



# Criminological Theories: An Insight into the Dominant Viewpoints in Uni-variate, Bi-variate and Multi-variate levels of Analysis

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## Abstract

This theoretical paper examines criminological theories at three different levels: uni-variate, bi-variate, and multi-variate. It looks at crime from the legalistic perspective (law breaking) to the traditionalist (cultural deviation). It brings to light the meaning of theories as they apply to the social sciences and criminology particularly: generalizations about, and classifications of, the social world; a particular way or 'eye' of viewing and explaining a criminological issue or event; and as a set of ideas that helps to provide an explanation for something. It emphasizes the central position of theory in social research and how research in turn generates theory. To buttress the applicability of theories in the three levels of criminological analysis in society, the work uses the Demonological theory for univariate; Labelling theory and Differential association theory at bi-variate level; and multi-factor theory and space transition theory at multi-variate level as samples of theories as they relate to crime in society. It shows theory as having the explanatory power to unravel criminal behavior in society. It concludes that, as much as theories unearth crime, it is advisable to combine or triangulate theories as no single theory would be enough for any crime in society.

**Keywords:** *Theory, Criminological Theories, Crime, Uni-variate, Bi-variate and Multi-variate.*

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## Introduction

Criminology is the body of knowledge that deals with crime in society ( Igbo 1999:1). Crime in itself connotes different meanings depending on perspective. From the legalistic approach, crime refers to those activities that break the law of the land and are subject to official punishment (Haralambos & Holborn 2004: 331). Traditionalists conceive crime as acts that deviate from the people's culture (mores, folkways, norms, values, skills etc). Criminology looks at the study of criminal behaviour systematically. On a more generic note, it includes how society reacts to criminal behaviour (penology). In other words, it concerns itself with the sociology of criminal law, crime and social psychology of criminals, and the sociology of punishment. In studying crime, one thing that is central is the perspective at which one looks at it from. Criminological studies take any of the following perspectives as put forward by Igbo (1999):

The Conservative perspective: This perspective looks at criminal law as “given” or sacrosanct and should not be questioned. Like divine rights, criminal laws are viewed as authority driven. It conceives the police as a well-intended

organization but riddled by a few bag personnel in line with the “rotten apple principle”. To resolve this, care should be given to the recruitment policies and training programmes to rid the law enforcement agencies the bag eggs right from the entry point.

Liberal- Cynical perspective: This is sometimes referred to as the Mainstream Criminology. To this perspective, crime is a function of significant others or external forces. Criminal behaviour is looked at beyond the criminal. Environmental forces, peer influence and other significant extraneous factors are seen as accountable for crime in society. To this end, it is believed that a resolve of these extraneous forces will definitely reduce the incidence and spread of crime in society.

The Radical perspective: Equally called the Marxist criminology, this perspective looks at crime as a reaction by members of the lower class against the oppression of the ruling class or elites in society. It is anchored on the fact that economic hardship generates crime. To resolve this situation, members of the lower class should rise up against their oppressors and overthrow their oppressive tendencies and the society will



equilibrate her members where it will be a classless society.

Criminological studies are anchored on theories. A theory is a set of ideas that helps to provide an explanation for something (Haralambos & Holborn 2004: 934). A criminological theory therefore is a set of ideas that provides an explanation for crime in society. To this end, the need for theories in criminology cannot be over emphasized.

A theory is an account of the world which goes beyond what we can see and measure. It embraces a set of interrelated definitions and relationships that organizes our concepts of and understanding of the empirical world in a systematic way. Thus, we may establish a statistical relationship between poverty and crime, but to explain that relationship, we might have to employ a number of theories: about people's motivations, the social meanings attached to poverty and crime, and the cultural constraints which keep sections of the population in poverty (Marshall, 1998:666).

The author went further to show that generally speaking there are three different conceptions of theory in social sciences. Some think of theory as generalizations about, and classifications of, the social world. The scope of generalization varies from theorizing about a particular range of phenomena to more abstract and general theories about society and history as a whole. Others believe that theoretical statements should be translated into a more empirical, measurable and observable propositions, and systematically tested. Thus, in the example above, we should test assumptions about motivations, social meanings and so forth. This approach is usually characterized (rather unhelpfully) as positivism. Finally, yet others argue that theory should explain phenomena, identifying causal mechanisms and processes which, although they cannot be observed directly, can be seen in their effects. For example, Marxists might use the alleged contradiction between the forces and relations of production (unobservable) to explain fluctuations in the levels and development of class struggle(observable). The label realism is sometimes attached to this view.

The concept of theory in criminology in simple sense connotes a particular way or 'eye' of viewing and explaining a criminological issue or event. In this direction, it is said to have a theory about anything (poverty, unemployment, crime, etc.) is to have explanation for it, and to achieve that (explanation) is the goal of science (Abdullahi & Hashim, 2009). Simply put, criminological theory aims to explain people's actions, behaviour, issues and events in society as they relate to crime. Criminologists developed theories as position, viewpoints or standpoints on specific issues of criminological concern in the society.

### **Background to the Study**

Right from hitherto existing societies, of great concern has been the issue of crime. That brought terms like 'Outlaws', 'Bandits', 'Social brigands' etc in oral traditions, novels, and records of past events. The question that continues to beg for an answer is: Why do people commit crime?

Even though this question looks simple, answers to it vary and often times conflict or contradict. For criminologists to get an answer to this question, the need for theory and research came up. Different criminologists came up with different theories which were reinforced by researches in testing the strengths or explanatory power and weaknesses of those theories. At the same time, researches and their results also informed the development of more theories thereby justifying the symbiotic relationship between theory and research.

Again, some theories best apply to cases at individual level (uni-variate/mono-variate like kleptomania), some apply to two people (bi-variate like in the case of divorce, two fighting, a buyer and a seller, passenger and conductor), while others concern a large group of people in what affects the entire society like corruption, kidnapping, electoral violence, examination malpractice, drug abuse, bad governance, etc).

Beginning with the demonological theory which attributes criminal behaviour to the work of the devil (Vold 1958:1) to the classical school which advocates that equal punishment should be meted



out for the same offence (Dow 1980:1), then the neo-classical school that came up with the view that in punishment, the age, mental state, first offender and situational or extenuating factors should be considered; criminological theories moved from those points to the biological and physical-type theories (scientific and empirical theories) and then later dove tailed into the psychological and psychiatric theories (Hanskel& Yablonsky, 1970:349, Gibbons 1973:160). The sociological theories, the multiple factor theory, and the

labelling theory (Lemert 1951:10) followed. Then, in recent times we have the space transition theory and many others too numerous to mention.

It is worthy of note that as society develops, so the advancement comes with new crimes and criminal techniques and the need for researches and theories to control the incidence and spread of such criminal behaviour. As such, the development of criminological theories is endless. We will however make our presentation clearer by looking at theories as they apply to uni-variate, bi-variate and multi-variate levels. This will be done through our review of literature.

### **Uni-variate Level Criminological Theory**

There are many criminological theories that apply at univariate level, that is, at individual level of people in the society. We will however consider the Demonological theory for want of space.

### **Demonological Theory**

This theory believes that the demon or other world evil powers inhibit the heart of man to push him into committing crime. This is exhibited in the confession of arrested criminals by admitting to commit a crime as a result of the devil's work. This theory was very high among primitive or preliterate people. It applies to individuals at uni-variate or mono-variate level. The crime committed by the individual is confessed to, by the individual as being pushed to such evil act by the demon.

The demonological theory held sway for a very long time and even as we speak, we still hear such

confessions from criminals at one time or the other.

Relating it to certain individual crimes like kleptomania, theft, human ritual, murder, manslaughter, burglary, car snatching, armed robbery, etc one discovers that criminals involved in all these criminal acts mentioned have confessed to the demon as having pushed them into going into such acts. This explanation assumes that human beings are robots acting the bidding of the demon.

The demonological theory was tenable at one time or the other to set criminals free or at least reduce the punishment. The demon was seen as responsible for crime in man. However, no matter its possibility in explaining why people commit crime, this theory lost value since it cannot prove the part of the human body inhibited by the demon to commit crime rather than law abiding acts. To this end, this stands as the major weakness of this theory.

The applicability of this theory can be seen in uni-variate or mono-variate level of analysis in our society. Often times, you hardly hear a group of criminals all admitting to the demon as the cause of their criminality; instead, such admittance is always very easily found with individual criminals.

More importantly, the demon is the uni-variate factor propelling criminal behaviour at this level. Nothing aside the demon is said to be the reason why individuals commit crime in the society. To this end, the demonological theory has its explanatory power relative to uni-variate factor.

### **Bi-variate Criminological Theories** **Labelling Theory**

From the denotative meaning of a label, it means a sticker. A name used to identify a product. By this token, a label is a name placed on somebody by another person.

The labelling theory has to do with the official definition, identification and reaction to criminal behaviour. The perspective conceives crime as a



label attached to a person's behaviour by another person. The theory was brought to bear by Edwin Lemert (1951) where he gave a clear demarcation between primary and secondary deviance. To him, primary deviance occurs when the individual commits a crime and he is labelled or sanctioned. Secondary deviance on the other hand occurs when the individual so labelled as a criminal begins to adapt to the social action of the label or stigmatization.

From this, it becomes clear that this theory involves the individual who committed the crime and the other person who labelled him as a criminal. For instance, a husband may give a lift to another woman and his wife happens to see him with the other woman and she begins to make trouble with the husband as a cheat. The trouble made with the husband is the primary deviance. Subsequently, the husband may decide to go into full time cheating on his wife with several women after-all he is regarded as a cheat by his wife already. The art of full-fledged womanizing on the part of the man is the secondary deviance. This could be as a result of lack of trust and anger. The wife does not trust the husband and at the same time, the wife is given to anger.

This is a bi-variate criminological theory application as it involves two individuals like the case of husband and wife above and the factors for the event are equally two: lack of trust and anger. It could also be related in the explanation of several other criminal behaviour. Examples also abound for instance in the case of a young daughter standing with a man on the road and the mother beats her up that she is having an affair with the man. The standing with a man and the beating is the primary deviance while the decision for the girl to begin to have an affair with men henceforth since the mother has stigmatized her as a harlot or prostitute is the secondary deviance. It can also relate to a child stealing money at home and is tagged a thief in the house, harassed and suspected over anything missing from the house whether he knows about it or not. He turns a criminal in his later adult life based on the nomenclature of a thief attached to him already. Again, this involves two people and two factors

too. That is, the girl and her mother and the same lack of trust and anger issues.

According to Hartjen (1978:176-177), when a person is socially defined as a criminal. Two things occur:

- The offender becomes identified, both to himself/herself and publicly, as a different kind of person. He/she is labelled a junkie, a thief, a murderer, and thus stigmatized and relegated to a sub-human status.
- Consequently, a process of special degradation is enacted for the individual and he/she is thus ritually destroyed. The old therefore gives way to the new.

Thus, Howard Becker (1963) argues that criminal behaviour is not a quality of the act committed by a person but a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to the offender. It therefore means that deviant behaviour is any behaviour that another person has so labelled. Once an individual's behaviour has been labelled, it becomes criminalized or changed into a criminal behaviour through social ascription process.

Social ascription process of behaviour is culturally determined. Though exhibited by the individual, what is right and what is wrong in the society is determined by the members of a particular society. For instance, in a particular society, to greet an elderly person, you must prostrate. You do not bring out your hand first except the elder decides to shake you as a younger person. If a younger person sees an elder and bring out his hand first to shake the elder, telling the elder 'hi', it becomes an offence. It would be classified that the younger person lacks home training and is full of disrespect. Meanwhile, in some other societies, when you lie down to greet an elder or anybody at all, it could be concluded that you have a mental problem and needs to be taken to the psychiatric hospital.

Consequently, this analysis above is anchored on two variables and involve two individuals.





### **Differential Association Theory**

Differential Association is a theory of crime and delinquency pioneered by Edwin Sutherland in the 1930s, as a response to the dominant multi-factorial approaches to crime causation, associated particularly with the work of Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck. In contrast to their account, which identified long lists of factors that contribute to crime causation, Sutherland aimed to build an integrated and sociological theory which stressed that crime was basically a learned phenomenon. The theory was elaborated and refined in various editions of Sutherland's works. The central idea is that crime is learned by individuals being in contact with situations where criminality was defined favourably.

It makes the process of criminal behaviour that of a learning process. That is, a non-criminal can only become a criminal by learning from another person who is criminally minded. This was underscored by the work of Sutherland as a breakthrough in the criminological explanation of criminal behaviour. It aligns with the saying that show me your friend and I will tell you who you are. There is no point of neutrality when moving with one with a criminal behaviour.

This theory was however criticized on the ground that it failed to look at the origin of crime. It did not mention who the first criminal was before other people interacting with him learnt criminal behaviour from him. At any rate, it is another criminological theory that could be analyzed at the bi-variate level.

### **Multi-variate Criminological Theory**

#### **Multiple Factor Theory**

William Healy (1915) was the first to posit that no single factor or cause can be isolated and shown to have an incontrovertible relationship with crime (Igbo, 1999:50)

The main argument of the multiple factor theory is that crime is caused by many factors rather than one single factor. The usefulness of this theory is in the ability to explain individual cases from different perspectives.

To this end, from economic to social, political, religious, environmental, cultural factors all contribute in one way or the other to bring about criminal behaviour in society. Poverty, unemployment, failure of the ruling class, religious war, slums and ghettos, ethnicity, tribalism, etc all contribute to crime causation in the society.

#### **Space transition theory**

This theory was developed in 2008 by Jaishankar. Jaishankar is formerly the professor and Head of Department of Criminology at Raksha Shakti University now Rashtriya Raksh University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India. This theory assumes that people move from one space to another for instance from physical space to cyberspace and from cyberspace to physical space. This theory argues that people behave differently when they move from one space to another ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)).

This theory believes that due to the faceless possibilities in the cyberspace and the assumption that it may be difficult to be tracked and uncovered, people are very easily given to criminal behaviour. The movement therefore propels criminal behaviour in several people. For instance, dating sites, pornographic sites, drugs sites, etc make vulnerability to crime easier as compared to the physical world where people tend to exhibit some sense of shame and decency.

This theory looks at the cyberspace which operates at different fronts by millions of people at the same time via different social media. These media is multiple and several variables come to play at all times. This makes this theory to explain crime at multi-variate level in society.

#### **Summary**

Criminological theories have explanatory power to account for criminal behaviour in the society. Some better fit into the uni-variate analysis while some better apply to bi-variate and multi-variate levels. At the beginning, the assumptions were on the demon responsible for criminal behaviour; acting on the individual to make him commit crime. This fits well into the univariate level of



analysis as the demon is assumed to be solely responsible for criminal behaviour. Beyond this traditional believe and superstition, there are other theories that looks at bi-variate levels of analysis like the differential association theory and the labelling theory. Besides , at the multi-variate level, there is the space transition theory and the multiple factors theory which posit that multiple factors come to play in crime causation.

### **Conclusion**

Theories are very important aspect of criminology. They create opportunities to understand the action of individuals in relation to crime. There are so many theories of crime and each claim to have the power to explain crime. However, no single theory can be enough to explain a particular crime and as such, the reason that criminologists are advised to triangulate (use more than one) theories in carrying out their research and analysis.

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