

EXPLAINING CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

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EXPLAINING CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

EDITED BY

WOUTER BUIKHUISEN AND SARNOFF A. MEDNICK



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PREFACE

Most of the chapters in this book are based on papers presented at the symposium *Explaining Crime: interdisciplinary approaches*.

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SECTION I
THEORIES OF DELINQUENCY

THE NEED FOR AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH IN CRIMINOLOGY

WOUTER BUIKHUISEN AND SARNOFF A. MEDNICK

How shall we explain the existence of crime?*

As early as 1600 B.C. the social circumstances of the sinner were acknowledged as contributory and said to be taken into account in judgement by Osiris and the 42 gods. Plato and Aristotle also emphasized the importance of social factors among the causes of antisocial acts. Plato considered money to be the root of all evil; in his famous Republic he points out that poverty breeds crime. Aristotle emphasized the relativity of poverty. In his Politics, for example, he observed that great crimes are not so much committed to obtain the essential as to achieve the superfluous.

Aristotle was among the first to also postulate a relationship between biological factors and criminal behaviour. He suggested the importance of the form of the skull and the role of genetics in the causes of differences in human behaviour including criminal propensities.

An important theme in the historical development of criminology theory has been the application of insights from other scientific areas to help understand criminal behaviour. Lombroso integrated Darwin's theory of evolution and Gall's phrenology in his theorizing.

Hegel proposed a structure for understanding the development of scientific insight: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Synthesis or integration is the *conditio sine qua non* for the development of the behavioural sciences. Integration, however, seems to be difficult to achieve in the field of criminology. This is not unique for the present situation. A century ago, Europe faced the heavy battle between the Italian and the French Schools of Criminology. The former, with Lombroso (1835-1909) as its outspoken leader, claimed that the roots of crime were biological in nature. Influenced as he was by the work of Darwin, he made two assumptions. First, he stated that primitive, uncivilized man is an amoral being. The second premise was inspired by Haeckel's biogenetic law, that individual (ontogenetic) development recapitulates phylogenetic development. Therefore, criminal (amoral primitive) behaviour was seen as an atavism: a developmental disorder in which the subject regresses to

* The following historical information has been derived from Hering (1966) and Bonger (1954).

a more primitive level in the phylogenetic development of his species. To support his theory he pointed to the many physical anomalies to be observed in criminals. These anomalies, Lombroso argued, were typical for primitive men.

Lombroso's attempt at explaining crime was heavily criticized by the members of the French School, headed by Lacassagne. Lacassagne was professor of forensic medicine at the University of Lyon. At the First International Congress of Criminal Anthropology in Rome he completely rejected Lombroso's biological orientation in general and his ideas about atavism more particularly. Instead he emphasized the importance of the social environment. Inspired by the work of Pasteur he compared the environment with a bacterial culture, the criminal being the microbe whose development completely depends on the nature of this culture. He ended his address with the famous phrase: "Les sociétés ont les criminels qu'elles méritent" (Societies have the criminals they deserve).

These discussions were continued at the Second Congress of Criminal Anthropology convened in Paris in 1889. Lombroso's main opponent at this Congress was Manouvrier, professor of anthropology at the University of Paris. Manouvrier argued that the so-called physical anomalies of criminals referred to by Lombroso, could be observed among non-offenders as well as offenders. He emphasized that there was no scientific proof at all that these anatomical characteristics are indicative in one way or another of a propensity to behave like primitive men. Such characteristics, he stated, could also be observed among the most gifted people.

To settle this dispute a committee of seven eminent anthropologists was established. The main task of this committee was to carry out an anthropological study in which 100 criminals were to be compared with 100 non-criminals. Unfortunately, this study was never carried out. Even more strongly: there was never one meeting of the committee.

In this respect the situation is not much different nowadays. Disputes such as this between socially and biologically oriented criminologists still exist.

For most of this century the main body of criminological theory has vigorously excluded consideration of biological factors from among the potential causes of criminal behaviour. This exclusion has not been free of cost. In all fields of science there is a process of development and accretion of knowledge. It is trite but true that the researcher of today sees further because he stands on the shoulders of earlier generations. Despite its youth as a field of empirical inquiry, criminology has benefitted greatly from this accretion because its origins coincided with a period of rapid scientific advancement.

But criminology has had a self-imposed blindspot which has sharply delimited the boundaries of its accumulation of knowledge. Criminology has steadfastly resisted attempts to integrate results of studies of the psychological and biological characteristics of criminals. It may be useful to consider the possible sources of this resistance.

Sources of resistance to biology

Advocacy

A significant part of the scientific task of sociologists is to chronicle the status (and therefore the plight) of the underprivileged. This role has served to make sociology the social conscience of science, the academic advocate of the weak, rejected and disaffected. Sociologists have been quick and eloquent to dispute research or policy which might delay the improvement of the lot of their charges. In this role they have fought against Nazis, Social Darwinists, fascists, and others who have taken conservative or reactionary positions on matters relating to social justice. Inevitably and unfortunately, the debate within the science has often become highly politicized; the sociologists and liberal thinkers being the "good guys" and others the "bad guys".

Being, on the whole, poorly educated, unemployed, and underprivileged, criminals have not been excluded from sociologists' sympathetic attention. This attention has had very positive consequences for the humane disposition of prisoners, the special handling of youthful offenders and the treatment orientation to prosecution and sentencing of offenders.

The criminal as a normal individual.

As a part of their advocacy, criminologists have steadfastly maintained that those who behave in a criminal manner are just normal folk who were pushed into their deviance by acquisitive, competitive, alienating societal forces or unfavourable social circumstances in general. They suggest that criminal offending is in no way an expression of any individual predisposition but rather a testimony to society's economic and social inequities. Some have identified crime as a form of social protest.

Assertions regarding partial psychological causes (e.g., low intelligence) of some forms of criminal acts have been typically rejected. Hirschi and Hindelang (1977) chastised criminologists for ignoring the clear empirical evidence of relatively low intelligence among offenders; for this they have been attacked as siding with the "bad guys". Because

of the intense political character of this field it presents a unique instance of scientific dispute in which assertions regarding biological or psychological characteristics of offenders are often condemned for being reactionary or fascist rather than because of methodological flaws in research, unsound theoretical development or lack of replicated findings. Mednick has been told to burn data which implicate genetic factors among the causes of crime.

The Social Darwinists

This pattern of reaction has a history. There have been a number of unsavoury individual interpretations and theoretical approaches linked with biological explanations of human behaviour. The Social Darwinists permitted themselves to become the intellectual apologists for imperialistic, racial and social policies of the late 19th century. Discriminatory immigration laws in the U.S.A. were largely based on false fears of weakening of the American genetic stock by mixing with immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. These false fears were fired by poor data from inadequate testing of immigrants' intellectual ability. Adolf Hitler's theory of Aryan racial superiority certainly contributed to the distaste for biological theory applied to human behaviour.

The empirical evidence

In addition to these emotional reasons for rejecting biological theory relating to criminal behaviour the fact is that until recently the evidence which has existed to support such theory has been extremely weak and conjectural. In the last ten years, however, the evidence has become very difficult to ignore. One telling finding is the demonstration that having a convicted biological father will markedly increase the risk of conviction in a son even if he was adopted at birth to a non-criminal middle class family. If the biological father is a chronic offender (three or more convictions) the adopted-away son's risk of becoming a chronic offender is tripled. In this study, male adoptees whose biological fathers are chronic offenders comprise one percent of the male cohort; they are responsible for over 30% of the convictions in the cohort. These results stem from a total cohort of 14,427 adoptions in Denmark (Mednick, Gabrielli & Hutchings, 1984) and have proven to be difficult to attack methodologically (Mednick, Gabrielli & Hutchings, 1985). It is clear that some of these convicted adoptees have inherited a characteristic from their convicted biological parent which serves to increase the probability that they, in turn, will suffer a court conviction. Since only biological characteristics

can be inherited, it follows that certain heritable biological factors are among the causes of criminal behaviour.

In addition to this genetic evidence, offenders have been consistently shown to have deviant neuropsychological functioning (Buikhuisen, 1987), and characteristic and distinguishing central and autonomic nervous system functioning (see review by Mednick & Volavka, 1980). Careful research has revealed distinctive and theoretically meaningful biochemical and hormonal factors in the aggressive and violent offender (Olweus, see section II, and Virkkunen (1986)). In general the biological findings have been most characteristic of the recidivistic, chronic offender. It seems extremely likely that we will better understand the etiology of criminal behaviour (especially chronic offending) and be better able to prevent and treat offending behaviour if we study the biological make-up of the offender (along with social background and environmental factors). The research presented in this volume strongly suggests that an even more rewarding approach may be found in the examination of the interactive and additive effects of socio-environmental and biological factors.

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TOWARDS A GENERAL THEORY OF CRIME

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For the last sixty years, crime research has been dominated by the sociological perspective. This perspective tends to concentrate its attention on the mid-teen years, where occupational and educational aspirations are formed, where social and ethical values are tested, where peers take on great importance, and where the rate of crime is at its peak. This tradition has produced an impressive collection of theoretical works, many of which — at least in the United States — have influenced public policy (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Albert K. Cohen, 1955; David Matza 1964; Edwin M. Lemert, 1951; Arthur L. Stinchcombe, 1964).

This tradition has also yielded an impressive amount of information on the social and demographic correlates of adolescent delinquency. With few exceptions, the basic facts about crime and delinquency are no longer in serious dispute. We know the relations between delinquency and gender, between delinquency and age, social class, school performance, urbanization, family criminality, and much more (see, e.g., Empey, 1978; Jensen and Rojek, 1980). Despite these important contributions, the sociological tradition has left several problems unresolved: the concentration on the mid-teen years leads to neglect of family influences on delinquency and adult crime (and consequent inability to develop meaningful intervention programs), to difficulties with the interpretation of causal sequences, and to perhaps too much emphasis on the development of delinquent motivation and too little emphasis on the forces promoting prosocial conduct. Perhaps even more important, the dominance of the sociological tradition has led to relative neglect of the potential contributions of other disciplines to our understanding of crime. One result is that there is now an uncomfortable disjunction between what is known about the facts of crime and our ability to interpret them.

While sociology, with its emphasis on criminal events and the external environment, was dominating the study of crime and delinquency, psychology, with its emphasis on individual differences and cognitive traits, was pursuing developmental studies focusing on child rearing practices and personality (Patterson et al., 1980; McCord, 1978; West and Farrington, 1973; Bandura, 1973). While often avoiding such terms as crime and delinquency, psychological studies of aggression, interpersonal maturity, and violence are clearly relevant to an understanding of

the causal sequences in the development of criminal behavior, and failure to deal explicitly with this research has become one of the outstanding anomalies of contemporary crime theory.

In recent years, the economic perspective has had considerable impact on our thinking about crime, promoting renewed interest in deterrence research and classical models of crime causation, including their emphasis on criminal events rather than criminal actors (e.g., Becker, 1968). And of course biology has also returned to the arena, reminding us that there is considerable evidence that heritable individual characteristics play a significant role in crime causation (Mednick and Christiansen, 1977; Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985).

All of which suggests that the time is ripe for a theoretical perspective sufficiently broad to incorporate insights from the various disciplines interested in crime, sufficiently flexible to be applicable to issues arising throughout the life course, and at the same time sufficiently specific to suggest concrete, practical prevention strategies. This paper attempts to advance such a perspective and to compare its implications with the implications of a theory developed by explicit integration of available theories. Our perspective is not an "integrated" theory in the usual meaning of that term. It did not arise from examination of current theories but from an ongoing effort to understand crime and delinquency. Nevertheless, we will try to show that it does a better job of making sense of the contributions of the various disciplines than could be hoped from an integrated theory constructed by more usual methods. For purposes of comparison, we turn to the integrated theory developed by Elliott and his colleagues (Elliott et al., 1979; Elliott, 1985; Elliott et al., 1985).

Elliott's Integrated Theory of Delinquency

In 1979, Elliott, Ageton, and Canter published an article integrating the sociological versions of strain, control, and social learning theories of delinquency. They argued that, contrary to the assumptions of control theory, some youth are adequately socialized and then become delinquent, an assumption of strain theory. They argued that, contrary to the assumptions of control theory, positive motivation from a delinquent peer group is necessary to explain delinquency, an assumption from cultural deviance or social learning theory. They argued that explanation should focus on "sustained patterns of delinquent behavior" (1979: 16) rather than on isolated or individual delinquent acts, an argument consistent with strain and social learning theories and contrary to control theory.

At the time this integrated theory was published, Elliott's National Youth Survey, a study designed to test the theory, was well underway. In 1985, Elliott published two additional works on the topic, one an essay addressing the general issue of theory integration (Elliott, 1985) and the other a monograph presenting the study results bearing on the theory (Elliott et al., 1985). In the essay, Elliott presents good evidence that integration is the wave of the present, citing over a dozen recent works devoted to such efforts. In the same essay, he explains the rise of integrationist efforts as stemming from "dissatisfaction with the empirical adequacy of classical theories of crime and with ... the competitive hypothesis approach to theory building and verification" (Elliott, 1985: 124).

With respect to empirical adequacy, Elliott reports that multivariate tests of classical theories of delinquency show that their explanatory power is "relatively weak," that "the pure forms of our traditional theories [studied] with cross-sectional data ... typically account for only 10 percent to 20 percent of the variance in illegal behavior and on rare occasions as much as 30 percent to 40 percent" (Elliott, 1985: 124). Elliott goes on to say that these theories are even weaker in "genuine predictive tests" where "the correct temporal order is imposed and prior delinquency is controlled" (pp. 124-25). In the end, Elliott concludes that the predictive ability of the classical theories is "embarrassingly low," that they are "overly simple," and that they are "inadequate to model the actual processes leading to crime..." (p. 125). While such a state of affairs would seem to justify doing something, it is not immediately apparent how it justifies putting such weak and defective schemes together. But let us go on to the difficulties with the competitive hypothesis approach to theory building, another reason Elliott gives for turning to integration.

According to Elliott, competitive tests of classical theories (such as that conducted by Hirschi (1969)) have several limitations. In the first place, classical theories "rarely provide competing hypotheses that [are] testable." Second, "there are logical problems in posing two hypotheses as simple alternatives to one another and presuming that the acceptance of one implies the rejection of the other." Finally, in practice, he says, "crucial tests of competing hypotheses nearly always involved a single indicator of a single theoretical variable, and the results of these tests [also] provided little evidence of the overall predictive power of the combined set of propositions specified by the theories involved" (Elliott, 1985: 125).

Whatever the validity of Elliott's conclusions about the adequacy of classical theories and competitive tests of them, they lead him to two further conclusions: (1) the primary reason for integrating theories of delin-