

## INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL EXPLANATIONS OF CRIME

Psychology vs. sociology

- Most theoretical insights into causes of criminal behaviour come from
  - o Psychology
  - o Sociology
- These 2 disciplines explain crime differently

Psychological approach

- o Why & how individuals produce criminal behaviour – where causes of crime are held to reside in the biological or psychological make up of particular types of people (and choices individuals freely make)

Sociological perspectives

- o Why and how society produces crime – looks at the way that society is organised and the manner in which people interact

Criminology emerged as a field of study through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Prior to this, *spirituality* formed the basis of criminal justice

- People as basically good and without sin
- People who committed crimes were violating God's law
- They were deemed sinful and evil

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century this logic still lingers and is strangely seductive

### ***Individual approaches [explanations of behaviour]***

- o Biological
- o Personality-based
- o Behavioural
- o Cognitive

### **BIOLOGICAL/GENETIC APPROACHES**

- A consistent finding in criminological research is that criminal behaviour is concentrated in families and transmitted from one generation to the next
- Biological explanations emphasise the transmission of genes from parents to children
  - o Twin studies – Much of the research trying to tease out the relative contributions of *genetics* and the *environment* to criminal behaviour has examined twins and children adopted away from their biological family
  - o Identical twins (who have identical genes) allow *concordance rates* to be explored – that is the probability that if one twin is criminal the other is also criminal
  - o Twin study indicates that there is a degree of genetic predisposition for crime. However, the research is controversial and has been criticised as methodologically flawed
- Whereas there is no gene for violence or crime, research has indicated that there is a relationship between genes and criminal behaviour (search anger/impulsivity gene')

### Biological risk factors related to antisocial behaviour

- Temperament
- Hyperactivity
- Impulsivity
- Autonomic arousal
- Hormonal influences

### Limitations of genetic arguments for criminal behaviour

- Criminal behaviour covers a wide range of behaviours (murder, stealing, tax evasion)
- A gene for 'crime' probably doesn't exist
- Genetic Theories have a difficult time explaining why criminal behaviour changes over a lifespan (peaks at age 20 and declines after age 30) – should be more constant if controlled by genes

### Cesare Lombroso: Biological explanations theory

- Criminals genetically distinct from non-criminal population
- Incorporated Darwinian evolutionary principles
  - Criminals throwbacks to earlier evolutionary stage
- *Atavism*
  - Where species reverted to long-lost characteristics
  - Asserted in countryside & urban slums, atavistic individuals were breeding criminal offspring
- *Born criminals*
  - Identifiable from observation of physical abnormalities
- Assumed crime essential to nature of individual

### Lombroso claimed:

- 1/3 offenders born criminal
- 2/3 acquire criminality through some environmental contact
- Believed crime was outside individual's control, caused by biological forces
- Set up 'scuola positiva' – 'positive school' [Italian]
  - Positivists: (someone interested in observing or measuring physical behaviour)
    - Investigate what can be observed or measured
    - Facts are irreducible units of truth waiting to be discovered by social scientist

### Criminal anthropology & popular culture – supposed appearance of a criminal

- Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) present the most enduring image; the vamp was depicted of having:
  - Massive eyebrows
  - Sharp protruding teeth
  - Red lips
  - A cruel mouth
  - Pointed and long sharp nails