

The contribution that positivist criminology have made to the understanding of th...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



First of all this essay will briefly outline the main assumption and methodology used by positivist theory in explaining the causes of crime. It will then go on to a more specific analysis of the two main areas covered by positivist theory. These two areas will be assessed critically as well as being compared and contrasted to highlight possible conflict within positivism. Other areas of criminology will be examined, such as classical, radical and feminists to see some areas positivism fails to address.

Positivist criminologies view criminal behaviour as determined in other words outside the choice of individuals, there is however conflict within the perspective as to where these forces originate e. g. internally or externally. There is also an assumption that crime has a cause which can be 'discovered' using natural science methods, producing quantifiable and objective data which highlight the cause and effects of criminal behaviour (McLaughlin & Muncie 2003).

Positivist criminology is divided into two different perspectives; individual and sociological positivism, these analyse social behaviour on different levels. Individual positivism is a very micro to meso level of analysis, which analyses people on an individual or small group level. The perspective views crime as being generated by forces located within the individual, such as biological and psychological drives i. e. personality theories. Biological positivism examines genetic and hereditary factors which may cause a predisposition towards criminal behaviour, an individual pathology.

Lombroso was one of the first to try and identify the distinguishing features of criminals; he noted such things as large jaws and cheekbones, long arms,

protruding lips etc. He concluded that five or more of these features indicated that the individual was born criminal. His research has been criticised as reminiscent of Darwinism and notions of the 'savage' and 'biological inferiority' (Muncie & McLaughlin 2004). More recent research was conducted by Mednick et al (1987) who showed a possible link between adopted children and their biological fathers.

Children born to criminal fathers showed a higher likelihood of being criminal despite being adopted by non criminal fathers, thus indicating the possibility of passing on a genetic predisposition. Mednick himself however, points out this can only explain 'some criminal behaviour' and they could only suggest that 'some factor' was passed on leaving the question of what was transmitted. Research into genetic predispositions can have dangerous repercussions, for example Goring (1913) thought that criminality was inherited and linked this to mental inferiority.

He suggested that those with such characteristics should not be allowed to reproduce (Muncie & McLaughlin 2004). Whether true or not such theories do not allow for human agency and are the breeding ground for prejudice. One only has to remember Hitler trying to engineer the master race to see the possible repercussions. Psychological positivism investigates the workings of the brain, in other words cognition. These have their basis in Freudian psychoanalysis. He suggested unconscious motivations which weren't directed towards socially acceptable behaviour could lead to crime.

Freud's work is often criticised as being very subjective, as researchers would have to distinguish what constituted an unconscious motivation from visible behaviour (Muncie & McLaughlin 2004). Eysenck (1964) studied personality directly, he suggests that personality types who have failed to develop a conscience through conditioning (punishment for 'wrong' acts), have the characteristics of high N and E (neurotic/unstable, extroverts) and that this can lead to criminal behaviour. Eysenck's theory combines biological determinism with social conditioning in producing personality.

His work can't always be replicated (Muncie & McLaughlin 2004) and due to its subjective nature this leaves psychological theory weak even by positivist standards, as positivist criminologies claim objectivity and scientific standing. Also this research cannot prove that personality is fixed; it can change over time thus highlighting the effects of the environment. It could test for this by conducting a longitudinal study of personality and criminal behaviour over time. Sociological positivism is a very broad macro analysis which analyses society as a whole. Crime is viewed as being determined by social structures i. . located outside the individual, such as Anomie, Strain theory and social disorganization, these produce a social pathology.

Researchers such as Quetelet (1842) investigated the influence of seasons, educational level, gender and age on the propensity to commit crime. He found that crime rates showed an amazing regularity, for example crime against persons occurred least in December when property crime was at its highest, with the exact opposite occurring in June. This pattern of crime

however does not show a cause of crime but rather a correlation (Muncie & McLaughlin 2004) between time of year and offence.

It also does not explain why these offences took place. When statistics are produced they are open to various interpretations, this is highlighted when the media exaggeration of certain areas of crime. Durkheim (1895) suggested that due to crimes predictable nature it must be a normal occurrence, with only very rare abnormal incidences (Muncie & McLaughlin 2004). This is in contrast to individual positivism which claims that 'criminality' is the result of abnormality. These perceived causes of crime effect how criminals are treated.

Positivists reject the classical theory of being able to deter offenders from offending by punitive measures, rather individual positivism suggests that abnormality could be treated or bread out. While sociological positivism shows something of a dichotomy, suggesting that crime can be treated through social reform, but never completely eradicated and yet it also proposes crime as a positive function that prevents society from stagnating (Durkheim 1895). This suggests that perhaps crime eradication would not be good for society as society would not progress.

A very social oriented study of criminal behaviour can be seen in Park and Burgess (1925) research. They produced the human ecology perspective in which society is likened to an ecological system, a living growing organism. By dividing areas into zones a more detailed analysis of particular areas could be undertaken. The zone(II) in transition was the one which was

studied most and was labelled as more criminal due to Social disorganization. It was characterized as a pit stop for the immigrant population, whom once they were on their feet would move on to better areas, only to be replaced by 'new' immigrants.

Shaw (1929) claims that crime occurs there because community resistance is low and therefore criminal behaviour is transmitted. There is an admittance that criminal behaviour is 'learned', in this way it assumes people to be automatons open to any social influence. There is also an assumption that criminal behaviour is the result of social disorganization. They fail to acknowledge that it could be a different kind of organization with different cultural values (Muncie & McLaughlin 2004). Both perspectives adhere to the belief of a consensus in society.

To the individual perspective it's a moral consensus, where the normal and abnormal are labelled. While the sociological views it as a collective consensus, as if society shares the same aspirations. Both fail to acknowledge the plurality of thought within individuals, and society. For example Merton's believes that the motivation for crime is based on the 'American dream'. While Cohen (1993) viewed gangs as operating collectively within a different value system to that of the whole of the US society this indicates a plurality in society rather than a consensus.

Durkheim (1895) formulated the theory of Anomie, which is a state of normlessness in society. This arises when cultural goals and structural means of achieving those goals is unbalanced. Merton suggests that if

individuals have high expectations and are unable to fulfill those aspirations through structural means then 'strain occurs'. Merton's research was conducted in America where there is a strong cultural aspiration labelled 'the American dream', it was very influential, with an adaptation being used under the Kennedy administration's 'war on poverty' (Katz 1988).

Merton acknowledged that the theory was biased 'it appears from our analysis that the greatest pressures toward deviation are exerted upon the lower strata' (quoted in Katz 1988 p170). This criticism actually applies to the majority of positivist research it is overly concerned with explaining the crimes of the lower classes. By ignoring other areas of crime it conveys the impression that crime is a lower class phenomenon (Lilly et al 1989). Radical criminologies provide a possible explanation of why positivist criminologies miss hidden crime.

They accept the definitions of crime at face value rather than looking at who does the labeling and why certain behaviours are labelled as criminal. It is the act of getting caught which results in the attachment of criminal labels (Muncie & McLaughlin 2004). In order to get caught the crime has to be observed or reported, the crimes which are reported are various forms of street crime and robbery. Radicals suggests that those with power are the ones who choose who's label is highlighted, it is more often than not street crime, with other forms of criminals e. g. hite collar simply remain unmentioned. It is those who get caught and are labelled who appear in the analysis of positivist theories. Positivist research as well as labeling the lower classes as criminal and therefore missing much hidden crime, conduct

research which is predominantly based on men. Smart (1990) points out that the social sciences have excluded women and their interests from the majority of research. Harding (1986) suggests that if women's study did exist in the current climate it would gravitate towards the domestic abuse side of crime thus biasing research again.

Smart (1990) does not encourage research in to female crime because it would simply highlight already existing gender assumptions. Rather to be a truly objective science it should take account of both genders. However as positivist criminologies like to control for confounding variables it is unlikely to pursue this course. Sally Merry (1981) has criticised Positivist theories for not acknowledging human agency in crime. Eysenck acknowledges the combination of biological and social factors in criminal behaviour; however he still views criminal behaviour as determined.

Determinism is in stark contrast to the classical school which advocates rational choice as the cause of crime and was the dominant theory until the 19th century. Radical criminologies emerged in protest to positivist thinking around the 1960's with their view of Interactionism. It emphasised an individual's ability to be flexible and to respond to the social world. Also Social learning theory does not presume the criminality is a pre given state but rather that it is generated through social interactions (Muncie & McLaughlin 2004).

Positivism fails in part because of the limitations of a pure design approach to crime. The theories try to simplify crime in order to use scientific

methodologies in investigation, for example they look for a single 'cause' of crime, as testing for multiple factors are not possible. Thus the perspective is reductionist and tries to reduce everything to a single factor. To summarise, this essay has highlighted that positivist criminology assumes that criminal behaviour is determined, thus failing to acknowledge human agency, it also points out the dangers of such a deterministic view.

However perspective does cover all levels of analysis from a micro to a macro level. Biological positivism highlights the impact of nature but was unable to identify what was transmitted. While psychological positivism highlighted the criminal personality however failed to acknowledge this can change over time. Sociological positivism was shown as viewing crime as normal while individual positivism claims it's abnormal, therefore effecting how each reacted to, and viewed crime, with sociological side even seeing crime as performing a positive function.

Both perspectives believe there is a consensus in society, either individual or collective. Therefore failing to acknowledge varying culture, as well as being class and gender blind. To conclude it is clear to see that positivist criminologies do add to our understanding of the possible causes of crime but it cannot explain all crime. Due to it's reductionist approach it misses many interconnecting aspects and cannot be considered comprehensive. Therefore a multi theoretical approach is best for investigating crime.