

Objectives of criminology



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A key aspect of criminology is the study of criminals and individuals who partake in criminal activities. However, what has remained extraordinary is the lack of interest that has been placed upon studying crime in relation to social demographic profiles, especially those regarding gender within traditional criminology. It was not until the 1970's that such issues were addressed as Feminist criminology sought to challenge traditional theoretical approaches to an understanding of the relationship and nature of women, crime and criminality. As Smart (1976; 2) explains; " Our knowledge of the nature of female criminality is still in its infancy. In comparison to the massive documentation on all aspects of male delinquency and criminality, the amount of work carried out in the area of women and crime is extremely limited".

Why has such a situation occurred? What has been regarded as the general relationship between taking precedence of studying male criminality over female criminality? Firstly, official statistics, such as the British Crime Survey and the Criminal Statistics for England and Wales, have consistently concluded that men are the disproportionate majority of criminal offenders, and that women only represent a very small majority. Although this does not signify that criminal offences are only subjected to men; when women do commit crimes, they are likely to be less serious in nature than those committed by men (Jones 2001). Such views are open to debate and scrutiny, as shall be explored later on, however it is generally the social view on how men and women fit into such statistics analysis. For example, of all criminals that were sentenced in 2006; 1. 42 million, approximately 80% of these were men (National Statistics 2008). Secondly, most criminologists

over the years almost exclusively before Feminism came into mainstream criminology, were in fact men who wrote extensively about male criminality (Cullen and Agnew 2006). Consequently, this has illustrated criminology as a male orientated and patriarchal discipline, as Britton (2000; 58) notes; “ criminology remains one of the most thoroughly masculinised of all social science fields”. These have led to stereotypical views of ‘ criminals’ whereby the man is often portrayed as being the offender, what is usually referred to as “ hegemonic masculinity” (Newburn 2007; 315), while the woman fits the image of being the victim of crime. These alone are enough reasons to ponder and contemplate the status and position of women within criminology.

Have women been neglected from traditional criminology then? Or have their studies merely been overshadowed the sheer dominance of men? Is this to assert that traditional criminology has failed to make a single contribution to an understanding of the nature of female criminality? What has been done in an attempt to alleviate such marginalisation and disregard for women? What implications has the emergence of Feminism had, not only on the discipline, but also in areas relating to policy making and the criminal justice system?

This assignment aims to offer a critical discussion regarding traditional criminology’s contribution towards an understanding of female criminality, the means in which women are presented, Feminism’s attempt to challenge such perspectives, and their attempt to rationalise women and the issue of gender equality within mainstream criminology.

Great scientific advancement during the 19th century had a profound impact on the means in which crime and criminality was to be studied (Jones 2001). This new approach came to be known as Positivism – a term coined by Auguste Comte to mean the scientific study of society, with the objective of establishing the relationship of “causes and effects” (Walliman 2006; 15). It held the principle that it was possible to study the nature of all phenomena on the basis that a scientific method was to be applied as its methodology. It is from this discipline that traditional criminology emerged, often referred to as Positivist criminology – the scientific study of crime. This perspective claims that criminal behaviour is deterministic; that there are factors beyond and external to the control of the individuals, be it biological, psychological or sociological factors, that influences individuals, and are thus responsible for their engagement in criminal behaviour (Newburn 2007). As a result, there are explicit and clear differences between those who commit crime, usually pathological, and those who do not (Smart 1976). Rather than the criminal act itself, Positivist criminology is concerned with the very nature of individuals, predicating that this would eventually lead to a treatment of those engaging in criminal acts (White and Haines 1996).

One of the very first studies on female criminality was proposed by Lombroso and Ferrero in their 1895 work entitled ‘The Female Offender’. They were greatly influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution and applied a biological framework in their attempt to explain the relationship between women and crime (Jones 2001), arguing that it was biology that was the key determining factor that led women to engage in criminal offences (Newburn 2007). This was done through their concept of “biological atavism” (Klien 1973; 183),

claiming that all criminals were characterised by a lack of advanced human development, and thus were more primitive in nature than non-criminals. It was this that differentiated deviants from the ordinary citizens (Heidensohn 1996).

Their study of female criminals and prostitutions through detailed examinations of their photographs, brains and bones as done with the aim of discovering characteristics which were more in common with the criminal type. However, there seemed to be an inconsistency between the claim that all criminals are “ biological throwbacks from an earlier evolutionary stage” (Smart 1976; 31), and their attempt to find such atavistic traits within the population of their research. How could they explain such a discrepancy? Lombroso and Ferrero argued that there were significantly “ fewer born female criminals than males” and that they displayed fewer signs of degeneration (Newburn 2007; 301) because of their lack of evolution as opposed to men. In this sense, white men were regarded the being the most advanced form of evolution, and non-white women comprised the least advanced; “ women are big children...their moral sense is deficient” (Lombroso and Ferrero; 151 cited in Heidensohn 1996; 114). Consequently, due to their more primitive nature than men, women had greater capacity to diverge in devious and criminal behaviour without being obviously visible or noticeable, while attempting to discover criminals within the male population was deemed as a very much easier task (Smart 1976), “ They observed it incontestable that female offenders seem almost normal when compared to the male criminal, with his wealth of anomalous features” (Lombroso and Ferrero 1895; 107 cited in Heidensohn 1996; 113).

Both had claimed that women were “biologically inferior” to men (Klien 1973; 185) to men. Having argued that women were naturally passive and had been culturally evolved for the duty of childrearing, this was seen as a reflection of their conservatism and were regarded as being generally much more “law-abiding” citizens than men. Thus they were deemed highly unlikely to enter the realms of criminality (Smart 1976; 32). Female offenders were thus labelled rare, an occasional rather than a born ‘criminal’. There existed greater stigma and shame on the criminal woman than on the criminal man, due merely to the fact that she was female. She was perceived as being unnatural, masculine and potent who lacked her passive role and maternal instinct; female offenders were going against conventional and traditional norms and values of society; “an inversion of all the qualities which specially distinguish the normal woman; namely, reserve, docility and sexual apathy” (Lombroso and Ferrero 1895; 297 cited in Heidensohn 1996; 114).

Lombroso and Ferrero concludes by arguing it is not only the biology of women that fundamentally forbids them to engage in crime, but social expectation of women and their perceived social roles, are it seems, lies as an antithesis for criminal involvement (Smart 1976).

Otto Pollak, in ‘The Criminality of Women’ (1961), argued that what seems to be relatively low crime rates for women are in fact a misrepresentation of the relationship between gender and crime, claiming “that female crime has been vastly under-estimated” (Pollak 1961; 153 cited in Heidensohn 1996; 118). After studying crime rates across European countries, he argued that for both men and women, their crime rates were actually very similar,

despite against such an assumption. Subsequently such statistical data concealed the true extent of female criminality and was deemed be unreliable, to which Pollak argued was the result of ‘ hidden’ female crimes that generally went unreported and undetected because of the nature of their physiology (Klien 1973).