**What is Criminology?**

The scientific discipline of criminology began forming because of two social theorists, Cesare Beccaria and Jermey Bentham. Since the creation of criminology there have been many theories developed by criminologists who wanted to try and better understand crime. Some of those theories are still relevant today, however the definition and study of criminology have become more precise from when the discipline first formed. This is because criminologists have begun gaining a better understanding of what motivates criminals, and prevents people from committing crimes through research. Through advancements in technology, the crime within America and other countries has become easier to document and share. Although these advancements are important because they produce statistics for criminologists to examine and study, the field of criminology might not even exist if it was not for the theorist who first began trying to understand crime.

To understand almost anything, one must first know the history of it. Beccaria and Bentham are important theorists that examined the discipline of criminology because they are practically the foundation of it. Beccaria is often referred to as the founder of classical school of criminology. His essay *On Crimes and Punishments (On Crimes)*, is known as a collection of principles. Beccaria would argue that these principles would make a legal system more systematically rational and efficient. He took offense to the barbarism of the legal codes throughout Europe because he believed their irrationality was insufficient for crime control. The purpose of his essay, *On Crimes* was not intended to question authority, but make it more rational. He argued criminals were motivated to commit crimes because of self interest, which he referred to as a despotic spirit, that every man has. When it came to his argument on punishment, he believed the punishment needed to be equitable to the crime. He argued that if a punishment was certain enough and severe enough to outweigh the criminals gains from the crime than the legal system would be more than just cruelty and random mercy, which is what it was at that time (Paternoster, 2010, pp. 767-770).

Beccaria’s, *On Crimes* gives practical policies to make legal systems more rational and efficient, but no real theory of behavior besides crime is driven by self-interest, that everyone has. In Bentham’s *Principles of Morals and Legislation (Introduction to the Principles)*, he offers a more sustainable general theory of behavior. Bentham argued that human behavior is controlled by gaining pleasure and averting from pain. Things that bring pleasure would grant someone utility. Someone who has self interest would want to maximize their individual utility. Bentham said the four general sources of pain are physical, political, religious, and moral or popular power. When discussing crime a physical pleasure would be being high off drugs. In contrast to this, an example of physical pain would be being shot by a store owner when trying to rob the store. Bentham’s broad theory resembles the rational choice theory in criminology which was named a century after Bentham developed his theory. He argued that pleasures and pains are what ultimately determines the utility of a person’s actions (Paternoster, 2010, pp. 770-771).

Another important theorist whose ideas and arguments have impacted the field of criminology is Lombroso’s. Ellwood (1912) states “It is safe to say that these two books should be found in the library of every judge of a criminal court, every criminal lawyer and every student of criminology and phenology” (p. 716). Lombroso discussed in his books things that influence a person to commit a crime such as; race, sex, age, economic status, education as well as many other factors. Lombroso pulled from almost every source that was available to form his discussion on crime. He was a determined student in the study of social and political conditions, along with anatomy and neurology. His theory was that crime is essentially due to biological or organic conditions (Elwood, 1912, pp. 716-718). His work accomplished that “the criminal man must be studied and not simply crime in the abstract; the criminal must be treated as an individual and not alone his act considered” (Elwood, 1912, p. 723). Lombroso was the first to develop this idea, and this idea is evident in criminology today.

Two authors of *Vold’s Theoretical Criminology* presented a new interpretation of existing criminology theories that allows for both integration and empirical testing. One particular chapter of their book summarizes their argument. The two of them argued several different points like how criminologists should focus on variables, rather than the theories themselves. They also believed criminology theories should be evaluated on their value to the scientific process and not their validity. They also argue that criminology researchers should not falsify theories. However, crime is complex and makes it seem as though every theory is a little true, therefore, no theory can ever be truly falsified. (Bernard, pg. 336).

Hirschi is the third author of *Vold’s Theoretical Criminology* and he argues that theories cannot be integrated with each other. Although the other two authors (Bernard and Snipes) agree that theories cannot be integrated with each other they disagreed with Hirschi’s conclusion that criminology theories contradict each other. The two of them argued that Hirschi’s social psychological interpretation of crime theories in regards to strain, control, and cultural deviance is incorrect because it misconstrues strain and cultural deviance theories. The way theories have been analyzed, accepted, and rejected have all led to what we perceive criminology to be today. There is a lot that goes into assessing criminology theories, and without the diligence of criminologist researchers in testing and studying the theories (Bernard).

Some theories of criminology that were developed centuries ago still remain relevant today. It is still an evolving field of study compared to other social sciences, but over the past century it has evolved as a science and applied discipline. Criminologists think the next best step in continuing the advancement of criminology would be policymaker/practitioner partnerships. The list of significant crime, criminal justice, and victimization issues is increasing and demand for research and policy collaborations. Criminologists believe now is a reassuring time for the field with the abundance of available data, refined methods of data analysis, and realization among researchers and policymakers/practitioners that they must work together in order to effectively defy crime (Blomberg, 2019, pp. 683-684).

“Similar to many criminologists, my interest in pursuing this career was driven by a desire to improve responses to injustices, on both small and large scales(Belknap, 2015 p.1).”

The words of the 2014 American Society of Criminology President. When it comes to the criminal justice system there are still many injustices. Historically, individuals have been kept out of the academy or were not given equal opportunities due to their race, class, gender, or other marginalizations. Due to this, there is a growing diversity among criminologists and more of them have begun advocating for social and legal justice on small and large scales. These legal and social injustices have an effect on criminology because a lot more technology is when assessing and analyzing the data collected. The more the number of injustices, the more off the data and analysis of crime will be. Luckily, criminologists have realized this injustice issue and it has had a powerful impact on expanding the scope and depth of the field (Belknap, 2015).

Improving the injustices will help more effectively combat things like mass incarceration, victimization, racial profiling, and offending through legal and social activism. Criminology has not only become advanced through its theories and understanding of crime, but criminologists have also begun to recognize and implement changes in order to improve the social and legal justice systems. These changes include: proximity to the study of criminology, giving stories of crime that are not drawn from fear or anger, keep hope that change can happen and current criminologists can be a part of the change, and recognizing that advocating for justice and fairness may require uncomfortableness. The field criminology is prominent because without it we would not understand crime or criminals at all. With no understanding, there would be no sense of order and chaos (Belknap, 2015, pg. 16).

In conclusion, criminology has become an important field of study because without it criminals would get away with their crimes and no one would understand them. The discipline of criminology would not be as progressive as it is if it were not for theorists like Becarria, Bentham, and Lombroso. Without their developing theories it would have taken criminologists longer to piece together crime and why criminals commit them, as well as things that keep them from doing so. Many theories have contributed to our understanding of crime as well. The field of criminology still has much development to do, and challenges within politics and economics will continue to play a factor.

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