

Criminals born or made essay sample

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



This essay shall attempt to critically consider the strengths and weaknesses of the argument that criminals are ‘born not made’. It will look at a number of biological explanations for offending focusing on Positivism, that support a criminal being born with features that make them distinctively different from the average man in the street. It will also consider the view that criminals are products of their environment using explanations of offending including Classicism to the contemporary theories of labelling, anomie and strain.

The Classical movement, founded by Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794), aimed to introduce a fairer and more rational system of organising control and punishments. It had little concern with establishing the causes of crime and was focused on establishing a more just social order within society.

(Carrabine et al, 2004: 32) The emphasis was on the criminal as an individual who was fully capable of calculating what he wanted to do and was assumed to have the same power of resistance as non-offenders.

The reasoning was that an individual had free will and their behaviour was guided by hedonism, or the pleasure-pain principle where if individuals saw they would be punished for their actions, they would be deterred, whereas if they thought they could get away with criminal acts, they would (Lilly et al, 2002: 15). There were problems in this theory as it has an overly rational, generalising view of human nature believing that individuals behave in a purely selfish and socially unconcerned manner, not taking into account personal circumstances (Carrabine et al, 2004: 35).

Following the Classicists was the Positivist movement headed by Lombroso’s theory of the Criminal man, a biological and psychological approach to

criminology, where criminals were atavistic throwbacks to a form of species earlier on the evolutionary scale (Carrabine et al, 2004: 36). Positivist wanted scientific proof that criminality was caused solely by features within an individual with the emphasis on the criminal mind and body, to the extent of neglecting external social factors affecting the individual.

The central tenet of these early theories were that criminals possessed a peculiar physical type distinctively unlike those of non-criminals. Enrico Ferri (1856-1929) developed and expanded upon this, placing more emphasis on the relation of social, economic and political factors that contributed to crime. Deviance, he argued, could be explained by examining the interrelated effects among physical factors, individual factors and social factors (Lilly et al, 2002: 19). The positivist model has been harshly criticized for assuming that crimes are largely caused by individuals under the influence of outside forces.

It is a simplistic mirror image of the classicist model, where people are not free and ultimately removes responsibility for their actions. While the classical and positivist theories are contradictory, they still have a great deal of influence in their modern day versions which continue to influence the working of penal policy. Contemporary sociology, seeing crime as a social phenomenon, identified the Strain theory stating that strains are fabricated by society rather than an individual.

As crime is connected with strains, stress and tensions within society, it can be understood by looking at those strains. From society in general, large cities prone to generating deviant lifestyles, to an individual's everyday

situations where meanings and values are learnt. Crime is seen a breakdown of social controls, a lack of groups valuing law abiding behaviour (Carrabine et al, 2004: 46). This theory was inspired by Durkheim's (1951) idea of social solidarity, integration and regulation, where moral order was fundamental to a functioning society.

The Chicago school developed this theory rejecting the social Darwinist logic that the poor were biologically inferior, less evolved and fell to criminality for that reason, preferring a more optimist interpretation; they were pushed by their environment, not born, into criminality. Thus, hope existed that changing the environment that fostered offenders would in turn change their deviant behaviour (Lilly et al, 2002: 33). Of the Chicago school, Robert E.

Park observed that the development and organisation of the city was not random and idiosyncratic, but patterned and could therefore be understood in terms of social processes like conflict and accommodation. The nature of the social pressures and their impact upon individual behaviour, like crime, could be further understood through careful observation of city life. Through this, the city could be delineated into five zones. What was named the zone in transition; containing rows of deteriorating tenements, often built in the shadow of aging factories, was the greatest cause for concern.

It was the least desirable living area, residents were constantly displaced, weathering waves of immigrants and migrants too poor to settle elsewhere (Lilly et al, 2002: 34). Immediately obvious was the concentration of pathologically deviant behaviour in the zone of transition. Deviance, while present elsewhere, was hugely conspicuous in the transition zone (Downes ;

Rock, 2007: 54). Wirth (p. 236) cited in Downes and Rock (2007: 55) stated the reasons behind this: ‘ contacts are extended, heterogeneous groups mingle, neighbourhoods disappear, and people, deprived of local and family ties, are forced to live under ... loose, transient and impersonal relationships. ‘

Identified with Chicago school is Sutherland (1956), who states in his theory of differential association, that any individual’s preference for conformity or deviance relates to the frequency of association with others who either encourage conventional behaviour or deviance. He claims that criminal behaviour is learnt whilst interacting through communication, principally within close personal groups. Motives are also learnt through definitions of the law as being favourable or unfavourable.

This process then is no different to the process involved in any form of learning (Carrabine et al, 2004: 57). Influenced by theories of Marx and Durkheim, Merton (1938) saw deviance as a result of individual response to pressures caused by social structure and occurring where there was an imbalance between social structure and goals. He called this norm breakdown, anomie. The cause of which was the modern capitalist society that generated considerable crime and deviance by placing many citizens, particularly the disadvantaged, in the position of wanting unreachable goals.

This tremendous strain moves individuals to find deviant ways of reaching their goals. As anomie grows, individuals feel free to pursue goals through any means available to them, legitimate or not. Like the Chicago theorists, Merton located the roots of crime in the fabric of capitalist society, rejecting

the notion that crime originated from within an individual's mind or body. Dominant for sometime in the 1960s and 1970s, the labelling theory highlighted social reaction and considered what happened to criminals once they had been labelled, suggesting that crime was possibly heightened by criminal sanctions.

It made few claims to understand what made people criminal, instead choosing to see criminality as a label conferred by the state (Lilly et al, 2002: 106). Lemert (1967) argued that when society takes notice of an individual's deviance and makes something of it negative labelling occurs, causing a change in the way the individual is viewed by others and themselves. Encouraging them to modify their behaviour to adhere to that label and associate with those with a same or similar label.

This self fulfilling prophecy is an application of the Thomas theorem which states: ' situations defined as real become real in their consequences'. Labelling soon fell out of favour as it failed to offer an explanation as to why offenders offended in the first instance, and gave too little consideration to the state, power and economy (Carrabine et al, 2004: 74). Carrabine et al (2004: 41) cites recent biological based research into theories of crime including twin studies which compared the criminality of sets of fraternal twins with identical twins.

The studies, in general, have proved a higher similar criminality rate of 60 to 70 percent for identical twin in comparison to fraternal twins whose concordance rate is 15 to 30 percent. In a famous study by Christiansen, after examining 3586 sets of twins born between 1881 and 1910 he found in

35 percent of the cases both identical twins would have criminal convictions compared to only 12 percent of fraternal twins. This does provide some support to the theories that genetics plays a role in deviant behaviour. In the 1960's XYY chromosome research became a particular controversy.

While 'normal' males have an XY chromosome configuration, 1 in 1000 males have an extra Y chromosome, giving them a XYY chromosome configuration. At that time research found a slight suggestion of an association between the XYY chromosome and criminality, which led to the idea of a 'super-male criminal' full of aggression. Recent studies, however, have refuted the idea that possessing the XYY chromosome 'causes' men to commit crimes. Other biological factors possibly related to crime are a serotonin deficiency which may contribute to impulsiveness and violence.

A dopamine, noradrenaline and serotonin imbalance which may be conducive to deviant behaviour. Also, there is some evidence that neurological defects are more common among excessively violent people than among the population in general. EEG (electroencephalograph) readings on a number of adult criminals have similarities to those of normal people at a younger age, signifying brain immaturity. This essay attempted to critically analyse the argument that criminals are 'born not made'.

It looked at a number of biological explanations for offending and also considered the view that criminals are products of their environment. On the whole, current evidence for biological research is at its best, limited.

Researchers often have difficulty separating biological factors from social ones and unrepresentative samples are common in such research. After

looking at various reasons behind deviant behaviour, it is not unreasonable with the evidence at hand, to conclude that crime is probably caused by a number of interrelated factors, rather than biology alone.

What is most promising about biological research is that with recent advances in science and genetics might come the day where it is proved irrefutably that criminals are born with a deviant gene. However, until then, the various sociological and criminological explanations claiming that criminals are moulded by society seems more likely. Ultimately, further research is needed before any conclusive reasons for deviance can be drawn.