

Theories of offending

Psychologists have used a number of approaches to explain why people commit crimes. These have included theories of offending that are largely biological, others that are influenced by psychoanalytic ideas, and those based on learning and social-learning theories.

Biological theories

Lombroso, a 19th century 'criminal anthropologist' argued that criminals were the product of a genetic make-up unlike that found in the non-criminal population. He put forward the notion of 'indirect heredity' suggesting that criminality could be acquired through contact with other so-called 'degenerates' such as insane people or alcoholics. He thought that environmental conditions such as poor education could also be attributed with causes of crime. He concluded, though without much concrete evidence, that one-third of offenders were born criminals, the remainder had to be accounted for by other means. Lombroso's views fall within the positivist school: crime being determined by genes outside the individual's control.

Biological theories are still influential and research on the heredity basis of criminal behaviour continues. Family studies have been used to examine the processes within a criminal family to see if they differ from non-criminal families. The argument behind these studies is that as biological relatives share varying degrees of genetic constitution, if criminality is inherited, criminal families will tend to produce criminal children. Osborn & West (1979) found that about 40% of the sons of criminal fathers were criminal themselves compared with 13% for sons of non-criminal fathers.

However, although there is a correlation between family criminality and off-spring criminality, this does not prove that a causal relationship exists. A third variable such as the environment could cause both the parents and their children to commit crimes.

Twin studies have also been used in seeking to determine the influence of heredity and crime. MZ twins show a much higher degree of concordance than DZ twins for criminal behaviour, i.e. up to 1941 there was a mean concordance rate of 75% for MZ twins compared to 24% for DZ twins. However, the sample sizes were small; 4 pairs in both studies and it can be difficult to distinguish DZ from MZ twins simply on the basis of appearance. Later studies capitalised on technological advances such as fingerprints, blood typing and serum protein analysis to make exact determinations of zygosity. From 1961 the findings show a mean concordance of 48% for MZ twins compared to 20% for DZ twins.

Other biological factors have been related to crime:

- 4 Neurophysiological: abnormal EEG patterns (Hill & Pond, 1952)
- 4 Certain types of brain damage and tumours (Kletschka, 1966)
- 4 Vitamin and mineral deficiencies: e.g. vitamin B3 deficiency (Hippchen, 1978)
- 4 Levels of protein, carbohydrate and sugar (Schoenthaler & Doraz, 1983)
- 4 Hormonal influences (Rada, 1983)
- 4 Allergic reactions: (Mawson & Jacobs, 1978)
- 4 Food additives: (Hawley & Buckley, 1974)
- 4 Lead pollution (David et al., 1976)

Such accounts are often attractive because they seem to promise a straightforward explanation of a widespread and enduring problem. They also offer relatively easy solutions (free vitamins!). However, they are very reductionist and do not take into account the fact that crime is the result

of a complex interaction between the individual and society. Factors such as economic deprivation and social exclusion that are emphasised by sociological theories are ignored in these explanations.



SAQ 4

What is the evidence that criminal behaviour runs in families?

Psychoanalytic theory

Aichhorn was one of the first psychologists to use psychoanalytic principles to explain criminal behaviour. He concluded from his study of delinquents that environmental factors alone could not adequately account for crime. Latent delinquency prepares the child for a life of crime. This is partially innate but is also determined by the child's early emotional relationships. According to Aichhorn, criminal behaviour is the result of a failure of psychological development, thereby allowing the underlying latent delinquency to govern the behaviour.

Alexander & Staub (1931) suggested that the criminal is someone who is unable to postpone immediate gratification in order to achieve greater long-term gains. He/she is one who has failed to progress from the pleasure principle to the reality principle.

Other explanations have focused on the inability to control impulsive, pleasure-seeking drives (Abramson, 1944), unconscious parental permissiveness which gives approval to delinquent behaviour (Johnson & Szurek, 1952), acting out of feelings of oppression and helplessness (Halleck 1971).

The emphasis on childhood is central to psychoanalytically oriented theories of crime. Bowlby's theory of maternal deprivation (supported by his famous study of 44 juvenile thieves and 44 non-thieves) indicates that a lack of attachment leads to crime. (See Gross, pages 559-560)

However, psychoanalytic theories lack scientific proof. It is argued that many of the concepts are untestable.

Learning theories

Jeffery (1965) provides an example of a behaviourist account of offending. He suggests that criminal behaviour is operant behaviour: crime is maintained by the consequences it produces for the individual concerned. It follows, therefore, that to understand crime it is necessary to understand the consequences of it. The majority of crimes are concerned with stealing where the gains are material and financial: the gains may be seen as positively reinforcing the stealing. Alternatively these gains may be negatively reinforcing the stealing as in cases where the proceeds from stealing are used to avoid the effects of poverty such as loss of a home, break-up of a family etc.

Sutherland (1947) suggested that learning criminal behaviour is no different from learning any other behaviour. Such learning includes techniques to execute particular crimes and also specific attitudes, drives and motives conducive toward crime. He also emphasised that association with others in close personal groups is the main means by which criminal behaviour is learned (i.e. social learning)

Social learning theory suggests that through observation, especially if the model is regarded as successful, we learn at a cognitive level how to perform the observed behaviour. Explanations of crime will therefore be found within families, by peer groups, on television and at the cinema. Bandura (1973) suggests a range of reinforcing outcomes for crime such as tangible reward, social reward and seeing other people suffer.



SAQ 5

Contrast psychoanalytic and behaviourist accounts of offending.

The 'criminal personality'

Most personality theorists assume that personality is something that 'belongs to the individual as a relatively stable and enduring collection of traits or characteristics. They see behaviour as strongly influenced by personality and, unlike most behaviourists, relatively less subject to environmental (or situational) factors. Some personality theorists have gone so far as to suggest that criminality is a personality trait. Hans Eysenck (1965) has developed a theory based on the idea that criminals measure highly on two personality dimensions: neuroticism and extroversion. They are neurotic extraverts. The basis of this theory is that through genetic endowment some individuals are born with cortical and autonomic nervous systems which affect their ability to learn from environmental stimuli: basically they are more difficult to condition to anxiety responses. The result is that they develop weaker consciences and feel less guilt. A number of studies have been conducted on Eysenck's theory. The conclusion of most of these has been that his theory is not supported by the available evidence.



Reading: Gross pages 835 onwards for a chapter on criminal psychology



SAQ 6

- a) Explain what is meant by 'extroversion' and 'neuroticism'.
- b) How do extraverts differ in terms of conditioning according to Eysenck?
- c) Why does he think that this might lead to criminal behaviour?
- d) Give two criticism of Eysenck's theory.