

USF CRIMINOLOGY CELEBRATES INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

An interview with Dr. Ráchael Powers on gender-based violence, research, and what it means to be a woman in academia.



Dr. Ráchael Powers

INTRODUCTION

The authors of this article, Meghan Scott and Danielle Thomas, are current first-year graduate students in our Master's of Arts in Criminology degree program. We chose to interview Dr. Ráchael Powers, Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology, in honor of International Women's Day. Dr. Powers holds a bachelor's degree in psychology/sociology from the University of Alabama in Huntsville, a master's degree in criminology from the University of Maryland, and a doctorate in criminal justice from the University at Albany. Dr. Powers has worked at the University of South Florida since 2012, and is a faculty affiliate in Women's and Gender Studies with the university, in addition to her appointment in the Department of Criminology. The authors decided to interview her due to

her extensive research experience and expertise in gender-based violence. Dr. Powers is the author of dozens of articles on the topic, as well as co-editor of the book *Addressing Violence Against Women on College Campuses*. We discuss her research on gender-based violence and women in academia.

Q1: WHAT LED YOU TO STUDY GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE?

I don't think I can pinpoint a specific experience or book I read or something like that, but I guess I can share an experience in my undergrad career that really kind of framed how I think about gender-based violence and maybe set me along this path without consciously setting me along the path. So, when I was an undergrad student, a couple of years ago now, the Vagina Monologues was gaining popularity on college campuses. It was being used often as a series of events, in aims of raising awareness about violence against women and often raising funds to support local shelters and other organizations. So, a number of us at my university decided to jump on board with this and we organized the play as a culmination of a month-long series of talks, fundraising events, other forms of activism like the Clothesline Project.

What I didn't anticipate, or I wasn't prepared for at all, was the immense backlash that hosting this play brought. There were inflammatory stories published in the student newspaper, sometimes with our names. A random student yelled "Feminazi" at me in the hallway one day, student organizations and departments that initially supported the event, completely backed out. It seems weird because I don't think we would have that same experience now. But the anger over those efforts to combat violence against women, which I thought we were all on board with, was a little bit befuddling, and the nature of those anti-activism efforts, that backlash, made it really clear that that vitriol wasn't over the play itself, it wasn't over the

words used, it wasn't over the play, it was the *public acknowledgment that gender inequality and cultural norms support violence against women*. It was the challenge to those larger supporting systems that some people really did not like and vocally didn't like and so, I don't know whether that led me down the path I am on now, but it definitely helped shape why I think studying gender-based violence is so important because it is bigger than individual victims and perpetrators.

Q2: WHAT IS ONE THING YOU WOULD WANT THE PUBLIC TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE?

A lot of my work is about what third parties can do to intervene in problematic situations and effect cultural change. I think in the spirit of this holiday, and piggybacking off my last answer there, *gender-based violence isn't just about bad apples, it's about larger systems and institutions that tolerate or condone violence*. That means that it's on all of us to combat gender-based violence. It isn't enough to not perpetrate violence ourselves. No one is giving you a gold star for that. Rather, everyone has the responsibility to address gender-based violence and everybody can. Not just in situations that someone is in immediate danger, but *we can all strive and engage in efforts to change the narrative and culture that surrounds violence against women and supports its occurrence*. Calling people out when you hear people espouse rape myths, for example. Everyone can make a difference and it's important that everyone try. That's a common, at least implication in a lot of my research.

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Q3: WHAT CAN WE DO TO ENCOURAGE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN WHO WANT TO ENTER ACADEMIA?

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This is a great question. The good news is that women are entering academia in great numbers, that's really great news. The problem is that they leave academia more than men, so, we have to address that, and women are still really underrepresented as full professors and in leadership positions in the university system. I don't think it is enough that we encourage women to enter academia; we need to remove those barriers to their success and create an environment where they can thrive. It is not enough for us to open the door; *we have to be able to welcome them and support them when they get in that door*. And I don't think we're doing a great job of that compared to getting people in the door.

Q4: WHY DO YOU THINK WOMEN SHOULD GET INVOLVED IN ACADEMIA?

I am very strongly in the camp that diversity makes everything better, and for everyone. Not just minority groups- everyone. Diversity makes everything better for *every single person*. Having diversity in terms of demographic representation and lived experiences is going to *advance our field and it's also going to help contribute to student success*. This is really especially true, with regard to research, in social sciences. We are limited in our world view. The research questions we ask and how we go about answering them is influenced by who we are. So, by *increasing diversity- not just in terms of sex or gender- but in terms of race, sexual orientation, first-generation scholars, et cetera, we can advance our field by collectively expanding our understanding of crime- its causes and its impacts*. And that benefits all of us. So, I am definitely Team Diversity here, for all demographic representation.

Q5: RECENTLY, THERE WAS A WALL STREET JOURNAL OPINION PIECE THAT DECLARED DR. JILL BIDEN IS NOT A "REAL DOCTOR." WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSE TO THIS CLAIM?

Well, I would like to actually focus on what went right with that situation, instead of giving his argument any more mental energy because it's just not worth it. So, while it is easy to dismiss that original article for what it is, which was a sad attempt by the author to get some attention by airing his insecurities, *we can't ignore the potential real-world consequences of an article like that*.

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So, while that op-ed, which was full of errors and derogatory language, got published and had the potential to cause harm to young women, particular young women thinking of pursuing academia and early career researchers, I ultimately don't think it had an impact. That is because right after it was published, both women and men, stood up immediately and in unison called out that op-ed for what it was, which wasn't an attack on academia, but sexist drivel. I was actually really heartened by the show of solidarity by my male colleagues and academics in general, in all fields. They spent time to write op-eds countering those points, people took to social media to amplify the credentials and impact of women scholars, and ultimately, I think that those efforts and those voices and that activism was much more powerful than the words published in the Wall Street Journal by that random has-been. I think what went right was the response by academia and ultimately, I think that was more powerful.

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