

**University of djlali bounaama khamis miliana**

**Faculty of social sciences**

**Master 2 criminology**

**Dr: Bokreta Farouk**

# **Courses of English in criminology**

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## master 2

- **What are the foundations of sociological theories of crime?**

- There are numerous hypotheses as to why people commit crimes.

Some may think that committing a crime is rational, with the offender considering the benefits and drawbacks of doing so before the criminal activity. Others may hold the opinion that criminals are different from law-abiding people in terms of biology or psychology.

- However, the one thing these two theories have in common is that they both emphasize the role of the criminal. In other words, they view crime as an individual issue rather than one that affects the entire community. Sociology, on the other hand, argues that society shapes the circumstances in which criminal activity occurs. Put differently, society influences people to commit crimes.

- Let's explore what sociological theories of crime are, and what they address.

- **Sociological theories of crime: meaning, causation and prevention**

- The definition of sociological theories of crime is as follows:

- Sociological theories of crime try to interpret crime through **societal conditions** and explain deviant or criminal behaviour through the **circumstances** in which they occur.

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- As we have mentioned above, sociologists suggest that societal conditions trigger individuals to commit crime, thus proposing that criminal behaviour is not natural. It is not innate to humans but rather circumstantial. Theories of crime in sociology attempt to explain both the **causation** of crime and how it can/should be **prevented**. We will look at examples of different sociological theories of crime below.

## **Functionalist theories on crime**

Functionalists believe that society needs a certain level of **crime**, as this is **inevitable**, and it also performs significant **positive functions**.

Therefore, all crime should not/cannot be prevented. Two influential functionalist sociologists are **Émile Durkheim** (1964) and **Robert Merton** (1949).

### *Durkheim's perspective on crime*

Durkheim stresses that not all members of society can commit to shared norms, values and beliefs and that exposure to different experiences or circumstances is what makes them different to one another. As a result, some end up breaking the law.

The three functions of crime according to Durkheim are:

- **Regulation:** when a person is apprehended for a crime, everyone else in society becomes aware of which actions are socially acceptable and unacceptable. Mass media e.g. newspapers, the courts and other institutions in contemporary society broadcast the boundaries of admissible behaviour.
- **Integration:** when the whole community unites against a crime, protests and expresses their outrage together, a sense of belonging to a particular community is strengthened.
- **Change:** the law clearly states what is or isn't permissible in society, but it isn't fixed. People notice when the laws don't line up with the shared values and beliefs of the majority. Offenders constantly test the boundaries of permitted action, and if their "crimes" reflect the wishes or changing attitudes of the population, this can lead to legal reform. Eventually, this can spur social change.

### *Merton's strain theory*

Strain theory suggests that crime occurs when there are **insufficient legitimate means** or opportunities available to achieve the goals set by society e.g. financial success. This can happen to people from low-income backgrounds, those who were not well-educated, those who lacked social networks and career opportunities, and so on.

People become frustrated that they cannot succeed in life conventionally, such as by obtaining a good job or working hard. Consequently, a 'strain' or tension develops between the goals and the means of achieving them, producing '**anomie**' - a social condition characterised by the dismantling or destruction of the moral principles,

guidelines, or standards that people generally aspire to. Without these moral standards, people turn to crime to achieve their goals.

### ***Social control theory***

Social control theory sees crime as an outcome of social institutions, such as family or the local community, **losing control** over individuals. This would also include a breakdown of trust in the government and the police.

**Hirschi** (1969) suggests that criminal activity occurs when the strength of attachment between the individual and society - **social bonds** - weaken. There are essentially four types of social bonds:

1. Attachment
2. Commitment
3. Involvement
4. Belief

According to social control theory, the ‘typical delinquent’ can usually be assumed to be a young, single and unemployed individual instead of a married and employed individual. This is because the theory suggests that those who have well-established bonds of attachment and are employed and involved members of social institutions are unlikely to go astray.

## **Physiognomy and Phrenology**

**Physiognomy and Phrenology** Physiognomy deals with making judgments about people’s character from the appearance of their faces. In 1775, John Caspar Lavater, in the book, “Physiognomical Fragments”, systematised many popular observations and made many extravagant claims about the alleged relation between facial features and human conduct. For example, beardlessness in men and its opposite, the bearded woman, were both considered unfavourable trait indicators, as were a “shifty” eye, a “weak” chin, an “arrogant” nose, and so on. Such given classifications are of little significance today. The principal importance of physiognomy lies in the impetus it gave to the better-organised and logically more impressive view that came to be known as phrenology. Phrenology focused on the external

shape of the skull instead of the appearance of the face. Based originally on Aristotle's idea of the brain as the organ of the mind, phrenologists assumed that the exterior of the skull conformed to its interior and therefore to the shape of the brain. Different faculties or functions of the mind were assumed to be associated with different parts of the brain. Therefore, the exterior shape of the skull would indicate how the mind functioned. The eminent European anatomist Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828) is generally given credit for the systematic development of the doctrines of phrenology, though he did not originate or make much use of that term. In 1791 he started publishing materials on the relations between head conformations and the personal characteristics of individuals. Closely allied with Gall in the development of phrenology was his student and one-time collaborator, John Gaspar Spurzheim (1776-1832). It was Spurzheim rather than Gall who carried their doctrines to England and America, lecturing before scientific meetings and stimulating interest in their ideas. Gall listed twenty-six special faculties of the brain; Spurzheim increased the number to thirty-five. Their lists included faculties described as amativeness, conjugality, philoprogenitiveness (love of off spring), friendliness, combativeness, destructiveness, acquisitiveness, cautiousness, self-esteem, firmness, benevolence, constructiveness, ideality, and imitiveness. These were said to be grouped into three regions or compartments:-

- 1) "Lower" or active propensities,
- 2) Moral sentiments, and
- 3) The intellectual faculties.

Crime was said to involve the lower propensities, notably amativeness, philoprogenitiveness, combativeness, secretiveness, and acquisitiveness. These propensities, however, could be held in restraint by the moral sentiments or the intellectual faculties, in which case no crime would be committed. Character and human conduct were thus conceived as equilibrium in the pull of these opposite forces. Animal propensities might impel the individual to crime, but they would be opposed by the higher sentiments and intelligence. Just as other organs were strengthened by exercise and enfeebled by disuse, so were the "organs" of the mind. Careful training of the child, and even of the adult, in right living would strengthen the "organs" of desirable faculties and inhibit through disuse the lower propensities with their concomitants of crime and vice. The obvious scientific criticism of the phrenological theory of crime was that no one was able to observe the physiological "organs" of the mind or their relation to particular types of behaviour. The most serious obstacle to its acceptance by the public, however, was the deterministic nature of its analysis. If human conduct were the result of the organs of the mind, then people's fate was in the hands of their anatomy and physiology. This view was rejected and opposed by teachers, preachers, judges, and other leaders who influenced public opinion, because it

contradicted one of their most cherished ideas, namely that humans are masters of their own conduct and capable of making of themselves what they will. It was the need to show that humans were still masters of their fate (as well as to respond to criticisms of the fatalistic position implied by his earlier work) that led Gall to publish his *Des Dispositions innées de l'âme et de l'esprit du matérialisme* (1811), in which he argued that phrenology was not fatalistic, that will and spirit were basic and supreme in the direction and control of human behaviour.

## **Early Criminological Theory Development**

Scholars suggest that we should start and look at the Classical Theory to have a better overall background of the development of criminological theories and their rise of importance in the United States. In 1764 Cesare Beccaria wrote an essay on Crimes and Punishments, which was one of the first scientific theories of crime. He suggests that people are rational and concerned with minimizing their pain and maximizing their pleasure. Therefore, Beccaria reasoned, people would take the easy way out and commit crimes if it benefited them and the rewards outweigh the risk or pain of punishment. He also rationalized that governments and sovereign states should decide what constitutes a crime and who interpret law and determines the appropriate sentence. He saw judges as those who ensure that the law and its process are accurately and fairly applied. Beccaria would expound on his proposition making clear his beliefs that punishment should be proportional to the crime committed, applied swiftly, with certainty and that all laws must be well published by the state. Beccaria's thesis was so popular that it facilitated and formed the legal bases for criminal legal systems in the United States, France, and other European countries. The Classical Theory as it became known lasted for well over 100 years, and some of its concepts are integrated with criminal theories today (Cullen & Agnew, 2006). The nineteenth-century sociologists and criminologist of positivism and evolution moved the field of criminology from a philosophical to a more scientific perspective of viewing criminological theories. This analysis is directed to the study of the sociological theories of crime and will reference Cesare Lombroso's approach as a prominent early biological theory of crime. His first work presented in 1876 and over the next 30 years, he would revise his opinion that served the basis that biological differences between criminals and ordinary people were causative of delinquency and crime. He drew quite heavily on Darwin's evolution theory suggesting that criminals are not as evolved as other individuals and are more of fewer throwbacks to primitive states and this savagery is cause for their propensity to be delinquent. While his research would later include environmental factors as causative factors leading

individuals to commit a crime, his work widely discredited. Lombroso's position was that research and theories must test against observations of the world made a significant contribution to the disciplinary field.

His work helped establish what is known as the “positive school” of criminology because of his insistence on scientific study; whether the theory was biological, psychological or sociological in-nature (Cullen & Agnew, 2006).

## **Strain**

French sociologist Emile Durkheim, using the same body of theory that inspired Robert Merton’s Strain Theory, produced a product of late 19th century criminological theory. They saw anomie not strain a simple as “normlessness” (below standard); but as the more or less acomplete collapse of social solidarity itself. The destruction of the original bonds uniting individuals in a collective social order so that each person is forced to go it alone (Lilly, Cullen& Ball, 2011, p. 90). Hence, for Durkheim, the collective activity which gave meaning to life and when the mass aspect of society (community) weakened mutual moral support was also eroded affecting the social bonds which lead to increased individualism. That lack of attraction that drew people together would allow a person to deviate away from the norms which regulated the joint effort. However, the French sociologist’s most notable work was in the study of suicide rates amongst Catholic and Protestant populations which later pioneered modern social research and served to distinguish it from a social science from psychology or political philosophy. The Columbine case helps in analyzing the theoretical foundations of the causal factors of crime. The Columbine High School massacre which occurred on April 20, 1999, caused the injury to 24 people and 15 deaths, including the two adolescence offenders, Eric Harris, and Dylan Klebold.

Scholars will continue to explore several facts relating to the strain View point because crime is the result of anomie or normlessness in society caused by a contradiction between the culture and the social structure. Meaning, it is the consequence of the promise of the “American dream” without the traditional means to realize it. Delinquency is the reaction from strain experienced by negative stimuli. The lack of legitimate opportunities produces pressure that leads to delinquent behavior. It is frustrated by the availability of illegitimate opening that facilitates delinquency. When illustrating this case from the strain perspective, you see that the boys’ extreme violence was a reaction to the strain of humiliation due to being bullied at school (Capella, 2010). Because the school did not have a policy toward bullying, they had to turn to illegitimate means to rid the noxious stimulus, which was the destruction of Columbine High. The lack of legitimate opportunity to stop their victimization resulted in the violent plan; and the availability of opportunity to obtain firearms facilitates their plan to carry out the massacre