

## Review Article

# Exploring the Evolution of Criminology: From Classical to Contemporary Perspectives

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## I N F O

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**How to cite this article:**

Sharma P. Exploring the Evolution of Criminology: From Classical to Contemporary Perspectives. *J Adv Res Humani Social Sci* 2023; 10(3): 8-12.

Date of Submission: 2023-08-07

Date of Acceptance: 2023-09-10

## A B S T R A C T

This review article provides a comprehensive examination of the evolution of criminology, tracing its development from classical theories to contemporary perspectives. Beginning with the rational choice theory of the classical school, the narrative progresses through positivist criminology's exploration of biological determinants and the sociological insights of the Chicago School. Symbolic interactionism and labeling theory challenge traditional notions, leading to the emergence of routine activity theory and rational choice models in the latter half of the 20th century. The review also addresses recent advancements in genetic and neuroscientific research, highlighting their impact on understanding the biological underpinnings of criminal behavior. Throughout the journey, the article emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of criminology and the ongoing dialogue between researchers and practitioners, ensuring its adaptability to societal changes. This exploration contributes to a nuanced understanding of crime and informs contemporary intervention strategies.

**Keywords:** Criminology, Biological Criminology, Genetic Influences on Crime, Rational Choice Theory, Routine Activity Theory, Labeling Theory

## Introduction

Criminology, as a field of study, has undergone a fascinating metamorphosis, evolving through different theoretical paradigms to understand the intricate dynamics of crime and criminal behavior. Rooted in the intellectual soil of the Enlightenment, criminology's journey began with the classical school, where luminaries like Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham laid the groundwork for rational choice theory. This review article embarks on a comprehensive exploration of criminology's trajectory, navigating through the landscapes of positivism, the sociological lens of the Chicago School, symbolic interactionism, and the contemporary resurgence of biological and genetic inquiries.

As society evolved, so did criminology, adapting to

shifting philosophical and scientific currents. The positivist criminologists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Cesare Lombroso, challenged classical notions by suggesting that criminal behavior had biological roots. The Chicago School, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, introduced a sociological perspective that brought urban environments and social disorganization into the criminological discourse.<sup>1</sup>

The mid-20th century witnessed a paradigm shift with symbolic interactionism and labeling theory, which directed attention towards societal reactions and the construction of deviant identities. The latter part of the century saw the emergence of routine activity theory and rational choice models, emphasizing the importance of daily activities and decision-making processes in understanding criminal behavior.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, criminology continues to evolve, embracing interdisciplinary collaborations that incorporate genetics and neuroscience into its toolkit. This holistic approach aims to unravel the intricate interplay of biological, sociological, and environmental factors in shaping criminal conduct. As we delve into the annals of criminological history, this review underscores the dynamic nature of the field and its enduring relevance in the face of societal transformations. By tracing its intellectual lineage, we gain valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of crime and the ever-adapting strategies employed to combat it.<sup>2</sup>

### **Classical Criminology**

Classical criminology, originating during the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, laid the cornerstone for the systematic study of crime and criminal behavior. Pioneered by figures such as Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham, classical criminology focused on rational choice theory as its central tenet. According to this perspective, individuals were seen as rational actors who carefully weighed the potential benefits and costs before committing a criminal act.

Beccaria's seminal work, "On Crimes and Punishments" (1764), argued for a legal system that prioritized proportionate punishment, deterrence, and the prevention of crime. Bentham's utilitarian philosophy furthered these ideas, introducing the concept of the "panopticon," an architectural model designed to optimize surveillance and deter criminal activity.<sup>3</sup>

Central to classical criminology was the belief that punishment should be swift, certain, and proportionate to the crime committed. The emphasis on the predictability of punishment aimed to dissuade individuals from engaging in criminal behavior by making the costs outweigh the benefits.

While classical criminology laid the groundwork for subsequent theories, it faced criticism for its simplistic assumptions about human behavior and its tendency to overlook the social and environmental factors influencing criminal conduct. Nonetheless, the enduring legacy of classical criminology lies in its role as the progenitor of systematic criminological inquiry, paving the way for diverse perspectives that would follow in its wake.<sup>4</sup>

### **Positivist Criminology**

Positivist criminology emerged as a response to the limitations of classical criminology, introducing a more scientific and empirical approach to understanding crime. Positivism gained prominence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, challenging the notion that criminal behavior was solely a result of rational choices. Instead, positivist criminologists sought to identify external factors, often beyond an individual's control, that could contribute to criminal conduct.

One of the key figures in positivist criminology was Cesare Lombroso, whose work laid the foundation for biological theories of criminality. Lombroso proposed the idea of the "born criminal," suggesting that certain individuals were biologically predisposed to criminal behavior due to atavistic features or physical abnormalities. This marked a departure from the classical emphasis on free will and rational decision-making.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond biological factors, positivist criminology also explored sociological and environmental influences on criminal behavior. Enrico Ferri, a contemporary of Lombroso, expanded the positivist perspective by emphasizing the role of social and economic factors in shaping criminal conduct. Ferri argued that crime was a response to social conditions and that addressing these conditions could reduce criminality.

Positivist criminology introduced empirical research methods and statistical analyses into the study of crime, moving away from the philosophical speculations of classical criminology. However, it faced criticism for overemphasizing the role of individual traits and neglecting broader social structures.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, positivist criminology evolved to incorporate psychological and psychiatric perspectives, further broadening the understanding of criminal behavior. While not without its challenges and controversies, positivist criminology marked a crucial shift towards a more scientific and interdisciplinary approach to studying crime and laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in criminological thought.<sup>6</sup>

### **Chicago School and Social Ecology**

The Chicago School of Criminology, active during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, represents a pivotal shift from individualistic and biological perspectives to a more sociological understanding of crime. This school of thought emerged at the University of Chicago and was characterized by a group of scholars, including Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Clifford Shaw, who sought to explore the social and environmental factors influencing criminal behavior.

At the core of the Chicago School's approach was the concept of social ecology, which examined how the physical and social environment of urban areas shaped patterns of crime. The scholars argued that crime was not solely a result of individual characteristics but was deeply intertwined with the characteristics of the neighborhoods in which individuals lived.

The ecological theory proposed by the Chicago School emphasized the importance of studying communities, their structures, and how social disorganization contributed to criminal behavior. Shaw and McKay, two prominent figures associated with the Chicago School, developed

the social disorganization theory, which highlighted the impact of deteriorating neighborhoods on crime rates. They argued that certain urban areas, characterized by poverty, instability, and a lack of social cohesion, were more prone to criminal activities.<sup>7</sup>

The Chicago School's emphasis on the spatial and social dimensions of crime marked a departure from earlier criminological theories. It paved the way for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between individuals and their environments. The influence of the Chicago School extended beyond criminology, shaping the field of sociology and urban studies.

While the Chicago School's ideas have been subject to critique and modification over the years, its legacy persists in contemporary criminology, especially in the exploration of how social and environmental factors contribute to criminal behavior in diverse urban settings. The school's focus on social ecology has provided valuable insights into the complexities of crime and has influenced subsequent generations of criminologists in their examination of the social roots of criminality.<sup>8</sup>

### **Symbolic Interactionism and Labeling Theory**

In the mid-20th century, a significant paradigm shift occurred in criminological thought with the emergence of symbolic interactionism and labeling theory. These perspectives challenged traditional notions of criminality by shifting the focus from the inherent characteristics of individuals to the societal processes of defining and reacting to deviance.

Symbolic interactionism, rooted in the works of sociologists such as George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, emphasized the role of symbols and social interactions in shaping human behavior. This theoretical framework posited that individuals construct their identities and meanings through social interactions, and these meanings, in turn, influence their actions. Applied to criminology, symbolic interactionism suggested that labeling individuals as criminals could lead to the internalization of this label, influencing their subsequent behavior.

Labeling theory, an offshoot of symbolic interactionism, expanded on these ideas and delved deeper into the consequences of societal reactions to deviant behavior. Howard Becker, in his influential work "Outsiders" (1963), introduced the concept of "moral entrepreneurs" and explored how societal reactions, including the application of labels such as "criminal" or "deviant," could contribute to the formation of a deviant identity. The theory argued that the act of labeling could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as individuals internalized these labels and engaged in further deviant behavior as a result.

Labeling theorists contended that the criminal justice system, by stigmatizing individuals with criminal labels, could exacerbate rather than alleviate criminal behavior. This perspective called attention to the potential unintended consequences of punitive measures, suggesting that the societal response to crime played a crucial role in perpetuating a cycle of criminality.<sup>9</sup>

Symbolic interactionism and labeling theory introduced a sociological lens that considered the dynamic nature of human interactions and the social construction of deviance. These perspectives prompted criminologists to reevaluate the criminal justice system's role in shaping behavior and led to a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between societal reactions, labels, and the perpetuation of criminal conduct. Today, these theories continue to influence discussions on the social consequences of labeling and the importance of a rehabilitative rather than purely punitive approach within the criminal justice system.<sup>10</sup>

### **Routine Activity Theory and Rational Choice**

In the latter half of the 20th century, criminology underwent further transformation with the development of Routine Activity Theory and the continued evolution of Rational Choice perspectives. These theories shifted the focus from individual characteristics and societal reactions to the actual routine activities and decision-making processes of potential offenders.

Routine Activity Theory, first introduced by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson in 1979, departed from traditional criminological approaches by concentrating on the convergence of three elements: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. The theory emphasized that crime was likely to occur when these three elements intersected in time and space. It underscored the significance of everyday activities and the built environment in influencing criminal opportunities.<sup>11</sup>

Building upon the rational choice foundation laid by classical criminology, Rational Choice perspectives within this context focused on the decision-making processes of individuals when choosing to engage in criminal activities. Scholars like Gary Becker extended the rational choice framework by incorporating economic principles, suggesting that individuals weigh the potential benefits and costs of criminal behavior, factoring in the perceived risk of apprehension and the severity of punishment.

Rational Choice theorists argued that individuals were rational actors who sought to maximize their utility, whether in legal or illegal pursuits. This perspective expanded beyond traditional criminological thinking by applying economic concepts such as cost-benefit analysis to understand criminal decision-making. Policy implications

of Rational Choice theory often revolved around altering the perceived costs and benefits of criminal behavior to deter potential offenders.<sup>12</sup>

Together, Routine Activity Theory and Rational Choice perspectives brought a practical and decision-oriented focus to criminology. They shifted the conversation from abstract theories of criminality to the tangible aspects of daily life and individual decision-making processes. These theories have been applied to various contexts, from understanding property crime patterns to informing crime prevention strategies.

While receiving both acclaim and criticism, Routine Activity Theory and Rational Choice perspectives have left an enduring impact on criminology, enriching the discipline with practical insights and contributing to the ongoing dialogue on crime prevention and the rationality of criminal behavior.

### Biological and Genetic Influences

In recent years, criminology has witnessed a resurgence of interest in biological and genetic influences on criminal behavior. This contemporary perspective explores the interplay between genetics, neurobiology, and environmental factors to better understand the biological underpinnings of criminal conduct. While these theories have generated significant debate and ethical concerns, they contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex origins of criminal behavior.

Biological explanations for criminality often involve examining the role of genetics, brain structure, and neurotransmitter function. Twin, adoption, and family studies have been conducted to assess the heritability of criminal tendencies. Research suggests that genetic factors may contribute to individual differences in impulsivity, aggression, and susceptibility to environmental risk factors.

Neurobiological studies delve into the structure and function of the brain, investigating how abnormalities or dysfunctions may be associated with criminal behavior. Advances in brain imaging technologies have allowed researchers to explore the neurological basis of traits such as impulsivity and aggression, shedding light on potential neural markers of criminal predisposition.

The role of neurotransmitters, chemicals that transmit signals in the brain, has also been examined in the context of criminal behavior. Imbalances in neurotransmitter systems, such as serotonin and dopamine, have been linked to traits associated with criminality, though the causative relationship remains complex and multifaceted.

While biological and genetic influences provide valuable insights, ethical considerations loom large. The potential for stigmatization and misuse of genetic information raises

concerns about the unintended consequences of these findings. Striking a balance between scientific inquiry and ethical responsibility is crucial in navigating the complex terrain of biological criminology.

Contemporary criminologists recognize that a holistic understanding of criminal behavior involves integrating biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives. The interaction between an individual's genetic makeup and environmental influences is now at the forefront of research, fostering a more nuanced comprehension of the factors contributing to criminal conduct.

As technology advances and interdisciplinary collaborations flourish, the study of biological and genetic influences on criminology continues to evolve. Researchers and policymakers must approach these findings with caution, considering both the potential benefits and ethical implications, to ensure that scientific progress contributes positively to the field of criminology and society at large.<sup>13-15</sup>

### Conclusion

Criminology has come a long way from its classical roots, evolving to incorporate multidisciplinary perspectives and adapt to changing societal landscapes. While classical theories laid the groundwork, contemporary criminology recognizes the complex interplay of biological, sociological, and environmental factors in shaping criminal behavior. The ongoing dialogue between researchers and practitioners ensures that criminology remains a dynamic field, continually contributing to our understanding of crime and guiding effective intervention strategies.

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