

# Critical criminology and the social sciences



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# Introduction

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Welcome to this free course, *Critical criminology and the social sciences*. While the names of some of the disciplines in the social sciences are likely to be familiar, you might have less of an idea about their core characteristics and, in particular, the strengths and limitations associated with these disciplines in terms of helping to make sense of the social world.

Criminology is often studied alongside other social science disciplines, most commonly: psychology, sociology or law. This course will help you to make sense of some of the key differences between criminology, psychology, sociology and law, while illustrating how certain topics might be approached and understood by someone from these different disciplinary backgrounds.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [DD212 Understanding criminology](#).



# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- outline the scope and nature of some of the key disciplines in the social sciences
- identify the core features of critical criminology
- explain how aspects of the social world might be explored from different disciplinary perspectives
- understand how critical criminology relates to other social sciences.

# 1 Introducing the social sciences

The social sciences are comprised of a wide range of academic disciplines that are concerned with the study of society, or the relationships between, and attitudes and behaviours of, individuals within a society. The emergence of these disciplines is relatively recent. Prior to the eighteenth century, you would not have come across explicit references to distinct academic disciplines in the way that is commonplace in universities today.



Figure 1

Why then, have separate social science disciplines come into existence? The main reason is that these disciplines help people to study and make sense of the social world around them. The breadth of human knowledge is now so wide that it helps to have this knowledge indexed and systematised, just as we might organise books in a library. Indeed, 'disciplines' is a term with medieval origins, which used to refer to the specific rules and processes that had to be followed in order to become an expert in a particular subject.

In the following sections, you will gain an insight into some of the main disciplines in the social sciences, focusing in particular on psychology, law and sociology. The reason you will focus on these three disciplines is that they are often studied alongside criminology, forming part of joint-honours degrees at many universities.

## 1.1 Psychology

In the following video, Professor Mark Fenton-O'Creevy introduces the discipline of psychology.

### Activity 1

Spend some time watching the video, and then try to summarise the defining characteristic(s) of psychology as an academic discipline in the text box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1



*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of the discipline of psychology is that it involves the study of the mind, and how the mind influences one's behaviour. While people often regard psychology as having a strong focus on the individual, many psychologists also focus on how individuals function within social groups, and how different forms of social organisation can influence an individual's attitudes and behaviour.

## 1.2 Law

In the following video, Dr Anne Wesemann introduces the discipline of law.

### Activity 2

Spend some time watching the video, and then try to summarise the defining characteristic(s) of law as an academic discipline in the text box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2



*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

The academic discipline of law involves the study of the rules by which a society is governed. Its scope can include not only the study of the content and application of particular rules (laws), but also how these rules are created and administered.

## 1.3 Sociology

In the following video, Dr Peter Redman introduces the discipline of sociology.

### Activity 3

Spend some time watching the video, and then try to summarise the defining characteristic(s) of sociology as an academic discipline in the text box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 3](#)



*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

Sociology can be defined as the study of society or the social world. In practice, this can mean studying what happens when people do things together. For this reason, sociologists are often characterised as being interested in collective, rather than the individual, phenomena. Finally, sociology often involves a focus on enduring aspects of society – what are commonly referred to as ‘social structures’.

## 1.4 Criminology

In the following video, Dr Lynne Copson introduces the discipline of criminology.

### Activity 4

Spend some time watching the video, and then try to summarise the defining characteristic(s) of criminology in the text box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 4](#)





*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

Criminology is a rendezvous subject that acts as a meeting point for different disciplinary perspectives, including (but not limited to) sociology, psychology and law. As criminologists come from different disciplinary backgrounds, this can often mean they have very different views about the nature of crime and responses to it.

Some criminologists think that the focus of criminology should be restricted to the study of behaviours formally defined as 'crimes' by the criminal law. Others, however, argue that confining criminology in this way is overly restrictive, as it precludes the study of other forms of serious harm, such as workplace deaths, homelessness and pollution, which may not be formally defined as 'crime'.

## 1.5 Other disciplines in the social sciences



Figure 2

There are many other disciplines in the social sciences besides psychology, law and sociology. These include, but are not limited to:

- economics, which seeks to understand, among other things, the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services between individuals and various forms of collective organisation
- education, which explores how people learn and develop
- politics, which explores the various ways in which societies are governed
- human geography, which involves the study of people and their communities, as well as cultures, economies, and the interactions between people and their environments

- anthropology, which can involve the study of any aspect of human life, including human origins and adaptations, as well as the diversity of human cultures and worldviews
- linguistics, which examines language and its structure.

An important point to take away from all this is that the social sciences are made up of a large number of distinct yet often interrelated disciplines. Understanding the basic nature and scope of each discipline, as well as the main differences between the disciplines, can help you to appreciate their strengths and limitations for making sense of social world.

## 2 Introducing critical criminology

As you saw in the previous section, criminology is an intellectual domain or rendezvous subject which acts as a meeting point for numerous academic disciplines across the social sciences, most commonly sociology, psychology and law, but increasingly other disciplines such as neuroscience, geography, politics, biology, anthropology, social work and public health.

At The Open University, students focus on a specific strand of criminology often referred to as 'critical criminology'. This strand of criminology became increasingly popular in the mid 1960s, as a number of seminal criminologists shifted their attention away from the search for the causes of crime, and towards a more critical consideration of the concepts of crime, social order and constructions of deviance.

This generation of criminologists, influenced by a rapidly changing social world, denounced what they had come to view as the 'mainstream criminological ideology' (Taylor et al., 1973). It is here that the story of critical criminology begins.

### 2.1 What does it mean to be critical?

Thinking is skilled work. It is not true that we are naturally endowed with the ability to think clearly and logically ... People with untrained minds should no more expect to think clearly and logically than people who have never learned and never practiced can expect to find themselves good carpenters, golfers, bridge-players, or pianists.

(Mander, 1947, p. 6)

As the above quotation suggests, critical thinking is a learned skill. According to René Van Swaaningen, the 'adjective "critical" has gradually become the demarcating line for scholars who oppose the utilitarian ethos that subordinates criminology to law and order interests' (Van Swaaningen, 1999, pp. 24–5).

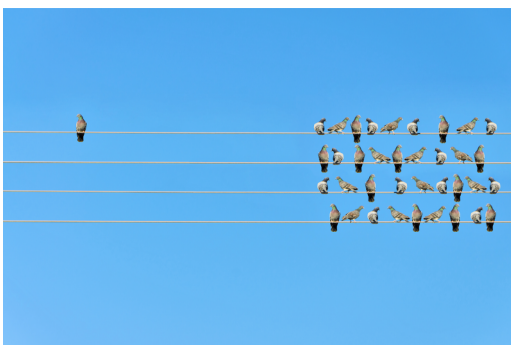


Figure 3

But what does this mean? It means that being critical includes being curious, sceptical, and prepared to challenge the underlying assumptions and accepted rationales of the criminal justice system and their taken-for-granted nature. It means being prepared to ask such questions as:

- How might we think about crime differently?
- Do the law, police, the courts and prisons have to operate the way they do?
- Could 'justice' be conceived in other ways?

Being critical is partly about considering and representing the side of the economically and socially marginalised (Becker, 1963). It is a position that seeks to promote social inclusion, equality and human rights. Critical criminology often finds its explanations for criminal activity in the unequal distribution of power and wealth in society and the resultant class, ethnic and gender discrimination. The official discourses about crime, like other areas of social life, are viewed by critical criminologists as constructed through contexts of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism.

Being critical is about much more than suggesting cosmetic or surface-level changes to existing crime-control regimes. To be a 'critical criminologist' is to seek out and highlight injustice, and to question the processes and practices on which laws are constructed, enforced and implemented. It is not merely tinkering with the existing system of justice and offering administrative changes to practice. It includes serious questioning of the ideological and political foundations on which crime is defined, enforced, processed and responded to.

## 2.2 The scope of critical criminology

Critical criminological perspectives or criminologies represent a dynamic, interconnected yet diverse range of theories, perspectives and methods that share a commitment to providing an alternative approach to the ways in which crime, justice and harm are examined. Critical criminological approaches have continually pushed the boundaries and scope of criminology, creating new areas of focus and innovation in relation to its subject matter, methods and theory.

Although there is much diversity and difference between critical criminological strands, they are united in their emphasis on economic and social conditions, the flows and uses of power, the interplay between crime, 'race'/ethnicity, gender, and/or social class, and their concern to seek out marginalised perspectives and investigate multiple truths.

Critical criminologists often prefer to be called social theorists, historians, sociologists, feminists and activists, in rejection of the arguably conservative and state-compliant label 'criminologist'. They have sought out and examined new areas that are often excluded from governmental and mainstream criminological agendas. For example, the critique of activities involving state and corporate harm that produce human suffering or environmental degradation and economic bias in the name of profit and power has long been the mission of critical criminologists. Other critical criminological perspectives have focused on the global issues of human trafficking, terrorism, environmental exploitation and human rights abuses – often entailing a critique of the unlawful actions of governments and large transnational corporations.

## 2.3 Key features of critical criminology

Although not all of the following characteristics apply to all forms of critical criminology, taken together they provide a useful insight into the scope and nature of much of the work of critical criminologists.





Figure 4

### Box 1 Key features of critical criminology

- Aims to bring about social justice – that is, the broadening of social democracy and equality through radical structural and cultural change – as opposed to a narrower conceptualisation of ‘justice’ through the criminal justice system.
- Considers that societies are made up of competing groups with conflicting interests.
- Often draws on Marxist analysis and begins from the premise that capitalist economic policies lead to immiseration, which thereby create conditions in which turning to crime becomes a viable survival strategy.
- Views criminalisation strategies as class-, race- and gender-control strategies that are consciously used to depoliticise political resistance and to control economically and politically marginalised neighbourhoods and groups.
- Highlights that powerful groups often create moral panics about street level crime being out of control to deflect attention away from much more serious harms associated with the activities of those powerful groups.
- Holds that orthodox crime control strategies aimed at dealing with street level crime are incapable of tackling crimes of the powerful.
- Emphasises that legal categories that claim to be race and/or gender neutral are riddled with white, male assumptions of what constitutes normal or reasonable behaviour.
- Views mainstream or administrative criminology as a criminology of the state.
- Often prioritises qualitative techniques such as biography, content analysis, critical crime history, deconstruction and ethnography.
- Holds that the criminological agenda should be expanded to include those social harms ignored or underplayed in dominant discourse, such as gendered and racialised violence, poverty, war, crimes of the powerful, environmental crime, state sanctioned violence and crimes against humanity.

(adapted from Muncie, 2004 and Brisman et al., 2017)

## 2.4 Sonae: an archetypal case study for critical criminologists

In this section, you will watch a video that explores some of the harms associated with a factory producing wood particle boards in Kirkby, near Liverpool (England), between 1999 and 2012. The film presents the stories of people who lived in the local area and were affected by the activities of the plant.

### Activity 5

As you are watching the video, think back to what you learned about critical criminology earlier in this section, and try to explain why the case of Sonae might be of particular interest to critical criminologists.

It might help to think about who is involved in this case, for example, who are those alleged to be committing the harm, and who are those claiming to be victims. What problems does the film raise in relation to the ways in which such harm is (or is not) being dealt with by the criminal justice system?

Video content is not available in this format.

### Video 5



*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

The case of Sonae contains many features that make it interesting from a critical criminological perspective. For example, the alleged perpetrator of serious harm is a wealthy company with access to high levels of economic and social capital. The victims of such harm, on the other hand, are community residents living in a socioeconomically deprived location.

This raises issues around the relative power of the alleged perpetrator(s) and victim(s). In the video, Hilda Palmer argues that the decision to build the industrial plant in a socioeconomically deprived location was taken because the plant owners would have known that residents living in this location would not be able to challenge the conditions, practices and harms associated with the plant. People living in a wealthy area, on the other hand, would have been far better placed to oppose the plant's construction and harmful practices, given their access to greater resources and social capital.

The video also considers the difficulties and problems with addressing the harms generated by the industrial plant through the criminal justice system. For example, despite the health and safety executive issuing five prohibition notices to the plant, explosions and fires continued to occur. Dr David Whyte concludes by highlighting that powerful groups committing serious harms often seem immune to prosecution and punishment through the courts and criminal justice system.

The case of Sonae highlights the importance of power and inequality in understanding who is able to get away with committing serious harms, and who is likely to suffer most as a result of these harms. It also illustrates the limitations of the criminal justice system in terms of controlling harms generated by powerful individuals and groups. These things combined make Sonae an interesting case study for many critical criminologists.

## 3 Exploring the 2008 global financial crisis from different disciplinary perspectives



Figure 5

The 2008 global financial crisis has been widely described as the most severe worldwide economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. While there is some consensus around its main causes and consequences, the precise object(s) of focus for academics trying to make sense of the crisis are likely to differ, depending on their specific disciplinary approach.

In this section, you will be introduced to some of these differences as you explore the potential angles that academics from a legal, psychological, sociological and critical criminological background might take to the subject.

### 3.1 A psychological perspective on the global financial crisis

In the following video, Professor Mark Fenton-O'Creevy discusses the potential ways in which someone might attempt to make sense of the global financial crisis from a psychological perspective.

#### Activity 6

Spend some time watching the video, and then try to summarise what you think the defining features of a psychological approach might be in the text box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 6



*Provide your answer...*



### Discussion

As discussed in the video, a psychological approach to making sense of the global financial crisis might explore how the emotions and motivations of individual traders may have enhanced their propensity to engage in risky behaviour. Psychologists might attempt to examine the extent to which professional traders are able to overcome the biases and errors of thinking that generally afflict members of the wider population.

## 3.2 A legal perspective on the global financial crisis

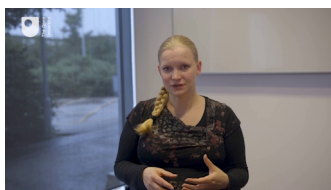
In the following video, Dr Anne Wesemann discusses the potential ways in which someone might attempt to make sense of the global financial crisis from a legal perspective.

### Activity 7

Spend some time watching the video, and then try to summarise what you think the defining features of a legal approach might be in the text box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 7



*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

Academics with a legal background might be interested in exploring the limitations and failings of the laws and regulations that were purportedly intended to prevent the global financial crisis from occurring, as well as the potential changes that might need to be made to stave off further financial crises in the future.

Legal scholars may also be interested in considering the ways in which people's understanding of the potential interconnections between different types of law changed as a result of the crisis, for example, developing a clearer recognition of the close relationship between financial and constitutional or public law.

### 3.3 A sociological perspective on the global financial crisis

In the following video, Dr Peter Redman discusses the potential ways in which someone might attempt to make sense of the global financial crisis from a sociological perspective.

#### Activity 8

Spend some time watching the video, and then try to summarise what you think the defining features of a sociological approach might be in the text box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 8



*Provide your answer...*

#### Discussion

While the global financial crisis provides a diverse range of potential objects of interest for sociologists, a sociologist of organisations might be interested in exploring the internal structure and organisation of large investment banks such as Lehman Brothers, which collapsed during the crisis. Sociologists might attempt to shine a spotlight on the social relations between those working within such organisations, and the general working culture that shaped employees' attitudes and behaviours.

### 3.4 A critical criminological perspective on the global financial crisis

In the following video, Dr Lynne Copson discusses the potential ways in which someone might attempt to make sense of the global financial crisis from a criminological perspective.

#### Activity 9

Spend some time watching the video, and then try to summarise what you think the defining features of a critical criminological approach might be in the text box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 9



*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

From a critical criminological perspective, the global financial crisis is an interesting and important subject of study. Some critical criminologists might be interested in understanding how apparently law-abiding individuals were able and willing to engage in behaviour that they knew was likely to result in severe harm being inflicted on millions of people across the globe.

Others might focus on identifying and understanding the full range of harms that resulted from the crisis, including the widespread loss of homes and jobs. Yet others might try to make sense of responses to the crisis across different countries, seeking to understand why those responsible in some countries were subject to criminal sanctions while others escaped punishment.

Whatever the precise focus taken by critical criminologists studying the global financial crisis, their approaches would likely include some consideration of the significant power disparities between different people involved in and affected by the crisis, as well as the contribution of the crisis to growing levels of inequality across the world.

## 4 Test your knowledge

Now that you have learned about some of the key differences between four of the social sciences – (critical) criminology, sociology, psychology and law – see if you can match the following statements to their respective disciplines/subject areas.

### Activity 10

Read each statement and select which discipline it relates to.

Focuses predominantly on mental processes and how these shape individual and social behaviour.

- ☐ Sociology
- ☐ Psychology
- ☐ Critical criminology
- ☐ Law

Focuses predominantly on the development, structure, and functioning of human societies.

- ☐ Sociology
- ☐ Psychology
- ☐ Law
- ☐ Critical criminology

Focuses predominantly on how a rule or set of rules can be applied in a particular situation to resolve a dispute or conflict.

- ☐ Law
- ☐ Sociology
- ☐ Critical criminology
- ☐ Psychology

Often involves a strong focus on the individual, but may also focus on how individuals function within social groups, and how different forms of social organisation can influence an individual's attitudes and behaviour.

- ☐ Sociology
- ☐ Law
- ☐ Psychology
- ☐ Critical criminology

Based on the idea that legal definitions of 'crime' are narrow and overly restrictive, and that criminal justice systems serve to protect the interests of the powerful.

- ☐ Sociology
- ☐ Law
- ☐ Critical criminology
- ☐ Psychology

Often involves a focus on enduring aspects of society – what are commonly referred to as 'social structures'.

- ☐ Critical criminology



- ☐ Sociology
- ☐ Law
- ☐ Psychology

Consists of a broad range of specialisms that focus, for example, on employment, human rights, land, property and contracts.

- ☐ Psychology
- ☐ Sociology
- ☐ Law
- ☐ Critical criminology

Focuses predominantly on how issues relating to harm, crime and justice can be understood in relation to unequal distributions of power, resources and recognition.

- ☐ Law
- ☐ Psychology
- ☐ Critical criminology
- ☐ Sociology

## Conclusion

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In this free course, *Critical criminology and the social sciences*, you have identified the key characteristics of some of the main disciplines and subject areas within the social sciences, including psychology, law, sociology and critical criminology. You considered the kinds of social problem with which critical criminologists are concerned and then applied this knowledge to the case study of Sonae – a case that many consider to be an archetypal ‘crime of the powerful’.

You also explored how academics from psychological, legal, sociological, and criminological backgrounds might attempt to make sense of the global financial crisis of 2008, which should have helped you to understand the key strengths and limitations associated with these social science disciplines and subject areas.

In summary, you have learned the following:

- Social science is made up of many different academic disciplines, each with their own distinctive characteristics.
- Critical criminology is a field of study that focuses predominantly on how issues relating to harm, crime and justice can be understood in relation to unequal distributions of power, resources and recognition.
- Psychology is a discipline that focuses predominantly on mental processes and how these shape individual and social behaviour.
- Sociology is a discipline that focuses predominantly on the development, structure, and functioning of human societies.
- Law is a discipline that focuses predominantly on how a rule or set of rules can be applied to particular situations to resolve disputes or conflicts.
- Approaching the same topic from different disciplinary perspectives can bring different things into focus and result in very different understandings of the same social issue.
- Bringing together different disciplinary perspectives on a particular topic, although oftentimes difficult, has the potential to generate a more rounded and rich understanding of that topic than any one disciplinary perspective can produce on its own.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [DD212 Understanding criminology](#).

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## Further reading

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