

different theories of criminology to understand the root of criminal behavior

Posted on September 15, 2018

Executive summary

The reasons behind people committing crimes are very complicated and this issue has been the subject of intense debate throughout history. The main topic of the discussion on criminal behavior is whether criminal behavior is hereditary, i.e., are people born with a criminal mind, or is criminal behavior the product of learning from others and the surroundings? This paper examines and analyzes the numerous studies and theories presented to explain the origins of criminal behavior among individuals. The various criminology theories have adopted different approaches to understanding the root of criminal behavior.

The History of Criminology Theories

The concept of crime and the root of criminal behavior has bedazzled sociologists and psychologists since ancient times. (Merton, 1938) Some of the main explanations regarding the origin of criminal behavior in individuals may be attributed to the abnormalities of the genes, the difference in psychological mentalities of different individuals, or the differing socializing patterns among various individuals. Throughout the history of humankind, intellectuals have tried their best to explain the cause of crimes.

The old Roman theory is one of the most ancient criminology theories in this context. It is founded on the observations of crimes in ancient Roman society. The Roman intellectuals observed that a majority of the crimes at that time were committed at night, in the presence of the full moon. Therefore, it led Roman scholars to believe that the appearance of a full moon was responsible for causing a temporary form of insanity in criminals. These intellectuals considered a crime not to be random, but the consequence of the adverse impact of the lunar cycle on humans.

Analyzing all the social and institutional forms is imperative to determine the real cause of crimes. All aspects of society and the environment play their role in enhancing or reducing the possibility of a person engaging in criminal acts. A child has a blank mind at the time of her birth. Her mind gradually fills up with the information she absorbs from her surroundings and the people around her over time. Therefore, the root of criminal behavior cannot be fully comprehended without carefully examining the social and learning settings a person is exposed to after birth.

However, these initial attempts at understanding the root of crime were not entirely adequate and

became obsolete over the passage of time. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the [sociological theories of crime](#) presented later in history.

The Sociological Theories of Criminology

The sociological theories of criminology are the most widely used theories in the United States to understand the causes of crimes. The two most significant sociological theories in this regard are the theory presented by Cesare Lombroso and the sociological theories of the Chicago school of thought.

Cesare Lombroso

Cesare Lombroso was a criminologist of Italian origins. He presented the idea that criminal individuals are born that way. He considered criminal behavior to be genetic; therefore, Lombroso says crime cannot be taught. It is not something that a person can be taught or learn over the course of her lifetime. He published the book titled, *L'Uomo Delinquent*. His work focused on the scientific concepts of criminology and was greatly influenced by the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin.

He stated that some humans are predisposed biologically to criminal behavior and have been like that since their birth. Moreover, he believed that criminal individuals were the products of a throwback to the previous genetic forms. It is known as the concept of atavism. According to it, a criminal person is identifiable from people without criminal behaviors through various physical anomalies. To develop his theory, he studied several military personnel and prisoners in Italian prisons. He suggested that some of the leading physical features that made the criminals distinguishable from the military personnel were the flat noses, the large lips, and the specific shape of the skulls of the offenders. Also, specific artificial identification measures can be used to distinguish criminals from noncriminal people, such as tattoos or their participation in orgies.

However, the theory soon fell out of favor among the leading sociologists and criminologists due to its insufficient explanation of the causes of crime. The later emergence of the Chicago School of thought is regarded as the most important factor in discrediting Cesare Lombroso's work and his understanding that [criminals are born](#) that way.

The Chicago School of Thought

The Chicago School of thought on criminology emerged in the 1920s and the 1930s. It viewed criminal behavior in the light of sociological perspectives instead of genetics or heredity. It was highly successful in shifting the focus from the crime being a hereditary aspect to the offense being the product of a person's interactions with the society she lives in. This modern perspective on crime causation called for crime prevention based on environmental designs. (Cohen & Felson, 1979) A number of such environmental design approaches are being considered to minimize crimes over the

passage of time.

According to the Chicago School of thought, all humans are born equal; that is, they are inherently innocent. Society and the environment transform innocent individuals into criminals.

Therefore, the Chicago school of thought is very significant in the history of criminology theories, as it played a crucial role in moving past the old concepts of the classical school of thought. Previous theories considered a crime to be individual responsibility and regarded crime as the product of a person's genetic aspects, physical features, and rational choice. On the other hand, the Chicago school explained crime in the light of socialization.

Some of the most significant theories of the Chicago School of thought are described below.

The Theory of Social Disorganization

It is one of the most significant criminology theories of the Chicago school of thought. The central aspect of this theory is its emphasis on the varying levels of social hardships and economic difficulties different individuals have to go through during their lifetimes. Also vital in this regard is the disproportionate levels of criminal activity people living in the inner regions of the cities have to face compared to those residing in the other areas of the cities.

The continuous influx of persons and various forms of businesses into the inner areas of the cities, accompanied by the rampant poverty and the greatly transient environment of the regions result in families being broken down. Also, several other social institutions that are the source of encouraging conformity, such as schools and colleges, are broken down.

In addition to the breakdown of the vital social institutions and influences, the theory of social disorganization also considers the impact of the negative influences of the environment on the development of delinquent and criminal behaviors. The regions with a high degree of social disorganization present a more sustainable environment for developing criminal value, compared to the areas with high social cohesion. Therefore, the rise in criminal values influences more individuals to engage in deviant behaviors.

The Theory of Social Learning

This theory expands the concepts of the Chicago school of thought. The leading point of this theory is that it deals with crime in the light of social learning and adoption. (Akers, 1998) For instance, if a child sees her parents not paying their taxes and staying in the company of friends who display delinquent and criminal behaviors, accompanied by the fact that they live in an area that can be considered a slum inhabited by criminals, she is continuously exposed to a constant influence of delinquent behavior. Also, the child is going through the most critical stages of her emotional and psychological development. Therefore, the child would consider such behavior the standard norm and

would imitate the acts that she witnessed her peers engaging in. Such a child would begin to engage in criminal behavior through small juvenile crimes and would gradually climb up the ladder toward becoming increasingly criminal.

Moreover, the theory also emphasizes the consequential social reinforcements that respond to criminal attitudes. This response to criminal activity may result in either its strengthening or the person refraining from such action in the future. If delinquent acts in childhood are rewarded in the form of the elevation of social status or monetary rewards, such behavior will likely continue in the future. On the other hand, if such an act is discouraged via the means of counseling or other punitive measures, the child is very likely to stop engaging in delinquent behaviors.

Conclusion

Understanding the reasons behind people engaging in criminal behavior is very complicated. The process is further complicated by the presence of a vast number of criminology theories attempting to explain crime from different perspectives. However, the old concept presented by Lombroso that crime is hereditary has become obsolete in modern times. Although ineffective, he successfully sparked the interest of later sociologists and criminologists to take an interest in the field. The later Chicago school of thought proved to be highly useful in explaining crime due to the learning process and the influences of the social environment. Therefore, it can efficiently be stated that crime is not hereditary. Instead, it is the product of learning from others.

References

Akers, R. L. (1998). *Social learning and social structure: A general theory of crime and deviance*. Northeastern University Press.

<https://www.routledge.com/Social-Learning-and-Social-Structure/Akers/p/book/9781560008835>

Cohen, L. E., & Felson, M. (1979). Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review*, 44(4), 588–608.

<https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/social-change-and-crime-rate-trends-routine-activity-approach>

Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5), 672–682.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2084686>