Institute were to examine how society's utmost faith in the power of reason and rationality to rescue it from any of the social ills of the day was misplaced. They sought to illustrate how Marx had even fallen "victim" to this line of reasoning in his theoretical positions about labor and social revolution. He had so little considered the role of individual and social consciousness, they thought, that he had at least partially aligned himself with the positivist notions of reality and rationality (Seidman, 1994). Habermas decried this position:

"The spontaneity of hope, the art of taking a position, the experience of relevance or indifference, and above all, the response to suffering and oppression, the desire for adult autonomy, the will to emancipation, and the happiness of discovering one's identity—all these are dismissed for all time from the obligating interest of reason" (as quoted in Giroux, 1982, p. 12).

Rationality, these theorists believed, when dispossessed of its cultural meaning, isn't rational at all; it is instead dogma that seeks to serve the interests of special groups, primarily those in power. Critical theory takes a look at whose interests are served, and rejects notions of objective truth. Positivism by its very nature precludes an understanding of how its neutrality isn't neutral at all; rather it is supportive of the status quo, because it does not question but simply reports (Giroux, 1982; Seidman, 1994).

Further goals of the Frankfurt School were to participate in raising the consciousness of those groups that were living under conditions of coercion or oppression. They sought to look at what should be, not simply what was. Compassion was at the heart of much of their inquiry and the basis of much of their critical thought (Giroux, 1982). They saw their role as one of enlightenment and empowerment (Merriam, 1991). They pursued not simply understanding of society, but the transformation of those structures within it that promoted and sustained hierarchies of power and prevented the full participation of all people (Seidman, 1994).

The questions asked by critical theorists are: Whose interests are being served? How have those who are oppressed cooperated in their oppression? What are the oppressive structures, and how do we go about unmasking them? How can we educate the oppressed in order to empower them to break free from these repressive systems? Is this irrelevant in America today? I will return to this question later, but first I will explain the other theoretical base from which I work, and then connect it to my philosophy of teaching D&D.

Feminist Criminology

The second theoretical basis of my work comes from feminist theory, developed during several graduate level Women's Studies courses. Producing even a few thoughts on any feminist perspective is a large undertaking, certainly within the confines of a relatively short paper. To attempt to do that in the area of criminology is perhaps just as daunting a proposition. The reasons for both are the same: Just as feminism itself is not one unified field of thought and theory, neither is criminology - nor is their intersection, feminist criminology. Almost any effort to expound on a particular issue produces a myriad of choices, and often-perplexing ones, concerning which of the many feminisms or feminist criminologies we would wish to interpret. Some brief explanation is possible, however, even within narrow confines.

First of all, in addition to the fact that there is no unified set of principles of feminist criminology from which feminist criminologists draw their theories, it is important to realize that their theoretical constructs are not always about women only (Alcoff & Potter, 1992). Men and masculinities are also of interest to feminists, as are the organizations and institutions of our culture, for women are affected by all these (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). Feminist thought has much to offer the field of criminology, according to Daly and Chesney-Lind. It can bring a more realistic perspective of women's issues within the field as opposed to the narrow focus on men and masculinity. Feminists know intuitively that we cannot just add women to the theories about men, as in 'add women and stir.' Additionally, it can bring to the attention of criminologists "that their discipline and its questions are a product of white, economically privileged men's experiences" (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988, p. 506). The addition of women, as well as those of color, can provide a needed balance to the field. Combined issues of class, race, and gender are vital to the full understanding of any area of concern within sociological endeavor, and this is clearly true within the confines of criminological theory. Several groups within feminist criminology are particularly concerned with these issues and have brought pressure to bear on the leftist criminologists (critical and Marxist, especially) to consolidate their theories with those of feminists (radical, Marxist, and socialist) in order to truly transform the field.

Feminist criminology had its inception in the late sixties, with the advent of the first works to refer directly to the omission of women in theories of crime (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). It has proceeded through almost four decades of scholarship, posing a number of questions to the establishment within the field of criminology and criminal justice concerning these and other related issues: gender ratio in crime; gender and generalizability in methodology; sexism in their views and interpretations of women's and girls' crime and deviance; discrimination against women within the system; the very definition of violence; and, finally, the control of men's violence - how can we do this without resorting to the same methods, violent ones, to do so? This last question has particular relevance for my own research and teaching - the nature of our responses to violence being violent as well.

Peacemaking Criminology: The Link Between Critical Theory and Feminist Criminology

I had found in earlier research a new way of responding to crime - restorative justice - called a new vision, or even a new paradigm, by one of its early advocates (Zehr, 1990). I was drawn to restorative justice by its message of non-violence, because I had come to believe that our criminal justice system, as currently maintained, was in some ways part of the long-term problem rather than the solution to all crime and violence. Let me say here that I had not sought initially to do research in criminal justice or criminology. It sought me instead, once I began to explore violence and its alternatives. It was, ironically, during a consideration of feminist theory that I found a link between these two areas, restorative justice and feminist theory: peacemaking criminology.

According to Pepinsky and Quinney (1991), peacemaking criminology is an area of criminology that concerns itself with human suffering and its role in crime. It focuses on issues of social, economic, and political justice; and is related to a concept called restorative justice. Who are the peacemaking criminologists, and what is their relationship to feminism? Pepinsky (1991a) tells us that in the late 1980s,

he and Richard Quinney began to see a common thread in certain criminological traditions - those of the religious, feminist, and critical criminologists (see also Henry and Milovanovic, 1991). Not all, certainly, but many of these writers were linked by their commitment to peacemaking as a function of criminological processes. Peacemaking criminology seeks to see crime more as harm to relationships than as crimes against the state, and asks how to address these harms and restore these relationships as opposed to simply assessing punishment.

One of these peacemaking criminologists, Harris (1991), explains a unifying principle that they share, a concept that is familiar to many of us: an ethical orientation that includes an *ethic of care* as postulated by Carol Gilligan (1977). Gilligan found in her research with women that they made moral decisions based on a *care/response* mode more often than the *rights/justice* mode accepted by most psychologists as the ethical model for adults.

The greatest hope Harris (1991) has is that we will find a way to apply some of the principles of feminism to our thinking on crime and criminal justice. She outlines the major uniting standards of what she calls values central to a feminist future, what she understands the core values to be: "Among the key tenets of feminism are three simple beliefs - that all people have equal value as human beings, that harmony and felicity are more important than power and possession, and that the personal is the political" (p. 88). Though she concedes that there are variances in feminist thought, she holds these ideals to be fairly transcendent of those variances.

In an explanation of these values, she indicates that while people are inherently different, they are all entitled to respect as persons and an equitable amount of consideration because of that fact. Secondly, she holds that feminists view the interconnectedness of people as a given, and this leads us to care for one another, to be mindful of their humanity. The hierarchical structures in our society that lead people to seek 'power over' others is the antithesis of this care orientation. And finally, the idea that the personal is political means (for her) that these humane values need to be lived out in our public spheres as well as in our private ones (Harris, 1991).

Violence and the Feminist Response

Violence permeates much of what we are in America, much more so than in other highly developed nations [1]. We need, however, to be clear in our definition of violence. What many of us see in the news media relative to violence is only the tip of the iceberg. Any worthwhile definition of violence must include the structural and systemic violence that pervades our culture. Violence impacts our lives, not only in the more obvious ways, but in covert ones as well. Our levels of interpersonal violence are the highest in the world; our structural violence is startling in its impact on us directly and indirectly in that it contributes to other forms of violence; and our responses to violence usually consist of adding more violence to that already extant (Chasin, 1997; Gilligan, 1996; Tift & Markham, 1991). How this affects all of us should go without saying, but how it affects women is almost catastrophic. And, as we shall see, it is gendered (Allen, 1989; Braithwaite & Daly, 1998).

Interpersonal Violence

Most of us define violence somewhat narrowly - the interpersonal violence that we see on the nightly news or in our newspapers and magazines - and, certainly, this is a part of the overall picture. James Gilligan (1996), a psychiatrist who has worked with violent criminals and directed the Center for the Study of Violence at Harvard Medical School, is an expert on this kind of violence. He has developed his particular theoretical concepts about violence from his observations of men institutionalized for their violence. He draws on these experiences to explain the role of shame [2] and the lengths the men go to in order to avoid shame and being seen as weak, not manly.

I have yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling shamed and humiliated, disrespected and ridiculed, and that did not represent the attempt to prevent or undo this "loss of face" - no matter how severe the punishment, even if it includes death. (Gilligan, 1996, p. 110)

J. Gilligan [3] (1996) suggests that the dialogue regarding violence must include women's voices if there is to be any hope for decreasing the level of violence in our society. He reveals that his work with violent men has informed his belief in the necessity for transforming our patterns of behavior along with the gender roles that we've adopted as part of our patriarchal culture. Within our system, he relates, men are socialized above all 'not to be women' in any way. This channels both men's and women's behaviors into gender appropriate roles, and both sexes are rewarded and honored for remaining within these roles. "The fundamental challenge of our time, I believe, is to break the link between civilization and patriarchy so that we can continue to receive the benefits of the former without having to pay the cost of the latter" (Gilligan, 1996, p. 267).

Chasin (1997), too, addresses this basic issue. She believes that men are socialized primarily to be more aggressive and achievement oriented than are women, but less responsive than women to their own and other's emotional needs. The desire of many men, therefore, is to be the antithesis of women. This contributes greatly to the homophobia that exists in many sectors of society and underlies much of the so-called gay bashing. Because of the lower status of women relative to men, it is considered inappropriate to be 'like a woman' in any way. For a man, consequently, violence may frequently be a more viable and acceptable alternative than allowing oneself to be put down or seen as not dominant (Chasin, 1997).

Structural Violence

Chasin (1997) also deals eloquently with the issue of structural violence. She defines violence as "acts, intentional or not, that result in physical harm to another or persons" (p. 4). These can be of two types: interpersonal or structural. She characterizes structural violence as that occurring because of our stratification system, the fact that many of our citizens suffer physically due to limited access to certain resources. J. Gilligan (1996) defines it likewise: "By structural violence I mean the increased rates of death and disability suffered by those who occupy the bottom rungs of society." (p. 192)

With some startling statistics, Chasin (1997) indicates that the United States has a dismal record regarding several indicators of structural violence compared to the other ten wealthiest capitalist nations in the world, indicators such as infant mortality rate, rate of AIDS infection, and hazardous waste production. These indicators, and others, are routinely ignored by those who make our laws and construct our news, she maintains. They focus on the interpersonal violence instead, diverting our attention away from the policies that shape our world, sometimes in unsafe and unhealthy ways. She points out the necessity of expanding our definitions of violence to include the structural for some very important reasons. Primary among them, she reports, is the fact that structural violence is a greater threat to more of us than interpersonal violence.

J. Gilligan's (1996) experiences have informed his scholarship regarding structural violence as well. Citing example after example, he condemns our basic refusal to care for and about one another in America, tying it to the shame we unknowingly inflict on one another. Agreeing with Ghandi that "The deadliest form of violence is poverty" (p. xi), he is convinced that our fear of any form of dependence is at the root of much of our pathology. He decries our refusal to help our citizenry with the most basic of human needs, accusing us of being the least compassionate democracy on earth. And, he says, we have not restricted our violent propensities to our own country; we have exported it to other countries also. While we remain the most violent highly developed nation on earth, we have added to the levels of violence elsewhere with our policies (see also Wolterstorff, 1983).

A Violent Criminal Justice System.

Not only is violence incorporated into the fabric of our lives structurally, it permeates our response to violence within the criminal justice system (Danner, 1998). Further, our recent attempts to redouble our efforts at controlling crime may have not only increased its effects on the whole of society, but especially its effects on women. For the last 30 years we have waged a war on crime and then a war on drugs, which many peacemaking criminologists would agree has been a war on the poor and on women in many respects, but particularly women of color (Danner, 1998).

In an interesting analogy of the 'three strikes you're out' laws passed in some states during the Nineties, Danner (1998) depicts how current policy affects women in disastrous ways. Strike one, she contends, was the removal of many women and children from welfare rolls due to insufficient funding for these programs resulting from increased incarceration rates during the tough-on-crime regime. Strike two was the loss of jobs of many women who had been over-represented in the social service jobs eliminated by the cuts in welfare funding. Strike three was the increased incarceration rates of men, leaving greater numbers of women behind to care for home and children without help. Add to this the fact that the whole cycle increases the level of poverty in these communities, and we have significantly affected women by these militant policies.

The current get-tough, lock-'em-up, and Three Strikes policies will not reduce crime nor women's pain associated with crime. They will only impoverish communities as they enrich politicians and those corporations associated with this new prison industrial complex. Although women have been largely left out of the debate, it is women who are the quiet losers - the big-time losers - in the crime bills. Criminal justice reforms such as these are politically motivated, unnecessary, ineffective, and far, far too costly. And last and most important, it is women who receive the least from the wars on crime and drugs, and it is women who bear most of their hidden burdens (Danner, 1998, p. 12).

A number of feminists have questioned the wisdom of our current approaches. Referring to another of the new crime initiatives, Morash and Rucker (1998) point out the irony of featuring a model of aggression as a means of correcting young offenders at risk through the use of boot camps. Many tactics used at these camps have been abandoned within the military itself as not effective, and empirical methods to evaluate these programs find them ineffective as well. In fact, research to date has indicated that these programs have actually promoted the very behaviors that they seem designed to discourage, aggression and a callous attitude toward others. Yet they continue to be touted as the new wave in programming for juveniles, occasionally including females as well as males. In actuality, these programs are not really new, as their primary components have been tried and found wanting throughout the history of corrections; militarism, hard (and often meaningless) labor, and scare tactics.

In her critique of the criminal justice system, Harris (1991) highlights the lack of rehabilitation in many of the current reforms^[4] and the ever-harsher attitudes toward offenders, as indicated by some of the policies of the last 20 years^[5]. We need to reflect, she suggests, on our current beliefs that only these highly punitive means are appropriate to our needs to provide safety for the majority of our citizens. Additionally, she urges us to refocus our attention on the social and economic causes of criminal activity, not merely see this as a problem of individuals who need correcting. Increased levels of law enforcement alone will not address the questions that face us in the area of criminality, particularly since they are primarily reactive.

Harris (1991) also stresses the current practices within our penal system, those that promote feelings of despair and hopelessness among the inmates. These harsh environments encourage increased levels of violence, both while incarcerated and upon release^[6]. Rather than eliminating violence by responding with violence, we are simply escalating it. We have lost a historical perspective and believe, therefore, that

incarceration is the only solution to the problems. Along with many others, she holds that incarceration should be the *court of last resort* with a continuum of other means to deal with those acts we deem as criminal (see also Braithwaite & Daly, 1998).

Harris' (1991) feminist analysis of the criminal justice system points to its coercive and dominant nature as a given, but also to the fact that its total embodiment results in seeing offenders as less than completely human. A feminist vision of the future should include questioning the very basis of our manner of responding to harmful behaviors, especially those which objectify criminals and seek to exile them into cages or death (Harris, 1991). Power structures and practices should not be pivotal to all that we do, and punishment need not be assumed without debate, especially those that are overly harsh. The least restrictive measures to assure safety should be applied, generally speaking. Compassion can be extended to offenders as well as to victims, she believes, for it "is not a fixed quantity" (p. 95).

Knopp (1991) adds her note of critique to that of other feminists that the system, as presently conceived misses the mark in our endeavor to curb the level of violence toward women. The structures of the criminal justice system are patriarchal and repressive in nature. Using them to combat behavior that is intrinsic to the system itself may produce additional harms that we do not want. She reminds us that the system is fashioned in the interest of the dominant class, and that when we demand incarceration, "we legitimize the degradation and destruction of human beings in prison as a method of social control - and we increase reliance on the patriarchal state to determine who is wrong or guilty" (Sullivan, cited in Knopp, 1991, p. 187). She reminds us as well that it is usually people of color and the poor who suffer in the most immediate terms in times of increased incarceration.

Knopp (1991) proposes a social justice model in place of the war model to which we have become accustomed. The system she envisions would address the needs of victims and offenders both, as well as the community. Primary concerns are the safety and rights of all parties involved and the least restrictive and most restorative environment possible for the offender. Included in the program is the effort to address all areas of concern, long term and short term: protection of the victim, including a full support system; offender prevention, education, and restoration; and elimination of structural conditions that continue the cycle of abuse. Though Knopp views prisons as inherently abhorrent, she agrees that there will likely always be those for whom incarceration is the answer, but she contends that just because this is true for some, is no reason to see it as the only solution for all offenders. Many would agree with this assertion, particularly in light of the injustices within the system today [7].

While we have continued to pursue these self-defeating policies that victimize us all, but primarily the most powerless sectors of our society; women, children, and the poor, we have not succeeded in elevating the security level of the rest of society (Chesney-Lind, 1998; Pepinsky, 1991b). Certainly our perceptions of safety and security are weakened yearly as horrendous stories of violence flood the media and our national consciousness. And, as we pour greater and greater quantities of our budgets into counterproductive correctional institutions, we gradually strip away the needed funds for the support of social and educational programming, thus perpetuating the cycles of poverty and violence. Chesney-Lind (1998) reminds us that our childhood poverty rates are the highest among the world's developed nations, 46% of African-American children and 39% of Hispanic children are born into poverty, compared to 16% of Whites (Sweden has a two percent childhood poverty rate by comparison). This is obscene in a country that controls so much of the world's wealth and claims to be democratic.

Making the Connections

As many feminist scholars have shown us, all the levels of violence we have talked about, interpersonal, structural, and correctional, are inextricably linked. They are linked just as surely to the classism and sexism of the culture we live in. So, how does that impact a D&D course? How is the subject of D&D related to

social justice? In more ways than I can count, is my answer to both questions. First of all, those issues that I mentioned as being somewhat more difficult to grapple with; medical ethics, the law and death, life after death, AIDS, war, violence, and the death penalty, all these issues demand moral and social choices, choices that are usually political in nature. To ignore this fact is naïve and not very good education, as far as I am concerned. It is political to choose what *is* over what *could be*, and I believe that it is the job of an educator to challenge students' assumptions. They do not have to choose *my* ethics and moral choices, but they do have to be aware that they *are making those choices and that these choices are being made in their names*. I consider it vital, therefore, that I offer them the awareness of how political choices have life and death dimensions.

When we consider medical ethics, we talk about informed consent, truth-telling, euthanasia, principles of autonomy and beneficence, and moral dilemmas within the medical arena. But we also talk about access to medical care in our country because that has life and death consequences. Lack of access to medical care is a significant issue in the lives of a large number of American citizens, especially the working poor. As stated previously, limited access to certain resources increases the rates of death and disability in some of our citizens. (Many of my students, and many other Americans, as well, falsely believe that anyone who works has health insurance, and therefore, if you do not have it, you must be lazy or incompetent.) Considering the law and death means discussing physician-assisted suicide. It may seem fairly straight-forward as a topic, but there are even special issues here. Who pays for the medical care of those who linger for years and years with great disabilities that are not initially severe enough to claim the life of the patient? Financial resources are not an inexhaustible resource, for us as individuals or as a society. Who pays? And who decides? These are very touchy questions with great social policy significance.

When we deliberate about life after death, we inevitably get into religion. This is difficult enough, of course, especially when there are those who wish to personalize and proselytize during this discussion. Religion becomes more difficult, however, when AIDS is brought up. There is little doubt today that the initial response of the public health community was slow due to the belief that it was only a disease of gay men, a highly charged religious and political issue.

When we reflect on issues of war, we inevitably engage in dialogue of its necessity and desirability. But we also speak of the fact that 90% of the people killed in war are non-combatants, mainly women and children. Additionally, we discuss how it affects those who serve and how they are changed, both before and after killing. When we consider the issue of violence, we speak of all its dimensions, not just the interpersonal that dominates the media^[8]. When we examine the death penalty, I ask the students to look at all its aspects. Is it necessary? Is it a deterrent? Is it racist and classist? Is it an appropriate response to certain crimes? But I also ask them if it serves us well as a society to kill our own citizens. Does it say what we want it to say about us as a society?

Above all, I ask them (overtly, of course, but also in more subtle ways): What kind of a world do you want to live in? And, what kind of a person do you want to be? This is what matters most to me, to challenge them to reflect on these two questions. It is, after all, a philosophy course. And recently, I have realized that these two questions are not only applicable to the more demanding areas I have just outlined. They are also connected to our struggle with the idea of our own mortality, and why that often seems to be so difficult to do in the contemporary world we inhabit.

I found the connection in an excerpt from a 1988 book entitled *The Politics of Being Mortal* by Alfred G. Killilea (excerpted in DeSpelder & Strickland, 1995). After hearing Elisabeth Kübler-Ross lecture many years ago on our denial of death in America, Killilea realized how that denial affected our political and social choices. He indicated that our ability to focus only on the now and our acquisition of the *good life* and all it brings is linked to our denial of death. If now is all that matters, and along with that, *we and what we accumulate* are all that matter, then our choice to ignore the suffering and shortcomings in the lives of others

doesn't really matter. That is his premise: that our inability to confront our own mortality is tied to our incapacity to look at ourselves as consumers for the sake of consumption. We are afraid to confront our choices and the "limits of self-interest" (DeSpelder & Strickland, 1995, p. 342). We seek meaning instead in the acquisition of *things*.

Shortly after finishing the book, his sixteen-year-old daughter was killed in an accident, and in an Afterword to the book, he said that what he had written theoretically in the book had come home to him viscerally after her death. He wrote:

I find it incredible that so many people in our society seek fulfillment and meaning in their lives by competing for a larger pile of possessions. The only thing that has allowed my wife and me to bear so far the loss of our child is the conviction that she knew that we loved her and that we know that she loved us. The ideology of quantity, of increase, of winning that one hears so much trumpeted in America today seems piteously irrelevant to the real life events that try people's hearts and souls. (Killilea in DeSpelder & Strickland, 1995, p. 347)

I have remembered that outpouring so many times as I have tried to encourage my students to reflect more closely on who they are and where they are going. I remember early in the last semester, I referred to an article in the newspaper about how much harder and longer we work in the United States than they do in Europe; how we seem to even be afraid often to take a vacation lest the company find out they can function without us. I had hoped to encourage a discussion on how that might impact our family life, the stress level of the average American employee, and even our productivity. One of the students spoke up, "But, isn't that what we're supposed to do in order to have the big house and the fancy car? Isn't that the American dream?"

References

Alcoff, L., & Potter, E. (1992). *Feminist epistemologies*. New York: Routledge.

Allen, J. (1989). Men, crime and criminology: Recasting the questions. *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, 17, 19-39.

Anderson, H. (1972). *Learning and teaching about death and dying*. Princeton, NJ : Princeton Theological Seminary. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED075728)

Braithwaite, J. (1993). Shame and modernity. *British Journal of Criminology*, 33(1), 1-15.

Braithwaite, J., & Daly, K. (1998). Masculinities, violence, and communitarian control. In S. L. Miller (Ed.), *Crime control and women: Feminist implications of criminal justice policy* (pp. 151-180). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bredo, E., & Feinberg, W. (1982). *Knowledge and values in social and educational research*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Chasin, B. H. (1997). *Inequality and violence in the United States: Casualties of capitalism*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

Chesney-Lind, M. (1998). Critical criminology: Toward a feminist praxis. *Critical Criminology Newsletter* [On-line], Available: <http://sun.soci.niu.edu/~critcrim/CC/meda.html>.

Corr, C. A. (1978). A model syllabus for death and dying courses. *Death Education*, 1, 433-457.

Daly, K., & Chesney-Lind, M. (1988). Feminism and criminology. *Justice Quarterly*, 5(4), 497-538.

- Danner, M. J. E. (1998). Three strikes and it's women who are out: The hidden consequences for women of criminal justice policy reforms. In S. L. Miller (Ed.), *Crime control and women: Feminist implications of criminal justice policy* (pp. 1-14). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- DeSpelder, L. A. & Strickland, A. L. (1995). *The path ahead*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.
- DeSpelder, L. A., & Strickland, A. L. (2002). *The Last Dance* (6th Ed.). Boston: Mayfield Publishing.
- Eisenbruch, M. (1984). Cross-cultural aspects of bereavement: II: Ethnic and cultural variations in the development of bereavement practices. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 8(4), 315-347.
- Gilligan, C. (1977). In a different voice: Women's conception of self and of morality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 47(4), 481-517.
- Gilligan, J. (1996). *Violence: Reflections on a national epidemic*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Giroux, H. A. (1982). *Critical theory and educational practice*. Boston, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc.
- Harris, M. K. (1991). Moving into the new millennium: Toward a feminist vision of justice. In H. E. Pepinsky & R. Quinney (Eds.), *Criminology as peacemaking* (pp. 83 - 97). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Henry, S., & Milovanovic, D. (1991). Constitutive criminology: The maturation of critical theory. *Criminology*, 29(2), 293-316.
- Irwin, J., & Austin, J. (1997). *It's about time: America's imprisonment binge* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Kastenbaum, R. (1977). *Death, society, and human experience*. St Louis, MO: Mosby.
- Kastenbaum, R., & Aisenberg, R. (1976). *The psychology of death*. New York: Springer.
- Knopp, F. H. (1991). Community solutions to sexual violence: Feminist / abolitionist perspectives. In H. E. Pepinsky & R. Quinney (Eds.), *Criminology as peacemaking* (pp. 181 - 193). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Merriam, S. B. (1991). How research produces knowledge. In J. M. Peters, & P. Jarvis (Eds.), *Adult education* (pp. 42-65). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Morash, M., & Rucker, L. (1998). A critical look at the idea of boot camp as a correctional reform. In S. L. Miller (Ed.), *Crime control and women: Feminist implications of criminal justice policy* (pp. 32-51). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Parenti, C. (1999). *Lockdown America: Police and prisons in the age of crisis*. New York: Verso.
- Pepinsky, H. E. (1991a). Peacemaking in criminology and criminal justice. In H. E. Pepinsky & R. Quinney (Eds.), *Criminology as peacemaking* (pp. 299-327). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Pepinsky, H. E. (1991b). *The geometry of violence and democracy*. Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press.

Pepinsky, H. E., & Quinney, R. (1991). *Criminology as peacemaking*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Seidman, S. (1994). *Contested knowledge: Social theory in the postmodern era*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Tiftt, L. L., & Markham, L. (1991). Battering women and battering Central Americans: A peacemaking synthesis. In H. E. Pepinsky & R. Quinney (Eds.), *Criminology as peacemaking* (pp. 83-97). Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press.

VanNess, D., & Strong, K. H. (1997). *Restoring justice*. Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing.

Wolterstorff, N. (1983). *Until justice and peace embrace*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Zehr, H. (1990). *Changing lenses: A new focus for crime and justice*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

Footnotes

1. In addition to ranking first in the rate of sexual assault, the United States also ranks first in homicides and imprisonment rates, all ratings of interpersonal violence by the United Nations Development Program (Chasin, 1997). [[return to article](#)]
2. This stands in stark contrast to the type of 'reintegrative shame' theorized by John Braithwaite (1993). Reintegrative shame respects the person and the relationship, deals with acts only, and focuses on forgiveness and repentance. [[return to article](#)]
3. Within the text I will refer to James Gilligan in this manner in order not to confuse with Carol Gilligan, also cited within the text of the paper. [[return to article](#)]
4. Harris refers the reader to the (Eisenhower) report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, in 1985, for articles and ideas on reform. She discusses the problems associated with some of the reforms suggested. [[return to article](#)]
5. Mandatory minimum sentencing, three strikes laws, proliferation of prisons, the reinstatement of the death penalty are all examples of those punitive policies, and information on all these are available from the U. S. Department of Justice. See also *It's About Time: America's Imprisonment Binge* by J. Irwin and J. Austin (1997). [[return to article](#)]
6. A full explanation of this idea is beyond the scope of this paper, but see *Lockdown America* by C. Parenti (1999) or the work previously cited by James Gilligan (1996). [[return to article](#)]
7. For an elaboration of some alternatives, see *Restoring Justice* by D. VanNess and K. Strong (1997). [[return to article](#)]
8. We also consider the media and its often unrealistic portrayals of violence, and how this affects our perceptions of death and dying. [[return to article](#)]

Copyright: Advancing Women in Leadership holds the copyright to each article; however, any article may be reproduced without permission, for educational purposes only, provided that the full and accurate bibliographic citation and the following credit line is cited: Copyright (year) by the Advancing Women in Leadership, Advancing Women Website, www.advancingwomen.com; reproduced with permission from the publisher. Any article cited as a reference in any other form should also report the same such citation, following APA or other style manual guidelines for citing electronic publications.

[Home](#) | [Job Search](#) | [Career Strategies](#) | [Business](#) | [Entrepreneur](#) | [Web](#) | [Money](#) | [Education](#) | [Network](#) | [International](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertising Info](#) | [Content, Reprints](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Sitemap](#)

AdvancingWomen Web site Copyright © Advancing Women (TM), 1996 -

For questions or comment regarding content, please contact publisher@advancingwomen.com.

For technical questions or comment regarding this site, please contact webmaster@advancingwomen.com.

Duplication without express written consent is prohibited