

Critically assess the contribution of positivist approaches to criminological thi...



Different theories for the causes of crime can be categorised in terms of the approach they take.

For example, some theories take a classical approach, where people are seen as having free will, and act in a rational way, while others might focus on why people conform rather than commit crimes. This essay will look specifically at theories that take a positivist approach, which try to explain crime in terms of how certain factors may cause people to break the law. Positivist theories can largely be split into three different approaches: biological, psychological, and sociological; although some theories do cover more than one factor (Hopkins Burke, 2005). The first person to be associated with positivist criminology was Lombroso (1876) who studied crime from a biological perspective (Hayward and Morrison, 2005). Lombroso believed that individuals who had certain physical characteristics which could be observed and measured, were predestined to become a criminal. Based on Charles Darwin's (1859) natural selection theory of evolution, Lombroso claimed that the physical characteristics of criminals were atavistic, i.

e. they looked like throwbacks to previous forms of evolution (Marsh et al., 2006). Some of these features included twisted noses, sloping foreheads, receding chins, long arms, and asymmetrical faces. A study of 383 criminals found that about one fifth of them had one of these features, and over two fifths had at least five of them. In his later work, Lombroso also took into account sociological factors such as poverty and urbanisation, as well as psychological characteristics, and came up with four categories of criminal (Hopkins Burke, 2005).

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The first was the 'born criminal'. These were the people that had atavistic characteristics, and were therefore predestined to become a criminal. The second category was the 'insane criminal', in which Lombroso included imbeciles, idiots, alcoholics, epileptics and paranoiacs. Third were the 'criminaloids', who had inherent traits that predestined them to criminality, but would only commit crimes when opportunities arose. Fourth, were 'criminals of passion', motivated by love, anger, or honour. One of the main problems with Lombroso's research is that the methodology he used was relatively primitive (Hopkins Burke, 2005). First of all, measurements done nowadays would be much more accurate. Also, simply classifying someone as having a twisted nose, for example, is not very scientific, as it does not define how twisted a nose needs to be before it is classified as such.

Another issue with this research is that Lombroso only studied criminals, and not non-criminals (Marsh et al., 2006). By not having this control group, it would be impossible to say whether it is just criminals that have atavistic features, or whether people in general have some of these characteristics.

In response to Lombroso's work, Goring (1913) did his own study in which he compared thousands of criminals to various control groups (Marsh et al., 2006). The study looked for 37 signs of atavism, and he found that there was actually no difference between criminals and the control groups.

Moving on from the idea of atavistic features but still looking at physical, as well as psychological characteristics, Sheldon (1949) proposed that criminality was linked to specific body types (Marsh et al., 2006). He

suggested that there were three basic body types, or ??? somatotypes??™. The ??? endomorph??™ was described as large, round, and chubby, and was extroverted and tolerant. ??? Ectomorphs??™ were thin and slender, and were introverted and sensitive. Finally, ??? mesomorphs??™ were well developed, muscular, and athletic, as well as competitive, fearless, aggressive, and risk taking.

Although some people do have one of these ??? pure??™ body types, most will have characteristics of two, or even three, but often one of the types will stand out over the other. Sheldon studied criminals in rehabilitation, and found that they were predominantly mesomorphs, with some endomorphs, and a distinct lack of ectomorphs (Hollin, 1989). This was a different pattern to that found in non-criminal populations. One problem with this theory is that it ignores the possible link between a person??™s physical characteristics and their social circumstances (Hopkins Burke, 2005). For example, people from poorer backgrounds would more likely tend to be ectomorphs, due to under nourishment, whereas people in jobs that have physical demands may tend to be mesomorphs.

If this was so, criminality might occur due to sociological reasons rather than biological ones, as mesomorphs are more able to commit certain crimes such as assaults. An issue with the study itself is that the subjects were taken from a rehabilitation establishment rather than a prison. The problem here is that only certain types of criminals will go into rehabilitation, and therefore white-collar criminals, for example, would have been automatically omitted from the study.

Other biological approaches to positivism take the idea that criminality can be inherited, just like physical characteristics such as eye or hair colour. Studying criminal families was the first method to be used in this approach, and it originated with the work of Dugdale (Hollin, 1989). The reasoning behind family studies is that because biological relatives have a degree of genetic similarity, if criminality is inherited, families with a criminal background should produce criminal offspring. Dugdale's (1877) study traced hundreds of members of the Juke family in search of a criminal background (Hopkins Burke, 2005). He found that that a large majority of the family were either criminals or paupers. A subsequent study by Goddard (1914) traced Kallikak family members, and again it was found that the majority were criminals. One major problem with this type of study is that only one family is being traced.

Claiming that criminality is inherited after studying just one family tree seems highly insufficient, as there could be many criminals whose family has little or no criminal past. Another issue is that just because a family has a criminal background, inheritance of criminality may not necessarily be what causes the offspring to become criminal themselves (Hollin, 1989). Other factors need to be taken into account, such as a family history of low income and poor schooling. More sophisticated research into the inheritance of criminality has been done using twin and adoption studies. There are two different types of twins: monozygotic (MZ) or identical twins, and dizygotic (DZ) or non-identical twins (Hollin, 1989). The genetic difference between these types is that MZ twins share the same genetic structure, whereas DZ twins only share half of their genes.

It should also be noted that a parent shares half of their genes with their child. By finding criminals that have a twin, and subsequently finding out if they are also criminal, concordance rates can be measured (Hopkins Burke, 2005). The theory is that if criminality is inherited, then there will be greater concordance between MZ twins than DZ twins, as they share more of their genes. The first twin study was conducted by Lange (1930), who compared 13 MZ twins with 17 DZ twins (Hopkins Burke, 2005).

Results showed a 77% concordance with the MZ twins, and only 12% for DZ twins. This would on the face of it seem like a very significant difference, however, there have been many studies done over the years, and there have been huge differences between concordance rates. For example, Legras (1932) found concordance rates of 100% and 0%, whereas Kranz (1936) found concordance rates of 65% and 53% between MZ and DZ twins respectively (Hollin, 1989). What does seem to be significant is that the vast majority of studies show a higher concordance for MZ twins than DZ twins.

The problem with many of these studies is that a low number of pairs of twins are used, probably due to the low number of criminals that have a twin, which could explain why the differences are so vast. The main criticism of twin studies is that it takes no consideration of possible environmental influences (Hollin, 1989). One possible factor that could lead to higher concordance rates for MZ twins is that the social environments they share are more similar than the DZ twins.

MZ twins often have a closer relationship than DZ twins, meaning that they behave similarly, and participate in the same activities. One of the activities

they might both participate in could be crime, and if so its cause would be an environmental factor rather than a genetic factor. One way of finding out how important environmental factors are is by using adoption studies (Marsh et al., 2006). Adoption studies look at people who were adopted at a young age, and find out whether their criminal behaviour is more like that of their biological parents or their adoptive parents.

If they are more like their biological parents, it would suggest that genes are more important than the environment, and vice versa with adoptive parents. A study carried out by Hutchings and Mednick (1977) looked at male adoptees born between 1927 and 1941 (Hopkins Burke, 2005). It was found that 48% of criminal adoptees had a criminal biological father, whereas only 31% of non-criminal adoptees had a criminal biological father. Furthermore, of the criminals, it was found that 18% had a criminal biological mother, and 23% had a criminal adoptive father. Out of the non-criminals, 7% had a criminal biological mother, and 10% had a criminal adoptive father. These results do suggest that inherited characteristics do have more of an influence on criminality than environmental factors.

It also suggests that environmental factors do play a part, as more than twice as many criminal adoptees had a criminal adoptive father than non-criminal adoptees. One problem with adoption studies is that in some cases children are adopted by relatives (Marsh et al., 2006). This means that they would share some similarity in their genes with their adoptive parents. For example, if the adoptive parents were the child's aunt and uncle, then they would share a quarter of their genes with one of them.

Another issue is that adoption agencies will try to place the child in a family similar to their biological one. Again, this will make it harder to differentiate between the environmental and biological effects. Moving on from biological theories, a second area of positivism that contributes to explanations of crime is psychology. One of the major names in psychology is Sigmund Freud, and although he did not really propose any specific theories on crime, his work has been the basis of ??? psychodynamic??™ theories of crime (Hayward, 2005). Freud suggested that the mind is split into three elements: the id, ego, and superego. The id is entirely unconscious, and the origin of fundamental desires like food, sex, or sleep, as well as for instincts such as that for life or aggression.

The id??™s goal is to satisfy these instincts, regardless of social rules or other??™s needs. The superego acts as a kind of moral conscience, and is the origin of feelings like shame and guilt. As a child develops, so does their superego, through social interactions. Finally, the ego acts as a mediator, balancing the id??™s impulses and the superego??™s inhibitions (Hopkins Burke, 2005). One of the first people to use this psychodynamic approach to explain crime was Aichorn (1925) (Hollin, 1989). After conducting a study on delinquents, Aichorn concluded that social factors alone were unable to explain crime. He argued that many of the delinquents he studied showed signs of ??? latent delinquency??™, which was an underlying predisposition that had prepared them psychologically for a lifetime of crime.

Aichorn suggested that the cause of latent delinquency was because the criminal??™s superego had not developed properly during childhood, which was due to parental neglect or over-indulgence (Hayward, 2005). One of the <https://assignbuster.com/critically-assess-the-contribution-of-positivist-approaches-to-criminological-thinking/>



good things about this theory is that it can lead to ideas on how to treat offenders. Aichorn himself suggested that juvenile delinquents should be placed in well-supervised and happy social environments that allowed them to socialize with adults, and therefore develop their superego. The major problem with this theory is that it is very difficult to test scientifically, because it is largely based on unconscious processes (Marsh et al.

, 2006). Also, it is hard to say whether the id, ego and superego do actually exist. Nevertheless, the idea of their existence does seem fairly plausible. Another psychologist influenced by the work of Freud was Bowlby (1946), who theorised that there was link between crime and maternal deprivation during infancy (Gadd & Jefferson, 2007). Bowlby studied 44 juvenile thieves in a child guidance clinic, and compared them to non-delinquents of similar age and intelligence who were also in the clinic. He found that in the delinquent group, 39% had experienced complete separation from their mothers for at least six months before they were five, which compared to only 5% for the non-delinquents (Hollin, 1989). From this research, Bowlby concluded that there was a causal relationship between maternal deprivation and delinquency. One criticism of Bowlby's research has been on methodological grounds (Hollin, 1989).

For example, there have been criticisms about poorly matching the control group, using unreliable assessment methods, and having unrepresentative samples. Another question that arises from this theory is whether separation is the same as deprivation. Prins (1973) pointed out that parents can be physically present but not in spirit; The reverse of this situation can also be true: a parent may be dead but his spirit kept alive successfully (Gadd & <https://assignbuster.com/critically-assess-the-contribution-of-positivist-approaches-to-criminological-thinking/>

Jefferson, 2007: 19). This suggests that whilst a child is separated from their parent, they may not necessarily be deprived of them.

Learning theories are another aspect of psychological positivism. The most important work on behavioural learning was arguably conducted by Skinner (1938) (Hollin, 2007). Skinner found that when certain behaviours were followed by a rewarding outcome (reinforcement), the behaviour was likely to be repeated. Conversely, behaviours followed by aversive outcomes (punishment) were less likely to be repeated. This is known as operant conditioning. Bandura's (1973) social learning theory took operant conditioning further by introducing a cognitive factor (Hayward, 2005). He conducted a study that showed how behaviour could be learnt by simply observing and imitating other people's actions.

Although both Skinner and Bandura were both psychologists interested in behaviourism rather than criminology, their theories can be applied to suggest how an individual might become a criminal. For example, if child watches an adult shoplift, they may themselves decide to take something without paying for it. If they feel rewarded by this, then the behaviour may be repeated. Bandura's study may in particular help explain why people commit offences like assault as it looked at learnt aggression, where a group of children watched an adult attack an inflatable Bobo Doll, and repeated their behaviour when left to play with the doll (Hayward, 2005).

However, just because children acted in this way towards an inflatable doll does not mean to say that they would do the same if it was a human. It would be reasonable to assume that they understand that dolls are

inanimate objects, and attacking a human would be different. Another point to make is that operant conditioning suggests that punishment of certain behaviours will make people less likely to repeat them.

If this was so, then it would suggest that criminals would not reoffend. In reality, however, this is not the case. Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory explained how an individual became a criminal through social learning. He suggests that criminal behaviour, including techniques and attitudes towards crime, is learnt through interaction with others, mainly in close personal groups (Sutherland, 1970). The attitudes can either be for or against breaking the law, and once their attitudes for outweigh their attitudes against, they become criminal. A strength of this theory is that it takes into account social factors, by suggesting how the interaction between the individual and external factors leads to criminality. Furthermore, this theory can be applied to a range of crimes from theft and assault, to white collar crimes such as fraud.

However, it has come under a fair amount of criticism, mainly due to a lack of empirical testing (Hollin, 1989). Even when consequent studies have attempted give empirical support, there have been problems with defining and measuring criminal attitudes. Also, not everyone who learns criminal behaviour will offend themselves, as the theory suggests. A further problem with learning theories in general is that if people learn crime from others, who did the first criminal learn from Although learning may be one way through which people become criminals, there must be other ways as well. Eysenck's (1964) personality theory has been described as ??? perhaps

to date the most complete psychological theory of crime??? (Hollin, 2007: 51).

This is because it takes into account biological, social, and individual factors. He suggests that individuals inherit specific learning abilities which affect their ability to condition to environmental stimuli, for example through operant conditioning. It also looks at the individual's personality, which is based on their extraversion (E) and neuroticism (N) (Hollin, 1989). These two dimensions run on separate continuums from high E (extravert) to low E (introvert), and high N (neurotic) to low N (stable). Most individuals will fall somewhere in the middle of both of the scales. With regards to conditioning to environmental stimuli, neurotic extroverts are considered as having the lowest ability to condition. Therefore, when these people offend and are punished, they will not learn to keep from offending in the future.

This can explain the problem with operant conditioning where criminals that get punished continue to offend. Empirical studies into this theory generally show that criminals do score high on the neuroticism scale, yet there is little evidence to suggest that offenders are more extraverted (Hopkins Burke, 2005). However, Eysenck points out that extraversion not only means sociability, but also impulsiveness, and it is impulsiveness that contributes to criminality. Tests for extraversion will usually combine sociability and impulsiveness, giving a mid-ranged score for someone with high impulsiveness and low sociability. This does seem to make sense, as a thief walking past an unoccupied car with a handbag on the front seat will make a split second decision on whether or not to break in and grab it. Conversely, a gang of armed bank robbers do not really act on impulse, as the crime will

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need to be planned in advance. Although research has shown that there is correlation between personality and criminality, it does not prove that it is a causal factor. There may be something else that shapes both personality and criminality, for example environmental factors.

Farrington (1994) found that although there was a link between impulsiveness and criminality, personality had no significant link with offending (Hopkins Burke, 2005). Sociological positivism has its roots in the work of Durkheim (Hayward & Morrison, 2005). The striking feature of Durkheim's theory is that he viewed crime as a normal aspect of all societies (Gibbons, 1968). Furthermore, he suggested that it was neither possible nor desirable for a lack of crime in any society, as it would be detrimental to the society's development. In other words, crime was functional to society. The rationale for this was based on what he called the 'collective conscience', which was the commonly shared morals and values of society and the basis of 'social solidarity' (Marsh et al., 2006). Without a collective conscience, individuals would attempt to achieve their own needs with disregard to the needs of others. The effect of crime is that it strengthens the collective conscience through condemnation and encourages positive societal changes. Durkheim (1895) proposed that crime was a product of social structures, and would happen when there was a state of 'anomie', or normlessness, where individuals were unable to identify with the collective conscience, and therefore felt no need to conform to its values (Hayward & Morrison, 2005). One problem with Durkheim's theory is that he ignores the negative impact that crime has. It is hard to see how burglary, for example, strengthens the collective conscience, as stealing <https://assignbuster.com/critically-assess-the-contribution-of-positivist-approaches-to-criminological-thinking/>

something from one house only really affects the people living there. As for explaining the causes of crime, Durkheim has been criticised for being overly-deterministic, leaving little room for choice in the actions of individuals (Hopkins Burke, 2005).

He suggested that people would turn to crime whenever they were unable to identify with societies values. However, many people may have a bad few days, during which they find it hard to identify with these values, yet it does not make them turn to crime. Merton's (1938) strain theory was a development of Durkheim's work. Merton suggested two elements of social structure, namely culturally defined goals and institutional norms, were responsible in leading individuals to committing crime (Merton, 1970). Culturally defined goals were goals that every member of society would strive to achieve, and institutional norms were the socially acceptable ways of achieving them. Merton suggested that there were five different ways in which people would react to these goals; what he termed modes of adaptation (Marsh et al.

, 2006). Firstly, and most commonly, was conformity, where people would accept both the goals and the means of achieving them. If people cannot conform, then they will feel a strain, which was caused by social inequalities. The other modes of adaptation are ways in which people will deal with the strain.

The second is innovation, where people would accept the goals, but find a different, possibly criminal means of achieving them. Third is ritualism, where people abandon the goals, but will continue to

legitimately aim for success. The fourth is ??? retreatism??™, where individuals will abandon both the goals and any legitimate means of achieving success. Finally, there is ??? rebellion??™, where the goals and means are both abandoned and substituted with new ones. A strength of Merton??™s theory is that it explains how crime is usually committed by the lower classes (as it is harder for them to achieve the goals), yet it still occurs amongst the upper class (as they may desire more success than they already have) (Gadd & Jefferson, 2007). Whilst this may be a good theory for explaining material crimes, it is hard to see how crimes such as assault can help someone achieve their goals. Furthermore, the main focus of this theory is on achieving material success, and the ??? American Dream??™, which he used as the culturally defined goal. However, different people and different societies may have different goals they wish to achieve.

A further development of this theory comes from Cohen (1955) with his subcultural approach (Marsh et al., 2006). Cohen suggests that the problem lies in the education system forcing middle-class values on boys from working class families. Because they are unable to compete with middle-class boys at gaining status through education, as middle-class values suggest they should, they start to suffer from status frustration. When working-class boys are unable to achieve status through education, they turn elsewhere to gain status, specifically to a deviant subculture. Within this subculture, they can achieve status by rejecting middle-class norms through acts of aggression, vandalism, and dishonesty (Hopkins Burke, 2005).

One strong criticism of this theory is that it assumes that working-class boys are actually interested in middle-class values (Gibbons, 1968). Although the <https://assignbuster.com/critically-assess-the-contribution-of-positivist-approaches-to-criminological-thinking/>

education system will obviously see education as important for everyone, the families of working-class boys may not see it as important, and will not force middle-class values upon their children. As a result, they will not suffer from status frustration. A further problem is that it completely ignores female offending, as it only proposes how boys become delinquent. Also, it suggests that all subcultures are delinquent, when in reality there are many subcultures whose members are law abiding. A different sociological approach to criminology is taken by the Chicago School, which studies how the sociological make-up of Chicago leads to criminality.

An important theory produced by the Chicago School is Burgess's (1928) concentric zone theory, which split the city into five different zones (Hopkins Burke, 2005). In the centre was the business district, which was surrounded by a ring called the zone in transition. This was, in turn, surrounded by the working-class housing zone, the middle-class housing zone, and the outer suburbs (Rock, 2007). The zone of transition was of particular interest.

This zone was seen to have the poorest housing and weakest social controls, and was inhabited by immigrants of diverse backgrounds who had come to settle in Chicago. It was also the zone of transition which had the city's highest crime rates (Marsh et al., 2006).

Burgess suggested that this was due to social disorganization; a result of the social patterns (high immigration rates) weakening community ties (Hopkins Burke, 2005). Because the community was constantly changing, it was hard for them to create bonds. Empirical research does show some strength in this theory. Shaw & McKay (1931) showed that crime



had been persistently highest in the zone of transition. Moreover, when the residents moved to other zones, their offending decreased (Hopkins Burke, 2005). This suggested that it was indeed the neighbourhood rather than the individual that generated crime. However, this theory can be criticised for ignoring individual motives.

If it was simply living in a certain area that caused crime, then it suggests everyone living in that area would commit crime, which is not true.

Furthermore, although this study did give good insight to crime in 1920s Chicago, it is not necessarily relevant to modern day Britain. Even if it could be generally applied to cities, it does not explain crime in towns or villages. One of the main contributions of positivist approaches to criminology is that it uses empirical methods to test theories. Before positivism, criminological theories were just based on common sense approaches, and could not be backed up by scientifically proven results.

Furthermore, positivist thinking has helped to show that there could be a number of factors outside an individual's control that has led them to crime. Of the positivist approaches mentioned, some do seem more convincing than others as a way of explaining criminality. Overall, the best ones are probably the ones that take into account a combination of biological, psychological, and sociological factors. Those that just take one of these factors into account seem to be too narrowly focussed and leave too many unanswered questions, for example they can only explain certain types of crime. However, being able to criticise theories is advantageous, as it allows the development of new theories, leading to a wider range of explanations.

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