

CRIMINAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Criminology, Anthropology, Sociology, Penology

1. Core Definition

Criminal Anthropology is a discipline rooted in the 19th-century positivist movement, specifically within the field of criminology, dedicated to the study of the relationship between biological, physical, and psychological characteristics and criminal behavior. This area of inquiry was foundational to the transition from the classical school of criminology--which emphasized free will and rational choice--to the positivist school, which sought scientific, deterministic explanations for deviance. At its core, Criminal Anthropology operates on the assumption that certain individuals are inherently predisposed to criminality due to inherited or developmental traits that differentiate them physically and mentally from non-offenders. The field's primary goal was the identification, categorization, and study of the "**criminal type**" based on observable, measurable traits, moving the focus of justice systems from the crime itself to the biological and social characteristics of the offender.

The field distinguishes itself by adopting a strictly empirical and scientific methodology, contrasting sharply with the philosophical and legalistic approaches of its predecessors. Proponents believed that by classifying human populations based on physical metrics, it would be possible to isolate those who represented a biological throwback, or atavism, to a primitive state of human evolution. This approach inherently linked criminality not to moral failing or societal structure, but to deterministic factors outside the individual's control, whether biological or, later, environmental. This deterministic framework provided the academic justification for comprehensive study of the criminal body and mind, giving rise to rigorous, albeit flawed, data collection methods concerning cranial measurements, physical anomalies, and psychological profiles.

While the original, purely biological theories of Criminal Anthropology have been largely discredited by modern science, the term encompasses the broader historical period and methodological shift that placed the individual offender at the center of criminological analysis. It laid the groundwork for subsequent biosocial and psychological schools of thought that continue to investigate the interplay between genetic, neurological, and environmental factors in determining criminal propensity. The initial belief, as summarized by early proponents, was that specific tangible traits separated criminal people from those not affiliated with crime, suggesting a fundamental biological difference that required focused anthropological investigation rather than mere penal correction.

2. Historical Development and the Positivist School

Criminal Anthropology emerged in the late 19th century, primarily within Italy, spearheaded by the physician and forensic psychiatrist **Cesare Lombroso** (1835-1909), often referred to as the "father

of modern criminology." Lombroso's work, particularly his seminal text, *L'uomo delinquente* (The Criminal Man, 1876), formalized the discipline and established the core tenets of the Italian Positivist School of Criminology. This school represented a revolutionary shift from the Classical School, which assumed legal equality and rational calculation on the part of the offender. In contrast, Positivism argued that scientific inquiry could uncover the true causes of crime, which were rooted in deterministic factors--initially biological, and later broadened by disciples like Enrico Ferri and Raffaele Garofalo to include sociological and environmental factors.

Lombroso's inspiration often traces back to the examination of the skull of the infamous brigand Giuseppe Villella in 1870. Lombroso claimed he discovered a pit in the occipital region (the median occipital fossa), a characteristic he believed was indicative of lower primates. This discovery, whether scientifically accurate or not, served as the epiphany for his theory of atavism--the idea that criminals were biological throwbacks to an earlier, savage stage of human evolution. This framework provided an attractive, if simplistic, explanation for persistent crime, suggesting that the problem lay not in society or law, but in the defective biological constitution of the criminal individual.

The rapid acceptance of Criminal Anthropology across Europe and the Americas reflected the broader cultural context of the late 19th century, dominated by evolutionary theory (following Darwin) and a strong faith in deterministic scientific measurement. This scientific enthusiasm led to the widespread application of anthropometric data collection in prisons and asylums, as researchers attempted to replicate and expand upon Lombroso's findings. While the initial focus was strictly biological, the Positivist School gradually integrated external factors; Ferri emphasized social determinants alongside biology, and Garofalo contributed the psychological and moral dimensions of criminality. However, the foundational belief remained that scientific analysis of the individual could predict and explain criminal behavior more effectively than legal statutes alone.

3. The Lombrosian Theory of Atavism and Born Criminals

The central, most controversial tenet of Criminal Anthropology is the concept of the "**born criminal**" (*reo nato*), inextricably linked to the theory of **atavism**. Lombroso posited that a significant portion of the criminal population were not merely individuals who chose to commit crimes, but rather, were fundamentally different beings, evolutionary throwbacks whose biological structure and corresponding moral sensibilities were more primitive than those of modern, law-abiding citizens. Atavism, in this context, describes the reappearance of traits that had been absent in intervening generations, suggesting that the born criminal retained the savage instincts and physical characteristics necessary for survival in pre-civilized society.

Lombroso further stratified criminals into distinct categories, recognizing that not all deviance could be explained by pure biological determinism, although the born criminal remained his primary

focus. These categories included:

The Born Criminal (*reo nato*): Individuals who displayed inherent, measurable physical and mental abnormalities (atavistic stigmata) that rendered them incapable of conforming to social norms. They represented 30% to 40% of the criminal population according to Lombroso's estimates.

The Insane Criminal (*delinquente pazzo*): Individuals whose criminality stemmed from recognizable mental illness (e.g., alcoholism, paranoia, idiocy) rather than pure atavism.

The Criminaloid (*delinquente occasionali*): The largest group, comprised of occasional criminals whose offenses were prompted primarily by opportunity or environmental factors, but who possessed latent biological weaknesses.

The Criminal of Passion (*delinquente passionale*): Individuals who commit crimes due to sudden, intense emotional states (e.g., grief, patriotism, honor), often exhibiting high moral character otherwise, and rarely repeating the offense.

The significance of the born criminal thesis was not merely academic; it had profound policy implications. If criminality was an intrinsic, biological state, then rehabilitation was likely impossible or ineffective. The appropriate response, according to this deterministic model, was permanent incapacitation or segregation to protect society from individuals biologically incapable of moral behavior. This framework shifted penological thought from focusing on punishment proportionate to the crime (Classical School) to measures designed to mitigate the inherent risk posed by the offender (Positivist School).

4. Key Concepts: Physical Stigmata

The most concrete expression of Criminal Anthropology involved the comprehensive cataloging of physical abnormalities, or **stigmata**, which Lombroso and his followers believed characterized the born criminal. These stigmata were thought to be visible manifestations of their atavistic nature. The methodology required meticulous anthropometric measurement--the systematic collection of data concerning body dimensions--on incarcerated populations, which led to exhaustive lists of potential criminal markers.

These physical stigmata included a wide array of morphological deviations. Cranial anomalies were particularly scrutinized, with identified traits including a receding forehead, exaggerated jaw size (prognathism), asymmetry of the face or cranium, and large or unusually shaped ears. Other non-cranial markers included sparse beard growth, unusually long arms, high cheekbones, excess wrinkling, and specific eye defects. Furthermore, Lombroso suggested that functional characteristics, such as unusual sensitivity to pain, dulled sense of touch, or specific tattoo

preferences (often violent or sexual imagery), also served as identifying stigmata.

The collection and interpretation of these stigmata were central to the positivist methodology, serving as the empirical proof for the born criminal theory. Researchers generated extensive statistical comparisons between criminal populations and control groups of non-offenders (such as soldiers or factory workers). Although Lombroso often conflated correlation with causation and failed to adequately control for variables like disease, nutrition, and poverty--which heavily influenced the physical health of incarcerated populations--his meticulous documentation established a standard for empirical data collection in criminology that persisted long after his specific theories were discarded. The practice of linking external physical attributes to internal moral or psychological deficiencies, however, remains one of the most ethically fraught aspects of this historical discipline.

5. Legacy and Influence on Penology

Despite the eventual scientific repudiation of the born criminal theory, Criminal Anthropology had a profound and lasting impact on the evolution of criminology, criminal justice, and penology. Its most significant legacy was the forceful shift from a juridical focus (the nature of the law and the crime) to a scientific focus (the nature of the offender). This change fundamentally altered how societies viewed and processed criminals.

This new focus led directly to the development of the **individualized treatment model**. If crime was determined by biological, psychological, or social factors unique to the offender, then the goal of the justice system should be diagnosis and treatment, not merely retribution. This influenced the introduction of indeterminate sentencing, parole systems, probation, and specialized juvenile courts--mechanisms designed to treat the individual risk profile rather than simply punish the act committed. The principles of offender classification and risk assessment, which are commonplace today, find their intellectual origin in the methodologies pioneered by the Positivist School.

Furthermore, Criminal Anthropology catalyzed the integration of multiple scientific fields into the study of crime. Although Lombroso's biological conclusions were faulty, his insistence on using empirical methods--including statistics, anthropology, and medicine--forced criminology to evolve into an interdisciplinary social science. It paved the way for modern psychological and biosocial criminology, which, while rejecting the simplistic determinism of atavism, still explores the complex interaction between genetics, neurobiology, environment, and behavior in the development of criminal propensity.

6. Debates and Criticisms

From its inception, Criminal Anthropology faced significant academic and ethical opposition. The most rigorous and famous challenge came from the English physician and statistician **Charles**

Goring. In his 1913 work, *The English Convict: A Statistical Study*, Goring meticulously re-examined Lombroso's findings using a controlled study involving 3,000 English convicts and a control group of non-criminals. Goring concluded that there were no statistically significant differences in the physical measurements of criminals versus non-criminals, effectively debunking the claim that a distinct set of physical stigmata characterized the criminal type. He attributed the minor differences found to poor nutrition and socio-economic status rather than inherited degeneracy.

Beyond methodological flaws, the theory drew intense criticism for its deterministic and potentially racist implications. By suggesting that certain groups (often based on class, race, or geography) were biologically inferior and predisposed to crime, Criminal Anthropology provided pseudo-scientific justification for discriminatory practices and, indirectly, supported the nascent eugenics movement. Critics argued that the theory ignored the profound impact of **environment and conscious choices**--key factors highlighted by sociologists and those returning to the principles of the Classical School, who argued that poverty, inequality, and lack of education were far more relevant causes of crime than skull size.

Modern critiques focus on the inherent ideological bias in the positivist framework, which often served to protect the established social order by pathologizing deviance and locating the source of social problems within the individual, rather than in the political or economic structures of society. While subsequent biosocial theories have adopted scientifically sounder methodologies (e.g., genetic research, neuroscience), they must constantly navigate the historical shadow of Criminal Anthropology's flawed deterministic assumptions and the potential for misuse in policy.

Further Reading

Lombroso, C. (1876). *L'uomo delinquente* (The Criminal Man).

Goring, C. (1913). *The English Convict: A Statistical Study*.

[Cesare Lombroso \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Positivist School of Criminology \(Wikipedia\)](#)