A Test of Leadership: Insight from Two Women from the Founding CrimCon Board

Joan Antunes¹, Breanna Boppre²

¹Towson University, ²Wichita State University

Published on: Jun 22, 2021

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

We write this commentary as two former members of the founding Criminology Consortium (CrimCon) board. In this essay, we share our gendered experiences with respect to the board's role in Reinhard, Stafford, and Payne's (2021) article, "COVID-19 and academia: Considering the future of academic conferencing." The paper's third-author, Payne, was on the board with us, and remains on it as we write. We will discuss issues with the study process and conclusions. We wish to share our perspectives on the board to inform future leadership and efforts towards public scholarship within criminology.

The organization's mission, we thought

In April 2020, we were recruited to join the founding board by (then-)president Andy Wilczak. In addition, Antunes served as vice president. Ultimately, we saw ourselves as assuming a leadership role within an exciting new organization that could shift how research is presented and disseminated to various audiences—academic and lay.

An official mission statement was never created for the organization. In hindsight, that was a notable limitation that impacted cohesion among board members. As discussed in our article in *The Criminologist*, CrimCon was created to provide a much-needed virtual alternative to the canceled ASC and ACJS annual meetings (Antunes et al., 2021).

As pre-tenure faculty ourselves, we recognized the cancelations would be to detrimental to graduate students and early career scholars. Even pre-pandemic, however, scholars were prevented from presenting their research by society membership fees, conference registration fees, and travel costs. To us, CrimCon's mission was to build a platform and community for supporting public scholarship, and to do so by challenging the elitist nature of criminology—as felt most by marginalized scholars, early career researchers, and those not at "R1s." The best way to create a more inclusive environment was to be an advocate for those pushed to the margins and upend the existing status quo. The CrimCon organization was our vehicle to engage in that work, we thought.

A divided front

As we began our work on the organization, it became clear that the board was not unified in its mission nor on management and operation. We encountered the unique challenges to engaging the research community often faced by women in academia. We acknowledge that as ciswomen (one white), that our experiences differ from the

experiences of academics that encounter multiple overlapping marginalizations. It is true that leadership styles vary across gender (see for examples Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Van Engen, & Willemsen, 2004). Further, in our field, in particular, it is not the norm for women to be in leadership positions. For example, across the top Ph.D. programs in the US, the average percentage of women tenured or tenure-track is about 36% and drops to 32% for the top ten programs (Carlan, Thompson & Cheeseman, 2013).

We, as women in leadership often do, approached our fellow men board members with a collaborative and cooperative mindset, which countered a typical androcentric autocratic management style (Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Board meetings felt like the “boys club” as our input was often dismissed or ignored. When we asked for support from leadership in private conversations, we were met with inaction or dismissal (i.e., “You misunderstood”). Looking back, such disagreements highlighted key differences in the organization, and the field as a whole, in mission and values.

The divide in perspectives on the organization’s mission came to a head when, four days before the start of the conference, Payne tweeted the following:

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

That tweet reinforced a privileged idea that every “no-show” is the result of general indifference to the event. On the contrary, as academics with children or other needs (e.g., mental and physical health) know well, interest may succumb to unplanned tasks that stem from more important commitments. We expressed our concern to the board about the tweet, including its insinuation that “we”—as in the board—were involved. In fact, such conversations only occurred privately between Payne and Wilczak. Numerous scheduled presenters were confused by the tweet and afraid of potential shaming. It led presenters to ask the board whether they should cancel in advance to avoid a public shaming in the event of an emergency.

Despite our concerns, we proceeded with the conference, hosting sessions each day. And, finally, we did feel some unity as a board: the virtual conference was successful. However, the above problems caused our confidence in the organization to waver. On the last day of the conference, we expressed to Wilczak the need for change in the

board's structure. Specifically, we called for more inclusivity in how meetings were run and the need for a larger more diverse board. Yet, our calls for change went unheard.

The study

On December 5, 2020, the board as a whole learned of a study that would be published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* (Reinhard, Stafford, & Payne, 2021). We did not hear about the study from Payne, our fellow board member and the treasurer/secretary. The existence of the study only came to our attention due to outsiders who alerted us. We immediately expressed our concern, especially regarding its methodology, IRB oversight, and ethics, including that participants did not give informed consent to be in the study.

We had many questions, but few answers from fellow board members. How exactly were the data collected? For example, some of the "public data" were hidden in CrimCon's website through a page with no direct link. Second, we questioned how the panels were selected because little to no detail was provided in the study. Over 60% of the panelists were femme presenting. Therefore, what was the gender distribution of the selected panels? It was implied from email exchanges that observations were made from recordings that had not been made publicly available as those posted on YouTube following the conference. We were later notified by Payne that his coinvestigator set up four cameras and, as evident in this tweet, recorded sessions in real-time:

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Panelists knew that the conference organizers were recording presentations to post on YouTube afterward, but not that one of us board members, Payne, was doing so with the intent of analyzing them for research. Thus, we view the article, and study on which it is based, as a major conflict of interest as a board member/co-author did not inform the board or CrimCon presenters of the research.

Wilczak was asked to review the paper by the journal's editor, Shaun Gabbidon, and declined with feedback about the potential ethical concerns. In a tweet posted January 14, 2021, but since deleted, Wilczak writes: "I am posting this to be transparent that I voiced my concerns about the JCJE piece and the editor brushed them off."

Nevertheless, the article was accepted only 16 days after submission, raising an eyebrow at the ethics of the peer-review process. The fact that *JCJE* published the article against the recommendations from the then-president of CrimCon, we feel, is incredibly problematic.

Others in this issue of *QC* will comment about the ethical concerns and methodology of the study, problematic as they are. However, we would like to point out our objection to the authors' discussion on page 12 of their article, which unfairly judged presentations and environments. They stated:

Attempting to minimize distractions or unprofessional objects observable from the camera is desirable. The authors of this study do not believe it takes a great deal of technical savvy to excel at virtual presentations; it just takes preparation and access to adequate facilities that may have been difficult for some presenters during 2020.

We believed, like countless others, that CrimCon's conference was meant to be inclusive—a challenge to elitism in academia. With so many femme presenting panelists, having a group of white cismen evaluate in an arguably mocking tone regarding what is and is not “professional” during a virtual conference seems problematic to us. One obvious problem with the piece is that the authors never define what they classify as professional, nor do they establish their qualitative expertise to judge professionalism. The piece provides no theoretical rationale or criteria for coding. There is no discussion of how the positionality of the authors, especially that of Payne as a board member, could impact the research, including the coding and themes derived.

The conference was advertised as an opportunity to share research in a “non-stuffy” environment in a more informal manner in comparison to traditional in-person academic criminological conferences. We purposefully showed our tattoos, wore fun lipstick, and had our dogs and kids with us *because* we thought the conference was a safe space. The ethos of the conference, as we see it, starkly contrasts being recorded for a study without direct consent, only to be judged and advised on “professionalism” by three white cismen (see Reinhard, Stafford, and Payne, 2021, p. 12; also see Buckler & O’Neal 2021). Further, the authors' comment on Page 12 disproportionately impacts scholars with low-income, and in caretaking roles who may be unable to create such a “professional” presentation environment (Acosta et al., 2021; Bradley, 2021; Gillis & Krull, 2020); the very scholars we hoped to increase inclusivity among in conference participation.

Resigning from CrimCon and moving forward

We joined CrimCon because we believed it could be a platform to counter typical elitism in academia. By January 2021, it was clear that CrimCon was not the inclusive and welcoming atmosphere originally proposed. We resigned in solidarity. We could not continue to be on a board with members who did not share the same vision for inclusivity.

Wilczak has since stepped down as president of CrimCon. We believe in his original vision to improve public scholarship. We were somewhat concerned with the existing composition of the CrimCon board: Until recently, the new president, Bobbie Ticknor, led with two other remaining board members (Payne and James McCafferty), and the board still significantly lacked diversity. However, the board has since added new members, and the original members are no longer serving (see Ticknor et al., 2021).

The above issues related to the previous board and article need not doom CrimCon. With an official vision and mission statement combined with a new board, we hope CrimCon will continue to promote public scholarship in ways the major Criminology organizations do not. We hope the new board engages in collaborative and inclusive decision-making to implement the next CrimCon conference. If anyone wishes to conduct research about the panels, we hope they will do so by following full IRB protocol and at the very least notify participants in advance.

This is a time for all of us to evaluate what strong, equitable, inclusive leadership looks like. Key is introspection and reflection about our own biases and limitations. Due to any number of reasons that are often ingrained and deep-seated, we may shy away from conflict; show preference or deference to dominant norms; and ignore or dismiss objections from marginalized groups or “lower-ranked” faculty. A close examination of these and other important issues—before, during, and after organization actions—can help to ensure that non-inclusive parts of the past are not repeated. Democratic and transformational leadership can be challenging and uncomfortable for some (Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Nonetheless, equitably hearing input, concerns, and opinions helps to facilitate a shared path forward.

What are the lessons of our experience for leadership roles beyond CrimCon? First, we recommend creating a specific mission statement to ensure board members, or others in leadership roles, are united. Second, we suggest providing platforms for each board member to speak and share insight equally, including scheduling meetings with input from all members. Finally, we recommend increased diversity in leadership roles to

foster a wider range of valuable experience and insight. Having three white cismen, all tenured, on a board of five impacted the dynamics of our meetings and the ability to achieve shared governance. We strongly encourage organizational boards in criminology, including editorial boards and executive counsels, to engage with early career, BIPOC, critical, system-impacted, and queer scholars. Collaborating alongside scholars with diverse backgrounds and methodological approaches will benefit the field of criminology and public scholarship.

We are thankful for our time as board members of CrimCon and are proud of the conference we facilitated. We provided a high-quality, accessible alternative to high-cost organizations and conferences. We formed genuine connections, were privy to awesome research presentations with innovative research methodologies, and facilitated critical roundtables around #AcademicTwitter and inclusivity among BIPOC scholars. We created a virtual platform for such conversations and research dissemination. We understand why the article has shaken trust in the organization and conference. It shook us, too. Beyond CrimCon, we will continue to fight against elitism and exclusion in academia through other avenues.

References

- Acosta, A., Johnson, E., & Romo-González, L. (2021). *What Students and Colleges Faced During the Pandemic*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/what-students-and-colleges-faced-during-pandemic/>
- Bradley, G. (2021, March 18). *Why Women Face Different Standards on Zoom and What to do About It*. PRNEWS. <https://www.prnewsonline.com/women-zoom-standards>
- Antnues, Joan Lobo, Breanna Boppre, Andrew Wilczak, Troy C. Payne, and James McCafferty. (2021). Come one, come all: Welcome to the Criminology Consortium. *The Criminologist*, 46, 1-6.
- Buckler, K., & O'Neal, E. (2021). The CrimCon Controversy: An Essay Addressing IRB Approval, Informed Consent, and the Interpretation of Results. *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice & Criminology*, this issue.
- Carlan, P. E., Thompson, R. A., & Cheeseman, K. A. (2013). Criminology and criminal justice doctoral programs in 2012-2013: Transformation of a male-dominated arena. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 24(4), 576-593.

Eagly, A. H., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C. (2001). The leadership styles of women and men. *Journal of social issues*, 57(4), 781-797.

Gillis, A., & Krull, L. M. (2020). COVID-19 Remote Learning Transition in Spring 2020: Class Structures, Student Perceptions, and Inequality in College Courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 48(4), 283-299.

Reinhard, D., Stafford, M. C. & Payne, T. C. (2021). COVID-19 and academia: Considering the future of academic conferencing. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2020.1871047>

Van Engen, M. L., & Willemsen, T. M. (2004). Sex and leadership styles: A meta-analysis of research published in the 1990s. *Psychological reports*, 94(1), 3-18.

Ticknor, B., Warner, J., Rojas, C., Madero, A., & Lytle, D. (2021). Seeing the Vision and Moving Forward: The Future of the Crimcon Conference From the New Board. *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice & Criminology*, this issue.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the numerous scholars who reached out and supported us. In particular, we would like to acknowledge and thank Drs. Sarah Daly and Jordana Navarro who helped us write this piece and provided valuable feedback.

Contributors

Maria João Lobo Antunes is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminal Justice at Towson University and is a 2016 recipient of the National Institute of Justice's W. E. B. Du Bois Fellowship. Her research focuses on intersections of neighborhood and youth negative outcomes, primarily violence and victimization. Her most recent scholarship can be seen in *Feminist Criminology*, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, and *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Breanna Boppre is an incoming Assistant Professor to Sam Houston State University in the Department of Victim Studies under the College of Criminal Justice. From 2018-2021, she was an Assistant Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Wichita State University. Her research focuses on how the U.S. carceral system impacts individuals, families, and communities. Her work appears in *Feminist Criminology*, *Justice Quarterly*, the *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, and *Corrections: Policy, Practice and Research*.