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**THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIOLOGICAL CRIMINOLOGY: ON THE FACTORS, PERSPECTIVES, AND IMPACT IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY**

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**Abstract**

Sociological criminology emerged in the early 20th century as a departure from traditional psychological and biological theories of crime, shifting its focus to social-structural and ecological factors that influence criminal behaviour. This study fills a gap in criminological literature by examining the development and impact of sociological criminology in the early 20th century. Hence, the prime intention of this study was to uncover the emergence and influence of sociological criminology during this specific time. Using the Narrative Literature Review method, this study identified the factors that caused the emergence of sociological criminology in the early 20th century and examined the repercussions. The conclusion section of the research study explains the various ways in which sociological criminology has contributed to the development of modern criminology.

**Keywords:** Sociological Criminology, Strain Theory, Social Disorganisation Theory, Crime Causation.

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**Introduction**

Over time, there has been an attempt to distinguish between crime and deviance by applying theories, approaches, methodology, and the like. The sociological part of criminology that developed as a branch of study in the twentieth century paid significant deviation from psychological and biological theories of crime. What was underlined more as the major method of examination was the social and ecological aspects of crime. Periodically, sociological criminology has been more involved in academic discourse regarding the numerous impacts of various scholars and organisations in this area of study.

Thus, Williams and McShane (2016) pointed out that sociological criminology was an important one of the weaknesses of the earlier criminological theories that targeted the characteristics and innate features of crime as the principal cause factors. According to the identification concerning criminology theories, different theoretical frameworks in relation to social disorganisation, heterogeneity, and strain theories fell under what was called sociological criminology. These are the 'social structure,' 'culture,' and 'opportunity frameworks', which are referred to as the different aspects that help one to grasp the type of criminal activity.

Kornhauser (1978) reported that these theories emphasised social aspects more than individual causes of crime. Sociological criminology brought a new age into the criminology by stating that rates of crime are the true sign of conflict and social disorganisation. Sociological

criminology can be broadly formulated as a vast body of information, and a correct understanding of the subject's development during the 20th century is required (Kornhauser, 1978).

This research is a contribution to criminological knowledge as it reports on the formation and application of sociological criminology in the early twentieth century. Some previous research has attempted to analyse sociological theories of crime; however, only some attempted to explain the development of sociological criminology, how it was distinct from traditional criminology, and the legacy that it left behind. This research also seeks to integrate sociological criminology's central ideas and concerns for the theory's formulation and practice. The study is relevant because it answers the concerns regarding the historical development and current role of sociological criminology by focusing on specific areas. Hence, this study is structured around the following general research objective and the secondary research questions:

### **Prime intention of the Study**

- To understand the development and impact of sociological criminology as a field of study in the 20th century.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors led to the development of sociological criminology as a field of study?
2. How did sociological criminology differ from other forms of criminology?
3. What were the main theoretical perspectives and debates in sociological criminology?
4. What impact did the emergence of sociological criminology have on the field of criminology?

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### **Methodology**

This research paper explores the development of sociological criminology in the early 20th century using a narrative, literature-based approach. It involved a thorough review of scholarly articles, books, and other publications from criminology, sociology, and related fields. The search for relevant literature included using terms such as 'sociological criminology,' 'early 20th century,' 'social disorganization theory,' 'anomie theory,' and 'strain theory' in academic databases. The narrative literature review followed the research questions outlined in the introduction to identify pertinent literature. The results were analysed thematically based on the theoretical perspectives and debates in early 20th-century sociological criminology.

### **Literature review**

The literature review was conducted based on the study's research questions of the study.

#### **1. What factors led to the development of sociological criminology as a field of study?**

Sociological criminology emerged in the 20th century as a result of various factors interacting with the intellectual and social setting. Therefore, this section discusses the existing literature regarding the impact of positivism, urbanisation, and industrialisation and the beginning of social disorganisation theory.

## Positivism

During the early twentieth century, sociological criminology played the main role in responding to the positivist movement in the pursuit of quantitative social research. Emphasis on such a role led to the following as a key concern of this revolution in sociological study. However, it is the Italian School of Criminology, which includes Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, and Raffaele Garofalo, who made the theory of criminal behaviour as an observable scientific measure famous. A survey on criminal behaviour grounded positivist sociology as emphatically dominant in sociological theories and led to the formation of sociological criminology (Friedman, 1993). Thus, sociological criminology became a specific area of interest for academic studies.

## Urbanisation

In the early years of the twentieth century, Shaw and McKay (1942) formulated the field of sociological criminology as the phenomenon of societies' urbanisation in progression. Thus, they stated that demographic mobility, meaning the migration of people from rural to urban areas, was another factor that accounted for crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour that traditional criminological theories did not account for. The social disorganisation theory was developed with the assumption that disruption of community and the breakdown of ties is the root cause of most crimes (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). Therefore, the social disorganisation theory was accepted to be a viable theory in the arena of sociological criminology.

## Industrialisation

Several scholars determined that the critical increase in industrialisation during the early part of the twentieth century influenced criminology significantly. It changed society from an agricultural-based society to an industrial society. The development of Strain theory lies in the notion that crime occurs when there is a disparity between the cultural aspirations and the said legitimate opportunities (Merton, 1938). In addition, within the scope of Strain theory, it has contributed to the understanding of the impact of social movements to rebellion. It is one of the ideal theoretical frameworks in sociological criminology.

## Social Disorganisation Theory

It is pertinent to note that the social disorganisation theory came to light in the early part of the twentieth century. Crime is, therefore, said to occur where there is a disruption of important social structures that provide for cohesiveness in society as well as overall social integration (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). It was appropriately labelled as the theory of the day because earlier theories failed to explain shifts in criminality attributed to the growth of cities (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Hence, the social disorganisation theory was adopted and developed as a key concept in sociological criminology.

### 2. How did sociological criminology differ from other forms of criminology?

The evolution of criminological thought in the early twentieth century involved the development of a number of schools of thought aiming at providing the most efficient solutions for the problems of crime and punishment. These schools were meant to identify the causes of crimes in order to avoid them, using various theories in criminology (Akers & Sellers, 2013). The sociological criminology deals with analysing the role of social aspects in influencing one to engage in criminal activities as contrasted with the biological form or the individual's free will.

As a result, sociological criminology mainly focuses on the social aspects and their relevance in the sphere of criminology. Durkheim, for his part, argued that crime, like any other thing in society, is inevitable as a result of the need for society to regulate behaviour and maintain order.

It differs from the classical school of criminology, stating that crime is the result of an individual's free-will decision to bend the law and engage in criminal activities so as to gain more (Garofalo, 1885).

Another key feature of sociological criminology that should be mentioned is its focus on the social structure as a cause of crime. Merton (1938) proposed anomie, which means individuals are losers in the social structure and have no motivation to obey law or norms because they have lost connection with society; this is a theoretical framework different from the biological theory of crime advanced by Lombroso (1876).

On the other hand, Sociological criminology differs from the other approaches since it studies the structure of crime. Shaw and McKay (1942) suggested that individuals living in poverty are more likely to engage in deviant behaviour and criminal activities when they experience cultural conflicts with other groups (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Park and Burgess, in 1925, identified social disorganisation and enhanced urbanisation as the root causes of crime in society (Park and Burgess, 1925).

However, sociological criminology has ideologies resembling some of the criminology schools. For instance, differential association theory, developed by Sutherland in 1924, places much emphasis on socialisation leading to criminality. This theory combines positivist and interpretive approaches to analysing criminal conduct (Sutherland, 1924). Additionally, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime claimed that causes of crime can either be sociological or biological and are controlled by self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Criminology has been defined and explained through its development and the different strategies involving this line of study by too many authors. As has been tried to answer the question 'What were the main theoretical perspectives and debates in sociological criminology?' this has reviewed the most significant and leading theoretical perspectives and debates of early sociological criminology.

### **Theory of Anomie**

In the early twentieth century, sociological criminology was influenced by theories that included Anomie and Durkheim's theories. According to Durkheim, the reduction of the rate of socialisation or other words, the sum of norms and values existing in society, contributed considerably to criminal acts. Durkheim stated that because of the changes referred by the Industrial Revolution, the value system of the society needed a change and thus turned into an Anomie state, implying that it had moved away from the norm. According to Durkheim (1951), this theory has a bearing on structural functionalism in criminology (Durkheim, 1951).

### **Strain Theory**

Continuing from Durkheim's (1951) Anomie theory, a study was conducted by Merton (1938), which came up with the strain theory. According to Merton (1938), socialization conflicts can lead to intentional deviance because what people in society want cannot be obtained by conventional means. As a result, they employ the so-called informal or rather illegal and unethical means to achieve their goal. Such frustration makes a person indulge in deviant behaviour and as suggested by Strain theory, a high level of crime (Merton, 1938).

### **Social Disorganisation Theory**

One of the most referenced theorists during the early twentieth century in sociological criminology was Shaw and McKay's social disorganisation theory in 1942. This theory states that crime is related to poverty, migration and a high level of social mobilisation. Shaw and McKay (1942) have also noted that other factors that contribute to this are proliferation and

anomie (Shaw & McKay, 1942).

### **Chicago School**

It is recorded that at the beginning of this twentieth century, experts in the field of criminality affiliated the Chicago School of Criminology to the University of Chicago in the United States. The renaming of the Chicago school involved taking a major interest in sociological criminology, which included the importance of social disorganisation and differential association in society. Some of the main participants of the Chicago school of Sociology were Ernest Burgess, Clifford Shaw and Robert Park (Burgess & Park, 1921).

### **Differential Association Theory**

The other early twentieth-century Criminological theory that is central to understanding crime and delinquency is the Differential Association Theory, which closely relates to social learning theory. This theory advances that persons become criminals through associating with other criminals. Further, they can learn such behaviours in societies where the ethical, cultural or moral fabric has been weakening, due to which crime rates have tended to rise (Sutherland, 1939).

### **Labelling Theory**

It is also one of the most preserved theories developed in the twentieth century. This implies that for those events, society categorises the people as criminals, and that can change such events into the motivating factors within a criminal. According to Becker (1963), the criminal justice system has enacted criminals, and through the criminals, the level of criminal incidence has increased in societies.

From these theories, Durkheim's anomie theory, Merton's strain theory, Shaw and McKay's social disorganisation theory of the Chicago School, Sutherland's differential association theory and the Labelling theory were of significant importance in twentieth-century criminology. Influence: They played significant roles in building and developing sociological criminology.

### **3. What were the main theoretical perspectives and debates in sociological criminology?**

Sociological criminology has made a huge impact on the development of the study of criminology. For a long time before the appearance of sociological criminology, there was an emphasis on the personological and psychological factors that are the causes of crimes. Sociological criminology has also always been concerned with the nature of society in as much as it relates to crime.

### **Expansion of Criminological Theories**

In the sociology of criminology, the theories of criminology were taken a notch higher. Among them are the strain theory, the social disorganisation theory, the differential association theory, and the labelling theory. Hence, the sociology of criminology was the approach to criminal aetiology and research in Criminology (Cullen and Agnew, 2011).

### **Shift in Focus**

Sociological criminology offered an alternative focus for crime investigation by criminologists by undertaking a shift from an individualistic to a social-structural perspective. This has, therefore, led to the development of critical criminology, which narrowed its focus on power, injustice and crime, as suggested by Taylor et al. (2013). In addition, the further development of sociological criminology is the impact of feminism crime, which focuses mainly on gender and power aspects and crime association or linkages, as defined by Daly (2016).

## New Research Methods

In the area of crime, sociological criminology has introduced some new research methods or frameworks to frame the research work for linking the social structure with crime, and these approaches are quantitative research in coordination with the qualitative research. These have been employed in researching various relations such as poverty and crime, social disorganisation and crime rates, labelling theory and criminality, among other relations (Hagan, 2013).

## Policy Implications

This has also impacted sociological criminology because many of them relate to policies relating to society. Sociological criminologists, for example, assert that social structure and not individuality is to blame for crimes. This was because these discourses would change the policies of criminal justice systems from retributive to more reformatory and crime prevention based on community justice (Garland, 2001). Therefore, in some ways, sociological criminologists have endeavoured to foster restorative justice in society (Braithwaite, 2002).

## Critiques

It is a proven fact that sociological criminology, just like any other branch of learning, is not exempt from criticism from different scholars who have practised in the field all through. Critics have argued that sociological criminology neglects any individual-level explanation for criminal behaviour (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Critics have accused it of over-emphasizing social and contextual variables as the cause of crime while it more or less disregards individual variables that lead to it (Katz, 1988).

**Table no 01: Overview of the key elements discussed in the literature review.**

Research Question	Key Concepts/Theories	Description	References
1. What factors led to the development of sociological criminology?	Positivism	Emphasized empirical research to understand criminal behavior, influenced by Italian School of Criminology.	Friedman (1993)
	Urbanization	Rapid urbanization led to increased crime, explained by social disorganization theory, emphasizing the breakdown of social institutions.	Shaw & McKay (1942), Bursik & Grasmick (1993)
	Industrialization	Shift from agrarian to industrial society influenced Strain theory, highlighting the mismatch between goals and means.	Gottfredson & Hirschi (1990), Merton (1938)
	Social Disorganization Theory	Crime results from the breakdown of social institutions and weakening of social ties, foundational to sociological criminology.	Bursik & Grasmick (1993), Shaw & McKay (1942)
2. How did sociological criminology differ from other forms of	Focus on Social Context	Sociological criminology emphasized social structure and processes rather than individual factors like genetics or rational	Akers & Sellers (2013), Durkheim



criminology?		decision-making.	(1895)
	Role of Social Structure	Highlighted social structure’s influence on criminal behavior, contrasting with biological and classical theories of crime.	Merton (1938), Lombroso (1876)
	Integration with Other Theories	Sociological criminology shared ideologies with other criminological schools, integrating concepts like differential association and self-control.	Sutherland (1924), Gottfredson & Hirschi (1990)
3. What were the main theoretical perspectives and debates in sociological criminology?	Theory of Anomie	Suggested that crime occurs due to the decline of social norms and values, influenced by rapid social changes.	Durkheim (1951)
	Strain Theory	Expanded on Anomie, proposing that strain from unmet goals leads to deviant behavior.	Merton (1938)
	Social Disorganization Theory	High crime rates are linked to poverty, migration, and social disintegration.	Shaw & McKay (1942)
	Chicago School	Focused on social disorganization and differential association as key factors in criminology.	Burgess & Park (1921)
	Differential Association Theory	Criminal behavior is learned through association with criminals and in contexts where social norms are weakened.	Sutherland (1939)
	Labelling Theory	Suggests that societal labeling of individuals as criminals can reinforce criminal behavior.	Becker (1963)
4. What impact did the emergence of sociological criminology have on the field of criminology?	Expansion of Criminological Theories	Introduced new theories like strain theory, social disorganization theory, and labeling theory, offering new approaches to criminology.	Cullen & Agnew (2011)
	Shift in Focus	Shifted focus from individual factors to social structural factors, contributing to the development of critical and feminist criminology.	Taylor, Walton, & Young (2013), Daly (2016)
	New Research Methods	Introduced quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the relationship between social structures and crime.	Hagan (2013)
	Policy Implications	Influenced shifts in criminal justice policies from punitive to rehabilitative and community-based crime prevention.	Garland (2001), Braithwaite (2002)
	Critiques	Faced criticism for overemphasizing social factors and neglecting individual factors in crime causation.	Gottfredson & Hirschi (1990), Katz (1988)

(Source: Based on the literature survey, 2024).

Accordingly, the development of sociological criminology has changed the field of criminology. It gave a new philosophical approach to criminologists, and it has emphasised the significance of the societal factors and the social structural factors of crime. Moreover, it gave a new methodological approach to the field of criminology. Despite the critiques of sociological criminology, it has had a significant impact on the field of criminology. Therefore, it can be identified the sociological criminology as the central component of contemporary criminology research.

## Discussion

Sociological criminology emerged in the early 20th century within the frameworks of social, political and economic factors. Rapid social changes occurred in society due to urbanisation, industrialisation, and migration, and crime rates in the cities have increased. These changes especially caused an increase in urban criminal occurrences. Thus, it took much work for criminologists to describe these changes. They have also identified that more than concern about individual factors is needed to get a comprehensive idea of crime. Sociological criminology emerged as a reaction to the clarifications of social changes and individual crimes. As the limitations of social changes and individual crimes have become greater, sociological criminology has become a field of academia.

Sociological criminology appeared at the beginning of the 20th century as a sub-discipline of criminology, and it has emphasised the societal and social structural factors of crime. Although classical and positivist criminology has focused on individual criminals, sociological criminology has focused on the societal and social structural factors affecting crime. Thus, poverty, inequality, social disorganisation, and the impact of social institutions were examined.

Within sociological criminology, the strain theory, social disorganisation theory, differential association theory and labelling theory were the dominant theories at the beginning of the 20th century. The strain theory emphasises that crimes occur due to an individual's incapability to achieve their goals through legitimate means. Moreover, this has led to an increase in the use of illegal means. On the other hand, the social disorganisation theory elucidated the social and economic factors affecting the crimes. And differential association theory explains that criminal behaviours can be learned from the association of criminals in society, while the labelling theory indicates the influence of social stigma on criminal behaviour.

The development of sociological criminology has shaped the field of criminology, and it has developed critical criminology and feminist criminology. It has contributed much to the development of sociological and criminological research with the implementation of a mixed-method approach in the field of criminology. Moreover, it has influenced policy implications and has developed restorative justice by giving a new approach to the field of criminology.

Despite the critiques that sociological criminology has disregarded the individual factors of crimes, it has become a prominent discipline in modern criminological research. Moreover, sociological criminology has contributed to expanding the understanding of scholars about criminal aetiology. Beyond that, it is the impact of sociological criminology on the field of criminology which has to be assessed as it has been produced in academia regarding the causative factors of crime.

Moreover, sociological criminology also opened the way for new interdisciplinary disciplines to develop. It has been crucial in terms of making progress on the research into criminal behaviour. It has provided criminology researchers with the ability to benefit from an interdisciplinary approach. It has also given them the ability to study criminal behaviour from a more holistic perspective. The outcome is that criminology becomes more useful in policy and practice. Likewise, the relevance of criminology to policy and practice has been growing



and more applicable in real life.

Apart from that, the policies of the criminal justice system have been significantly influenced by sociological criminology. The policy approaches of sociological criminology have even resulted in excluding the conventional approaches for crime prevention. Sociological criminology also significantly influences the development of restorative justice, and it has been responsible for focusing on the identification of the main causal factors of crime.

### Conclusions

In the early twentieth century, sociological criminology shifted towards studying the causes of crime in society rather than individual causes. This development introduced theories of strain, social disorganization, and differential association that assisted the researchers in better understanding crime and underlined its relevance to society. Thus, this change has impacted not only criminal justice but also social policy. Despite the critiques, sociological criminology has given modern criminology much insight into the social aspects of crime.

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