

# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

## Adler, Freda: Sisters in Crime

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A prevailing fact within criminology is that criminal offending varies dramatically by gender. Indeed, gender is one of the strongest correlates of crime. Given the strength of this relationship, it is reasonable to expect that any theory of crime, and certainly any general theory of crime, must account for the differential involvement of males and females in criminal activity. However, little attention was given to explaining gender differences in crime until relatively recently. The publication in 1975 of Freda Adler's book *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal* marked a defining moment in the history of criminological thought. For the first time, women's involvement in crime and its relationship to social, political, and economic structures received serious academic attention. While a handful of other scholars were working on related questions at the time, no work had such broad and visible impact as Adler's.

The publication of *Sisters in Crime* coincided with the women's liberation movement. Influenced by the social and political context of the time, the central thrust of *Sisters in Crime* was that women were becoming more aggressive and competitive as they moved from the private sphere into the public sphere. Adler hypothesized that as women became liberated, they would gain access not only to new *legitimate* opportunities but also to new *illegitimate* opportunities. In other words, Adler argued that female and male offenders commit crime for the same reasons. Gender differences in levels and patterns of offending are explained not by the differences between women and men but by their different levels of access to criminal opportunities.

The suggestion that women's liberation might contribute to female criminality was met with controversy. Feminist scholars and traditional criminologists alike critiqued the work—albeit for different reasons—citing methodological and theoretical shortcomings. The significant debate surrounding Adler's work is a testament to its importance. This entry briefly traces the development of Adler's liberation hypothesis describing the personal and professional experiences that contributed to her thoughts about crime and gender. It also considers how this pioneer work led to the development of feminist criminology.

## Influential Contributions

Adler graduated in 1956 with a B.A. in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania and also earned her Master's in 1968 and Ph.D. in 1971 there. Reflecting on the origins of her hypothesis, which she has described as a “very simple idea,” Adler noted the importance of several intellectual, empirical, and historical influences. First, her academic training at the University of Pennsylvania shaped her approach to the study of criminal behavior. She was well trained in sociological theory and “thought like” a sociologist about gender and social structure. In addition, there was an empirical focus to her work that was heavily influenced by the pioneering research being conducted at the University of Pennsylvania at the time.

### [p. 4 ↓ ]

Adler's quest to learn new things led her to take a criminology course taught by Otto Pollak. Pollak had recently published a book on female criminality, in which he attempted to explain female crime by focusing on the physical and psychological characteristics of women. Pollak argued that physiological characteristics such as menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause caused women to be more secretive and deceitful and that this was reflected in their criminal behavior.

Pollak's perspectives on female criminality had an important influence on Adler, although she disagreed with much of what he had to say about female criminality. Pollak's work helped Adler bring her own counter-arguments and insights about female crime into sharper focus. For example, Adler fundamentally rejects the assumption of “essential difference” between the genders. She maintains instead that criminological theories should be able to explain both male and female criminality as well as gender differences in the level of offending. Thus, Adler's scholarship was a significant departure from biological determinism popular at the time she was a student. Adler's work is more consistent with liberal feminism, which emphasizes the “essential sameness” between the genders and focuses on the importance of legal rights, individual choice, and access to economic opportunities (Rhode, 1989).

Another formative influence upon Adler's scholarship was developed while working on a study of sentencing disparity in capital cases with Anthony Amsterdam. This experience piqued Adler's interest in bias and gender disparity. Adler's doctoral dissertation, titled *The Female Offender in Philadelphia*, asked descriptive questions focusing on racial bias. In particular, research questions addressed included: What crimes did the women commit? What was the seriousness of their offenses? What effect did race have on sentence outcome?

Adler's ideas were also shaped by her field experiences interviewing drug offenders. The individuals she met on the streets, in treatment centers, and in prisons knew little about a consciousness-raising social movement, or even about "women's lib." Nevertheless, her observations led her to conclude that women's attitudes and access to criminal opportunities were changing in response to changing social attitudes about gender. Adler drew on these professional experiences to write *Sisters in Crime*, in which she argued that since women and men have the same basic motivations, given similar access to opportunities, they would behave in a similar manner.

## Opportunity and Gender

*Sisters in Crime*, a nominee for a Pulitzer Prize, proposed that the Second Wave of Feminism would have a major impact on female criminal activity. Of note, Adler's use of the term *opportunity* was similar to Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin's use of *negative opportunity*, that is, criminal or illegitimate behavior that is in opposition to prosocial or legitimate behavior. Thus, women who had blocked means would become "liberated" and be "given the chance to be as greedy, violent and crime prone as men" (Lilly et al., 2007, p. 215). Thus, Adler argued that female criminals face crimes in the *same* way as men face crime, simply as another means to reach blocked opportunities. This was in stark contrast to previous assertions that women's criminality was pathologized and sexualized and viewed as uniquely different from men's criminality. What was extraordinary about Adler's hypothesis is that it advanced a sociological explanation for female criminality that suggested that female criminals were motivated by the same processes as male criminals.

To support her hypothesis, and similar to other theorists, Adler utilized cross-sectional official data to illustrate that decreases in the social and economic disparities between the sexes were correlated with increases in female criminality. With regard to murder and aggravated assault, Adler reports that the rates for men were not significantly different from those of women, although both were increasing. Adler also explored female crime patterns via topics on prostitution, drug abuse, and incarceration. Moreover, these substantive areas incorporated topics such as the intersection of race, class, and age with female offending. Notably, Adler asserts that her primary concern was that the subject of female criminality be approached scientifically and empirically, a concern that paralleled that of other University of Pennsylvania criminologists who were committed to elevating criminology to a social scientific discipline.

The women's liberation movement influenced Adler's thinking about female criminality and [p. 5 ↓ ] women's access to both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures. It was also influential in shaping Adler's beliefs about gender equality and her own unwillingness to be defined primarily by her gender or as a feminist scholar.

## Public Reactions

*Sisters in Crime* was met with much academic interest and struck a chord with the mainstream media as well. Adler's work challenged traditionalist views about the "cult of femininity," which asserted that women were the gentler sex who required special treatment. Traditionalists, however, also interpreted the liberation hypothesis as providing additional justification for limiting women's liberation. Among liberal feminists, Adler's work was valued for asserting the equality of women and advocating a sociological rather than a natural view of gender differences. Some feminists, however, met any suggestion that women's liberation was not wholly beneficial to women and to society with strong resistance and anger. Relational feminists may have appreciated the challenge to androcentricism represented by Adler's work, but remained committed to a view of gender that emphasized essential differences between the sexes that required legal recognition and protection.

To promote the work and respond to what grew into a furor over the prospects of the new female offender, Adler went on a media tour explaining her thesis. If there was

high profile crime committed by a woman, she was solicited as a spokesperson for an interview. She recollects that she did over 300 media spots, including interviews with Barbara Walters and Johnny Carson and an appearance on *Face the Nation*. As Karlene Faith explains, “With reductionist finesse, and without empirical grounding, journalists spread the warning that women's liberation would be turning out a new ‘liberated’ breed of criminal woman, as violent as any man” (1993, p. 6). Adler recalled it was “an era of profound social changes” (Hartman & Sundt, in press), which helps explain the tremendous response to her book.

While *Sisters in Crime* gained national and international public prominence, it also inspired significant scholarly debate. For multiple reasons, critics suggested the text was incomplete and contradictory. Some criticized the work for reinforcing gender stereotypes. Others criticized Adler's methodological approach. Critics argued that Adler misinterpreted the data. The work was criticized for its over-reliance on a small sample and for a short-sighted historical perspective, which distorted the interpretation of the data. Still others asserted that female offenders' motives were more rational and complex than a need to simply “compete” with the male offender. Finally, some maintained that male and female crime rates were never as close to convergence as Adler predicted. In sum, Adler's proposed “masculine crime wave” among females would never materialize.

Ironically, a work that was criticized as harmful to the women's movement inspired unprecedented interest in and scholarship about women and arguably led to the development of feminist criminology. Debates about the political and scientific significance of gender differences remain hotly contested issues today. Whatever the ultimate outcome of these debates, Adler's work helped pave the way for criminologists to move beyond simplistic and futile explanations of female criminality.

## Legacy

Speaking about her legacy, Adler states: “I do not care how criminology became interested in women. I am very proud to have brought women into the criminological literature—even with me as a target ... I am still proud of what I did. I wrote the book I wanted to write” (Hartman & Sundt, in press). The importance of Adler's work is

not only, or even primarily, that it advanced a new hypothesis about crime, but that it brought gender and women to the forefront of criminologists' thinking. Over three decades after its publication, her work still generates debate.

Contemporary feminist criminology now fully engages general theories of crime that offer insight via a gendered crime analysis. Further, feminist scholarship and activism is abundant in the areas of criminal justice research and practice. Feminist scholars have brought to light prejudices faced by incarcerated women. Moreover, feminist scholarship is making great strides in addressing the victimization of women and understanding how experiences of trauma and abuse affect their involvement in the criminal justice system. New [p. 6 ↓ ] questions have also emerged and scholars are now exploring same sex violence, masculinities and crime, and the combined influence of race and gender on sentence disparity. Feminist criminology is now a force in the discussion about the causes of crime, a discussion that Adler initiated.

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*See also*

- [Klein, Dorie: The Etiology of Female Crime](#)
- [Pollak, Otto: The Hidden Female Offender](#)
- [Simon, Rita J.: Women and Crime](#)
- [Smart, Carol: Women, Crime, and Criminology](#)
- [Steffensmeier, Darrell J.: Organization Properties and Sex Segregation in the Underworld](#)

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