

**Full Length Research**

# Evaluating perceptions on criminal atavism and social disorder in Nigeria: revisiting the thoughts of Cesare Lombroso

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This study evaluates the perception of the Nigeria people in criminal atavism and social disorder; revisiting the thoughts of Cesare Lombroso. This study therefore, sought to understand Lombroso's perspective of crime and social disorder by finding out notions about crime in relation to his propositions, ways in which these notions have impacted respondents' views of criminal elements, and how this perspective on crime and social disorder can help in the resolution of criminal cases in Nigeria. The view of researchers and author adequately present literature and charts a course for the study. A cross-sectional survey of residents in the central business district of the FCT was conducted. A questionnaire was designed to obtain data on residents Statistical analysis utilized the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16.0. One sample T test was used to test the hypothesis set for the study and Likert scale to score the responses obtained from the questionnaire. Consequently, the results of the study reveal that majority of the respondents disagree with genetic traits as being responsible for crime. This is further posited by the hypothetical test in this study, which states that there is no relationship between the biological compositions of people with crime and social disorder in Nigeria. One thing Lombroso's work has definitely accomplished, and which will remain forever a monument to his name, and that is, that the criminal man must be studied and not simply crime in the abstract; that the criminal must be treated as an individual and not his act alone considered.

**Key words:** atavism, crime, perception, social disorder.

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## INTRODUCTION

Societies have for long continue to search the reasons for crimes and social disorder and many reasons found could be traced to unstable economy, poor political structure, degenerating societal values and a host of many others. However, Cheema and Virk (2012) draws our attention to consider a world where an analysis of genetic materials at birth creates a 'genetic *resume*',

which determines ones station in life. Lewis (2005) emphasises that in this world, diseases are identified and cured before becoming symptomatic and antisocial behaviour is treated prior to resulting in violence. But scientists are identifying genes that indicate characteristics such as antisocial behaviour, aggression and social orientation. Rothstein (1999) alludes to the fact that;

Advances in genetic technology have opened doors never before imagined. Doctors are diagnosing diseases before a person becomes symptomatic and customize treatments to the patient's genetic makeup. Law enforcement officers are compiling physical profiles of criminal suspects from DNA evidence left at a crime scene. And behaviourists will use biology to explain certain behaviours in an individual.

Over the years there have been growing appreciations for the role that genes play not only in the development of certain physical characteristics and diseases, but also in human behaviour, (*Supra* note) because of the increase in chronic repetition and the development of criminal career. Cheema and Virk (2012) opine that if only a few offenders become persistent repeaters, what sets them apart from the rest of the criminal population may be an abnormal biochemical makeup, brain structure or some other human trait and all these mostly depend upon the genetic composition of the individual. In essence *criminal atavism* seeks to explain the recurrence of past crimes of identified people after a period of absence. Siegel (2008) however notes that, even if crime is a choice, the fact that some people make that choice repeatedly could be linked to their physical and mental makeup. Therefore, an understanding of the role that genetics play in affecting behaviour may help us to answer the age old question: why do we do the things we do? Understanding this subject matter is the core of this study from the Nigerian perspective. The growing spate of crime in parts of the nation, ranging from terrorism, kidnapping, farmer/herdsmen crises etc., have for long rendered administrations seemingly unfit to lead the people.

Studies (Bill McCarty; 1995, Patricia Brantingham, Paul Brantingham & Wendy Taylor; 2005) have concluded that human behaviour has a genetic component. Does this mean that genes leading to physical and mental attribute of a person affect human behaviour? Does this mean that we are reinventing Lombroso in the era of genetic revolution? Howbeit, it becomes imperative to revisit Cesare Lombroso and his theory of '*atavism*' in the eye of the people by knowing what they perceive of the situation in Nigeria. According to Darwin (1874), Lombroso proposed the idea that;

With mankind, some of the worst dispositions which occasionally without any assignable cause make their appearance in families, may perhaps be reversions to a savage state, from which we are not removed by very many generations".

In citing Lombroso, Bartol & Bartol. (1986) say that he was especially impressed by the notion of Charles Darwin that some men are genetically closer to their

primitive ancestry than others gave the concept of 'born criminal'.

According to Meghna Rajadhyaksha. (2006);

Cesare Lombroso was the first to give scientific backing instead of philosophical to the study of crime. He gave impetus to the movement towards secular, rational-scientific thinking and experimentation as opposed to the 'pure reason' of the Age of Enlightenment. He was the one to shatter the notion of 'Free Will' as propounded by the Classical School. His theory raised the question that if the person's actions are not motivated by oneself but by hereditary factors, then how can criminal justice presume that he acted out of 'Free Will'? Lombroso was also the first person to raise the idea that the punishment meted out to criminals should be decided according to the individual biological makeup and not by the nature of the crime.

Lombroso's original and basic premise, published in 'L'Uomo Delinquente (The Criminal Man) in 1876 was that some people are born with strong, innate predisposition to behave antisocially. The criminal, Lombroso believed, represented a separate species that had not yet evolved sufficiently towards the more 'advanced' *Homo sapiens*; this species was genetically somewhere between modern humans and their primitive origins in physical and psychological makeup. He called this evolutionarily retarded species *homo delinquents* and considered those individual mutations or natural accidents living among civilised humans. Bartol & Bartol. (1986) further state that Lombroso developed an interest in biological influences on criminal behaviour while he was serving as an army physician between 1859 and 1863. During this period Lombroso conducted autopsies on 66 executed offenders, including a well-known criminal named Vilella (Gutenberg.com).

While examining brain, Lombroso found features that he identified as similar to those found in lower primates. His findings were supported by the study of another offender named Misdea. Lombroso also examined 832 living prison inmates and compared body part measurements with those of 390 soldiers Schmallegger (2002). From this research, Lombroso identified body features (including the skull, brain and other body parts) that he considered being atavist. In other words, the criminal's physical characteristics reflected our lower and more ape-like ancestors. According to him, a criminal is supposed to be a throwback in the evolutionary chain, a more primitive being who was both mentally and physically inferior Williams (2001)

The physical characteristics measured by him included sloping foreheads; ears of unusual size; excessively long arms; receding chins; excessive cheek bones; twisted noses; fleshy swollen and protruding lips; premature and abundant wrinkling of the skin; inability to blush; extra

fingers, toes or nipples; ambidexterity; nose upturned or flattened (indicative of thieves) or aquiline or beak-like (indicative of murders); enlarged jaw and cheekbones, peculiar size or shape of head; abnormal teeth; abundance of hair which is often black and frizzled, sparse beard in men but abundance of facial hair in women; bushy and prominent eyebrows; facial asymmetry and dark skin, Akers and Sellers (2004). In addition to these physical stigmata, he noted a lack of moral sense; vanity; cruelty; idleness; the use of a criminal argot; a specific nervous insensibility to pain with contempt of death and suffering, and finally an inclination for tattooing as characteristics of criminal Mannheim (1980)

Crocq, 2013 and Kushner 2013) in their studies identified that Cesare Lombroso saw also left-handedness as evidence of a criminal personality. He came to include left-handedness among the somatic stigmata of offenders, having just found a high presence of left-handers in prisons. Only in the 60-70s of last century it has been proven the safety of left-handedness: since the right hemisphere, as well as being appointed to 1. fundamental neurological functions, including the perception of spatial parameters and the summary faculties, is the seat of emotions, imagination and 2. creativity you find particularly interesting to note that, in general, left-handed people think mental representations rather than concepts and are also often equipped with 3. mnemonic, intuitive and visual-spatial abilities higher than those of the right-handed subjects (at the popular level, sometimes left-handedness is considered term equivalent to genius by many people. his assertions (Lombroso) have been largely dismissed by physiologists and sociologist but given the peculiarity of certain crimes, the perception of the black race need to be sought.

Williams (2001) also notes that from time to time the list was changed, but it was always made up of similar types of physical anomaly. Lombroso reckoned that if an individual portrayed five or more of these atavisms or anomalies, then the individual was a born criminal. He stated that these traits could be observed in the 'savages' or aborigines of Africa and the Americans. However, these attributes as outlined by Lombroso may be tags to paint these regions of the world as bad since it was a notion that held sway prominently during the years of Africa and American colonization. Howbeit, Lombroso's line of thought may seem false, but it becomes pertinent to put it to test by gauging the perception of a section of Nigerians on the matter in the light of the nation's predicament. The researcher purposively chose to study residents of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, in that there exist a sparse population of intellectually aware citizens.

## Statement of the Research Problem

The protection of lives and property, social stability and equal opportunities is the major responsibility of the state to ensure and citizens entrust this duty to politicians during elections. The security architecture in Nigeria which is largely run on relative analog systems or structures may not fully consider the science of crime. But presumably, the people hold perceptions about the way certain people that commit crimes operate, dear to their hearts. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to find answers to pertinent question as it relates to criminal atavism and social disorder from the perspective of Casare Lombroso.

## Objectives of the Study

This study is set to achieve the following objectives, which is to;

1. Find out respondents notions about crime in relation to the propositions of Cesare Lombroso's criminal atavism.
2. Ascertain the ways in which these notions have impacted their view of criminal elements through the eye of Cesare Lombroso.
3. Find out if this perspective on crime and social disorder can help in the resolution of criminal cases in Nigeria.

## Research Hypothesis

**H<sub>0</sub>** There is no relationship between the biological compositions of people with crime and social disorder in Nigeria.

## Method of Study

A cross-sectional survey of residents in the central business district of the FCT was conducted. A questionnaire was designed to obtain data on residents' demographics, notions about crime in relation to the propositions of Cesare Lombroso's criminal atavism, ways in which these notions have impacted their view of criminal elements through the eye of Cesare Lombroso, and how this perspective on crime and social disorder can help in the resolution of criminal cases in Nigeria. The design of the questionnaire was guided by findings from a Focus Group Discussion of 15 randomly chosen staff in Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State and minor modifications were made to the instructions for clarity after pilot study.

However, a sample of 400 respondents were

purposely selected for this study, derived from a population of 776,298 (2006, National population Census) and projected at 3.2% growth rate is 782, 378. A convenience sample was utilized. Quota sampling was further adopted based on the organisation and government agencies; in terms of offices, businesses and other institutions ensured adequate representation of each. A random distribution approach was used to achieve response to the questionnaire.

**Statistical Analysis/Results**

Statistical analysis utilized the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16.0 for statistical

analysis was determined. *One sample T test* was used to test the hypothesis set for the study and Likert scale to score the responses obtained from the questionnaire. The following results got from the field study show that; the demography of respondents in terms of age bracket, revealed that many of the respondents were within the ages of 19-30 years. This is as a result of a youthful population encountered in the study. However, other demographic results in marital status, occupation and religion reflected relatively sparse outcomes. With singles being the highest population at 67.8%, students at 33.8% and Christians at 56.4%

**Table 1.** Respondents’ notions about crime in relation to the propositions of Cesare Lombroso’s criminal atavism

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
<b>Criminal traits can be hereditary</b>	26(6.7)	68(17.5)	46(11.9)	97(25.0)	151(38.9)	388(100.0)
<b>Physical features can influence crime</b>	66(17.0)	163(42.0)	19(4.9)	71(18.3)	69(17.8)	388(100.0)
<b>Crime is as a result of political, economic &amp; social factors</b>	166(42.8)	187(48.2)	22(5.7)	-	13(3.4)	388(100.0)
<b>Science of crime is neglected in Nigeria</b>	157(40.5)	186(47.9)	22(5.7)	3(.8)	20(5.2)	388(100.0)

Source: SPSS output of field survey, 2021.

From the table above, majority of the respondents strongly disagree that criminal traits cannot be hereditary. In other words, crime cannot be found in the gene but a behavioural characteristics that is imbibed. However, about 24% of the respondents think otherwise. In the perspective of Cesare Lombroso, criminal traits can be found in the genes of individuals just like he found out in his researches.

**Table 2.** The ways in which these notions have impacted their view of criminal elements through the eye of Cesare Lombroso

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
<b>Formed hate for particular ethnic group</b>	42 (10.8)	138(35.6)	77 (19.8)	46 (11.9)	85(21.9)	388(100.0)
<b>Pushed me to understand the reasons they indulge in crime</b>	29 (7.5)	184(47.4)	37 (9.5)	65 (16.8)	73 (18.8)	388(100.0)
<b>has influenced me to go into crime since I share same features</b>	29(7.5)	61(15.7)	24(6.2)	219(56.4)	55(14.2)	388(100.0)

Source: SPSS output of field survey, 2021.

The results presented above shows an overwhelming number of persons indicating the level of hate they have formed for a particular section of people perpetrating crime in Nigeria. Others were of the view that it has pushed them to understand the reasons these persons engage in such crimes against the state and people. However, a few respondents stated that they may be influenced to go into crimes because they share the characteristics as espoused by Lombroso.

**Table 3.** How this perspective on criminal atavism can help in the resolution of criminal cases in Nigeria

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Deployment of forensic research in finding out criminal actors	124 (32.0)	198(48.7)	40 (10.3)	16 (4.1)	19(4.9)	388(100.0)
Cause discrimination of a section of the country & division	50 (12.9)	154(39.7)	37 (9.5)	13 (3.4)	134 (34.5)	388(100.0)
Help relationship with sections of the country that are predisposed to crime	94(24.2)	252(64.9)	16(4.1)	26(6.7)	-	388(100.0)

Source: SPSS output of field survey, 2021.

The findings of this study are contrary to the position of Lombroso. However, respondents are of the opinion that atavism will help in the deployment of forensic approach to finding out criminal actors through the gathering and availability of forensic data of people in Nigeria for finding out criminal elements. On the other hand, it has caused the division of the country.

### Hypotheses

There is no relationship between the biological compositions of people with crime and social disorder in Nigeria

#### One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 0.05					
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Criminal traits can be hereditary	54.830	387	.000	3.669	3.54	3.80
Physical features can influence crime	38.478	387	.000	2.728	2.59	2.87

\*S = Significant

One sample T test calculated (54.830 & 38.478 respectively) and the associated probability level showed (.000). Since it is less than the 0.05 significance level, it accepts the hypothetical statement that there is no relationship between the biological compositions of people with crime and social disorder in Nigeria.

### Discussion of Findings

Lombroso's thought that pragmatism, facial asymmetry, and an attitude of face similar to that of the opposite sex,

a sparse beard, a deformed nose, thick hair, protruding cheekbones, a squint, a receding forehead and pointed ears, were all criminal traits. These elements may combine to set up various distinct somatic

types, each related to a particular form of criminal activity. For example, a thief will have a livery, a small beard, small mobile eyes, thick close eyebrows, a twisted snub nose and a small receding forehead. According to him, a rapist will have brilliant eyes, delicate features, swollen lips and scroll ears. A murderer will have wide cheekbones, a sparse beard, well developed canine teeth, thin lips, a cold and motionless look, a bloody eye, a large, hooked nose, strong jaws and thick frizzy hair. A fraud will be fat and pale, with a long twisted nose and small downward-looking eyes.

Cheema and Virk (2012) avers that Lombroso's theory of atavism has profound impact on India too. In India, some 126 tribes/castes were designated criminal tribes under the Criminal Tribes and Castes Act of 1871. The police, during their training were instructed to treat these tribes and castes as 'born criminals'. The application of the born criminal theory, largely a byproduct of Lombroso's work, turned out to be a very potent tool for English colonial domination in India.<sup>50</sup> During the nineteenth century, British developed a criminal justice system devoted to rooting out the 'criminal tribes', particularly those who practiced thuggery. The notion of genetically inferior criminal tribes, promulgated by the British was compatible with the ruling Hindu concept of caste. Sir William Henry Sleeman (1788-1856) was a British soldier and administrator in India who was known for his suppression of the thugs or religious murderers in India. Sleeman implemented the 'born criminal theory' by incarcerating both husband and wives separately to prevent additional offspring. Howbeit, there may not be a legislation in this regard but individuals have perhaps formed perception about tribes in Nigeria and the way the security situation stands now. In recent times the media have profiled the Fulani ethnic group as sponsors of the carnage in Nigeria, leading kidnapping, banditry and suicide bombing. One is tempted to place side by side the juxtapositions of Lombroso and the physical features of these terrorists or criminals. However, largely, respondents disagree with genetic traits as being responsible for crime. This is further posited by the hypothetical test in this study, which states that there is no relationship between the biological compositions of people with crime and social disorder in Nigeria.

However, genetic composition can be taken as defence for crime as the accused may not have a reactive mind to commit the crime as his genes compelled him to do so. Moreover, behaviourists till now have not been able to pinpoint accurately to the fact that genes alone can be the cause of criminality. Behavioural genetics does not determine who will commit a crime, only that a person has a tendency or increased likelihood of exhibiting anti-social behaviour when combined with multiple other factors like environment and upbringing. Therefore, at this point of time, science has not been able to prove with some degree of accuracy that anti-social behaviour can

be predicted.

Although, researchers have been able to prove that genetics does play a role in human behaviour but it does not control human behaviour completely. There are many other factors which are to be considered along with genes in order to predict a person's likelihood of exhibiting anti-social behaviour. The theory of Free Will hence, based on practicality, social order and most importantly convenience of assumption allows for easy administration of justice and solves any tension that might exist between deterministic science and normative criminal justice theory. Therefore, it is clear from the recent advancements in the field of genetics that the free will foundation upon which the criminal justice system is based is in serious jeopardy. Genetic discoveries will alter the vision of what it means to participate in criminal justice. As genetics becomes more predictive of individuals' behavioural patterns, this science would surely have an impact on the principles on which the criminal justice system is based. Therefore, accepting genetics as a complete defence does not look like a tenable proposition because of the low level of accomplishment in the fields currently nevertheless it can be a good defence for mitigating the sentence as it has been proved that genes do control our will and the will is not always free.

## CONCLUSION

One thing Lombroso's work has definitely accomplished, and which will remain forever a monument to his name, and that is, that the criminal man must be studied and not simply crime in the abstract; that the criminal must be treated as an individual and not his act alone considered. The individualization of punishment, which all humanitarian and scientific thinkers are now agreed upon, is something which Lombroso's work, more perhaps than that of any other man, has helped to bring about. While there may be many errors in Lombroso's theory of crime, he set about to demolish a much more absurd theory. That the theory of the "classical school," that crime is the product of an arbitrary free will, and the resulting criminal law and procedure, received from him a death stroke is now beginning to become apparent to all intelligent observers.

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