

# Explanations of Criminal behaviour

Psychology is clearly not the only contributor to explanations of criminal behaviour, although in the past it has tended to be viewed as a rather simplistic and conservative contributor. This may be due to its emphasis on individual pathology, i.e. a search for deficits within the individual, and an apparent neglect of social factors in the construction of criminal careers. More recent developments in psychology, and particularly in the applied field of forensic psychology, however, have made a considerable impact on the contribution psychology as a discipline can make to our understanding of crime.

## THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES:

- **psychological theories of criminal behaviour**
- **individual and cultural differences in criminal behaviour**
- **the social context of crime.**

## What exactly is crime?

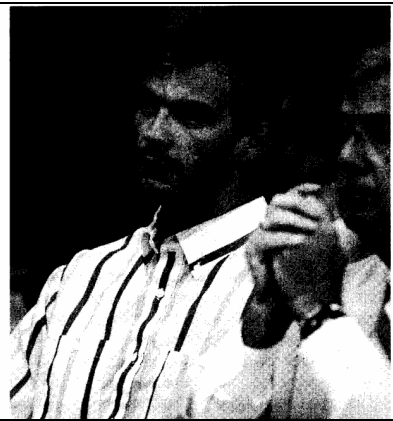
Before attempting an overview of the input of psychology, we need to take a step back and consider the problematic concept of crime itself. The question, what is crime? sounds as if it should have obvious answers, and certainly there would probably be widespread agreement that some acts, such as personal violence or theft, constitute crimes the world over. However, there might be disagreement about whether these acts are still seen as crimes if the rule of law is challenged, for instance in wartime. It was only in 2001 that the mass rape of Muslim women during the Bosnian conflict of 1992-95 was first deemed to be a crime against humanity, with three of its perpetrators receiving lengthy prison sentences at the Hague War Tribunal. Prior to this, wartime rape and the provision of kidnapped 'comfort women' for soldiers had been regarded simply as a by-product of war.

While legal sanctions hold, there is reasonable understanding about what constitutes crime, but this understanding tends to vary according to historical, cultural and power dimensions which may rule different behaviours as criminal at different times. Obvious examples of this are when laws change, so for example attempting suicide was regarded as a criminal offence until 1961, while incest was not classed as a crime until 1908. Similarly, female circumcision is acceptable in some cultures though not in the UK, while in contrast male circumcision has never been against the law, though in both cases genital mutilation occurs without the consent of the individual concerned. Age and mental state also influence whether someone is regarded as having committed a crime. The age of criminal responsibility varies considerably from country to country, so in the UK it is 10 while in Norway it is 15. The murder of two small children by other children in both countries in 1993 and 1994 highlights the very different views taken of similar crimes. In 1993, two-year-old James Bulger was taken away from his mother in a Liverpool shopping centre by two boys aged ten who subsequently beat and murdered him. Both boys were charged with murder and appeared in an adult court more than a year later, when they were ordered to serve a minimum sentence of eight years. This was subsequently increased to ten and then fifteen years in response to public and media outrage, though this action was later deemed unlawful. During their time on remand they did not receive any psychiatric help because of their not guilty pleas, prompting one of the jurors to remark five years later:

The trial was about retribution ... It was apparent that in the dock were two children; almost entirely uncomprehending of most of the proceedings; distressed by those parts they did understand; subject to trial as if they were aware adults; unaccountably branded as 'evil' by the judge. (The Guardian, 5th November 1999, Letters)

In 1994 in Trondheim, Norway, a five-year-old girl was violently killed by three friends aged five and six while

Mentally ill offenders are not normally held responsible for their crimes unless it can be demonstrated that they intended to break the law. However, in many trials the distinction between offenders being presented as 'mad' or 'bad' has proved controversial and moved beyond simple psychiatric diagnosis into the realms of moral responsibility. For instance, Peter Sutcliffe murdered 13 women in the 1970s and his defence claimed diminished responsibility on the grounds that he was suffering from paranoid schizophrenia and heard voices telling him to kill prostitutes. The jury, however, decided that Sutcliffe was not sufficiently mentally ill to be absolved of responsibility for the murders; he was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. Three years later he was transferred to a special hospital because of his mental illness. Similarly Jeffrey Dahmer, who murdered and cannibalised 17 young men in the 1980s, was found not to be suffering from the personality disorder and necrophilia his defence described, and was sent to prison, where he was murdered by another inmate in 1994. In both cases there was clear evidence of dysfunctional behaviour with psychiatric symptoms, and yet the horrific nature of the crimes seems to have demanded some form of public accountability and retribution.



. Figure 1.11: Serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer makes his initial court appearance in Milwaukee County Court with his lawyer, 25 July 1991. Dahmer is wearing the shirt of one of his 17 victims

## Theories of criminal behaviour

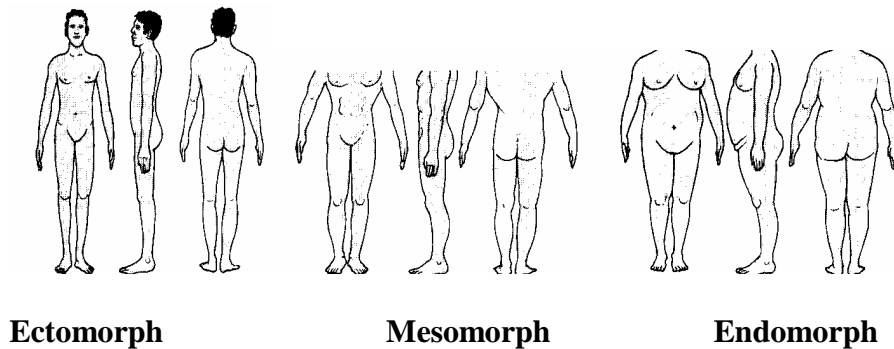
Most theories attempting to explain criminal behaviour represent part of the classic psychological **nature versus nurture** debate: can behaviour be seen as the result of heredity or the effect of the environment?; are criminals born, bad, or are they somehow made bad? Do offenders rationally choose to commit crime, or are they somehow programmed to do so? Genes are often said to set the limits on behaviour, while the environment shapes development within those limits. Thus a child born with some potential to offend may, depending upon their family environment, come to realise that potential or not. The discovery that our genetic make-up may not be as complex as was once believed suggests that the interaction between genetic vulnerability and environmental protection has become even more worthy of investigation.

Theme link to Perspectives and Issues (**the nature-nurture debate**)

**Plomin** (2001) suggests that behavioural genetics must become a prime component within the study of psychology in the future, not in the traditional and much criticised sense of genetic determinism but because **'behavioural genetic research provides the strongest available evidence for the importance of environmental factors'**. (p.134) He adds that most behavioural disorders reveal some genetic influence, in fact rather more so than common medical disorders, but that the exact nature of the 'genotype-environment correlations' will require sensitive and sophisticated analysis. Intervention is then more likely to involve changes to the environment rather than genetic engineering.

All theories of criminal behaviour try to address the question of why people commit crime on the assumption that such a course of action merits explanation of the inexplicable, that criminals are somehow different from the rest of us, and that there might be a single cause of criminal behaviour. However, one of the major reasons offenders commit crime is simply because they enjoy it. Katz (1988) has spoken of the 'seductions of crime', while Hodge, McMurrin and Hollin (1997) refer to criminal behaviour as an 'addiction'. Both perspectives recognise that the

Some of these theories emphasise physical features, while others stress chromosomes, genetic transmission, or neurological factors, but they all place criminality firmly within the individual, playing down the possible influence of social factors. In other words, the reason someone is criminal is the result of internal or innate characteristics, rather than the consequence of being brought up in a poor environment. If we believe that criminals are very different to the rest of us, it is not too big a step to assume that they will also look quite different to the rest of us. Subsequent labelling and stereotyping can help us identify this group and reinforce our belief in their status as an out-group. Sheldon (1942) developed descriptions of three basic body types or **somatotypes** which he believed were correlated with particular types of personality. He suggested that broad and muscular mesomorphs were more likely to be criminals.



**Figure 1.2: Sheldon's body types with mesomorphs identified as the most likely criminals**

Although Sheldon's work was criticised on methodological and subjective grounds - because he rated his subjects' body types himself, and assumed correlation was linked to causality - his theories were supported by Glueck and Glueck (1956). They found that 60% of their sample of delinquents were mesomorphs, while only 31% of their non-delinquent sample were, and Cortes and Gatti (1972) found in a sample of 100 delinquents that 57% were mesomorphic, compared with 19% of controls.

While these findings support the view that delinquents are likely to be muscular and fit, it remains unclear what the exact association might be between mesomorphy and crime. Boys tend to admire others who mature

**Theme Link to Perspectives and Issues (individual differences)**

Following in the Ancient Greek tradition of physiognomy - judging people's character by studying their faces - William Sheldon (1942) suggested that there were three somatotypes with distinctive personality characteristics:

**Endomorphs** who are soft, round, comfort-loving, sentimental, tolerant and sociable while prone to depression.

**Ectomorphs** who are slender, fragile, sensitive, intellectual, solitary, restrained, and prone to schizophrenia.

**Mesomorphs** who are muscular, athletic, active, energetic, risk-takers, dominant and Prone to delinquency.

early and are muscular and physically agile. The status these boys acquire can often only be maintained by taking risks, becoming involved in ever more daring and anti-social acts and increasing their chances of apprehension. This might explain their over- representation in delinquent samples, though mesomorphy is also associated with high testosterone levels (Hartl *et al.*, 1982). We all tend to develop beliefs about what 'criminals' look like and this can determine our reactions to such people. Bull and McAlpine (1998) were able to demonstrate that these facial stereotypes can influence judgements of guilt, and clearly the stereotypes are often reinforced by media representations since casting editors tend to choose the same actors to portray villains. Could it be that we are not very nice to people whom we consider unattractive, and that over time these individuals begin to lose faith in themselves and act to fit their stereotype? Masters and Greaves (1969) surveyed the incidence of facial

'The criminal by nature has a feeble cranial capacity, a heavy and developed jaw, projecting (eye) ridges, an abnormal and asymmetrical cranium ... projecting ears, frequently a crooked or flat nose. Criminals are subject to colour blindness, left-handedness is common, their muscular force is feeble.'

### **Theme Link to Perspectives and Issues (social psychology)**

Dion, Berscheid and Walster (1972) found that people attributed more positive qualities to attractive people than to unattractive people. They were shown photographs and asked to rate people's personality characteristics on the basis of pictures alone. Their very favourable ratings of attractive people demonstrated the what-is-beautiful-is-also good stereotype, whereby a halo effect seems to operate and assumptions are made on the basis of physical attributes alone. The stereotype seems to operate across a range of settings including the courtroom. Stewart (1980) found that judges were less likely to imprison attractive defendants than unattractive defendants, while Downs and Lyons (1991) showed that judges imposed lower fines on attractive defendants.

Lombroso (1911) went so far as to suggest that the distinctive appearance of criminals was very similar to lower animals such as chimps, and that female offenders were biologically more like men than women.

But, in spite of the obvious criticism and lack of political correctness, could Lombroso have had something? Maybe we can rule out the possibility of genetic transmission, for as Rowe (1990) says: 'No responsible geneticist would argue that a specific gene exists for crime, as specific genes may be identified for Huntington's disease or eye colour' (p. 122) but we are now much more aware of the power of the media and its role in perpetuating stereotypes and self-fulfilling prophecies. If someone appears to fit our image of a 'criminal' do we assume the worst, and thereby create a social reality? Stereotypes certainly still appear to be exerting their influence. For instance, Lombroso suggested that the presence of tattoos was a good indicator of criminality; a recent study indicated that children were significantly more likely to pair a negative attribute with a drawing of a man with tattoos than one of a man without tattoos (Durkin and Houghton, 2000).

### **Theme Link to Methodology**

Lombroso's theories can be criticised on methodological grounds - for instance, he did not use a proper control group, often relying on large groups of soldiers, and his criminal samples contained large numbers of the mentally disturbed. One of the most important criticisms of Lombroso's theory was that he failed to recognise that correlation does not imply causality. Simply because his criminal subjects shared a significant number of physical anomalies does not mean that this made them criminal. It could be that poverty and deprivation produced the physical defects he noted, rather than them being the result of genetic transmission. In later years Lombroso modified his thinking on criminality and was more prepared to accept that the environment can influence the onset of criminal behaviour.

The 1960s saw the emergence of a new explanation of violent crime in terms of chromosomes and an identifiable genetic abnormality - the XYY syndrome. We all have 46 chromosomes in pairs, one of which determines our sex - XX for females, and XY for males. There is a variety of chromosomal abnormalities, one of which involves the presence of an extra Y chromosome in males, and is usually linked to above average height and low intelligence. The incidence of this condition in the general population is about 0.1 %, but Price et al. (1966) found that 28% of the men in a Scottish State Hospital for the criminally insane were XYY. The assumption was that individuals with an extra Y chromosome must somehow be 'supermales' and therefore more inclined towards violence, hence their over-representation in prisons and special hospitals (Jarvik et al., 1973). The XYY defence was used in some criminal trials, and suggestions were made that mass screening be carried out to detect these individuals at an early age, in order to take preventative action.

However, a comprehensive Danish study which screened 4591 men for the presence of XYY found only 12 cases

Contemporary researchers have searched for support for the **genetic transmission** of crime by studying criminal families, and the possibility that criminal tendencies are inherited. Earlier researchers had claimed this was so by looking at the family trees of criminals, and although these studies can be criticised for their lack of methodological rigour, subsequent studies have shown that a relatively small number of offenders, often from the same family, tend to be chronic repeat offenders across a significant time period (Farrington, 1997). Is this the result of prejudice, years of social deprivation, or genetic transmission, and why are the effects only experienced by a minority of individuals, often young males?

A consistent research finding confirms that criminal parents are indeed more likely to have criminal children, for example Osborn and West (1979) found that 40% of the sons of criminal fathers had criminal convictions, compared with 13% for the sons of non-criminal fathers. However, this does not provide evidence for genetic transmission, since 60% of those who had criminal fathers did not go on to become criminals themselves. Other factors must be involved in the process, which is why studying families provides rich but often complex data about the interaction between biological and social influences.

Some of these other influencing factors within the family could be lifestyle, poverty, family size or parenting styles, and one of the most influential longitudinal studies of the development of criminal behaviour examined these factors over a 30 year period. David Farrington and his colleagues collected data on a regular basis from a sample of working-class boys and their families, in order to see which of them became delinquent. They discovered that 20% of their sample had criminal convictions by the age of 17, and that 50% of all the convictions recorded had been acquired by only 5% of the boys. Within this group of repeat offenders Farrington (1997) notes that there were early indicators of potential problems. These boys had been described as troublesome or dishonest in primary school, came from poorer, larger families, were more likely to have criminal parents, and had experienced harsh or erratic parenting. Farrington suggests that from his own study and other comparable studies there are:

numerous replicable predictors of delinquency over time and place, including impulsivity, attention problems, low school attainment, poor parental supervision, parental conflict, an antisocial parent, a young mother, large family size, low family income, and coming from a broken family. (1997 p.363)

Significantly, however, Farrington states that having a convicted parent is more likely to be related to persistency or continuity of offending rather than early onset. This suggests that criminal behaviour develops within a social context of inappropriate role models and dysfunctional reward patterns, rather than being a direct result of genetic transmission. There is also a gender connection here, since the girls in the families studied did not develop criminal careers in the way that their brothers were prone to do.

A well-established method for exploring the potential genetic component of a number of characteristics including criminality is that of **twin studies**. This is on the assumption that because monozygotic (MZ) or identical twins share the same genes, while dizygotic (DZ) or non-identical twins share about 50% of their genes (just like any other siblings), any similarities between twin pairs can be distinguished as the result of genetic or environmental influences. Unfortunately the issues are not quite as simple as this: when twins have been studied in relation to criminality, and it has been found that MZ twin pairs appear to share more criminal tendencies than do DZ twins, it has been argued that this demonstrates a significant genetic component in criminal behaviour (for example Christiansen, 1977).

### **Summary of Farrington's findings**

- ? **a longitudinal study of 411 boys born in the East End in 1953**
- ? **20% had acquired convictions by age 17**
- ? **33% had acquired convictions by age 25**
- ? **50% of the total convictions had been acquired by < 6% of the sample, i.e. 23 boys**
- ? **most of these chronic offenders shared common childhood characteristics:**
  - **rated troublesome/dishonest in primary school**

- had tattoos, bitten nails, a low pulse rate
- associated with gangs

? at age 32

- poorer housing
- marital break-up
- psychiatric disorder
- problems with own children

However, all twin studies tend to suffer from the same difficulties, which makes interpreting their results problematic. For instance, MZ twins look alike, and may therefore generate more similar social responses than DZ twins. This means that in addition to sharing the same genes, they may share an almost identical environment too. They are also likely to share the same interests, which might include criminal behaviour, and as MZ twins are always the same sex while DZ twins are not, it could be that the lower concordance rate for DZ twin pairs is explained by a preponderance of males in the MZ pairs.

### Theme Link to Methodology

Psychologists investigate the possible influence of genetics by studying pairs of identical and non-identical twins. If it is found that identical twins are more similar than non-identical twins then this would suggest a strong genetic influence. The extent of difference is measured by looking at 'concordance', or the degree to which twins display the same behaviour or characteristics. This is usually expressed as a percentage, so a 100% concordance would indicate that in every pair studied both twins possessed the same characteristic, while a 50% Concordance would indicate that in half of the total sample both members of a twin pair displayed the same behaviour.

In the absence of crime-related data on MZ twins reared apart and therefore sharing nothing but genes, it is difficult to draw any conclusions, though it is worth noting that recent studies looking at measures of personality and intelligence in MZ twin pairs who were reared apart found some striking similarities, which suggest that the genetic component is not insignificant (Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal and Tellegen, 1990). An alternative approach to determining the extent of possible genetic influence is to study adopted children - this allows examination of the extent of biological inheritance together with that of the environment in the adoptive home. If the behaviour of adopted children is more similar to their biological parents than to their adoptive parents, this would provide strong support for genetic transmission. In one of the early adoption studies looking at criminal behaviour, Crowe (1974) found that in a sample of 52 adopted children of imprisoned women, seven of them had at least one criminal conviction, by comparison with only one in a matched control group. Subsequent studies have supported these findings. For example, Mednick, Gabrielli and Hutchings (1987) found that boys whose biological parent had a criminal record were more likely to have been convicted of a crime than were boys whose adoptive parent had been convicted. Thus, the biological parents' genetic contribution had a greater effect on behaviour than did the adoptive parents' rearing. When Waiters (1992) carried out a meta-analysis of 13 adoption studies he found a moderate but significant association between hereditary variables and crime, which led him to suggest that the individual genetic inheritance of criminal behaviour is 11 -17%. Some of the possible interaction effects between genes and the environment are highlighted by Bohman's (1995) findings below.

### Theme Link to Perspectives and Issues (nature-nurture debate)

Bohman (1995) found that there was more chance of criminality where there was a genetic risk factor *together* with an environmental risk factor. The environment clearly seemed to have its most marked effect on those children who might have already been genetically vulnerable.

#### Rates of criminal conviction in adopted children (Bohman. 1995)

	Adoptive parents had criminal record	Adoptive parents had no criminal record
Biological parents had criminal record	40%	12%

mechanisms which control socially inappropriate behaviour, while Prozac can produce akathisia, a state of restlessness and unease which can lead to suicide or violence against others (Healy, 1997). The brain is a vulnerable organ and can be susceptible to a range of influences, although these may not be obvious at the time. For instance, when Charles Whitman killed 21 people during one day in 1966, shooting 16 of them from a Texas university tower, an autopsy subsequently revealed that he had a large brain tumour which was affecting the area of the brain responsible for controlling aggressive urges, the amygdala. Testosterone can also affect the activity of neurotransmitters in the brain, lowering serotonin levels, creating a neurological state which is associated with disinhibition, acting on impulse and seeking arousal and stimulation in the environment. Another suggestion is that certain individuals, as a result of brain damage at birth, suffer from a cluster of symptoms which render them incapable of moral control, and are constantly seeking stimulation because of this cortical under-arousal. The symptoms appear in early childhood, are subsumed in the term Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and include an inappropriate degree of inattention, impulsiveness, challenging behaviour and hyperactivity. Moir and Jessel (1995) have suggested that this disorder can account for impulsive and seemingly irrational crimes, some of which involve violence. Moreover, they suggest that brain scans could identify the disorder in young children who are already showing behavioural problems, and that treatment with Ritalin (a stimulant which can reduce the need for sensation and arousal) together with parental training might prevent these children from growing up to be seriously anti-social. The jury is out on this disorder and its treatment, however, with serious concern expressed about early and inaccurate diagnosis, inappropriately high doses of medication, and potentially damaging labelling. For example, labelling a small child as suffering from a medical condition said to be linked with adult violent crime may lead to stigma and isolation.

#### **Theme link with ethics**

Some authors have argued strongly that genetics play a major role in determining criminality (Raine, 1993), to the extent that screening has been suggested in order to identify potential criminals at an early age. However, the complexity of the interaction between nature and nurture, together with the political ramifications, should demand caution in the interpretation and application of these research findings.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF CRIME**

An unusual explanation of crime which attempts to combine genetic, biological and psychological factors was offered by Hans Eysenck (1964), and refined by Eysenck and Gudjonsson (1989). While it is often presented as a general theory of crime it actually attempts to explain why some people fail to follow rules, and suggests that neuroticism and extroversion are linked to antisocial behaviour. At a later stage in the development of his theory Eysenck introduced a third personality variable - P (psychoticism) - which he believed was marked by aggressive, cold and impersonal behaviour. He believed high scorers on this scale, together with high extraversion and neuroticism scores, would be more likely to be associated with violent crime. Much research has been generated in an attempt to verify Eysenck's theory (see Blackburn, 1993), and while there has been some support for an association between psychoticism and serious criminal behaviour, there has been little support for the predicted configuration of high scores in extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism. Moreover, there has been serious criticism of the authority with which this particular theory has been presented when there are misgivings about any evidence for its theoretical foundation

Theme link to Perspectives and issues (**individual differences**)

Eysenck developed measures of **introversion/extraversion** and **neuroticism/stability** to characterise personality, believing that most people would score somewhere in the middle of each of these two scales. Neuroticism was seen to include characteristics such as low self-esteem, emotionality, and a tendency to depression and anxiety, while extraversion was signalled by sociability, impulsivity, a search for excitement, and optimism.

Eysenck believed that some people are born with different types of autonomic nervous systems which will

children acquire through the process of socialisation. Their high score on the extraversion scale means that they are under-aroused, impulsive and outgoing sensation-seekers who are difficult to condition. High neuroticism scores are said to be linked with moodiness, anxiety and depression, which produces a resistance to social conditioning and an inability to learn from mistakes.

(Trasler, 1987). The suggested link between crime and specific personality types does, however, have some intuitive strength. Those individuals who are labelled as psychopaths, or as suffering from antisocial personality disorder, will have shown a resistance to conditioning from an early age, as well as the sort of personality characteristics which are likely to produce conflict.

## PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES OF CRIME

An alternative explanation of criminal tendencies, linked to the characteristics Eysenck associated with psychoticism but which relate more appropriately to psychopathy, is that of John Bowlby (1944). Bowlby suggested that any disruption of the attachment bond between mother and child in the early years might lead to later deviance, mainly because of the consequent inability of

such a child to develop any meaningful relationships. This psychodynamic theory of 'maternal deprivation' led to serious concerns about the quality of mothering especially in the case of children whose mothers worked, and in spite of the potent critique provided by, amongst others, Rutter (1971), continued to hold currency in explanations of juvenile delinquency for a considerable period of time.

Bowlby's work is very much rooted in a psychoanalytic framework, and although Freud himself had little to say about crime, his view of the small child as inherently asocial and motivated by pleasure-seeking and self-destructive impulses is used and developed by Bowlby, in order to explain adult criminal behaviour. If the child is raised in a dysfunctional family it may cause long-term damage to their superego or conscience. A poorly developed superego will result in a lack of control over anti-social impulses, impulsiveness and a lack of guilt, leading to unacceptable behaviour. In contrast, an over-developed superego will produce a desire for punishment, unresolved guilt, and a **subsequent 'acting out'** type of behaviour.

*Figure 1.3: Being scolded should help the child develop a sense of right and wrong*

- a conscience



While psychoanalytic explanations hold some intuitive strength, their emphasis that crime develops from unconscious conflicts in **childhood does** not square with the idea that some criminal behaviour involves rational planning. Moreover, one of the essential assumptions of psychoanalytic theory is that females develop an inferior superego/conscience and should therefore be more likely to commit crime, a view which is simply not borne out by crime statistics. Clarke and Ciarke (1998) suggest that there has been undue emphasis on the irrevocably negative consequences of early deprivation, and point to case studies where children who have suffered severe disadvantages have been able to make remarkable recoveries, for example those described by Koluchova (1991). The possibility of compensation exists, although Clarke and Clarke do say that one of the consequences of adverse early experience is a degree of

vulnerability which could result in regression should further stress occur.

their adult lives. This case highlights the potential for some children in certain contexts to reverse the effects of even severe early deprivation.

## **SOCIAL LEARNING THEORIES OF CRIME**

A stronger contender in the stakes of psychological explanations of crime is **social learning theory**. Within this theory crime is seen as a product of learning, or as a failure of the socialisation process which endeavours to teach children how to behave appropriately. Children usually learn socially acceptable behaviour by acquiring an association of fear or anxiety with antisocial acts which prevents them from behaving similarly in the future. Trasler (1978) suggests that ineffective parental strategies may produce inadequately socialised children who then go on to offend. This is particularly likely if these children also associate with other children from whom they learn offending patterns of behaviour. The view that criminal behaviour, in common with all other behaviour, is a learned response was most clearly expressed by Sutherland (1939) in his theory of 'differential association'. Sutherland suggested that individuals learn criminal behaviour by becoming part of close groups for whom offending has become a norm. Not only are criminal skills acquired, but also attitudes and beliefs which support offending behaviour, together with a feeling of group identity and belonging. Sutherland was describing powerful social forces working on the individual and affecting skills, attitudes and beliefs. His theory was in many ways ahead of its time in representing a very definite move away from a view of criminals as predisposed to a life of crime. He also attempted an analysis of the gender differential in crime, arguing that boys are more likely to become delinquent than girls because they are less strictly controlled, and are taught to be aggressive and active risk-seekers, all characteristics likely to bring success in the criminal world.

### **Theme link to Perspectives and Issues (Reinforcement)**

Subsequent developments of Sutherland's theory emphasise the role of rewards and punishments, learning by imitation, and observation of others' behaviour, as outlined by Bandura (1977). Peers who are held in high regard are very influential role models, as are media stars, while rewards which might encourage certain behaviours include status, self esteem, financial incentives or just plain excitement.

One aspect of social learning theory which has been developed as a possible explanation of violent behaviour is exposure to violence on television, in films, video and computer games. The influence is ascribed to imitation, but also desensitisation, with viewers observing so much violence on screen that they begin to see such behaviour as normal. Over 5,000 articles on the possible link between media violence and aggression have so far been published (Wallbott, 1996), but it has not been possible to conclusively demonstrate a causal link between the two, or to explain why some individuals copy screen actions while the vast majority do not.

## **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS**

It would seem that negative experiences at school are often linked with delinquency, and that in many ways the school acts as a catalyst for pre-existing problems (Hirschi, 1969). Low academic achievement is a characteristic of many offenders but this is not to say that poor intellectual skills are the contributing factor. It may be that particular schools fail to engage with challenging pupils who then opt out of the school system, play truant, and become involved in offending behaviour, failing to achieve the educational qualifications they may need to escape the spiral into a criminal career. Hargreaves (1980) identifies the features of a school which may contain high numbers of delinquent pupils and these include high staff turnover, low staff commitment, streaming, social disadvantage, and a view of pupils as being of low ability.

More black pupils are excluded from school and this leads to the assumption that black people, particularly young black men, are disproportionately involved in crime, a view often supported by media coverage of crime. Official data and self-report studies would bear this out, in addition to the disproportionate likelihood of black people also being the victims of crime. For instance, 12% of arrests in 1998-99 were of non-white individuals (7% black, 4% Asian, 1% other), but relative to the population this was four times the rate of arrests of white

evidence suggests that black people are indeed treated unequally within criminal justice processes, but the differential in imprisonment rates is said by some to be the result of higher crime rates among black people (Wilbanks, 1987). Reiner (1993) argues that methodological flaws beset any attempt to provide rational explanations of the differences in crime rates and imprisonment rates, and that it is still possible to argue that black crime is partially the result of white racism.

While some have suggested that blacks are more likely to be involved in crime because of genetic inferiority (Rushton, 1990), it is clear that a more likely explanation lies in the sub-culture of violence and social disadvantage which many black people share, and institutional racism within the criminal justice system. Racial discrimination undoubtedly limits the educational and occupational opportunities available to ethnic minorities, and there are biases operating in the legal processing of offenders which work against black people. These biases appear to be remarkably resistant to intervention, despite the findings of the 1999 Stephen Lawrence enquiry.

## **WHY IS GENDER IMPORTANT IN EXPLANATIONS OF CRIME?**

Probably the most significant feature of both recorded and self-reported crime is that more males than females commit offences. This is particularly true for violent crime, in spite of claims that women are becoming more aggressive (Krista, 1994), or that, because of their inherent deviousness, they have always been more criminal but have simply been able to conceal it (Pollak, 1950). In 1997 only 11% of known offenders were women, and it is estimated that only 8% of women have a conviction by the age of 40, compared with 34% of men (Home Office, 1999). There have also been suggestions that the criminal justice system is more 'chivalrous' towards females, and thus the gender difference is not as large as would appear from official figures (Hedderman and Hough, 1994), although self-report studies bear out the differential (Hindelang, 1979). Most explanations of the gender gap in crime draw on accepted differences between males and females such as dominance, aggression, physique and nurturance. Others point to female socialisation which tends to be characterised by greater parental supervision, more stress on conformity, and fewer opportunities for crime. Those females who do deviate are viewed as having not only rejected society's rules but the traditional female role too, and are described as showing 'double deviance' while risking 'double jeopardy' (Heidensohn, 1995). In fact Lombroso and Ferrero (1895) suggested that criminal women were rare, but those who had not been 'neutralised by maternity' were likely to become even worse criminals than men. Criminology has notoriously ignored the issue of gender, preferring to offer universal theories of crime based on empirical work which has relied only on male subjects. As Cain (1989) points out:

Men as males have not been the objects of the criminological gaze. Yet the most consistent and dramatic findings from Lombroso to post-modern criminology is not that most criminals are working-class ... but that most criminals are, and always have been, men. (p.4)

It was not until the 1970s that feminist criminologists such as Heidensohn (1968) and Smart (1977) began to point out this gross oversight. Since then there have been significant developments in the area, with calls to 'feminize' socialisation in an attempt to reduce crime and to ascertain why females tend to conform rather than searching for why males offend (Heidensohn, 1995); and suggestions that 'masculinity' itself should be examined more closely in order to understand why so many young men commit offences and are also the victims of crime (Messerschmidt, 1993; Newburn and Stanko, 1994; Walklate, 2001). As Wilson and Herrnstein (1985) observe:

Crime is an activity disproportionately carried out by young men living in large cities. There are old criminals, and female ones, and rural and small town ones, but to a much greater degree than would be expected by chance, criminals are young urban males. (p.26)

The fact that over 80% of all offenders are male (Home Office, 1999), and that this pattern is repeated internationally, inevitably begs the question that many criminologists have hitherto avoided asking - what is it about the cultural history and social construction of masculinity which ensures that so many young men become involved in crime? One of the most useful analyses of masculinity in relation to crime has come from theorists using the concepts of psychoanalysis and object-relations theory in an attempt to place psychic processes within a social context. Frosh (1994) draws on the work of Nancy Chodorow (1978), and argues that the process of separation in early childhood is different for girls and boys, and that while girls may be left with the problem of

Rather than simply examining female crime as if it were somehow different - and in so doing accepting a marginalised status within criminology which allows the discipline's gender-blindness to be condoned and continue - it is suggested that a gendered analysis of crime is the only way forward. Messerschmidt (1993) provides an astute analysis of gender and crime, highlighting particular aspects of masculinity, such as the collective processes of male youth groups and the 'public' arena in which masculine rituals are played out, as the major contributory factors to the predominance of male crime.

There have also been some very useful attempts to provide gendered analyses of specific crimes, including Jackson's (1995) examination of the murder of James Bulger, and Mai and Alpert's (2000) psychodynamic analysis of the motives of the two young men involved in the Columbine High School shootings. In both accounts links are made between the social construction of masculinity, the masculine signifier of violence, and the potential mismatch between cultural expectations and vulnerable individuals which may lead to inappropriate overcompensation.

## **Summary**

Psychological explanations of crime reflect the range of perspectives within the discipline of psychology. Thus, psychobiological, psychoanalytic and learning theories are well represented, alongside a predictable emphasis on individual differences. However, crime always occurs in a social context and so factors such as ethnicity, gender, group dynamics, media pressure and cultural expectations cannot be ignored. The contribution of psychology is therefore valuable in terms of extending our understanding of crime as long as it is seen as part of a multidisciplinary approach.

## **KEY TERMS**

- nature versus nurture debate**
- somatotypes**
- atavistic**
- genetic transmission**
- twin studies and concordance**
- disinhibitors**
- introversion/extraversion**
- neuroticism/stability**
- early deprivation**
- social learning theory**
- masculinity**