

## Applying threshold concepts theory to an unsettled field: an exploratory study in criminal justice education

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Criminal justice education is a relatively new program in higher education in many countries, and its curriculum and parameters remain unsettled. An exploratory study investigated whether threshold concepts theory provided a useful lens by which to explore student understandings of this multidisciplinary field. Eight high-performing final-year students in a Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice degree were invited to identify and reflect on one powerful concept that helped them make sense of the field. Analysis indicated three subgroups with different conceptual encounters. There was evidence that multidisciplinary professional fields are characterised by bounded and unbounded generic thresholds. While the article comments on current criminal justice education, it raises concerns for multidisciplinary and threshold concepts research more broadly.

**Keywords:** threshold concepts; generic thresholds; interdisciplinarity; criminology; qualitative research

### Introduction

The research reported in this study aimed to explore whether the idea of threshold concepts was useful for investigating student understandings of the contested professional field of criminology and criminal justice. Academic programs in criminology have existed at some older universities in Australia for more than half a century. However, it was only in the early 1990s that criminal justice degrees were established. These degrees went by different names – justice studies, justice administration, criminal justice – and were mainly established at ‘new’ universities which resulted from extensive institutional amalgamations in the 1980s. Criminal justice programs provided higher education opportunities for personnel working in justice systems, such as police and corrections officers, and were intended to enhance professionalism and accountability. Criminal justice education had earlier experienced considerable growth in the USA from the late 1960s, where it was also anticipated that the provision of higher education for frontline workers would improve the competence of personnel and the provision of justice services.

The Australian programs attempted to avoid the division between *criminology* and *criminal justice* observed in the USA, where there was considerable divergence in quality and content between the two fields. Programs in the two areas were often taught in different academic departments, and even different institutions, with differently qualified staff. Criminology was seen as a theory-based academic discipline fitting graduates for careers in teaching and research. Criminal justice degrees were

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vocational, valued more for gaining employment and furthering careers in the justice system. Nevertheless, by the 1990s an educational convergence between criminology and criminal justice was said to have occurred (Dantzker 1998; Finckenauer and Laufer 1996), as 'second generation' criminal justice matured into a scholarly and research-based discipline, and criminology came to focus increasingly on the practical application of its own advanced research and theorising.

It was this apparent disciplinary rapprochement that the Australian justice programs sought to emulate. For example, the degree featured in this study was called a Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, and thus signified some perceived convergence between the fields. The degree consisted of a core of criminological theory and research methods subjects, and a choice of electives in areas such as policing, corrections, youth justice, crime analysis, crime policy and evaluation, and crime prevention. To complicate matters, in addition to the two major strands of criminology and criminal justice, the entire multidisciplinary field has been constituted by a diversity of disciplinary content, including sociology, psychology, criminal law and public policy.

The earlier separation between criminology and criminal justice may not have been simply an artefact of American academic politics and infighting. Garland (2002) noted that criminology in Britain has also been characterised by two deep and often divergent endeavours. On the one hand, criminology sought to explore scientifically and explain theoretically the causes of crime and criminality. On the other, it aimed to inform administrative strategies of governance and control to enhance the systemic response which is usually called criminal justice. Some commentators (e.g. Crank 2007) point to ongoing tensions in current criminal justice degrees, where they say that typically the criminal justice components inform responses to crime, often advocating imaginative and sophisticated technologies, while the criminological components provide scholarly legitimation for what remains basically a controlling enterprise. Thus, the divergence between the two domains, now often located under the same degree umbrella, may reflect not only differing industry needs and scholarly activities, but also fundamentally different ideological orientations, world-views and ways of comprehending complex problems.

While there is agreement that criminal justice has 'come of age' in terms of academic respect and research funding (Clear 2001), little is known about how students experience this multidisciplinary field and its possibly inherent tensions. Specifically, there is little research on the conceptual knowledge that students derive from their programs. There may be limited agreement even among academics teaching in the field about what graduates should know. For example, Clear (2001, 724) claimed that in the USA 'criminal justice education programs developed willy-nilly with program designers more or less free to build a curriculum that reflected their own understanding of the field'. Recent attempts to identify an educational 'core', referred to as 'cultural literacy in criminal justice', have mainly produced lists of 'great books' and related works with which graduates should be familiar (see Giblin and Schafer 2007; Vito and Tewksbury 2008).

The study reported was exploratory and did not attempt to identify 'core' in terms of a common body of knowledge *agreed upon* by educators or students. Rather, threshold concepts theory was used as a lens to explore how students made sense of their experiences of this multidisciplinary and contested field. It may be that the attempts noted above to identify great works and thinkers does represent a search, among teachers at least, for what constitutes powerful conceptual understandings in

criminal justice. However, the limited research to date has not investigated the extent to which students develop integrative/transformational understandings that offer them a sense of coherence in this diverse field.

### Threshold theorising

Meyer and Land (2003, 1), who coined the term, wrote that ‘a threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress’. Threshold concepts are powerful concepts that are integrative and transformational in learning. While these powerful or keystone concepts may offer coherence in understanding a discipline, threshold theory also suggests they are troublesome in learning, yet their comprehension is essential if students are to achieve confidence and competence in their discipline. It seems that understanding powerful disciplinary concepts can prove troublesome because comprehending the ‘bigger picture’ in one’s field, or passing through the portal, engenders sometimes disconcerting intellectual and emotional transformations in the learner.

It is not clear how threshold concepts function, but a theoretical outline has emerged. Davies and Mangan (2007) suggested that disciplinary concepts, from basic to advanced, cohere in web-like relationships. Basic concepts are building blocks, whereas true threshold concepts integrate basic concepts into more powerful disciplinary insights *and* equip learners with procedural knowledge to activate and/or manage their new, more advanced understandings. Similarly, Perkins (2008) speculated that the acquisition of powerful conceptual knowledge tends to invite learners ‘beyond understanding’, encouraging them to apply their understanding in new or unusual problem-solving situations. That is, comprehending threshold concepts – moving through the portal – encourages learners to progress toward better integrated, more advanced learning and application.

On first consideration, threshold concepts may not appear a promising lens by which to explore criminal justice education, a relatively recent arrival in universities, comprising a multidisciplinary field of professional education. Threshold theorising initially inferred that discipline-specificity possibly precluded the likelihood of *generic thresholds*, or thresholds that acted across many disciplines in a field. Meyer and Land (2003, 5) had noted that ‘any conceptual space will have terminal frontiers, bordering with thresholds into new conceptual areas [and] that such boundedness may in certain instances serve to constitute the demarcation between disciplinary areas, to define academic territories’. This was usually referred to as the discipline-bounded nature of threshold concepts. However, Meyer and Land (2006, 15) also expressed caution about whether threshold concepts exist only in disciplines with ‘clearly identified’ bodies of knowledge. They suggested that comprehending ‘ways of thinking and practising’ within a professional field may also ‘constitute a crucial threshold function’ in leading to a transformed understanding of multidisciplinary content and transformed learner subjectivity. That is, the possibility of generic thresholds was held open.

While the term ‘generic threshold’ is not widespread in the literature, several studies suggest something of the kind. Taylor’s (2006) nomination of ‘hypothesis testing’ as a threshold for biology students obviously must apply across a range of natural and behavioural sciences. A few studies of professional programs have also suggested the

likelihood of 'big picture' integrative concepts that are apparently superordinate to the constituent disciplines. For example, Clouder (2005) found that developing a sense of *self-care* was a crucial understanding for health care professionals. Failure to internalise such awareness contributed to avoidance coping-strategies in the workplace, the potential for occupational burnout, and ultimately declining quality of patient care. Cove, McAdam, and McGonigal (2008) found that a threshold for neophyte school teachers was their realisation that numerous stakeholders (parents, fellow teachers, school management, education department bureaucracy) profoundly shape educational outcomes. Thus, comprehending the multifaceted nature of school politics comprised a powerful threshold for beginning teachers.

These studies, while still few, indicate that threshold theory may be applied to multidisciplinary professional fields. Indeed, as noted by Atherton, Hadfield, and Meyers (2008), much of what is taught in professional and liberal education in contemporary universities is multidisciplinary. An intriguing question, then, is to what extent generic thresholds might resemble thresholds in the constituent disciplines, and to what extent they comprise integrative/transformational phenomena of a quite different order.

Generic thresholds, if such exist, could conceivably be of two types, each bearing a different relationship with the problematic characteristic of discipline-boundedness. A generic threshold might constitute:

- (1) a powerful integrating concept acting across several, perhaps cognate, disciplines which provides a deeper understanding of the field. In this case, a common powerful concept which informs several disciplines in a professional domain would remain *bounded* by the field;
- (2) a powerful conceptual understanding that acts across a range of not closely related disciplines, and perhaps across many dissimilar scholarly/professional domains. In this case, discipline-boundedness would cease to be a characteristic of generic thresholds, and might be referred to as an *unbounded* threshold.

Researching powerful concepts proves not to be a straightforward task. Examples of applied research commonly begin with collating the views of academics about powerful concepts in their disciplines. Students – often first years, since threshold researchers acknowledge contemporary problems of retention and engagement – are then quizzed about their comprehension of specified concepts. Such an approach serves to remind us that there are 'totalising' and 'domesticating' tendencies close to the surface in threshold research (Meyer and Land 2003), where academics and others (employers, professional associations) may be primarily concerned about inculcating 'approved concepts'. There is the related conundrum that, if threshold concepts represent 'experiential entities' in the minds of students – that is, students must ultimately grasp powerful understandings for themselves and in their own ways (Meyer, Land, and Davies 2008) – then the extent to which thresholds identified by specialists/academics correspond with those *experienced* by students remains problematic for applied research.

Meyer and Land (2003, 9) observed that teachers in 'less settled disciplines' often have difficulty identifying powerful organising concepts ('habits of mind') that graduates should acquire. On the other hand, they also observed that the 'reconstitutive effect' of threshold crossing may occur more readily through exposure to the social and behavioural sciences. Changes in world-views, encouraged in these constituent disciplines, potentially involve emotional disruptions and epistemological uncertainty. Cousin (2006, 137) noted that grasping powerful concepts is never shaped just by the

inherent complexity of the concepts or with activities of mind. Rather, learners are always 'emotionally and socially positioned vis-à-vis whatever they are learning'. Thus, asking final-year students about the most important conceptual threshold they crossed during their degree may provide insights into the intellectual/affective dynamics of the unsettled and contested field of criminology and criminal justice. The study builds on Davies's (2006, 80) methodological suggestion that 'biographical interviews (or reflective diaries) of the kind that encourage the description of critical incidents might reveal threshold concepts through moments of realisation of how a subject community thinks and practises'.

## The study

### *Participants*

Students entering the third and final year of a Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice degree at Griffith University were asked by the program convenor about their willingness to participate in the research. Since this was an exploratory study, better-performing students with a grade point average (GPA) of 5.0 or better (on a 7-point grading scale) were approached on the assumption that better performers may be those most able to articulate their strategies for making sense of the field. From this group of potential participants ( $n = 30$ ), the researcher was provided with the names of eight who expressed interest. The participants had GPAs ranging from 5.1 to 6.6, with a median of 5.3, which placed them in the top academic quartile of final-year students. There were six women and two men, an equivalent ratio to the degree, which had an enrolment of approximately 70% women students. Their ages ranged from 21 to 56 years, with a median of 34 years. Three of them had come to the program directly from school, while the other five were mature students.

### *Method*

Participants were provided with a definition of threshold concept based on Meyer and Land's (2003, 1) formulation. They were asked to think about *one* powerful concept that they felt provided coherence for their degree. After a few days' reflection, each participant completed a semi-structured interview with the researcher. They were asked to identify and describe the concept, why they had nominated this concept, when and how they encountered it in the program, how the concept had changed or enhanced their view(s) of the field, about any conceptual precursors or preconditions leading to their new understanding, the extent to which their insight affected other aspects of their lives, and whether comprehension had proved difficult. Participants were also asked for advice they might offer other students (or teaching staff) to assist better understanding of the concept. While all scheduled questions were covered, participants were encouraged to elaborate on any aspects they felt were important. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Individual interviews averaged 50 minutes in length and each was completed in one session. The names of participants have been changed for the article.

### **Findings**

Analyses of the transcripts, summarised in Table 1, indicated three subgroups of three members each (one participant overlapped two categories). Comprising Group A were

Table 1. Characteristics of individual thresholds described by the eight participants.

Group A	Robert	Realised that he could 'connect up' different components of his degree by relating criminological theory to his vocational ambition.
	Emily	Described her insight that criminological theories can be applied to personal and vocational situations as a 'light bulb moment' of understanding.
	Jason	Knew he understood criminology when he found that criminological theories could be applied in other discipline domains outside of criminal justice.
Group B	Tanya	Completion of a hands-on project which validated her sense of 'can do'. Theory seen as somewhat antithetical to real world of getting things done.
	Lisa	Trusting to a familiar theoretical orientation and sticking with that approach.
Group B/C	Christine	(1) Apprehensive about criminological theory, feels theory is stigmatising.
		(2) Realisation that mass media are partial and selective in reporting crime.
Group C	Rebecca	Believed concept 'rule of law' underpins the liberal-democratic justice system and should be the unifying principle holding a criminal justice program together.
	Gina	Realised early in her degree that crime is variable, most crime is mundane and common, and she had to reconcile this understanding with her interest in serious crime.

three participants who nominated coming to grips with criminological theory as an important transformative and integrative experience. These students engaged with theory by applying theoretical insights to their own lives, including their career aspirations. By contrast, Group B comprised three students who avoided coming to grips with theoretical knowledge, and they tended to dwell on the ways they had skirted around engagement with theory. Group C consisted of three students who nominated 'content' concepts: mass media representations of crime, rule of law, and the variability of crime.

#### ***Group A. Crossing thresholds (1): comprehending criminological theory***

Robert described arriving at university and 'nothing making sense' because he lacked vocational ambition. University looked like a place where one drifted along doing assignments, and then escaped after three years. Abruptly, at the end of the first year, he decided to become a police officer. The decision was 'pretty much an overnight thing, I woke up and said I want to be a cop'. From this point he orchestrated his learning around his ambition, strategically selecting and discarding course content depending on its relation to policing. His vocational commitment enabled him to integrate criminological theories into everyday thinking, and he spoke at length of two favourites: Merton's strain theory, and Shaw and McKay's social disorganisation theory. Theories had been introduced in the first year, but only fell into place as he related them to policing. Robert acknowledged that police officers may only rarely engage in abstract, theoretical speculation, but he tried to envisage how police *might* apply criminological theory to their work: 'that is how I connect things, and it has worked for me so far':



It has formed all my ideas together just because I know where I'm going. Otherwise, if I did not know that I was going into the police I would have every single theory in my head not connected in any way and just floating there randomly, whereas now it is all connecting itself like a flow chart with the police in the middle.

Robert, however, perceived a disadvantage to his conceptual breakthrough. Recently he suddenly thought 'God, I'm going to turn into one of them' (an academic) and 'it kind of scared' him. He was thinking like a criminologist ('it is naturally coming to me') but reminded himself that as a student he should lighten up and escape from 'this little bubble of studying crime, crime, crime. I think I should feel more free'.

Emily's breakthrough occurred in her second year when she found a way to 'sift and sort' through criminological theories to arrive at the ones she could 'make most sense of in my head'. She identified two theoretical perspectives that she could apply to her current and anticipated employment: biological theories and social learning theories. She linked these by way of her attempt to develop 'understanding, deep understanding' of why people make choices, trying to understand how peer pressures and family influences related to crime. She wanted to work at the interface of criminal justice/human services after graduating. Despite her youth, Emily had worked since leaving school with disadvantaged and troubled young people. She recalled in the first year being overwhelmed by the 'jumble' of theory, and realising the need to 'sort through and find the ones that I believed in or meant something to me'. In the second year the opportunity came with an assignment which required her to select and apply a criminological theory in a case study. Emily took the opportunity to review five or six theories 'thoroughly'. This required considerable effort because:

it was confusing, you are given so many theories and you sort through all of them, all aspects. And I am a bit of a geek so I did that for this assessment piece and it was hard because I had to really look at myself as well, it kind of took into account my values as well while looking through them. Self-evaluation of myself and the interests that I have in the correctional system. It was hard, it was a long process.

She felt the program was missing a subject that focused on procedures for identification, selection and application of theory to real-life problems (in contrast to theoretical content), and that processes for theoretical sifting and sorting might best be modelled by teachers.

Jason also took up the notion of staff modelling powerful concepts. He noted that what struck him about the definition of a threshold concept was that grasping a powerful concept usually entailed a 'shift in learner identity or sense of self'. As a mature age student, he gained considerable confidence in his academic ability when he realised he thoroughly understood strain theory. The awareness came as a shock because Jason's discovery occurred while taking elective subjects *outside* criminal justice. For example, while reading *Oliver Twist* for a Victorian literature subject, he was struck by parallels between the oppressive conditions described and the way criminological theories might explain the behaviours of the fictional characters. These kinds of insights compelled him to look for a theory that 'sits right' with him, to revisit theories only briefly introduced in the first year. His understanding of strain theory became second nature: 'it's there now, I can understand it [crime] on a social level'. He wants others to experience the same process of finding a preferred theoretical framework, clarifying that perspective for themselves, polishing, reworking, reflecting on it through their degree, and he believed that academics should model the process:

I think you should present us with all the theories but then guide us towards the one that we think is right for us to pursue further. I think it's going to make people want to pursue it further. From my perception, I look at the academics and the research they are doing. They're not all applying six different theories to that one piece of research. You think well, okay, if you're only applying one that sits well with you, even though we're learning all these different theories, maybe we should be encouraged to find our one.

### ***Group B. Deflecting theory***

The three participants in Group B, while nominating insights/understandings which were clearly important to them, at the same time indicated degrees of disengagement from criminological theory. Tanya identified the successful completion of a practical crime prevention project in the second year as her transformative experience. She had been unsure whether she even wanted to study criminal justice, but now felt she could work in the field. The project explored a problem in her local area, and she contrasted this 'real world' activity with sitting in classrooms soaking up theory: 'To be quite honest, I think it was being hands-on for me. Not so much the theory and gaining knowledge, and sitting there and getting lots and lots of theory coming in'. Tanya contrasted her focus on 'real world' activity with the perceived bookish interests of other good students, whom she described as very competitive and marks conscious, and not passionate about community problems.

Lisa noticed by the end of the first year that theoretical perspectives informed many subjects. She concluded that good assessment pieces should also feature some reference to theory, no small insight for a first year. She reasoned that, 'since criminology is never black and white', just about any theory would suffice, provided some justification was mounted. Thus, she settled on a theoretical perspective early and tended to rely on it through the program ('pick a theory and run with it'). However, she was starting to feel uneasy about what she called her 'methodical' approach, that her formula may be less useful for advanced subjects:

because teachers go with their pet theories. You generally have a question, and you can choose your theory, [but] if the lecturer doesn't understand the theory you've chosen particularly well and they're not particularly interested in it, are you going to be marked as well as somebody who's done the lecturer's pet theory, even if they've done it wrong.

Christine wanted to talk about her insights into the mass media (discussed shortly), but a chance comment by the researcher elicited anti-theory sentiments. Christine vehemently rejected criminological theory: 'I hated those theories subjects'. She found theory difficult to learn, but managed to pass the subjects. She said her mind 'shied away from that kind of thing', and she was disdainful of 'those psychology subjects'. She acknowledged that theoretical insights were important for criminology, but was affronted by what she saw as an overemphasis on human failings (perhaps a curious stance for a criminal justice student). She attributed this aversion to her mature age and family background, mentioning that her parents had avoided discussion of people with disabilities: 'these things were swept under the carpet, anybody who had any kinds of problems'.

### ***Group C. Crossing thresholds (2): specifying powerful concepts***

Three participants nominated content concepts in keeping with the criminology and criminal justice domain. While Christine was apprehensive about theory, she also



spoke at length about her discovery of media partiality and sensationalism. Growing up and living much of her life in a small regional city, she again attributed her former unquestioning stance to her background, including her working life where workmates talked about newsworthy events, but not in depth. Christine described her former approach as ‘just skimming newspapers’:

So I just took that as gospel. Whatever they said well that’s the way it was. I believed everything that I heard, that I read you know, I didn’t know any different.

A first-year subject in law and government alerted her to relations between government and business interests, pressure groups and the media. She began to consult a variety of sources to inform her academic work. Her analytical approach to the media has helped link a range of subjects in corrections, rehabilitation, and race and crime. Christine wanted to work in court liaison to ease the fears of those entering court proceedings, fears that she said were largely generated by sensationalist media. It has become second nature for her to question media reporting; she looks for what might be *missing* from news reports. Yet while Christine avidly devoured print and broadcast media, she had little understanding of interactive web-based media, and believed that such media were basically entertainment for young people, and not for the exchange of important information.

Rebecca was the only participant who nominated a disciplinary concept in terms typically found in the thresholds literature. She later expressed surprise that others had focused on the *experience* of grappling with theory, rather than a more discrete concept. She believed that the concept ‘rule of law’ permeated the criminology program, but tended to get lost along the way. The concept was defined by her as equality of access to the law, equality before the law, protections accorded by due process (procedural justice) and holding liberal democratic governments accountable to the law. She sensed these essential qualities of justice before entering the program, but in the first year they were named and clarified for her: ‘I thought, oh okay, this is where it all came from’. Rebecca claimed many students did not clearly understand rule of law as *the* powerful concept that should bind the system (and the degree) together. They tended to attribute rule of law to the existence of liberal democracy, whereas the reverse was the case, rule of law was the essential condition for the survival of liberal democracy. Rebecca thought her powerful concept was always there, ‘simmering away’ in the background of the program, but the concept ‘gets fuzzy, it isn’t sort of staying up there’. At times, the degree seemed ‘bitty’ and needed a theme to ‘tie things together’ and, in Rebecca’s view, rule of law might best serve that integrating function, but staff needed to ‘nudge it through’ more.

I think it is good to just keep reminding people through the degree that there are some tenets that underpin the system. Because as I said, by the time you get to third year everyone is really focused on, you know like specific sorts of things and it all gets patchy, if you know what I mean.

Gina nominated ‘variation in crime’ as her threshold understanding. She described her upbringing as ‘sheltered’ and entered the program believing that criminals were typically ‘psychologically impaired’ predators. However, she realised in the first year that ‘you’re more likely to encounter a shoplifter on a daily basis’. Criminological theory helped change her views, but the ‘bigger picture’ (a term she used often) fell into place through her keen interest in criminal justice statistics. Crossing her threshold

was academically and personally transformative. She came to write assignments ‘from a more realistic point of view’, and felt that her work had greater depth. She also felt safer in her personal life. Grasping that crime is commonplace

hasn’t stopped me from going with my gut instincts in situations where I feel uncomfortable, but it’s definitely made me not so fearful to be on my own I think, and be a little more independent. Nothing’s going to happen if I go out on my own. I’m going to be okay.

Gina wanted to work in criminal justice policy, where she hoped to contribute a sense of balance to debates about crime and crime prevention. Interestingly, while her powerful insight equipped her with an understanding of both the variation and basic mundaneness of crime, her ‘secret’ interest continued to be ‘the more severe crimes, even though I know they’re a small percentage’. She wanted to know why/how serious criminals could ‘deviate so far from the norm’. She joked that she could often be found ‘glued to’ the cable television crime channel with its focus on extreme crime: ‘I just love that channel’.

## Discussion

Each of the three groups represents ways in which students attempted to establish a sense of identity in a multidisciplinary professional field. Even the ‘avoidances’ of Group B indicated their attempt to establish a sense of belonging by validating hands-on experience over ‘classroom theory’. Importantly, Groups A and C seem to constitute different student approaches to comprehending the two types of generic thresholds suggested earlier in this article.

### *Bounded generic thresholds*

We begin with Group C, who identified disciplinary-like concepts. Group C comprised students who had endeavoured to identify an integrating concept that for them pulled the field of criminology/criminal justice together. There is the sense that they were most interested in positioning themselves in relation to issues and scholarship across this diverse and unsettled professional field. They experienced their threshold in terms of negotiating their relationship to a multidisciplinary scholarly domain. Their thresholds seem to belong to the first type of generic threshold concept noted earlier. That is, each of their concepts attempted to integrate ideas from a range of largely cognate disciplines within a multidisciplinary field, and remain *bounded* by that field.

These multidisciplinary concepts emerged as personal and idiosyncratic to the participants and, in any case, threshold theorising should alert us to the affectivity of powerful learning. A considerable amount of applied research across disciplines continues on the assumption that a small number of powerful integrative concepts can be recognised and agreed upon by academics, employers, students and other stakeholders. However, if I were to identify a half dozen possible generic thresholds for the program, it is unlikely I would have made the same choices as these participants. *Rule of law* perhaps. As Rebecca noted, the concept is fundamental to liberal-democratic criminal justice, and hence potentially an important integrative concept for the field. Perhaps a larger sample of final-year students would identify a core of

similar powerfully integrating concepts, but the nature, number and parameters of such thresholds remain uncertain. Rebecca reminded us that fellow students mostly did not value the concept as much as she did, and that her appreciation emerged (as a mature student) from a commitment to human rights and civil liberties.

### *Theoretical engagement, disengagement, and unbounded thresholds*

The preoccupation with theory displayed by the participants is an intriguing finding. There were only *two* compulsory theory subjects in the degree, both at second-year level in a program with 24 subjects, although theory featured to some extent in all subjects. Yet engagement with, or disengagement from, grappling with theory loomed large in the minds of these final-year students. Participants from Group A engaged with theory, which none of them found an easy task, and persevered until they understood theoretical applications in their degree and how theory might inform their broader lives. In particular, the theoretical perspectives they adopted helped them to integrate the program with their envisaged future employment (police officer, youth correctional officer). Theoretical understanding is central to comprehending scholarly and professional fields, as Kraska (2006, 167) observed:

It [theory] defines the parameters for how we think about our objects of study, and provides us the lenses through which we filter our subject matter in order to make sense of complex phenomena. It gives us our organising concepts, frames our research questions, guides our scholarly interpretations, and is an unavoidable presence in crime control policy, practice, and decision-making.

Coming to grips with theory seems to represent the second type of generic threshold mentioned earlier. Crossing this type of generic threshold integrates and transforms student experiences of their higher education, but the threshold seems *unbounded* by either disciplinary or multidisciplinary fields. That is, experiencing this threshold is not dependent on field of study. Further research may identify other unbounded thresholds which apparently span scholarly/professional domains.

By contrast, Group B members tended to skirt around engagement with theory, and instead some of them validated 'hands-on' activity. Validation of real-world 'doing' over classroom theory may be an example of 'ritualised knowledge' (Perkins 2006, 44), where activity experienced as emotionally and intellectually important on one level nevertheless prevents capable students from moving forward, despite early success. It may be that those who rejected theory were creating what Atherton, Hadfield, and Meyers (2008, 11) called 'threshold myths'. These myths, it has been suggested, also constitute a form of powerful learning and *at first* may prove transformative for learners, helping them identify with their programs.

In the longer term, it is difficult to see the situation of Group B in a very positive light. They avoided deep engagement with theory and tended *not* to talk about employment aspirations (as with Group A), nor did they specify the kinds of generic thresholds identified by Group C. The only participants whose GPAs declined over time were from Group B. Interview data indicated that at times they felt adrift, still managing to cope, but increasingly lacking direction and a clear sense of place in the program. The condition of Group B may be an important area for future research since they probably reflect the situation of many apparently capable students. They voiced strong beliefs about the benefits of their degree and the way their studies had 'transformed' them, but they had difficulty identifying powerful threshold crossings,

and seemed to reach a point where they avoided further progress. It could be, for example, that multidisciplinary programs which combine an array of theoretical and applied studies facilitate avoidances of powerful conceptual understandings by offering compensations in other curriculum areas.

### ***Generic thresholds and troublesome pathways***

Groups A and C represent different types of generic thresholds, and for both groups the acquisition of their powerful concepts did not come easily. It might be contended that the struggle for Group A was more apparent than real; that they only appeared to have trouble crossing their theoretical thresholds. That is, after some testing and uncertainty, they settled upon theories that complemented their preconceptions and/or emerging plans. There may be truth in this, which might also be simply to say that biographical factors (especially vocational concerns in this case) assisted and gave shape to their scholarly/professional conceptual integration.

Personal factors also shaped Group C's acquisition of bounded generic concepts. In their case, however, the struggle may have been more protracted since they were trying to establish their relationship to the field without (according to the transcripts) recourse to strongly held employment aspirations, although a couple had thought about possible areas of work. Nor was it the case, of course, that these participants were unaware of the importance of theoretical engagement. For example, Gina (Group C) in passing acknowledged the importance of theory, although not its centrality to her concerns. She mentioned that initially theory 'scared the living daylights' out of her, but soon saw that it was 'essentially ideas about how things work [and] not something to be scared about'. Rather, choosing a theory that 'sat well' with them was never seen by participants in Group C as an option for integrating their conceptions of the broad field of criminology and criminal justice.

### **Conclusion**

It seems that, contrary to the beliefs of degree planners, student experiences of criminology and criminal justice education remain divided. The division was reflected in the comments of those students who had comprehended generic thresholds (Groups A and C) and those who had difficulty describing powerful concepts. The latter group (Group B) sometimes stressed that they were practical people. There are intriguing echoes here of the earlier divide which characterised the 'first generation' of programs in the USA, but said to have been bridged by later programs both in Australia and elsewhere. Groups A and C attempted to *make their own sense* of the scholarly and professional field. Indeed, a feature of the study was that participants made little reference to teacher influence. In most cases, academic staff constituted a backdrop to the participants' commentary on their own ways of grappling with (or avoiding) powerful concepts.

A related indicator of unsettledness in the field concerns the multiplicity of conceptual crossings, including the avoidance strategies of Group B. There is a subtext running through the study in that all of these students were 'high achieving', none of them failed a subject, and all graduated comfortably. Yet their conceptual insights had little in common, apart from belonging to one or other of two kinds of generic threshold. Such variability might also suggest ongoing uncertainty among academics in the field about the hallmarks of high achievement.

Threshold concepts proved an effective lens by which to examine the experiences of participants coming to grips with their sense of place in a professional program. Two types of generic threshold were identified. Group A's conceptual crossing – realising the importance of finding a theory that 'sat right' with them, and the application of theoretical competence to their lives and vocational aspirations – seems to be an example of an *unbounded* generic threshold. There may be other examples of unbounded thresholds which characterise success across a range of scholarly/professional programs. Group C identified generic thresholds which were *bounded* more by the multidisciplinary field itself. It is possible that the latter group, by way of their attempts to integrate the scholarly field, without recourse to specific employment aspirations, may have encountered more 'troublesomeness', but this is not clear from the data.

There are implications for teaching and program design beyond the field of criminology and criminal justice. First, the value of 'explicit assistance' in the acquisition of powerful concepts is likely to benefit the full range of student abilities. There is, at times, an assumption in the thresholds literature that 'the benefits of explicit assistance are likely to accrue disproportionately to learners who have developed weaker meta-cognitive abilities in terms of learning how to learn' (Davies 2006, 80). By contrast, these participants were strong academic performers, yet Group A insisted that teachers should model the acquisition and application of theoretical preferences, and that academics needed to demonstrate how they had discovered a theory that 'sits right'. It may be, however, as noted by Lucas and Mladenovic (2006), that the explicit surfacing of emotional and intellectual aspects of powerful conceptual acquisition in their own personal/professional lives constitutes a 'threshold barrier' for academics.

Second, there is evidence from Group B that 'successful students' can graduate while also avoiding deep conceptual insights. It may be that those students who validated practical activity over classroom theory were sustained by invoking their own 'threshold myths'. Be that as it may, it is probable that many capable students complete their programs with good grades without conceptualising the powerful integrative components of their field. This is an aspect, perhaps especially of multidisciplinary professional programs, worthy of further investigation.

Finally, the study found that students utilised bounded generic concepts to help them make sense of their field, but we do not know whether other students and academic staff would nominate similar generic thresholds. It does seem that a qualitative methodology as used above is particularly useful for trying to unravel the conceptual understandings of students. The views of experts in the field are always a valuable supplement to research on student learning. However, a research approach which hinges upon student responses to lists of concepts agreed upon by experts may also close down a rich vein of data at the outset.

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