

A short review and analysis of the article: Smart, Carol. (1979) "The New Female Criminal: Reality or Myth", British Journal of Criminology 19(1): 50-59

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Female crime and female emancipation is not new to criminology, but the debates for why it happens and how it is controlled can be interesting, albeit controversial.

This article reviews Carol Smart's "The New Female Criminal" to demonstrate its efficiency in addressing some of the reasons for female crime occurring and why it is different from male crime. For any new researcher, student or interested reader, it suggests areas of expansion that Carol has not discussed in her own article, or areas that have been developed after 1979 and provides an insight into the importance of good methodology.

Key words: Female Crime, female liberation, methodology

Throughout the article Smart is engaging as well as convincing. Her analysis and evaluation of female crime and liberation is fascinating both due to the theories she discusses, the methodology she uses (and its analysis) and also her examples.

The journal's main aim and thesis is whether there is a relationship between the rise in female crime and the rise in female liberation; and it is this which is discussed. Smart does

not give a final conclusion on the matter and allows the reader to come to their own conclusion, although her detailed exploration throughout the article provides the reader with sound evidence to enable them to make their own judgment. She does so by giving the reader a balanced evaluation of the theories for, and against, female liberation as a cause for the rise of female crime. An example, she uses Adler's theory; women adopting male characteristics and abandoning the traditional female role. She criticises Adler's theory immensely; statistics, comparing different countries, distinction between crime and deviancy and the ambiguity of who is turning to more masculine forms of crime - existing female criminals, or non-criminal females. Despite her wide criticisms, her viewpoints are valid and useful in understanding the complexities in the theory, and unlike some occasionally found in literature, are not an attack on the theorists themselves. Nonetheless she realises Adler's difficulty in establishing her research owing to the limited amount of studies prior to her own work. She also acknowledges the insight Adler provides into a relatively unexplored (at that time) area. The question nonetheless arises whether Smart undermines her own argument by overemphasising the flaws within Adler's research, yet still uses it for her own argument.

Smart also adopts other concepts aside from female liberation. This could be surprising to some readers due to a 'particular interest she has in feminist approaches especially those of the family, marriage and divorce' (SPIG, 1998). She talks briefly of these topics in her journal but does not say too much on them. Although a brief discussion would be useful to understand why more women might commit crimes post-female liberation movement compared to previous years, she does well to focus on her title. When looking at marriage

she speaks only of Adler's theory and women removing themselves from a traditional female role, (that of living at home and being a well-respected house-wife). The other side of the argument is because of changes in the law, (Theft Act 1968 and the Criminal Damage Act 1971 are examples she uses) and police reporting. Smart could also at this point, have looked at the theory of the underclass and how women behave or are treated in the underclass to examine a potentially new reason for the rise in female crime.

Smart also acknowledges the arguments associated around males such as Lombroso and Ferrero (1968) who give biological explanations as a result of female crime. They believe that the female offender is biologically abnormal because she holds too many male characteristics due to a hormonal imbalance. A theory likely to anger Smart due to her background. Nonetheless she demonstrates a well-balanced argument and also develops it further to acknowledge male behaviour towards females within the courtroom. It has been argued that males tend to be gentler on sentencing female offenders (Blackburn, 2001: 50-51), which may be due to the traditional female image over portrayed in the courtroom, or another explanation, sexual appeal. Lombroso's theory on the appearance of offenders could have some relevance as there is evidence that more attractive people receive lighter sentences, inspiring Kurtzberg et al., (1978), to conduct a study on plastic surgery and sentencing. He found there was a significant reduction in recidivism although Smart has not mentioned any of this in her journal article. It must however be noted that owing to the passage of time, Smart may have already begun the publishing process when Kutzberg et al., published their findings.

Smart takes another methodology to emphasise the validity of her argument. She looks at self-report studies, all stating that the true official gender ratio for juvenile offenders is about 2:1, not 7:1 as suggested. Instead of proposing the importance of these new statistics, Smart starts to immediately criticise the research, undermining the study from the start. An added criticism to Smart's argument is this continuous and scattered criticism throughout her article towards the use of statistics. It ruins the flow of her argument, making it appear disorganised and confusing but remaining as a constant reminder of the limitations of her research and of other researchers. One or two acknowledgments for the reader should have sufficed.

Smart takes other considerations into account to further improve the validity of her argument. She explains part of the study in terms of women committing the same amount of crime as men where 'age crimes' are concerned such as under-age drinking, sex, gambling and smoking. She also states that women are more likely to lie about committing violent acts or other masculine offences, such as theft, indicating further reason to look at the above research. All of which ultimately strengthen Smart's argument and makes the reader aware of outside influences that could also affect the amount of crime committed.

The concept of 'hidden' crime would therefore also have expanded her current argument and thus an examination into Campbell's study on hidden female crime would have added further value (Campbell, 1977). As an active researcher in this area, Smart should have been aware of the "hidden" crime theory especially as it is relevant to other research she has also

discussed. Factors such as Adler's theory are very influential in the "hidden" crime aspect and new ideas such as girl gangs, the new ladette culture, education and the criminal justice system are all considered in Campbell's case study. Including a case study also helps to encourage the reader to trust the result because it can be examined and re-tested by other researchers.

A further potential weakness within Smart's article is the use of graphs which provide an easier understanding of statistics. Despite the problems with statistics she criticised so intensely throughout her article, she still uses them in her own study. As a result of her previous criticisms, her article would have benefitted from some form of justification for using them, plus the benefit for her research as well as their use for other researcher's work. Her tables are also slightly misleading owing to their modification in 1973 but for the purpose of the journal she has used the previous classification. This modification could have had an effect on the result; nonetheless it is understandable why she had to do so for the purpose of applying the data effectively.

At some stages in the journal she also weakens her argument by comparing male and female crime together, which can be misleading. For example, "between 1965 and 1975 there has been an increase of 500% in murder by women; the absolute figure for 1965 was one and for 1975 it was five". However, the case studies all compare the sex juvenile ratio, once again undermining her previous argument or her argument towards her own research. Nonetheless, the reader can gain useful insight from the later example.

The main criticism towards Smart's article is that she does not explain the theories sufficiently and as a consequence misses points that would have further strengthened her argument. For example on page 56 she mentions McRobbie and Garber (1976) when discussing property and violent crimes, then later she brings up the idea of opportunity. McRobbie and Garber's theory on 'bedroom culture' would have fitted well: the theory that girls tend to stay indoors, whilst boys are out on the street, thereby proving that there is more opportunity for the males to commit crime, especially in the cases of property or violent crimes. By failing to explain all the theories has also meant that some important issues are potentially excluded.

Nonetheless the importance and insight of the journal should not be underrated. The article would be useful to many academics and students across a range of disciplines because it explores a wide variety of issues and explanations for patterns of behaviour linked to society. The article demonstrates how interdisciplinary research can benefit the wider research spectrum and why other researchers should also be directed towards inter or multi-disciplinary research. The well balanced argument is also a wise decision by Smart as it allows readers to understand the whole concept of female crime and come to their own conclusions. Overall, this journal is generally well written and engaging owing to the considerable range of ideas, theorists and the evidence it provides. The transparency she presents on the theories and the methodologies used alongside a critique, allows the reader to make a balanced judgment and expands their awareness of such complex issues in research.

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