# Changing the Core of Criminology?

**Frances Heidensohn** reviews some of the major developments in the study of gender and crime and points to some areas that remain 'gender free'.

This is an auspicious moment at which to reflect on the study of gender and crime and to assess its impact on criminology: it is 35 years since I published 'The Deviance of Women: a critique and an enquiry' (Heidensohn 1968), and Carol Smart's (1977) *Women, Crime and Criminology* passed its quarter century last year. These two publications marked for many criminologists the start of the modern study of gender and crime; Smart's book in particular, launched what has come to be known as feminist criminology. Credited by some commentators as one of the most notable developments in theorizing about crime and deviance, others, including some of the pioneers in the field themselves, have been more downbeat in their assessments and have argued either that there has been little or no impact on mainstream activity in the subject, or, that it has been confined to a smaller, separate sphere. Some of these accounts are already rather dated; my aim here is to review the state of things as they look at this moment and in relation to what the original aspirations were in those days that already seem so distant.

## Shifts and developments

Viewed in this way, it is clear that there have been major shifts and developments since the 1960s and 1970s. The focus of our criticisms then were basically that the gendered nature of crime was barely considered in contemporary criminology, especially the lower recorded rates of female offending, that theory failed to account for women's experiences and that academic criminology was a distinctively male and macho world – college boys admiringly studying corner boys – as I perhaps unkindly put it (Heidensohn 2000).

Taking the last point first, it is evident that the bastions of academia have been, if not stormed, then infiltrated. Many more women study crime and write about it now than did so then: Rock (1994) noted a ratio of one to four women to men in his 1990s sample. Of the contributors to a major text on doing research in criminology, (King and Wincup 2000) about half are women, although they are younger, and in junior posts. Even more noticeable are the levels of recognition of the key themes in the texts used on courses in higher education: nowadays they all include sections on gender and crime, generally covering the questions mentioned above, as well as discussions of developments in various theoretical debates (see Downes and Rock 2003). There are moreover, increasing numbers of publications in the area and there has been a growth in the outlets dedicated to its production —e.g. the US based journal *Women and Criminal Justice*, the Duke University Press series edited by Nicole Rafter — as well as numerous texts with titles playing on variations on 'gender and crime', and there are other signs in the academy: the American Society of Criminology has long had its very active Division on Women and Crime.

## Cautious optimism

Yet, what does all this action amount to? Has the (criminological) world changed? Do we have a greater understanding now than we did 35 years ago of the reasons for gender differences in recorded crime? In answer to these questions it is possible to make some optimistic judgements, but also to record some notes of caution.

First of all, as already noted, the study of crime, in Anglophone nations at least, is no longer gender blind, there is a high recognition factor. Second, there has been a remarkable expansion of work both in terms of volume and of the range and nature of the topics covered. 'Equity' studies which compare women's and men's experiences of courts and sentencing are copious and have lead the authors of one key text (Downes and Rock 2003) to conclude that they have rebutted the repeated positivist claim of criminal justice system chivalry towards women. Numerous studies have compared and analysed penal regimes for women, challenging views about prison subcultures. These relatively traditional topics have been joined by whole new subgenres: on the role of women in law enforcement and other professional criminal justice tasks, for instance. Most significant of all perhaps has been the 'discovery' of the gendered victim and the acknowledged impact this has had both on criminal justice policies and theories, especially left realism.

## Transformation?

Do these developments, however, amount to capturing the criminological castle, let alone a regime change within it? How far has mainstream criminology responded? Two areas of engagement between the mainstream and gendered perspectives are often noted: the 'liberation causes crime' debate and the much sounder and more sophisticated work on gender, crime and control by John Hagan and colleagues (see Heidensohn 2002). The former hypothesis sought to link increases in female crime, especially violent crime, with the advent of second wave feminsim and

was quickly refuted by empirical studies which found no such link. Hagan's work continues, as do a variety of projects which explore gender and social control.

Historical studies of crime have also embraced gendered perspectives and mainstream scholars have engaged in debates about the 'true' levels of female criminality in the past, with historians of crime offering alternative interpretations of crime data series. Nevertheless, not every room in the criminology clubhouse seems to have space to fit in gender matters. One new and major area appears to be remarkably gender-free, that of what David Garland (2001) calls 'the culture of control'. Almost all of the work contributing to this topic treats social control as though it is equally experienced by everyone everywhere at least in 'late modernity'. Completely missing from all these accounts are the studies of resistance to just those apparatuses of control which most obsess their writers: techniques of surveillance and oppression, the inexorable power of the state. Work by contemporary feminist criminologists shows us, for example, how female drug users in a Brooklyn drug market developed tactics of resistance and contest against the forces which shaped their lives, while other young women engaged in street robbery (Maher 1997, Miller 1998). So there are still parts of the field which are gender-free, if not gender-blind.

**Academic criminology was a distinctively male and macho world – college boys admiringly studying corner boys.**

For many scholars, the most important impact has been achieved through 'deconstruction' of the subject and its methods, by the questioning of these based on gendered perspectives. This is most evident in debates about approaches to research and in key changes in concepts and their use. Social research has, in general, become a much more reflexive and reflective matter since the mid 20th century. Criminologists have reflected at length on their own intellectual formations and foundations. This is not solely down to the influence of feminism, although it was one of the key factors. Using qualitative methods and debating these seriously is now pervasive, as a special edition of the British Journal of Criminology on methodological dilemmas, based on the ESRC Violence Programme, conclusively shows. As projects from that programme demonstrate too, one theme which has come into focus through work on gender is that of masculinity and crime. This is a growing topic in criminology, as well as one of increasing public concern. While male offenders were the main subjects of past analysis, their masculinity was never seen as a problem. It tended to be essentialised and stereotyped.

## Summary

In conclusion, I think we can say that there is a mass of evidence testifying to the effect of studying gender on criminology. It has been one of the main influences on the subject in the past three decades. Shelves of books, piles of articles, countless student essays and projects bear witness. Whether criminology has been as shaken at its core as the pioneers hoped however, is a more difficult question to answer.

■

***Frances Heidensohn*** *is Professor of Social Policy at the University of London.*

**References**

Downes, D. and Rock, P. (2003) *Understanding Deviance,* 4th Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Garland, D. (2001) *The Culture of Control: crime and social order in contemporary society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hagan J., Simpson J., and Gillis A. (1979) 'The Sexual Stratification of Social Control: a gender based perspective on crime and delinquency', *British Journal of Sociology* 30.

Heidensohn F. (1968) 'The Deviance of Women: a critique and an enquiry', *British Journal of Sociology* 19 (2).

Heidensohn F. (1996) *Women and Crime*, 2nd edition. London: McMillan.

Heidensohn, F. (2000) *Sexual Politics and Social Control*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Heidensohn F. (2002) 'Gender and Crime' in M. Maguire, R. Morgan and R. Reiner (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* 3rd. edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

King, R. and Wincup, E. (eds.) (2000) *Doing Research on Crime and Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Maher, L. (1997) *Sexed Work: gender, race and resistance in a Brooklyn drug market*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miller J. (1998) 'Up it Up: Gender and the Accomplishment of Street Robbery', *Criminology* 361 pp 37-65.

Rock, P. (1994) 'Criminology in Britain' in M. Maguire, R. Morgan and R. Reiner (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, first edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Smart C. (1977) *Women, Crime and Criminology*. London: Routledge.