

Individual and sociological positivism | theories of crime



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Describe 2 theories of crime covered in the module

Individual Positivism

Sociological Positivism

This essay will discuss two theories of crime, sociological positivism and individual positivism. These theories will highlight the main principles within individual and sociological positivism. Both criminological theories determine the possible reasons as to why criminals are in fact criminals, looking at the influence of society and the idea that an individual may be a born criminal. Pre-World War II theorists suggested that a criminal is influenced by either biological or social factors. Lombroso, Merton and Sutherland are the main three theorists who discussed biological and sociological positivism and their theories will be highlighted throughout this essay.

Individual Positivism

Positivism is the idea that everything should have scientific evidence in order to be recognised in society. Individual positivism in criminology is the concept that all individuals have specific yet some similar characteristics, which allows there to be visible differences between criminals and non-criminals (Open Learn, n. d.) This is the idea that crime is as a result of the person biology rather than the motive. It looks at the characteristics of individuals and discusses how this may lead to them inevitably being driven to a life of crime. The introduction of individual positivism was a step towards a more natural scientific approach when considering criminology. The most significant theorist within individual positivism is Cesare Lombroso. He

developed 'Atavism', the theory that the biology of an individual has not developed at the same pace as others. It highlights that this has a great impact on individual actions. He has discussed that there are four types of offenders; the 'born criminal', criminaloids whose crime was due to opportunity, the insane criminals and the criminal of passion, who killed for love or irresistible force. Lombroso's most notifiable criminal type and the most critiqued is the idea of the born criminal. He strongly believes that criminals who acquired the several specific characteristics were born criminals. There were many features that could lead to being classed as a born criminal including having large ears, jaw, chin, lips, nose and wrinkles (Lombroso, 2016). For men, at least five of the named characteristics must be visible and only three for women. When looking at female born criminals, it is important to note that the crimes they commit generally defeat their expected maternal roles. Jimmy Saville, who has a large jaw, nose, ears, chin and has wrinkles would be, according to Lombroso a prime example of a born criminal. Lombroso also noted that born criminals inherit their characteristics from their families, therefore born criminals tend to be a part of criminal families. This theory has been criticised by Vold (1958) who highlighted that classical criminological theories, particularly that of Lombroso are in fact pre-scientific and should not be classed as true criminology. Lombroso's theories of individual positivism are also heavily criticised by sociological positivists.

Sociological Positivism - Merton Strain Theory & Sutherland Differential Association

Sociological positivism is the theory that people commit crimes as a result of societal values. One sociologist who has discussed theories of sociological positivism is Merton. Merton's Strain Theory discussed the causes of crime, highlighting that the reason for criminal activity is a cultural gap between the goals of society and the means in which to achieve them. This theory is also known as the 'American Dream'. This strain theory was developed from Durkheim's 'anomie' theory. Anomie is a state of normlessness within society, which many working classes experience. There are five different adaptations of an individual discussed within this theory; ritualism, conformity, innovation, retreatism and rebellion. These adaptations highlight how an individual responds to the goals of society and the means in order to achieve them. Ritualism is the decline of the goal but accept the means which they are expected to execute. Conformity is the acceptance of both the goals and the means expected, ensuring they achieve the shared values of society. Innovation means accepting the goals but rejecting the means. Innovators are much more likely to take part in criminal activity such as theft, as they want to achieve the goals of society but don't want to achieve them in legitimate ways. Retreatism is the decline and rejection of both the goals and means. Retreatists tend to lack in cultural values and don't try to achieve any shared values of society. They are likely to be drug addicts or 'drop-outs' as they have no legitimate goals. Rebellion is much more different in comparison to these adaptations. These groups of people change the goals and the means of society completely. For example, they may change their goal to something that will gain them status, the means of them achieving this may be to join a gang and to engage in criminal activities (Agnew & Jang, 2015). Merton's strain theory has been expanded and <https://assignbuster.com/individual-and-sociological-positivism-theories-of-crime/>

criticised by Cloward (1959, cited in Agnew, 2016) who developed the theory of illegitimate means, arguing that individuals may want to achieve goals but also do not have ways of achieving illegitimate means either. For example, a person who wants to be a drug dealer in order to earn money may not have the access to be in possession of drugs or may not know how to go about how to sell drugs.

Differential association is also a theory within sociological positivism that highlights how individuals learn actions through society, including criminal ones. Sutherland developed this theory in order to highlight how criminals only engage in criminal activity as they are only repeating actions that they have already witnessed or been told about before. Some of Sutherland's theories within differential association highlight how crime motives can also be due to society's norms and values, anything that is appealing to society leads to the criminal motives amongst individuals to achieve these values. In this case, differential association is not just something that criminals face, but non-offending individuals also feel the strains of societies values, which has led to a much more self-obsessed and determined society, only in some cases does this lead to crime (Carrabine, 2014). Many criminals today have been heavily influenced by what they have seen in the media. Differential association has developed through time, suiting the modern age. Many individuals, particularly children are easily swayed into a life of crime due to the media representation and romanticising of crime. For example, James Bulger who was brutally murder by two young boys. These criminals were influenced into committing this crime due to the film *Child's Play 3*. The media has great influences on society and is increasingly encouraging

people into committing crimes, whether it be because they place high value on top clothing brands encouraging theft or whether it be due to crime films romanticising the life as a criminal. However, differential association can be disputed as it doesn't actually explain any ways of preventing crime or why individuals are so easily influenced by today's media coverage.

In conclusion, Lombroso's theory of a born criminal can be heavily criticised by Merton's strain theory and Sutherland's differential association theory. These both highlight that crime is not genetically attained and is something that is driven by the motives that are valued by society. However, Lombroso's theory can still be used today when looking at criminals within the 21st century and analysing their facial features. Many serial killers within the past century have been comprised with the facial features described in his theory of atavism, such as Ian Brady or Aileen Wuornos. Although it is not an effective way of distinguishing the difference between criminals and non-criminals it is still an interesting theory that is evident amongst some cases. Sociological positivism is an effective theory when looking at crime within today's society as it highlights the many motives for crimes are due to what individuals have been taught or what they have witnessed within the media. There are many cases of criminals being driven by crime and thriller films, even in recent years. This theory is most likely to be detectable when discussing criminals and why people commit crimes in the first place.

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