Paradigms in criminology

Introduction

The science of criminology, which is roughly a hundred years old, is a relatively young field of study which, broadly speaking, aims to study crime as a social phenomenon. Criminology covers various facets such as the etiology of criminal behaviour, the development, change and application of criminal laws, the correction (rehabilitation) of the offender as well as the criminal-victim relationship, or as it is more commonly known, victimology (Reid 1976; Barlow 1978; Schurink 1979; Stevens 1983). In the study of crime researchers draw upon various disciplines, but criminology remains a discipline in itself. Although there has been some difference of opinion regarding this statement, Reasons (1975) supports it by pointing out that criminology has accumulated its own set of organised data and methods in the development of theoretical concepts and makes use of a scientific method and approach in research. According to Wolfgang as cited by Reasons (1975: 333–334), the criminologist is, therefore,

"... one whose professional training (and) occupational role ... are concentrated toward a scientific approach, study and analysis of the phenomena of crime and criminal behaviour."

The essence of this scientific pursuit then would be to observe and analyse events in order to discover some kind of natural or historical order which can in turn be used to explain and predict other occurrences (Inciardi 1978). A scientific approach to crime implies objectivity, which means that the criminologist’s prejudices and values do not intervene with his study of crime. As Barlow (1978) correctly points out, however, this is only applicable in theory and not in practice since scientists (criminologists) are human beings who all subscribe to certain values and the particular assumptions or beliefs that they imply. The impact of values can inter alia be seen in how criminologists conceptualise their field and its subject matter. The many differences in opinion merely regarding what the definition of crime should be, reflect the intrusion of values. It is therefore of paramount importance to define what crime is, since the definition that is adopted determines the subject matter of criminology and sets limits on what is to be considered criminological work. In short it makes some questions more likely to be asked than others (Barlow 1978; Kramer 1982).

Aim

The two major approaches to the definition of crime will be discussed — first, to illustrate how different values held by criminologists influence the choice of field to be studied, as well as the manner in which it is to be studied. Secondly, the term paradigm will be defined. Various definitions and typologies or classifications have been proposed regarding paradigms in criminology. However, owing to limited space not all of these will be discussed fully. Thirdly, the classification of paradigms in criminology provided by Kra-
mer (1982) will be dealt with, namely the behavioural and the definitional paradigm. Pertinent theories and approaches within each paradigm will then be discussed as well as the research methods characteristic of each. It is hoped that this article will sensitize researchers and future researchers to some of the issues included in the study of crime and deviants.

Definition of crime

Two approaches are generally found in the relevant literature. Firstly, there is the legalistic definition of crime which considers any behaviour breaking the criminal law of crime. The relation of crime (behaviour) to the law is therefore considered the essence of the matter. The following arguments have been advanced in favour of the legalistic definition:

- It recognizes a common thread binding certain forms of human behaviour by legally identifying them as criminal.
- The word *crime*, by being reserved for rule-breaking behaviour, leads to stigmatisation of such behaviour on account of its illegality. To alter the definition to include other forms of behaviour, would only increase stigmatisation of the individual (i.e. the criminal).
- The legalistic definition identifies clear-cut boundaries for criminology.

Secondly, various authors have called for a broadening of the legalistic definition. Sellin believes that the definition should encompass any violation of group norms. Hall, on the other hand, considers crime only to be acts which harm interests external to an individual. For Hartjen the most important aspect of crime is the fact that behaviour is labelled as criminal. The following strong argument against the legalistic definition of crime has emerged from the labelling perspective:

If we restrict ourselves to crime as a legal status, then we are in effect treating acts as crimes only when they are so labelled by those who create and administer the criminal law ... criminal law plays an important part in the determination of crime, but ... it is ... more than a ‘formal’ cause of crime. Apart from anything else, criminal law in action sets the conditions under which labels may be applied, and it restricts, in theory if not always in practice, the range of behaviours that can appropriately be defined as crime” (Barlow 1978: 9).

The need for a broader definition of crime has further been pointed out by Reasons (1975) who mentions that the increases of various types of crimes (such as war, political, corporate, government, environmental and white-collar crime) have raised issues questioning the adequacy of criminological theories and the focus of criminological research. 

Attempts to broaden this legalistic definition of crime have, however, often led to the use of terms such as antisocial or social behaviour in social definitions of the concept of crime. Kramer (1982) correctly points out that such terms are very vague. Firstly, they do not define exactly what is meant by injurious. Secondly, no particular standards are set whereby one case can be distinguished from another. This, then, encourages subjective value-judgements by the researcher. Kramer (1982) further emphasises that the social scientist needs always to bear in mind that a society’s norms are not static but relative and vary with the passage of time.

It should, therefore, be clear that the debate concerning the definition of crime increasingly involves moral and ideological issues, as seen for example in the Schwendingers’ call (according to Kramer 1982) for criminologists to be guardians of human rights. However, the most fundamental issues and value decisions associated with the task of defining crime still remain. These issues can, to a great extent, be clarified within the context of more fundamental images or paradigms of crime. These paradigms have been classified or described differently by different authors. The term “paradigm” first needs to be defined for the purpose of this study.

Definition of the term paradigm

Various definitions of the term “paradigm” have been suggested (cf. Kuhn 1973; Scimecca & Lee 1978; Williams 1981; Kramer 1982).

One of the more practical definitions is that provided by Ritzer, as cited in Kramer (1982: 44), namely:

A paradigm is a fundamental image of the subject matter within a science. It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained. The paradigm is the broadest unit of consensus within a science and serves to differentiate one scientific community (or subcommunity) from another. It subsumes, defines, and interrelates the exemplars, theories, and methods, and instruments that exist within it.

Various theoretical perspectives therefore may be grouped under one paradigm. Thus an abstract definition of the subject matter within a discipline is provided by the paradigm, while theories and theoretical models attempt to predict and explain more specific aspects of a particular subject. Since paradigms largely define the subject matter to be studied, it is clear that the particular paradigm used by a social scientist will determine his perception of the phenomenon.
being studied. Michalowski (1977) has likened a paradigm to a telescopic lens which enables an obscure object to be seen, but also distorts our vision since the objects focused on become larger while other things disappear from the picture altogether. Various paradigms in criminology can thus be distinguished.

Two major perspectives have thus far been used in criminology: the consensus perspective and the conflict perspective (cf. Szabo 1978; Williams 1981). Within these perspectives Kramer (1982) identifies two paradigms, namely the behavioural and the definitional. The various theories and schools of thought that fall within these categories respectively will be dealt with briefly.

### The behavioural paradigm

The emphasis of this paradigm is on criminal behaviour. Criminologists using this paradigm as their frame of reference attempt to describe the nature, extent, distribution and causes of criminal behaviour, thereby aiming to predict and control crime. According to Kramer (1982), since the emergence of the positivist school in the late nineteenth century, much of the theory and research in criminology has been influenced by the behavioural paradigm.

The positivistic school developed in opposition to the harsh legislation proposed by the classical school (cf. Vold 1980), which was based on the principles of clear-cut legal definitions of acts considered criminal and therefore punishable. Positivism is essentially a deterministic view of mankind in which the cause-effect relation between man and his environment is emphasised. Certain factors have been singled out as causing crime on account of their inherently negative valence. This has lead to the development of various theories, most notably the following:

- **Biological theories** of which the chief components were Lombroso, Kretschmer and Hooton. The main emphasis of these theories was on the identification of physical and biological characteristics of criminals, with the result that physiognomy and phrenology became the fields of study.
- **Psychological theories** focused on the (state of) mind of the criminal as a determinant of his behaviour. Feeblemindedness and psycho-pathology were, for example, thought to cause criminal behaviour (e.g. Freud, Gluecks, Yochelson and Samenow).
- **Sociological theories** can be placed in the following groupings:
  - *Control theory* (e.g. Hirschi; Cohen, Durkheim) assumes that criminal behaviour results when an individual's bond with society weakens or is broken. The emphasis, however, falls on why people conform to societal norms since, according to control theorists, man is assumed to be amoral. The socialisation process and the particular elements thereof strongly come to the fore here.
  - *Strain theory*: In contrast to control theory, this theory assumes that man is basically a moral being, innately willing to conform. Deviation from the societal norm occurs as a result of some stress or strain. The task of strain theorists, therefore, is to identify this extraordinary motivation that leads to deviance. This also includes the study of factors that lead to the development of deviant subcultures. Merton, for example, used the concept of anomie to explain deviance. This theory basically assumes that deviance is the result of a discrepancy between culturally defined goals and the socially accepted means whereby they can be reached.

Criminologists working within the behavioural paradigm emphasise the scientific method, thereby regarding objectivity as all important. However, with much of the criminological work being correctional by nature, moral judgements that certain behaviours are wrong or harmful are automatically made and therefore need to be controlled or prevented. The question that should be asked is: What are the criteria used and who selects the behaviour to be studied and controlled? Traditionally criminologists working within the behavioural paradigm have allowed the state to determine which behaviours are to be studied. The definition by the state of what constitutes criminal behaviour has largely been accepted as value-free. Kramer (1982) sees this as a loss of scientific autonomy in the sense that criminologists do not have their own independent criteria of which behaviour should be defined as criminal. He calls for the study of criminal behaviour that uses both legal and social definitions of crime. Despite the value-neutral ideal of science and the assumption of the behavioural paradigm that there is an absolute separation between the social scientist and the phenomenon being studied (subjective impression, personal values and feelings do not therefore enter into the scientific inquiry), Michalowski (1977) points out that this scientific objectivity is only possible when the phenomenon being studied is of a permanent, stable character. Personal values will therefore not change the object being studied. However, according to Michalowski (1977: 30)

> ... crime ... has no basic properties other than our subjective interpretations of right and wrong. Because crime is a social rather than a physical reality.

Various criticisms of the behavioural paradigm have been noted. Reid (1976), for example, mentions...
that the terms used in the theories are rather loose and vaguely defined. In addition the tools for measurement are not precise — the samples are often not representative (subjects are often selected from institutionalised populations) and control groups often poorly selected. With the exception of studies conducted by the Gluecks, follow-up studies do not generally form part of the research process. Furthermore a good guy/bad guy approach is used in the sense that society is divided into two mutually exclusive groups, namely criminals and non-criminals. It is emphasised by Reid (1976) that crime should be seen as a definition and not as a type of behaviour. By dividing society into these two mutually exclusive groups, some members of society are automatically excluded from both, namely those persons involved in behaviour which can basically be considered criminal, yet which is not classified as criminal (e.g. jumping red traffic lights, taking small articles home from work, et cetera). How then should this group of people be classified according to the behavioural paradigm?

Research methods within the behavioural paradigm

The assumptions of the behavioural paradigm have largely determined the research procedures and techniques used. Extensive use is made of quantitative methods within this paradigm (Szabo 1978). Examples of typical criminological studies guided by the behavioural paradigm have been conducted with regard to:

— Prediction of crime and juvenile delinquency;
— parole success and failure;
— treatment typologies;
— distribution of crime;
— psychological and sociological causes of crime;
— evaluation of treatment programmes;
— comparisons between criminals and non-criminals (Schurink 1979).

Another quantitative method used is the construction of official crime statistics (cf. Barlow 1978; Inciardi 1978; Sykes 1978). In fact the quantitative method of research has developed to such an extent that the term “quantitative criminality” has arisen. Hagan (1982) believes that the creative potential of the application of quantitative techniques in criminological research is not always sufficiently recognised.

After a brief discussion of some theories relating to the behavioural paradigm, the definitional paradigm, as proposed by Kramer (1982), will now be considered.

The definitional paradigm

This paradigm, also referred to as the interactionist paradigm Schurink (1979), is based on the assumption that crime, rather than being a type of behaviour, should be seen as a legal definition, label or status. The etiology of criminal behaviour is therefore not studied; instead the processes whereby certain behaviours are classified as criminal (that is, the legal process) are investigated. It can thus be seen that within the definitional paradigm a legal definition of crime is used, although it differs significantly from the legal definition used in the context of the behavioural paradigm. The contention of criminologists within the definitional paradigm is that crime is a legal category created by the state: criminality is therefore a status ascribed by legal persons in a legal process which is, in turn, guided by specific procedural or legal rules. No person is considered inherently criminal within this paradigm — he/she only becomes so when defined as such by legal authorities. Criminological work within the definitional paradigm therefore specifically aims to establish an objective and scientific body of knowledge concerning the criminal law, in other words, its origins, enforcement and administration are studied (Kramer 1982).

Two fundamental theories within this paradigm are the differential association theory and the labelling theory. Differential association was first proposed by Sutherland and is based on the laws of learning as well as certain concepts of symbolic interactionism. In essence this theory holds that criminal behaviour is learnt through interaction with other people. The direction of motives, drives, rationalisation and attitudes toward criminality or anticriminality is learnt either from individuals or groups who define the law as something that can be violated, or from those whose definitions of the law favour conformity to it. The basis of the labelling theory is that acts are interpreted in accordance with the ascribed status once an individual has been labelled. Briefly the labelling theory assumes:

• That no behaviour is intrinsically criminal.
• That criminal definitions are enforced in the interest of those in power.
• A person becomes criminal only by designation of criminality by the authorities. A series of actions, reactions and counteractions must first occur before an individual finally perceives himself as being labelled criminal. This process usually begins once a person has been caught transgressing the law (Pelfry 1980).

Michalowski (1977) further distinguishes the socialist paradigm, classified under the conflict perspective, which has given rise to critical criminology, also often referred to as radical criminology, Marxist criminology and socialist criminology. This can also be considered part of the definitional paradigm. Pelfry (1980) refers to new criminology as consisting of the various perspectives of conflict, critical, radical and
Marxist theories of deviance, all an extension of the conflict theory in criminology. These terms are often used interchangeably, possibly creating the impression that a single new perspective has developed which will replace older views in criminology. This, however, is not the case since these newer orientations in criminology are not all alike (Gibbons 1982). There is often confusion concerning the distinction between conflict and radical theories in criminology, possibly because during the last decade many American criminologists claimed to be conflict criminologists. Therefore these two theories will be discussed more fully in an attempt to illustrate the differences between them. The conflict theory is comparable to sociological conflict theories in sociology, while radical theories in criminology differ fundamentally in their assumptions regarding human nature (Pelfry 1980).

The conflict theory

Vold was one of the first conflict theorists in criminology (Bernard 1981). He emphasised that, as a means of pursuing their own interests, people naturally organise themselves into groups. Society, then, does not consist of a single all-encompassing group, but rather of many interwoven groups, each with its own interests (an example of one such group is the juvenile gang). The behaviour of individuals is, therefore, assumed to be consistent with the values and interests of such groups. Further assumptions held by the conflict theory are the following:

- Part of the conflict arising among groups in society is believed to arise from the law enforcement process which accounts for the distribution of crime rates.
- The generation of conflicting behaviours in society is considered non-problematic since it is assumed to be an inherent characteristic of society. According to Bernard (1981: 301) it

... implies that criminal behaviours cannot be differentiated from non-criminal behaviours, so that the explanation of differences in crime rates must be found in the behaviour of the legal process.

- Furthermore, conflict criminology questions the position of criminologists since they are regarded as tools used by those in power to maintain their position (Bernard 1981; Strijdom 1982).
- Conflict criminologists do not take a stance as regards whether or not certain behaviours may be socially harmful or a violation of human rights. The main emphasis is on the power relationships that underlie criminalisation.

The radical theory

Although radical criminology is based on similar assumptions as conflict criminology, it is distinctly more Marxist oriented. The following basic principles of radical criminology can be identified:

- There is a conflict in society regarding the issues of basic values and interests of individuals.
- Society is divided into various classes each of whose members share similar values and interests. The two major classes are: the class of people owning the means of production (ruling class) and the class of people employed in production (working class). The principal conflict in society, then, is between these two classes.
- Crimes are defined as being socially harmful acts which violate basic human rights. The socially harmful actions of the ruling class are not however, according to radical criminologists, defined as crimes by the official justice system since the law is used as a tool of the ruling class in its conflict with the working class.
- The definition of crime provided by the law is rejected by the radical theorists — all socially harmful behaviours that violate basic human rights are studied.
- The capitalist economic system is considered to be one of the major causes of the crime problem experienced in society.

Radical criminologists therefore, call for an overthrow of the capitalist system (which is to be replaced by a socialist state). Bernard (1981: 305) highlights the basic difference between conflict and radical criminology in the following statement:

Radical criminology has been defined as that criminology which takes a marxian approach to crime and crime control, while conflict criminology is said to share some of the intellectual heritage of Marx.

By way of a summary the differences between the two theories have been illustrated by Szabo (1978) as on page 28:

Research methods within the definitional paradigm

The accuracy of official crime statistics has often been questioned by theorists of new criminology (Strijdom 1982). The main research principles and strategies pursued within the definitional paradigm are generally referred to as qualitative methodology (Szabo 1978). The qualitative approach in the study of crime is generally characterised by the following procedures and techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, ethnographies, autobiographies, or any other form of personal documents. One of the arguments provided in favour of this research model is that the researcher can exert more control over the data collected than would be the case had it been obtained
Diagram 1

BEHAVIOURAL PARADIGM

Socio economic conditions, psychological environment, etc.

Criminal behaviour

Power

Law

Sanctions

DEFINITIONAL PARADIGM

Socio economic conditions, psychological environment, etc.

Criminal behaviour

Power

Law

Sanctions

Notes:  
(i) Taken from Szabo (1978: 21)  
(ii) For the same of clarity behavioural and definitional headings have been included.
from secondary sources (e.g. official statistics), often by persons not involved in the field of criminology. However when conducting qualitative studies certain issues are relevant, the following having been identified by Schurink (1979):

- How contact is established with deviants (or any other group to be studied).
- Whether subjects should be studied overtly or covertly.
- How to establish rapport and a relationship of trust with persons who are normally rejected by society.
- When involved in participant observation, to what extent, if at all, the researcher should take part in criminal activities.
- Whether a researcher should assist a deviant, financially or otherwise, if approached in this regard while conducting the study.
- Whether subjects involved in the study should be remunerated.

When considering the extent to which criminologists working within the definitional paradigm aim to develop a body of objective scientific knowledge, Kramer (1982) points to the fact that the definitional paradigm is also not altogether value-free. The mere fact that the use of the state's power to criminalise comes under judgment (as to whether or not it is good or bad), is in itself a value judgment. Kramer (1982: 56) makes the following statement in this regard:

... whether criminologists judge the use of the state's power to criminalize to be good or bad,

appropriate or inappropriate, depends upon their view of whose interests the state serves ... . These value judgements and ideological positions shape most criminological work within the definitional paradigm.

Conclusion

After a discussion of some criminological theories under the two major categories of behavioural and definitional paradigm, it can clearly be seen that each viewpoint has inherent differences and similarities. Rather than being viewed as competing perspectives these divergent perspectives should be seen as complementary versions of reality which promote rather than inhibit the development of a body of criminological knowledge (Horum & Stavish 1978). In this manner our understanding of the crime phenomenon can be increased.

Broadly speaking, it appears that criminology in South Africa is largely dominated by the consensus or positivist approach. The dominance of the positivist influence in South African criminology is especially evident in the use of quantitative methodology in studying the crime phenomenon (cf. Venter 1952; Smith 1971; Strijdom 1982; Van der Westhuizen & Oosthuizen 1983). Qualitative studies of crime are indeed few (cf. Schurink 1979). It is hoped, however, that both the behavioural and the definitional paradigms (with their particular research methods) will be used in future in a complementary manner in research on crime in South Africa.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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ENDNOTES

1. Adapted from a paper of the same title by W. Schurink and M. Kerr delivered during a seminar on research methodology in criminology, 1986, by the Institute for Sociological and Demographic Research of the Human Sciences Research Council.

2. For a more detailed explanation of the relationship between criminal law and criminology, the work by William Sanders (1983) can be referred to.

3. Perspective is a broad concept and thus may influence the development of a paradigm, but paradigms represent specific ways of interpreting events.

4. For a more detailed account of the various theories in criminology, works such as those by Vold (1980), Reid (1976) and Pelfry (1980) can be referred to.

5. Hirschi, as cited by Pelfry (1980) developed the control theory of delinquency based on the concept that conformity is the result of an individual's bond with society. An individual's bond with or attachment to society would include the internalisation of the common value system of society even though the individual may violate such rules. These values are accepted or rejected to the extent to which they are consistent or inconsistent with an individual's position in society.

6. Quantitative methodology regards phenomena as being measurable; results are generally represented by using figures with data being analysed by means of statistical techniques.

7. Schurink (1979) has also dealt with this matter elsewhere.

8. An example of one such study recently conducted in the RSA is by Van der Westhuizen and Oosthuizen (1983) regarding the prediction of parole failure and maladjustment.

9. Besides the theorists who are mentioned, Bonger and Quinney also deserve mention since they have made relevant contributions within the definitional paradigm (see Vold 1980; Barlow 1978).

10. Social scientists have different views at present regarding the concept qualitative. It has been regarded inter alia as a form of data ("soft" versus "hard"); a specific method of data collection and a particular strategy for analysing and interpreting data. Qualitative in this paper is regarded as a methodology since it involves the entire process of social research, including the logic and assumptions on which it is based.