

Biological and psychological theories of crime essay sample

[Science](#), [Genetics](#)



The positivist theory is centred on the idea of a scientific understanding of criminality and crime. A key assumption in this field of study is that there is a definite distinction between 'normal' (in terms of human nature), and the 'deviant'. For positivists, the occurrence of crime is explained by reference to forces and factors outside the decision making ability of the individual - a reason why often the classical and positivist theories are seen as being directly opposing. Biological positivism became popularised through the work of Cesare Lombroso, who attempted to explain criminal and deviant behaviour by differentiating different types of human individuals, and then to categorise them, based on their racial and biological differences, in the attempt to establish a link between criminality, and the assumption that individuals exhibit particular traits that roughly correspond to the varying stages of human evolution. Cesare Lombroso adopted the view that criminals were born and not created.

He sought to present an 'atavistic criminal,' a person who was biologically inferior to a degree where they were developmentally more akin to apes and an early period of human evolution than the evolved man. These 'atavistic' criminals could be identified through a variety of different physicality's (particularly facial) including abnormalities in teeth (protruding teeth), having an asymmetric face, large ears, more fingers and toes than is normal, eye defects and even tattoos. Cesare Lombroso developed this idea over time and came up with the idea that he could divide the population into several categories. The 'born criminal' was one who displayed all of the atavistic features that Lombroso described.

He then categorized 'insane criminals' which included 'idiots, imbeciles, and paranoiacs', as well as epileptics and alcoholics. Then came the 'occasional criminals,' or 'criminaloids,' who committed largely what were perceived as opportunistic crimes, and then finally the criminals who committed 'crimes of passion,' crimes because of emotions such as love, honor or anger. He believed the latter to have been driven by some form of (albeit temporary) uncontrollable force. Later, during the study of biological positivism, some additional categories were added which gave a slight allowance for the influence of social factors by Enrico Ferri (another Italian positivist), who speculated about the interaction between genetics and environmental influences.

Lombroso never moved past the principle that the true, 'born,' criminal was responsible for a large portion of all crimes committed, despite his beginning to develop a multiple factor approach. William Sheldon, whose work followed on from that of the Italian positivist school, offered his 'body type' theory in 1942, which attempted to study the link between a person's body and their personality. He divided the human population into three 'somatypes.' 'Endomorphs,' who had what he described as a heavy, soft, or round build and displayed a relaxed, sociable and extroverted personality. 'Mesomorphs,' who had the physical characteristics of being well-developed and muscular, with an athletic build, who displayed an active, dynamic and aggressive (if not sometimes violent) personality. The final category he characterised as 'Ectomorphs.'

These people had a small, lean and delicate or weak build and he thought to be hypersensitive, intellectual, sensitive, and introverted in personality. Some people could be considered 'pure types,' while others were 'hybrids,' who had several different elements incorporated into their physique. Sheldon argued that delinquents were characterized by a multitude of mesomorphs, some endomorphs, and a marked lack of ectomorphs. More recent studies however have concluded that there is no such link in existence. One of the central features of biological positivism is the idea that there is a 'moral consensus' in relation to what constitutes deviant and normal behaviour. Because of this, behavioural problems are largely seen in terms of individual pathology or deficiency.

The people who do not conform within a society are seen as having individual and personal difficulties related to biological factors, and it is the task of the expert in the field to identify these factors in order to correct or fix the deficiency, whatever it may be. These biological factors are inclusive of the ones talked about in the first paragraph, but also of other biological explanations, such as research that examined genetic factors. The XYY chromosome theory proposed that criminality is related to having a deviant genetic composition. The generic female chromosome is XX, and the male is XY, but an XYY composition was also found. The idea was held that those who had this chromosome complement was predisposed to criminal, far more than those with the generic chromosome complements, due to their abnormal height and mental structures.

This presented a central problem that remained unresolved – how did genetic differences translate into behavioural traits? The biological explanations of the kind are usually fairly pessimistic about positive actions to prevent or deal with crime. This is because crime, in terms of biological positivism, is seen to be the result of something that is essential to the nature of the individual offender, meaning that we are born with certain attributes in our biological make-up which we cannot change, and so some individuals are seen as being locked into a life of crime and anti-social behaviour. Biological positivism stressed a shift from the question of “ why is there crime in society” to “ why is this individual a criminal?” It marked a paradigm shift from punishment to rehabilitation, beginning to see the criminal as a patient and crime as a disease that was treatable.

Rehabilitation and reformation became the primary motive behind professionals who worked with criminals, and this is seen in the change of terminology from ‘ penology’ to ‘ corrections.’ There was also a large increase in discretions and individualized treatments, due to the idea of the individual pathology of the criminal. However, these biopsychological explanation of criminal behaviour were very much politically and socially repressive. Prefrontal Lobotomies became popular from 1930 onwards, in which portions of the frontal lobes of the brain were destroyed in order to try and remove the parts of the brain that the criminal and anti-social behaviours were thought to originate from. Psychosurgery also became popular around this time until the 1950s, where surgeons would surgically alter brain tissue to alter personality or behaviour. Drug therapy treatments

began to replace lobotomies by the 1950s, seeking to control the criminals urges medically.

There are many limitations of individual (biological) positivism. Early biological positivism suggested that there was a genetic source for a socially defined category of behaviour and ignored both social and cultural factors. It also weakly operationalized key variables such as feeble-mindedness, inferiority and crime, such as one theory where Charles Goring in 1913 decided on criminals intelligence by having a conversation and deciding if he thought they were feeble minded or not. It was also often based on small and inappropriate samples, and was compatible with authoritarian and totalitarian thinking. Neobiological positivism makes claims that are less grandiose than those of earlier studies, but is often based on smaller sample sizes.

It also has a dualistic fallacy, the view that society consist of criminals and non-criminals. Another critique is that it has an over-reliance in the incarcerated population. In order for the biological perspective to be fully evaluated, four things must be accomplished: the estimation of the extent of the biological disorders in the antisocial population, the identification of causal mechanisms, the assessment of the biological and environmental factors, and lastly, the determination as to whether therapy works. In conclusion, individual (biological) positivism places an emphasis on determinism - an individual's subjectivity to external forces and the problem that arises from it of under socialisation and the subsequent difference of criminals to non-criminals which is identifiable, and believes the correct

response to be expert study and intervention. It is however a very much flawed theory, especially the work of the early Italian positivists.