Psychological Explanations for Criminal Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

For many centuries, we have attempted to find out which people are likely to become criminals and what drives certain individuals to commit a particular type of crime in the first place. Over the years psychologists have considered a range of different explanations in order to answer these difficult questions. Some have argued that there may be a genetic explanation which is at the centre of explaining criminal behaviour; others have suggested that it is the environment in which people live which can influence their chance of becoming criminal.

At different periods in history these ideas have been prominent in the minds of not only psychologists but also other professionals and the public alike. However nobody has seemingly provided a comprehensive and infallible answer to the question of criminality. This chapter will introduce some of the key theories that psychologists have attempted to use to explain criminal behaviour, such as personality, social factors and cognition.

CRIMINALITY AS AN ELEMENT OF PERSONALITY

It is common for us to attach labels to criminals and attempt to explain their behaviour through describing them as possessing a certain character trait. For example, it is common to refer to some criminals as 'psychos' – particularly in films and the newspapers. This type of person is actually called a psychopath and labels such

as these have been developed by psychologists to help us understand the different types of personality category that people fit into. Not all of these are criminal, but it is assumed that many criminals possess similar personality characteristics. Clearly there are some important factors to criminality that can be explained by situational and developmental factors, but there is also the psychological element to criminal activity that is relatively unique to that individual. One possible explanation for this desire to uncover the psychological traits of offenders is that it provides a quantifiable difference between 'us' and 'them' and to some extent further defines law-breakers as being almost another 'breed' of person. The following section will describe the different explanations of *criminal personality* and why some people are more prone to criminal behaviour than others.

QUESTION BREAK

- Consider your own personality and list the key characteristics of it.
- Where did these characteristics come from?
- Describe what you think a criminal personality might consist of.

You might find it interesting to refer back to these answers when you have finished this chapter.

Intelligence

One prominent idea surrounding the nature of criminal personality concerns the notion of intelligence. When we talk about intelligence we are generally referring to a person's intellectual ability or IQ (Intelligence Quotient – usually measured by an IQ test, such as the 11+ exam that used to be taken by children at the end of their primary school education). The link between intelligence and crime is regarded as being *negatively correlated* (i.e. as the rate of one rises the prevalence of the other diminishes) and it is thought that people with low IQs are more likely to become criminals. One of the first to propose this was Goddard (1914) in his book called *Feeble-Mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences*. Here Goddard suggested that it was low intelligence that made criminals unable to learn socially acceptable conduct and resist offending behaviour. A later study by Zeleny (1933) postulated that criminals were nearly twice as likely to be low scorers on IQ tests than non-criminals. These studies and many similar ones have suggested that people who have low intelligence are for many reasons (mostly the inability to learn rules) more likely to become criminals. It is probably due to its simplicity that this theory has been popular for many years and indeed still does have a significant research interest in more recent times.

Longitudinal studies have consistently shown that intelligence is a relatively reliable predictor in children of later adolescent and adult offending. One such examination known as the Cambridge Study (Farrington 1992) followed a group of

males from birth into adulthood. Farrington reported that over a third of the eight-to-ten year-old boys who scored less than 90 (below average) on a test of non-verbal intelligence were later convicted of a criminal offence. This was twice the conviction rate of the remainder of the sample. It was also discovered that this low level of non-verbal intelligence was particularly characteristic of recidivism in juveniles and of those who were to be convicted of offences when aged ten to 13 years.

There could be a number of explanations as to why intelligence may be related to criminal behaviour in this way. Firstly, there is a possibility that those with low intelligence could be more likely to be actually caught when committing crime. Their evaluation and selection of crimes may not be as successful as those who are more astute. However, West and Farrington (1977) also found that this link remained even when the measurement of offending was not arrest data but individual self-report measures. The second possibility is that the less intelligent could simply be more ready to admit to committing crime. This could be in an interrogation by the police or in self-report evaluations. Quay (1987) believes this could be also as a result of not understanding the charges being presented to them. Such a hypothesis remains largely untested and difficult to quantify. There is support however for the differences between offenders and non-offenders on measures of intelligence reflecting only *verbal* intelligence. Hirschi and Hindelang (1977) found limited support for any real discrepancies between the two groups in *non-verbal* intelligence.

However, despite these early assumptions regarding intelligence and criminal behaviour there are a number of problems in simply accepting this apparent link. Firstly, defining exactly what we mean by 'crime' and similarly 'intelligence' is not as simple as it may first appear. Although the development and use of IQ tests has improved considerably since the days of Goddard and Zelany, there is still debate as to what intelligence actually is. For example, some people may be highly competent mathematicians but have poor social skills and other people may be excellent artists but poor at organizing themselves. Secondly, what makes somebody a criminal is also open to some debate. It cannot be assumed that what makes a person a criminal is the fact that they have been convicted of breaking a law. The majority of people have probably committed a crime of some description – even if it was as seemingly minor as breaking the speed limit whilst driving – so it is inappropriate that just because someone was caught, they should then be seen as different from those who eluded being apprehended. In addition, there are probably big differences between someone convicted of financial fraud and a violent murderer. In short, it is therefore difficult both to define and to measure intelligence and crime so easily.

Despite these limitations in allowing us to explain criminal behaviour in this way, there are many studies that still include intelligence as a variable when assessing offenders. There is now, though, the recognition that low intelligence might not be a personality feature of the individual *per se*, but in fact a result of poverty or other social factors. Instead of low intelligence causing crime, it could equally be possible that coming from a poor neighbourhood influences the educational skills available to a person. There is extensive research to support the idea that people with low incomes and limited access to employment are more likely to be involved in criminal activities. Hence it is too simplistic to assume that a person who does not score high on an IQ test will become a criminal for that reason alone.

There are many other factors that may vary in their influence on unlawful behaviour. For example, if two people with similar IQ scores came from two different localities – one rich, one poor – then their risk of offending is likely to be different. Their behaviour is not purely a function of their intelligence. Hence it is almost impossible to separate the link between intelligence and propensity for criminal behaviour from environmental and even possible hereditary factors. Hirschi and Hindelang (1977) reviewed many studies reporting the link between crime and intelligence, and discovered overall that, when socio-economic factors are statistically controlled for, the pattern remains. Nevertheless, there is a vast amount of research into intelligence and crime and it highlights the difficulties in researching criminal behaviour in general and finding one simple answer to explain this type of activity. It should be remembered that, although there is often a relationship between intelligence and crime, it is seldom proposed that low intelligence actually *causes* crime.

QUESTION BREAK

- How would a researcher go about testing whether criminal behaviour was a result of a poor upbringing or as a result of poor intelligence?
- Suggest the advantages and disadvantages of different research methods.
- What other areas of social research have used similar methods?

CASE STUDY BOX 3.1 TWIN STUDIES

When researchers are interested in finding out if behaviour is a result of genetics or the environment which an individual grows up in, they often try to isolate one variable by using twins as their subjects. Mono-zygotic (MZ) or identical twins have exactly the same DNA, meaning they should have exactly the same physical and mental attributes. Research into intelligence has made significant use of such methods. If intelligence is genetically based, then two identical people (i.e. MZ twins) should have the same IQ score even if they were raised in different environments. Similarly, if crime were genetically based, then two MZ twins would have the same predisposition for crime. Indeed, Blackburn (1999) reports that most MZ twins reared apart show comparable levels of intelligence, and similarities on personality and attitude measures. Twin studies are popular in the social sciences as they allow any genetic influence to be controlled and the behaviours that are observed to be accounted for by other factors. Such research is expensive and, although many twins volunteer to be included in studies, access to samples is difficult.

For more detail on twin studies in relation to studying criminal behaviour, see Chapter 2, pp. 35–6.

Impulsivity

Aside from intelligence, there are other personality traits that have been implicated in the acquisition of criminal tendencies. One such area has been termed *impulsivity*. From a clinical perspective, being impulsive describes behaviours where people are likely to act almost on instinct and seldom weigh up the consequences of their actions. This process of 'acting without thinking' has found a receptive audience amongst criminologists and forensic psychologists in providing another way of explaining why some people commit crime and others don't. Glueck and Glueck (1950) were early pioneers of such thought, and believed that poor self-control mechanisms led to impulsive and often criminal behaviour. The public perception of the rampaging, 'out of control' offender also found harmony with these ideas. The modern-day juvenile is often described as being a 'hooligan' and certainly conjures up images of marauding gangs of youths who are seemingly uncontrollable. Large-scale public unrest and protests also fuel this image of people being out of control.

Early sociologists debated the idea that there were differences in the social classes' ability to *delay gratification* – people from higher social classes were assumed to be able to plan for the future and set a path to reap greater rewards for sacrificing earlier gains. For example, attending higher education courses was seen as delaying the immediate benefits of employment in order to access better-paid jobs in the future. Similarly, criminals have been assumed to act in a way that seeks to maximize their immediate desires without considering the likely future consequences that these actions may have, such as imprisonment. Criminals are therefore assumed to have poor control mechanisms that cause them to seek immediate satisfaction of their needs (see Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990 and Chapter 4 below). Longitudinal studies that follow individuals over a period of time or even their whole lifetime have shown this to be a relatively enduring and stable trait amongst offenders (e.g. Farrington 1992). However, as with intelligence, the link between impulsivity and crime is not so simple. Indeed much criminal behaviour is meticulously planned. Many financial frauds and robberies require very detailed planning and a complete lack of any impulsive behaviour.

Support for the link between impulsivity and crime has been mixed, in that reckless and spontaneous activity of a criminal nature is often observed in conjunction with many other personality and situational variables, e.g. in offenders who are under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Other researchers have elaborated on the nature of impulsivity and seldom describe it as an umbrella term to encompass any behaviour that has shown irresponsible and uncontrolled factors. For example, Dickman (1990) hypothesized that impulsivity was composed of two separate entities: functional and dysfunctional. Impulsive behaviour does not necessarily lead to offending behaviour, and indeed some spontaneity is often applauded in certain situations. Increased activity, adventurousness and enthusiasm were characteristic of the functional type of impulsivity. Hence, dysfunctional impulsivity is more closely linked with offending in that the behaviours generally have negative consequences for the individual. Disorderliness, poor appraisal of facts and lack of concern for the consequences of actions were symptomatic of people experiencing dysfunctional impulsivity. The difference between these two forms has been supported both in adults (Claes,

Vertommen and Braspenning 2000) and in children (Brunas-Wagstaff et al. 1997). Its prevalence in criminal populations has yet to be sufficiently established. But the ineffective thinking styles that are implicated in criminal activity are quite apparent between the two types. Impulsive criminals have also been seen to behave in a generally reckless – not necessarily criminal – way and to seek excitement in many situations.

QUESTION BREAK

Draw a line and write 'impulsivity' at one end of it and 'careful planning' at the other.

Place the following crimes at where you feel to be the appropriate place on this line:

- Shoplifting
- Drug dealing
- Fraud
- Burglary
- Assault

Think of other crimes and add them to the line.

Part of the problem with assessing impulsivity as a correlate of criminal behaviour is the differing theoretical perspectives that underpin the explanation of this personality trait. For example, as with the psychodynamic theory (see p. 67), impulsivity is suggested to be a result of poor ego-control. The drive impulses of the id are not adequately suppressed and the individual seeks to satisfy them in a manner that may infringe on current laws. Conversely, social learning theorists see the suggestion of impulsivity as a lack of self-control as being determined by situational forces as well as the individual's own inner narrative. Regardless of the theoretical paradigm as to where impulsivity is believed to originate from, there is also a practical problem in its measurement and intensity. Blackburn (1999) reports numerous measures of impulsivity that have originated from more general personality inventories. One problem with using these scales is that they have usually not been validated on offender populations. When personality measures are created, they are tested and retested on very large samples to ensure that they are valid and reliable. If it is valid and it measures what the researchers hoped it would (i.e. a personality feature) then they must make sure that it could do this over and over again – its reliability in identifying this trait. This means that a 'normal' score is based upon certain factors and generally applies to the population that they tested during developing these scales. Hence, offenders might score differently only because they interpret the questions

differently, not because they are actually unalike. Nevertheless, they do show some marked differences between the control 'non-offender' samples. There is also the question as to whether impulsivity merely predicts the prevalence of offending behaviour rather than its simple occurrence.

CASE STUDY BOX 3.2 ATTENTION DEFICIT AND HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER

Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (or ADHD as it is commonly abbreviated) is a personality disorder that was proposed in the American Psychological Society's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM). The DSM lists a number of symptoms that psychologists and psychiatrists have identified as defining a particular abnormal pattern of behaviour. Those for ADHD are:

- Symptoms of inattention: missing important work details, not listening, forgetting instructions, forgetful, always losing things
- Symptoms of hyperactivity: frequent fidgeting, excessive talking, inability to remain seated
- Symptoms of impulsivity: blurting out answers to questions, inability to wait their turn, constant interruption of others.

Researchers have only recently explored the link between ADHD and crime. There is also some debate about the diagnosis of ADHD and about the fact that it is being used to explain any children who have even minor behavioural problems. But the link with impulsivity and crime is a compelling one and the role of the frontal lobes of the brain are implicated in explaining both ADHD and impulsivity (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion on the brain and behaviour). Research in this area is relatively new and no firm conclusions can be drawn as yet. What is apparent, though, is that many of the symptoms of ADHD have been found in longitudinal studies of juveniles and their likelihood of committing crime (see Farrington 1992). Moffitt (1990) and many other researchers also believe that ADHD sufferers are at increased risk of becoming chronic alcohol and drug users. Coupled with the interpersonal effects of impulsivity, there are then the added dangers that the well-documented links with drugs and crime pose.

Locus of control

A factor related to impulsivity and another prominent feature that has been hypothesized as being related to personality and a tendency for criminal behaviour is the idea of *locus of control* (Rotter 1975). Whereas impulsivity was concerned with the way in which offenders might not anticipate the consequences of their actions adequately, the idea of having a locus of control describes the way in which people accept there being different explanations for things that happen. People with an

internal locus of control perceive events as being largely under their own command. Those with an *external* locus of control see occurrences as resulting from forces beyond their influence. With regard to criminal behaviour, offenders are generally assumed to have a distinct external bias in their personality. Hence offenders generally put the consequences of their actions, for example being arrested or injured, down to other forces such as luck. Foglia (2000) believes that children who are repeatedly exposed to situations where they only have minimal influence – in particular absent or mentally ill parents – are more likely to develop an external orientation to their being. What results is often an increased risk of delinquency. As with impulsivity, offenders with an external locus of control are unlikely to adequately appreciate the consequences of their actions, but for very different reasons.

Rotter's (1975) theory has a widely accepted audience both from criminal researchers and from wider social science users, but the research is inconclusive with regard to providing an adequate explanation of criminal behaviour. Although some studies have indicated that some offenders have a high external locus of control, others have not. Indeed some have shown that certain offender populations have a higher internal locus of control than non-offender samples. As with many of the discussions on the criminal personality, the inconsistencies in research findings are possibly attributable to the difficulty of adequately defining both the concept in question and what exactly constitutes a criminal. For example, internal and external controls have been shown to deviate depending upon the subject under examination, e.g. a job interview versus a political event (Mirels 1970). Despite these contradictions, locus of control has been argued to be an important predictor of people who are at *risk* of becoming involved in criminal behaviour (Werner 1989). In addition, many cognitive-behavioural rehabilitation programmes delivered in prisons attempt to address offenders' behaviour by questioning such belief systems.

Cognitive behavioural theories (the work of Hans Eysenck)

Intelligence, impulsivity and locus of control are just some of the more prominent theories that have emerged in an attempt to explain criminal personalities. It can be seen that there are many shortcomings in trying to assign this to any one cause. Subsequently, many researchers believe that offending is multi-faceted – it has more than one cause and more than one explanation. For example, the fact that someone has a low IQ does not necessarily mean that they will commit crime. Similarly, some offenders might have high levels of impulse control, but choose to offend for entirely different reasons. Owing to this, there have been a number of 'complete' theories that try to show how the interplays between these and many other variables interact and result in criminal behaviour. Two in particular will be discussed in more detail – those of Hans Eysenck and his *Theory of Crime* (see below) and Yochelson and Samenow's idea of a *Criminal Personality* (later in this chapter, see p. 75).

Hans Eysenck is perhaps one of the most well-known and widely published psychologists in recent times, and his research interests span many areas from general personality to intelligence and also criminal behaviour. Eysenck's (1974) theory of crime is a combination theory in that it includes elements of biological antecedents

and environmental influences, along with specific personality traits that are assumed to underpin criminal behaviour. For Eysenck, it was impossible to ignore hereditary and social causes of offending. Instead he believed that poor cognitive or 'thinking' skills were passed down through generations, which then affected the person's ability to effectively deal with external situations and in particular unlawful ones that presented themselves. The interplay between poor social conditioning and inability to comprehend such conditioning subsequently created the criminal personality. Eysenck believed that there were many similarities in the way that a mental illness is acquired and how criminality developed. For example, schizophrenia often runs in families and can therefore be regarded as having a genetic component. However, not everybody will inherit this disorder if they have schizophrenic parents and likewise it is also possible to acquire this disease without any hereditary component. Both genetic factors (having schizophrenic parents) *and* social factors (such as drug taking) can lead to schizophrenia. Hence, in the same way, certain types of personality were more inclined to act in a criminal manner in light of environmental stimuli.

Eysenck's theory of crime essentially explained the criminal personality as resulting from the interaction between three major psychological traits: *neuroticism* (N), *extra-version* (E) and *psychoticism* (P). To begin with, a neurotic can be loosely defined as a person who is suffering from anxiety and appear 'nervous' and 'moody'. However, the manner in which neurotics are defined in Eysenck's theory is not the strict clinical meaning and many 'neurotic criminals' would not be seen as suffering from a mental disorder. The second and perhaps most integral part of this explanation of criminal personality is the dimension known as Introvert–Extrovert. Generally introverts are described as being quiet, withdrawn people and conversely extroverts as being out-going and impulsive. Explanations for this vary, but from within this current theory it is the level of cortical (or brain) stimulation that is important. Extroverts have low cortical arousal and seek excitement to maintain levels of stimulation; Introverts are over-stimulated and avoid stirring situations to avoid becoming over-aroused. Finally psychoticism – which is similar to the more modern term of psychopathy (see Hare 1980) – describes people whose personality is characterized by poor emotion, sensation-seeking and general lack of empathy for others. This final variable was added later to the theory, as it was not initially characteristic of all offenders. Later testing did indicate a certain prevalence of this trait amongst many offender groups.

The relationship between these three personality dimensions is for Eysenck the essence of the criminal personality. Specifically, the interplay between these variables is assumed to limit severely the ability of an individual to be conditioned or socialized into a non-criminal way of thinking and behaving. People who were highly neurotic, highly psychotic and were also extraverts epitomized the criminal being. Alternatively, those who were introverts with low scores on neuroticism and psychoticism were seen to be ideal candidates for social conditioning and less likely therefore to become involved in criminal activity. Interestingly, psychoticism is regarded as being particularly prominent in offenders who display hostility towards others (Hollin 1989). Individual differences relating to the speed and intensity of conditioned responses would therefore explain the correlations between personality dimensions and levels of criminality. An evolution of the separate N, E and P scales was the amalgamation of the highest scoring items to create the *criminality* (C) scale (Eysenck and Eysenck,

1971). These are the actual statements that best identified the criminals from the non-criminals, which were then combined to make this separate scale. This has been reported to be an even greater discriminator in identifying offenders – both adult and juvenile. Interestingly, Eysenck (1987) reports that little in the way of gender differences have been reported, but that high levels of neuroticism are associated with adult offending, and extraversion is more prominent in younger offenders. Possible reasons for this included the potential difficulty for adult offenders who had been incarcerated in accurately reflecting social activity important for assessing extraversion.

CASE STUDY BOX 3.3 CRIMINAL PERSONALITY PROFILING

Criminal personality profiling, or offender profiling, is an investigative technique used by the police to help catch criminals. Many profilers believe that the personality of a criminal is reflected in the way they commit their crimes. One of the first major studies into offender profiling was conducted in the USA by the FBI (Ressler, Burgess and Douglas 1988). They conducted interviews with 36 incarcerated sexual murderers and ascertained a number of significant variables that were features of these offenders. In particular, they were to propose that these offenders could be separated into two main types: the organized and the disorganized. By examining the crime scene it was possible to determine which sort of offender had committed the crime. This then gave an indication of the 'type' of person they were looking for. For example, an organized offender was likely to be employed in semi-skilled labour, be married and have access to a vehicle. By contrast, a disorganized offender would be unemployed, live alone and have poor personal hygiene. This information could then be used to prioritize suspects during an investigation. Critics have suggested that this depiction of offenders is too simplistic and further research has produced alternative models. Holmes and Holmes (1996) for example propose a more varied taxonomy, which includes up to six different types of murderer.

Profiling is a useful tool for the police to help identify a suspect from a list of likely offenders, but is not always successful. One of the first cases where a profiler was used in Britain was in the case of the 'Railway Rapist' John Duffy who raped and murdered a number of women in the south of England in the 1980s. A psychologist called David Canter helped the police to identify a number of characteristics of the offender, which led the police to suspect Duffy (Canter 1994). In particular, Canter provided a geographic profile that showed that the likely offender would live in a certain area. This was done by analysing the criminal's spatial behaviour and the fact that he had a good knowledge of the railway system – Duffy worked as a carpenter for British Rail and usually offended near stations; hence the name given to him by the media. Other cases that have not been so successful include the murder of Rachel Nickell, who was stabbed as she walked with her young son on Wimbledon Common in 1991. Paul Britton, who was a well-known forensic psychologist, assisted the

police and led them to suspect a man named Colin Stagg. When the police set up a trap using an undercover policewoman to try and get him to confess to the crime, Britton guided the operation by telling the police the way in which he believed Stagg would act (Britton 1997). He never confessed to the crime and when they brought him to court the judge refused to hear the case as they had inappropriately used profiling to try to trap a suspect. Nobody has ever been caught for the crime. Profiling can be useful to the police during difficult investigations but doesn't always lead to a suspect and must be used very carefully.

Although Eysenck and his colleagues have continually developed and refined their ideas on the nature of crime and personality, empirical support for its validity has also reported many discrepancies. McGurk and McDougall (1981) found high levels of neuroticism, extraversion and psychoticism amongst a cohort of juvenile offenders. Whilst there were mixtures of the three personality traits amongst these individuals and a control group of non-offenders, only these three variables were *all* present in the offenders. The converse – low-N, low-E and low-P – was discovered only in the non-offending sample. So whilst a mixture of these (e.g. low-N, high-E and high-P) might be present in both offenders and non-offenders, it was the extremes of each variable in combination that predicted criminal behaviour. Others disagree with these relationships and have reported differing levels of all three variables amongst criminal and non-criminal groups.

Eysenck's theory of crime has been widely reported in criminal research and indeed forms the basis of many discussions on the nature of criminal personality. Given the inconsistent findings of the high-E, high-N and high-P combinations amongst offender populations, it is generally regarded as too simplistic to define all criminal behaviour in these terms. Further to this there is a wider debate as to whether crime can be explained with reference to psychological factors at all and suggesting that the causes of crime are much further-reaching. Although Eysenck believed that biological and environmental factors essentially created these personality types, the issue of 'cause and effect' remained largely unanswered. But what did emerge was that criminal behaviour did have a cognitive element, in that it was an individual's thinking style and subsequent behaviour that led to criminal activity. It was a similar notion that drove Yochelson and Samenow (1976) to develop their theory of *The Criminal Personality* which will be explained in the section on cognitive theories of crime (p. 75).

QUESTION BREAK: USING SELF-REPORT INVENTORIES FOR ASSESSING PERSONALITY

When researchers attempt to explain and measure criminal personalities, they often use what are called 'self-report' inventories. Generally these are

questionnaires that have a number of statements with which people respond to. For example, if we were trying to measure impulsivity, we might ask people a number of questions like: *Do you act without thinking about the consequences?* It is usual to give people a Likert-style response option, such as strongly agree, agree, don't know, disagree, strongly disagree. Each choice is then given a score and then all the responses are added up to give a total. Somebody who marks 'strongly agree' to the questions on the extraversion scale from Eysenck's Personality Inventory would therefore be judged to be an extravert. Psychologists then make judgements about the person on the strength of these scores and for instance, whether they are likely to commit crime. These types of test are widely used in all fields of psychology to measure different types of personality traits and attitudes, such as depression or self-esteem. However, although they can be used to explain why people differ on these personality traits, it is less clear as to why people with different characteristics behave in the way that they do. There is also the question of how they acquire these dispositions.

- Can you think of any problems associated with this method for identifying features of people's personality?
- What other ways might we use for assessing the psychological traits people show?

PRECURSORS OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

Other psychological explanations have not tried to explain crime in terms of a particular personality type. Such theories have typically looked for 'precursors', or reasons why a person may become involved in criminal behaviour, reasons which lie outside that individual's personality.

Psychodynamic theories – the influence of Sigmund Freud

A major early theory which attempted to explain criminal behaviour is the psychodynamic theory. The psychodynamic approach is based closely around the ideas of perhaps the most widely known psychologist, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Freud's ideas have been developed and modified by other psychologists over the years; however the work of Freud and his followers is still generically referred to as psychodynamic theory.

Psychodynamic ideas are extremely complex but a key notion is that of the 'unconscious mind'. Freud believed that much of our conscious behaviour is determined by unconscious influences of which we are unaware. The mind has a complicated structure which is built up through various stages of development. Freud thought there to be three key elements to the mind. Firstly there is the id, which Freud saw as the basic instincts that drive our behaviour. Secondly, the ego controls these basic

urges by operating according to the reality principle. Thirdly, the superego is a form of internalization of the standards of society. At each stage of development the instincts of the id (within the unconscious mind) are expressed. You may have heard of, for example, the 'oral stage' where babies have an instinct to explore objects with their mouths. During this stage, if you give an infant a new toy, it is very likely that the infant will put the toy in its mouth. Freud thought that later psychological problems arose when there were problems in the expression of these basic instincts at different stages of development.

One psychologist who was strongly influenced by these ideas of Freud was John Bowlby. Bowlby took particular interest in the close relationship formed between a parent and a child, which he termed attachment. Attachment refers to the strong social and emotional bond between an infant and its carer. He argued that the bond works both ways; carer and child provide comfort and warm feelings for one another. He argued that the attachment bond is critical in shaping the future behaviour of the infant. Bowlby (1946) examined a sample of 44 juveniles who had all stolen and were referred to a child guidance clinic. He found that, compared to a non-delinquent control group (who also attended the guidance clinic), a much higher proportion of the delinquents (almost 40 per cent compared to 5 per cent in the control group) had been separated from their mothers for more than six months in the first five years of their lives. This evidence does seem to be consistent with the idea that early relationships with the mother are important for a child's psychological development. Despite this finding, other researchers such as Rutter (1971) have pointed out that the research of Bowlby in this area has not been substantially replicated. Rutter argued that separation from the mother in itself is not the problem, but found that failure to form a bond with a carer (not necessarily the mother) was critical in future delinquency.

CASE STUDY BOX 3.4 FREUD AND RESEARCH

Freud conducted his research not by conducting experiments but by in-depth observations of individual patients. The image of a patient on the psychologist's 'couch' stems from Freud's work in understanding behaviour. Freud drew inferences about the human mind from the detailed cases which he observed. He was deeply impressed by work on the phenomenon of hysteria. His psychodynamic theory is complex and capable of almost infinite variation, meaning that it can be adapted to explain almost any occurrence. However this is all on the basis of inference (i.e. Freud inventing his own possible explanation predicated by his own hypotheses) and not experimentation.

The problem with psychodynamic theories is that because they rely on unconscious processes they are hard to test empirically and this has been one of the major criticisms of this approach. Because they focus on internal conflicts and unconscious processes (which are things we cannot see or measure), it is impossible to prove or disprove

them. It is worth noting that in the present day many theorists (although not all) feel that the role of explaining criminality in psychodynamic theory is limited.

QUESTION BREAK: THE KRAY TWINS

Ronald and Reginald Kray were two highly feared notorious London gangsters. They were both sentenced to life imprisonment for murder, and both twins have since died in prison. Yet both of the twins were famously very close to their mother Violet and valued their family identity very highly. Read the following extract from Pearson's account of their lives and consider the questions below.

The Krays were an old-fashioned East End family – tight, self-sufficient and devoted to each other . . . The centre of their world was to remain the tiny terrace house at 178 Vallance Road where they grew up and where their Aunt May and their maternal grandparents still lived . . . For Violet none of this mattered. Her parents were just around the corner: so was her sister, Rose. Her other sister, May, was next door but one, and her brother, John Lee, kept the café across the street.

And old grandfather Lee . . . would sit with the twins for hours in his special chair by the fire . . . And sometimes the old man would talk about the other heroes of the old East End, its criminals.

(Adapted from Pearson 1972 12–27)

- What does this say about maternal deprivation as an influence on criminal behaviour?
- More generally, do you think the behaviour of children can be blamed on their parents? (List the arguments for and against.)

Behaviourist theories

Whilst Freud proposed that our behaviour is the result of tension and conflict between psychodynamic forces that cannot be seen, other theorists have proposed an alternative approach which focuses much more on observable behaviour.

Behaviourism relies on the fact that any behaviour can be learned. The behaviourists would posit that there is no such distinction as 'us' (non-criminals) and 'them' (criminals). Rather, they would argue that as we develop and interact with other people we learn, through trial and error, how to behave in different ways. Depending on how and what we learn, we either may or may not learn to behave in either criminal or non-criminal ways.

These underpinnings of behaviourism began at the beginning of the twentieth century with the work of Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936) whose ideas of 'classical conditioning' or 'learning by association' had a huge impact on the development of psychology and criminology in the twentieth century. Pavlov's first significant

discovery came about by chance when he was studying the digestive systems of dogs. Whilst it is quite normal for dogs to start to salivate at the sight of food, he noted that the dogs would start to salivate at cues associated with the presence of food, such as the sound of food being prepared. He explained this behaviour by noting that stimuli (i.e. environmental events such as the sound of the dog bowl scraping as the food is prepared) can be associated with a natural reflex response (i.e. salivation). This response can become conditional on the stimuli. So by ringing a bell before the dogs were fed, he noted that they would begin to salivate even if he didn't actually feed them. For this reason, learning by association is called 'classical conditioning'. The main tenet of this new approach was that people's behaviour could be explained not by forces inside a person (as in psychodynamic theory) but by the interaction between the person and their environment. Behaviour could be learned through interacting with the world.

This new approach to psychology was termed behaviourism and many researchers expanded upon the approach since Pavlov. For example John B. Watson (1878–1958) argued that humans are born with various innate stimulus response reflexes, in the same way that some animals are. He argued that through 'learning by association' humans could develop increasingly complex chains of behaviour. Pavlov and Watson, like Freud, had started a new way of thinking about the world and upon these behaviourist ideas were based some important criminological theories.

The Chicago school and criminology

In the USA, at around the same time as Watson was developing the behaviourist approach, a group of researchers were dissatisfied with the biological and Lombrosian approach of 'the criminal man' (as outlined in Chapter 2, pp. 23–4). During the 1920s and 1930s this Chicago University-based research group developed the idea that crime was not the result of biological or psychological factors associated with individuals, but was instead the product of social forces. They noted that people who lived in areas of community disorganization, with poorer social conditions, had an increased risk of being delinquent. They hypothesized that, once a delinquent culture became established in a particular neighbourhood, other youths would be drawn into this subculture by associating with the delinquent group.

Edwin Sutherland (1883–1950) was one of what was named the 'Chicago school' of researchers, and had an interest both in the social creation of crime and in the role of the individual. He was interested in establishing how criminal behaviour was transmitted through the generations and why some people would be drawn into crime when others would not. He was particularly interested in how criminal behaviour can be learned. Sutherland argued that crime is defined socially. Those with power within society decide what is considered a criminal act and what is not. Therefore crime as a concept has both a social and a political dimension. So why, asked Sutherland, do some people obey these socially and politically created laws when others do not? Sutherland argued that this depended on the person's 'definitions' i.e. their attitudes towards breaking the law. A definition, according to Sutherland, is the way a person views crime, depending on the social forces in their life. Some individuals will hold

definitions that are favourable to crime and others will not. Therefore to understand a person's criminal behaviour we need to understand their history of individual learning experiences. Sutherland argued that learning took place through association with other people, and that the learning might be about specific criminal techniques as well as about attitudes towards committing crimes. The important point is that each person's learning experience is different, depending on whom they are exposed to, and so the theory was termed differential association theory. Sutherland believed that learning criminal behaviour was no different from any other sort of learning. Sutherland's theory was highly influential, but it left many questions unanswered. For example what social conditions are likely to lead to learning criminal attitudes? How does the learning actually happen?

QUESTION BREAK: GIRL GANGS

Rates of girls joining gang culture have increased rapidly over the years. Gangs first emerged in the 1930s, and were predominantly male gangs. However even in such gangs women could often be seen on the periphery of gang activity. Women would often hide weapons for the men and get involved at the fringes of fights. In the present day female gang membership has risen sharply, particularly in the USA. Read the following extract and consider the questions below it.

> Two teenage girls who led a violent gang in Surrey were jailed for life at the Old Bailey yesterday for kicking and beating a man to death at a drunken party. The court heard how the teenagers from Walton on Thames, Surrey, spent their time with a 'violent peer group' drinking heavily and taking drugs. The group aged between 14 and 19 were notorious in the area according to police. Detective Chief Inspector Graham Hill, who led the murder inquiry, said the girls were part of a group of teenagers who hung around the local area causing criminal damage and generally making a nuisance of themselves. 'They existed in a culture in which there was a hierarchy within the group and these two were in it' he said. 'They spent their time engaged in anti-social behaviour and causing chaos. They felt they could get away with anything.'
> (Sandra Laville, *The Guardian*, 9 February 2005)

- What are the social conditions which you could identify which may account for such a rise?
- How could you explain why women may join gangs by using learning-based theories?

Skinner and behaviour analysis

From 1930 to 1935 a researcher at Harvard University laid the foundations for a new way of understanding behaviour. His name was Burrhus Skinner, and the new approach he championed was behaviour analysis. Skinner formulated, through experimental research, the principles by which we can understand the relationships between behaviour, the consequences of behaviour and the learning of new patterns of behaviour. Skinner's early work was conducted with animals (much like the researchers who had gone before him) but rather than focus on classical conditioning he looked at what is known as operant behaviour. Operant behaviour is the sort of behaviour which operates on the environment to produce consequences – for example if a rat in a cage pushes a lever to receive a food treat as a reward. The rat operates on the lever, which produces a consequence (the food). The relationship between a behaviour and its consequences he termed a contingency, and he identified two types of contingency: reinforcement and punishment.

These types of reinforcement were subsequently used to develop differential association theory to give an explanation for both acquiring and maintaining criminal behaviour. To understand why someone commits crime it is necessary to understand their individual learning history and what has reinforced their behaviour. Differential association theorists suggest that there are two types of conditions likely to make a crime happen. The first being the background factors of individuals which might make them more likely to be involved in crime (for example low IQ, poor parenting techniques or peer groups – to name just a few). Secondly, the setting events at the time of the criminal act are of importance – in other words the environmental cues, which indicate to the offender whether or not their behaviour is likely to be rewarding. For example, if an empty house appears easy to access because it has a window left open, it is more likely to be burgled.

Crimes can be rewarding in many ways: they can be materially rewarding in terms of financial gain, but they can also be rewarding in terms of peer status. Yet, on the flip side, they can also have aversive effects such as imprisonment and the subsequent disruption of family relationships. Each individual will have a unique learning history so that their individual history of reinforcement and punishment will determine their risk of criminal behaviour when the opportunity arises. Therefore the precise circumstances that lead an individual to commit crime will be unique to that person, depending on the context they are within.

CASE STUDY BOX 3.5 BEHAVIOURISM AND RESEARCH

The behaviourist school discovered their 'facts' by using rigorous experimentation in a laboratory. Their participants were usually animals, rather than humans. This allowed their researchers a great deal of control over their experiments. For example, because of being able to control an animal's environment totally, the researchers

are able to isolate the one variable of interest, and make sure that, apart from that variable, absolutely everything else is the same about the groups of animals being tested. This is at the heart of experimental psychology. Unless we can be sure that there is only one variable that is different we cannot be sure that our results are due to that variable. This is very hard to achieve outside a laboratory setting and is particularly hard to control when we are working with humans.

One obvious problem of this approach is that real life does not work like a laboratory. In real life several forces may operate at once, rather than there being tight control. Additionally some theorists have been critical of the concept of studies which have at their basis animals as participants – they argue that because humans are so much more complex than animals it is hard to draw conclusions from observing animal behaviour. Another drawback is that behaviourists are interested only in observable behaviour – they are not interested in a person's innermost thoughts – yet a lot of people believe that our inner thoughts are what set us apart from animals, and are at the heart of what being human is about. When trying to use such theories to explain criminal activity it is obviously very hard to find out about a person's unique learning history, owing to the complexity of human life. This therefore makes some of the theories based in behaviourism hard to apply to our lives.

QUESTION BREAK: LEARNING HISTORIES

Think about your own life to date. Think about the situation you are now in. For example you may be working full-time and studying at night school, or you may have just enrolled in an undergraduate degree.

• What learning experiences have contributed to your current situation?
• What experiences do you think reinforced you along the way? For example did you have particularly encouraging parents or did a particular teacher put you off education?
• Do you think it is possible to try and view your current situation as a result of many individual learning experiences?
• How might 'learning history' relate to involvement (or not) in criminal behaviour?

Media aggression theories

An alternative theory that has been suggested is the idea that, although criminal behaviour may be learned, this isn't necessarily from a person with whom the individual physically interacts. This is the central tenet of the media aggression hypothesis. There have been concerns for several years that exposure to violence, via

television or video games, may cause an increase in aggression. Much of the research has looked at short-term increases in small acts of aggression in children, which may have only limited application to criminologists. However, some research has looked also at longer-term effects on criminal violence. From those who believe that media can cause aggression the current view is that filmed violence has a small significant effect on viewers (e.g. Passer and Smith 2001). However, various factors can interact with the effect of the media on aggression. For example research suggests that if the violence is depicted as being justified it has a greater effect, and there are individual differences in the extent to which people are affected by media violence. In addition, certain individual factors such as unpopularity and low educational attainment are also involved in the interaction (Blackburn 1999).

Despite this research many criminologists and psychologists adopt a critical stance on the studies conducted in this area (e.g. Fowles 1999). This is largely due to the problem of how media aggression has been studied. Much of the research has looked at short-term influences on minor acts of aggression, and has been based in laboratories. However it is hard to extrapolate from such lab-based research whether or not viewing violent material would be likely to make someone be physically violent in the real world. Other research has attempted to take real violent criminals and find out about the level of violence in the television programmes they used to watch. This is very difficult – for example, how do you rate and compare cartoon violence to violence in an 18-rated film? And how likely is it that a 'true figure' can be established on how much violence someone has actually been exposed to? These are just a few of the reasons that the research in this area remains controversial.

QUESTION BREAK: MEDIA AGGRESSION RESEARCH

Think of possible reasons why the media aggression research may have been problematic to carry out. Imagine you are a media aggression researcher wanting to establish whether or not violent video games cause violence in adulthood.

- How would you design such a study?
- What problems are there with this design and with implementing it?

One of the main problems with the research into media and aggression is that the relationship is likely to be bi-directional in that the aggressive person is more likely to choose to want to watch violent television or play violent video games, which then influences further the level of aggression. Most of the research in this area comes from laboratory-based studies and it could be asked whether this is appropriate when we are trying to use media aggression hypothesis as an explanation for serious crimes such as murder. When using field-based retrospective studies (i.e. taking a sample of violent adults and asking them if they were exposed to media violence as they grew up) there will be huge problems with remembering what was watched many years ago.

In the discussion above we provided a few of the reasons why researchers are often sceptical about the research conducted into media aggression.

- Can you think of any other arguments against the view that violence in the media leads to violent and aggressive behaviour?
- Can you think of arguments to support the notion of a link between media violence and aggressive behaviour?

Cognitive theories

One area of psychology that has not been particularly linked with criminal behaviour is known as cognitive psychology. The majority of research conducted by cognitive psychologists concerns internal mental processes, such as attention and memory and is generally studied in a laboratory setting. Although it is perhaps easier to understand how people can acquire criminal tendencies by learning them from other criminals, identifying how 'thinking' in a criminal way leads to offending is more difficult.

Using the data retrieved from a series of interviews with acute offenders from a Washington secure unit, Yochelson and Samenow (1976) believed that the 'choices' an individual made led to criminal behaviour. These preferences for action were under the person's rational control. What made these people criminal was that they had learned poor and ineffective thinking styles that were at odds with prevailing societal conventions and laws. In particular, criminals' thinking patterns were characterized by a lack of empathy, poor perspective of time, perception of themselves as victims and general concreteness in their beliefs (Hollin 1989). They identified over fifty of these different 'thinking errors' and these were further separated into three main categories. The first category comprised simple character traits that related to overriding needs for power and control (Blackburn 1999). Second were the generalized thinking styles of poor decision-making, lack of trust and failure to honour obligations. The third and final category relates to the judgements directly related to criminal acts. These can take the form of anti-social fantasies, removal or ignorance of deterrents and an elevated sense of optimism. Hence, criminals see nothing wrong with the way they behave and often fail to understand the consequences of their actions. Blackburn (1999) reiterates that Yochelson and Samenow didn't see criminal acts as opportunist but that they were premeditated; if not by actual planning then through general anti-social values and beliefs that instigated offending patterns. From a cognitive perspective, criminals have internalized different ways of thinking about the world and also fail to understand why they must not behave as they do.

The origins of these 'cognition errors' were believed to be in childhood, and, as with Eysenck, the relationships with parents – both genetic and environmental – were important antecedents to acquiring these flawed thinking styles. As with most criminological research, there were mixed results to support this theory of a general criminal personality, i.e. as a definitive definition of criminality. Many of the

cognition errors identified in the interviews have been found to be present in various criminal populations. But their attempt to produce an all-encompassing theory was flawed in a number of important ways. Firstly, their assumptions were based on a small number of incarcerated offenders (240 in total) with no control group for comparison. This sample is both small and also curiously flawed in that all the subjects were incarcerated for being 'guilty by reason of insanity'. Hence to make assertions on the nature of human criminality from these few individuals who quite likely had mental health problems was inappropriate. Hollin (1989) also raises the point that Yochelson and Samenow were labelled as being 'neo-Lombrosian' (see pp. 23–4) owing to the way that they define these different types of criminal as being a different 'breed' from other people and without sufficient explanation as to why this should be so.

Despite the inherent problems in the theories of Eysenck (see pp. 63–6 above) and Yochelson and Samenow, explaining criminal behaviour by way of cognition or flawed thinking styles became a renewed area of research. Where intelligence and locus of control had failed to provide adequate explanations of why individuals committed crime, cognitively based theories had less basis in social class or poverty. Two prominent names in the development of this theory have been Ross and Fabiano (1985). They have provided some lucid accounts of how poor upbringing – whether due to general poverty or to parental neglect – can hamper the formation of cognitive skills that are appropriate for pro-social behaviour. Ross and Fabiano believe that the way in which people make decisions – their cognitive or 'brain ' functioning – will influence future criminality. In contrast to the 'grand' theories which provided elaborate answers to the influence of various factors involved in criminality, the idea that poor thinking patterns could be largely responsible for such behaviour was enduring. The emphasis for the responsibility for committing unlawful acts was also placed firmly with the offender.

Although we talk about flawed cognition in the execution of criminal behaviour, the main emphasis is on social cognition. Social cognition refers to the way in which we think in social situations. For example, if you are in a pub then you are likely to behave differently from how you would behave in a church. Similarly, if you are talking to a policeman or teacher then there will be different ways in which you behave towards them, and this is part of social cognition. More specifically, this process is important when considering rules and how to behave. Social cognition amongst criminals is assumed to be flawed, in that they have not learnt socially acceptable ways of thinking. For example, taking drugs or stealing may not be seen by some people to be wrong. There are many different theories about these styles of thinking and how they are acquired. One such example of this is *moral development* (see box below).

QUESTION BREAK: THE STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Psychologist Jean Piaget and later Lawrence Kohlberg were to develop theories of moral development that consisted of a number of stages that individuals

passed through. Whilst it was Piaget who provided the basis of this theory, it would be Kohlberg who developed this into a consistent and detailed account. As children develop, they begin to learn different ways of behaving. Children begin at Level 1 and then progress through the stages as they grow older. Each person advances somewhat at their own pace and doesn't necessarily reach the higher levels even when they are adults. Essentially, he proposed there to be three levels of moral judgement, each with two separate stages:

Level 1: Pre-conventional morality (age nine and below) – At this level, rules are essentially external and self-serving. They are obeyed so as either to avoid punishment or to gain rewards. Young children often see an act as wrong only if they are told off or may persist in misbehaving because the rewards are great. A child who eats somebody else's sweets may do so because the consequences may be outweighed by the benefits!

Level 2: Conventional morality (most adolescents and adults) – The approval of others now plays an important role in moral behaviour in the second level and the perceptions of others are first recognized before embarking on any course of action. Hence, a person may have the opportunity to commit a crime, but desist from doing so as they know that it may have dire consequences for the victim. In particular, they may not want others to think that they are a bad person.

Level 3: Post-conventional or principled morality (only 10–15 per cent of adults before age 30) – The two highest levels of moral reasoning are characterized by the broader principles of justice, and the idea that they may be surpassed by other obligations. Legally right and morally right become two separate components of behaviour orientation – so although stealing is *legally* wrong, stealing medicine to save someone's life may be seen as *morally* right.

- Have you ever considered others when deciding what to do – for example, returning a wallet or purse even though you might have wanted to keep the money?
- Have you ever seen or heard about something that made you think that it was unfair and that the law was wrong?
- If you think back, do you see a change in the way you behave now as compared with how you behaved when younger?

There is some debate from within the wider psychological literature as to the way in which people pass through the stages and also some gender and cultural biases in the overall theory (Gilligan 1993). For example, the theory was mostly developed during interviews with Western males, and hence may not apply to the way that females and non-Western people debate moral issues. Nevertheless, the links with crime and social cognition are clearly observable. Kohlberg (1978) believed that criminal behaviour was a direct result of a setback in moral development whereby the individual is 'stuck' reasoning at the lower *pre-morality* levels. These stages are characterized by seeking fulfilment of one's needs, lack of concern for others and

avoiding punishment. The parallels with many descriptions of offenders' behaviour and personality traits are glaringly apparent. The earlier (Level 1) stages are concerned with maximizing rewards whilst avoiding or minimizing punishment. Higher stages (Level 3) are linked with values of morality and less to do with being punished. Criminals are often regarded as thinking within the lower stages of moral reasoning, where they will commit crime so long as the rewards outweigh the potential penalty if they are caught. People who reason at the higher stages may desist from crime as it is at odds with their values of right and wrong; being caught has little significance. Farrington (1992) interviewed many delinquents in his longitudinal studies and revealed that the way offenders thought about crime was quite simple. For some, they cared only about being caught or not, and many didn't care about the victims of their actions. Studies have shown clear differences in the judged acceptability of various offences and behaviour and level of moral reasoning. Some people may regard certain behaviours as reasonable and care only about the chances of getting caught. Others have provided an inclination that lower levels of moral reasoning are symptomatic of individuals nominated as being psychopathic (Hare 1980). Psychopaths generally have little sympathy for their victims and think only about themselves. If they think that they can get away with a crime they generally won't consider the wider implications of their actions (e.g. their victims) and this is similar to people who reason at the first stage of moral reasoning.

Criticisms of this simple explanation of criminal behaviour are significant, and are not related solely to the hypothesized relationship. In particular, there are concerns over whether the actual stages proposed by Kohlberg are somewhat arbitrary in that they need not necessarily be passed through in sequential order. Including the gender and cultural biases mentioned by Gilligan (1993), Kohlberg himself was to remove the final stage (universal ethical principles) as being largely unattainable and suggested that people could be 'coached' to record higher scores than they probably should. With regards to crime, research has been accused of putting much much emphasis on the *content* of the moral judgements than on the *processes* involved in attaining these decisions. In a similar way to which culture in the non-criminal sense has been found to influence moral reasoning, the 'subcultural' environment that has been argued as a characteristic of criminal fraternities may operate in a similar fashion. By imposing our own moral 'code' on which we judge offenders, we may simply be missing their own values and attitudes that represent different societies. Other theories of morality and its influence on crime have been proposed to confront this anomaly. Bandura (1990) proposed that people could actually become detached from their own moral principles in certain situations. The *theory of moral disengagement* highlights how people can separate themselves from generally accepted morally contemptible decisions by utilizing various psychological 'techniques'. The most common form of disengagement found amongst a cohort of young offenders was to dehumanize the victim. Hence it is not always the offenders' own actual moral code that is adhered to, and indeed they can devise justifications as to why they offend. For example, people may join gangs to save becoming the actual victim of these groups.

The idea of cognition and crime is closely related to the classical theory of criminology, in that offenders are seen as being responsible for their own behaviour.

Psychological explanations of crime see the personality of the offender as having a major influence on their actions; criminal behaviour is regarded as being an almost rational choice that is made by the individual. Although genetic and environmental factors can never be discounted, psychological traits that lead to an offender making decisions to offend can be identified. Cook (1980) believed that offenders conduct a rudimentary cost-benefit analysis when deciding to commit a criminal act. Subsequently if the rewards outweighed the potential negative consequences, it was likely that a crime would be committed. This is generally referred to as the *deterrence hypothesis*. These ideas were refined and developed by Cornish and Clarke (1987) into the *rational choice theory* of crime.

The basic premise of this theory is related to the rewards that potential offenders seek from their crimes. This is done by certain decision-making processes that are unique to the individual (e.g. skill) and to the dynamics of the actual situation (e.g. time available). Rational choice theory clearly believes that certain crimes are selected by offenders and committed for specific reasons.

QUESTION BREAK

Think of three particular types of crimes.

- What are the rewards gained from committing these crimes?
- What are the main 'dangers' and difficulties involved in committing such crimes?
- What generally held moral values have to be 'controlled' to encourage people to commit those crimes?

Cornish and Clarke (1987) developed a list of such choice properties, which included technical know-how, resources needed, confrontation with victim and moral evaluation. Although these related primarily to property offences and offences committed for financial gain, the authors believe that they are easily transferable to violent and sexual crimes. However, despite there being over fifteen different reasoning patterns, research has shown that it is the amount of punishment that exerted the biggest influence on whether to offend or not. Hence the relative 'cost' of offending greatly outweighs the 'benefits' of committing the act. In particular, Bridges and Stone (1986) have shown that prior experience of punishment – in the form of prison or other punishment – vastly influenced this equation. So offenders who have been caught and punished for their crimes were able to evaluate the potential costs more accurately and effectively.

CASE STUDY BOX 3.6 RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Rational choice theories have received increased attention in recent years, and in particular the psycho-geography of crime has seen a resurgence of interest since the early Chicago school proposals (see p. 70). Of particular benefit has been the development of what is termed *situational crime prevention*. Utilizing the theories of criminal decision-making, researchers have shown how simple methods of crime prevention can have dramatic effects on reducing the prevalence of specific crimes. If it is harder to offend, the less likely an offender is to select a target. Whilst this may sound simplistic, the emphasis on 'target hardening' has been a major area of criminal justice policy in recent years.

Routine activity theory is one such idea that sees an overlap between criminal and non-criminal behaviour. Cohen and Felson (1979) believed that, for a crime to occur, three specific elements must interact: firstly, the presence of a motivated offender; secondly, a suitable and accessible target; and thirdly, the absence of any capable guardian. The congruence of these three factors determined when and where crime would be experienced. Support for this theory was, according to Cohen and Felson, shown in the changing type and amount of crime experienced over time. For example, it was discovered that the amount of time people spent away from their home also increased the chance of experiencing a domestic burglary. The empty residence then provided two parts of the crime equation – a suitable target and a relative lack of guardianship. Increases in the use of crime prevention techniques, such as alarms and CCTV, have indeed impacted on the amount and location of criminal events.

What has emerged as a result of explanations such as these is an increased awareness of how people become victims – and, in particular, how individuals suffer from repeat victimization. For example, Miethe et al. (1987) illustrated that people who seldom left the home during the night or day were at the lowest risk of property crime, and naturally the opposite (those often away from home at day and night had the highest level of victimization). Similarly, Cohen and Felson identified the increased risk that age makes to the chance of becoming a victim. Older and less 'active' people reported significantly lower levels of victimization. Consequently, it is argued that the more active a person's lifestyle, the more chance they have of becoming into contact with suitably inspired offenders and becoming a victim. The importance of absent guardians is also an important factor to recall. In areas that are characterized by social disorganization, crime is often high and it may be the lack of neighbours or police patrols that compounds this. The opposite may be experienced in areas that have neighbourhood watch schemes and where suspicious-looking people may be reported to the authorities. Although routine activity theory is an attractive and robust explanation of *how* crime can occur, it is less proficient at clarifying *why*.

■ SOCIAL FACTORS AS AN EXPLANATION OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

Despite all of the above research, which has focused very much on individual thinking patterns, some psychologists remain committed to the idea that causes of crime are more relational. Many have chosen to look at the social factors in individuals' lives to try to explain why certain individuals become criminals. For example, do people who commit crime come from similar communities? Do they share common occurrences in how they have been raised by their parents? Are they more likely to be found attending certain types of school? The results of the research in this area show that indeed some social factors are commonly seen in the lives of those who go on to commit crimes. However, the research in this area is also surrounded by many 'myths'. For example, we often hear it said that people who have been brought up in violent homes are likely to become violent adults themselves. However, often the research into the social factors which vary with criminality shows that the facts are not so straightforward, a point we will turn to later on in this chapter.

Firstly, in order to get a feel for how the research in this area has been conducted we shall consider how researchers design studies which enable them to find out which social factors are common in the backgrounds of criminals.

Researching the social factors of crime

Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies are two examples of research methodologies which can be used to research the social factors of crime.

Cross-sectional designs

In a cross-sectional design the researcher takes what is effectively a 'snapshot picture' of groups of individuals, at a particular point in time. This account is simply a measure of people at that one stage in their life. When considering social factors, researchers may wish to compare two groups of individuals: one group who are involved in theft, for example, and another group who have never committed theft. This method would allow comparisons to be drawn between the two groups (thieves versus non-thieves) on certain social factors. For example, do those involved in theft tend to come from certain areas? Do they tend to live in crime 'hot spots'? Were they raised by parents who adopted a particular parenting style? Ideally, when using this sort of design the researchers would try and ensure that the two groups were 'matched', i.e. were similar on all criteria other than the one being studied (i.e. theft). This would mean the two groups should be of similar age, class and IQ for example. That way hopefully the only differing variable would be the variable of interest.

One problem might be that it is very hard to 'match' the two groups effectively. Differences may emerge in that one group might be older, or have a higher level of intelligence, which could add what is known as a confound to the study. Another problem is that often there will be a lot of differences between the two groups: it might not just be the area where they lived which differed between the groups, but also other

factors such as family size. Such factors could also add further confounds to the study. An additional weakness is that cross-sectional studies do not allow researchers to look at development of individual, over time, as they are just a one-off picture of a group.

Longitudinal designs

Longitudinal designs differ from cross-sectional designs, in that, rather than taking a one-off measure of individuals, they actually look at changes over time within the same person. For example in a longitudinal study the same 'cohort' of participants may be tested once a year for ten years, to see the changes which take place in the group over time. The advantages of longitudinal studies are that they allow researchers to predict later outcomes from information they have when the group members are first selected. They also look at the development of the person and can see if any particular developmental sequences are critical in the person becoming criminal in later life (Loeber and Farrington 1994). There are two different kinds of longitudinal study: *retrospective* and *prospective*.

Retrospective designs

In retrospective designs researchers might identify a group of people whom they wish to study, for example murderers. They would then analyse existing information on that group, focusing on information from their past (for example their childhood upbringing). Whilst this approach is very useful if you want to study a particular group of people (e.g. people who have already committed a murder) it does have some disadvantages.

One problem is that information may well have been lost over time as the people studied will not have known that in the future they would be asked to be a participant in such a research project. A lot of the information gleaned will be dependent on people's remembered experience and this in itself relies upon the human memory processes, which we know can be unreliable. This method is most useful when researchers are interested in a rare phenomenon such as murder, or arson.

Prospective designs

Prospective designs identify a large sample of people and regularly, over time, test them on various criteria. This overcomes many of the problems with retrospective designs as the measures are taken at various points in time throughout the person's life and so rely less on memory. The researchers can then follow their cohort through their lives and look at who goes on to become criminal, and who does not, and make comparisons between the two groups. An example of a successful longitudinal prospective study would be the Cambridge study of delinquency by Farrington (1995) which looked at the development of 411 boys starting in 1961 and is still in progress today.

The weakness of this type of research is that it is very expensive (because of the amount of testing required), and is often dependent on the same researchers sticking with the project throughout to give continuity to the research project.

In spite of the weaknesses, these types of study have helped psychologists to identify several social factors which to some degree can be used to predict criminal behaviour. We would like you to start to think about some of these research findings in light of the theories we have already discussed in this chapter.

One of the things you have probably already noticed is that psychologists have come up with several different types of theories which rely on totally different factors as an explanation, ranging from unconscious processes to different learning experiences to how we think. And yet all of these theories are attempting to explain exactly the same thing – why certain people engage in criminal behaviour. What you can see therefore is the crucial point in psychology and criminology – that psychologists and criminologists will come up with quite different theories which can be based on exactly the same evidence. Understanding this fact is a crucial point in developing what are called 'critical evaluation' skills. Critical evaluation skills refer to the ability to look at either theories or research methods and provide critical comments. A good example in this chapter is the section above on longitudinal and cross-sectional research designs. If you had read some research which had been carried out utilizing a cross-sectional research design, you could critically analyse this research by commenting on the weaknesses of such designs, and could comment on whether or not you felt this was the most appropriate design to deal with the participant group who were being studied.

To test your evaluation skills, the rest of this section asks you to consider some of the key research findings in the area of social factors and how they may predict criminality, and to attempt to apply the different theories we have covered to these findings. These social factors are major areas of enquiry: here we will introduce them only very briefly and highlight some of the issues they raise in relation to criminal behaviour.

Family characteristics

There is a common belief that offenders are more likely to have been raised in homes where one or more parents are not present as a result of separation, divorce or death. Indeed early research seemed to find evidence to support this view.

Wells and Rankin (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of fifty studies published between 1926 and 1988 that investigated the relationship between delinquency and broken homes. A meta-analysis is a type of research project where instead of gathering data first-hand the researchers re-analyse the data collected by previous researchers but include the data from lots of different studies on the same topic. This allows the researchers to draw some broad-based findings on a specific topic area. In their meta-analysis Wells and Rankin found that the prevalence of delinquency in broken homes was 10–15 per cent greater than in intact homes.

The relationship was stronger for less serious *status* offences (a status offence is an offence dependent only on the age of the offender, e.g. drinking under the age of 18) than for more serious *index* offences (e.g. burglary and assault). Interestingly, it would seem that simply having one parent absent does not lead to such high levels of delinquency. For example in families where one parent had died compared to families where there had been a divorce the children were not as likely to become delinquent (Wadsworth 1979). So the common belief that offenders are more likely to come from homes where both parents are not present seems to be a little misleading.

As a possible explanation for such a finding McCord (1982) looked at the prevalence of offending behaviour among groups of boys who were raised in intact and broken homes, but also took into consideration the presence of a loving mother and the amount of parental conflict. McCord found that the prevalence of offending was:

- broken home, without a loving mother – 62 per cent
- intact home, with parental conflict – 52 per cent
- intact home, no parental conflict – 26 per cent
- broken home with a loving mother – 22 per cent

That is to say offending was highest in the broken home without a loving mother. However with a loving mother present, even in a broken home, the prevalence of offending was lower than in intact homes with no parental conflict at all.

QUESTION BREAK: LOVING MOTHERS – DIFFERENT EXPLANATIONS

- As we have discussed previously it is common for psychologists to come up with alternative theories to explain the same phenomenon. How do you think the different theories we have covered would explain this finding?
- What would personality theory say is a possible explanation?
- What would psychodynamic theory argue?
- Can we apply differential association theory to this research, if so how?
- Try and put yourself in the position of Eysenck, Freud and Sutherland. How do you think they would evaluate McCord's findings?

Child-rearing practices

There is little doubt that the family is a highly influential social institution. Most of us look to our family upbringing to explain our own behaviour as an adult. References to this in popular culture are common. The baddie of many a film was 'turned bad' by some sort of bad experience as a child. This common conception is at least in some way supported by research which shows that family functioning plays a large role in how children adjust and develop (for reviews see Farrington et al. 1996). Early work on the relationship between how a family functions and delinquency led to the

formulation of 'typologies' of parenting style (e.g. Baumrind 1978). A typology attempts to put different types of behaviour into categories of some. For example Baumrind evaluated parental behaviour through interviews with parents and teachers and through direct observation of parents with their children. From this she devised four different types of parenting style:

- Authoritarian – parents place value on obedience and favour punitive punishment in order to exert control over children.
- Permissive – parents nurture their children, but prefer to allow them freedom of expression.
- Indulgent and neglectful – parents neglect their children.
- Authoritative – parents fall between the extremes of the authoritarian and permissive styles, and use an inductive (see below) style of discipline.

(Baumrind 1978)

Baumrind found that, of these types of parenting style, the authoritative style was found to be least associated with producing delinquent children, and was indeed considered the most effective parenting style.

It is perhaps unsurprising (considering our discussion of behavioural theory earlier on in this chapter) that psychologists agree that for discipline to work effectively it needs to be applied consistently, and needs to depend on the child's behaviour. However further research by Hoffman (1977) identified that there are differing styles of delivering discipline, which have different associations with the development of delinquency. Hoffman identified three types of disciplinary practices:

- power assertion – includes the use of physical punishment, criticism of the child and threats of maternal deprivation (e.g. saying to the child 'you are a bad little boy, mummy won't love you any more if you do that')
- love withdrawal – involves expressing disapproval, but not in a physical way, and the witholding of affection (e.g. saying to the child 'That's a bad thing to do' and not cuddling the child)
- induction – involves reasoning with the child, and talking through the consequences of the child's behaviour on others (e.g. saying to the child 'It makes Jonny upset if you steal his toy rabbit and it hurts his feelings, if someone did that to you you would be upset too, wouldn't you?').

Of these three types of discipline power assertion was the technique most used by the parents of delinquent offspring.

QUESTION BREAK: DISCIPLINING CHILDREN

Power assertion was the technique most used by the parents of delinquent offspring. How do you think these different theories would explain this finding?

- Psychodynamic theory

- Behaviourist theory
- Cognitive theory

Take a sheet of paper and write the three theories as headings: try to think about how each theory might explain this finding (you may need to refer back to each theory in order to help you do this).

Finally, under each explanation which you have created, try to think of some possible criticism of why that theory may not fully explain the finding – when you do this you will be critically analysing that theory.

What must be borne in mind when considering parenting skills is that even parenting which closely meets the ideal may be disrupted by stressful experiences which may have an effect (temporarily or longer-term) on the skills being utilized. External stressors such as unemployment, poverty, illness and parental conflict could all disrupt the most effective parenting techniques. The coping strategy of the parents in dealing with such stressful life events will play an important mediating role in how these factors may affect the children they raise.

Parental criminality

Many common phrases refer to the fact that similarity often seems to be passed down from generation to generation. Phrases such as 'like father, like son' and 'he's a chip off the old block' reflect this common conception. Once again some research seems to support the adage. McCord (1979) noted that criminal fathers tend to have criminal sons. In support of this finding West and Farrington (1977) found in their longitudinal study that having a convicted parent predicted later offending in both adolescence and adulthood.

QUESTION BREAK: LIKE FATHER LIKE SON

There are a number of possible explanations for the finding that criminal fathers tend to have criminal sons.

This time try not only to consider the theories covered in this chapter: consider the explanations offered in other parts of this book. How do you think the finding can best be explained? Choose any two theoretical positions (e.g. biological explanations versus labelling theory, for example).

- Firstly try and work out how each theory you selected might explain the findings.
- Secondly try and work out how each theory would criticize the assumptions of the other.

Peer influences

It is a common saying that a child 'fell in with the wrong crowd'. Children have strong peer attachments and friendships are critical to them. Research has found that friends can play a role in encouraging or inhibiting delinquent behaviour. There are two consistent findings in the literature:

- Adolescents with close friends who are delinquent are more likely to behave delinquently.
- Delinquents are more likely than non-delinquents to have delinquent friends (West and Farrington 1973).

Both of these findings hold true both for self-reported crime and for crime as reported in the official statistics. This is an important point as not all people who commit crime get caught and so do not show up in the official crime statistics. Moffitt (1990) came up with an intriguing theory to explain why many adolescents become involved in offending when they are teenagers, but then desist from offending when they become adults. Moffitt argued that the peak in offending rates, which happens in adolescence, conceals two different types of offender. One type is the 'adolescent limited offender', who will be likely to have a short period of time (during their teenage years) in which they offend, before they 'grow out' of the behaviour. The other type is the 'life-course-persistent offender', who is likely to progress from offending in adolescence to further and more prolific offending in adulthood. Moffitt argued that life-course-persistent offending is very different in its etiology to adolescent limited offending. Indeed it is likely that there may be some element of neuropsychological risk in the life course of persistent offending which can be worsened by problem interactions, and by the individual becoming ensnared as a result of an offending lifestyle. What is interesting though is why the adolescent limited offenders ever become involved in criminal activity. Moffitt argued that in our modern society children in their teenage years are held in a sort of 'maturity gap'. They are not considered adult enough to have jobs, and yet they are no longer children. As a result they can become frustrated and seek ways to break away from their parents' control. Moffitt argued that in this period where adolescents feel that they are in a 'no man's land' they begin to look around them and realize that some people are plunging ahead with an exciting lifestyle – potentially drinking, engaging in criminal activity, maybe even becoming parents themselves. These people are likely to be the life-course-persistant offenders. To the other adolescent offenders these more exciting peers can effectively become role models, and the adolescent limited offenders become involved in offending in an attempt to emulate the life-course-persistant offenders. This then explains the sharp rise in offending around the age of 17. The adolescent limited offenders are able to stop offending – by adapting to changing contingencies, i.e. when it becomes more beneficial to them to stop offending they can do. When they realize they will gain more benefit from getting a job, or continuing with education, they desist from offending. However the life-course-persistent offenders do not (or cannot) adapt to these changing contingencies and continue to offend.

QUESTION BREAK: THE PEAK IN CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

Moffitt's theory is of particular interest because it combines elements of several of the theories we have discussed in this chapter.

- Try to work through Moffitt's theory and identify the different elements which may come from the theories we have studied.

Unemployment

Recently a lot of attention has been paid to the idea that if someone is employed they are less likely to be involved in criminal activity. Research indicates that the most important issue is someone's ability to hold down a job to which they are committed (Jeffery 1977). It has been proven that offenders have higher rate of unemployment than non-offenders (Freeman 1983). However there is a complex relationship at play because it can be harder for someone, once they have a criminal record, to obtain employment. Furthermore once released from prison, if the person is able to find employment they are less likely to re-offend (Rossi, Berk and Lenihan 1980).

QUESTION BREAK: EMPLOYING OFFENDERS

We know that if offenders can be released into the community with a job which they are committed to it will reduce their risk of re-offending. Imagine you are working with an ex-offender trying to secure them a job.

- What challenges do you think you will face in convincing employers to give an ex-offender a job?
- How might you go about overcoming these challenges?

Child abuse

Research has shown that children who have been victims of severe physical abuse in the home are around three times more likely than other children to use alcohol and drugs, to deliberately damage property and to get into fights. Additionally they are about four times more likely to be arrested than other children (Gelles 1997). Wisdom (1989) carried out a 20-year follow-up study of children who had been abused or neglected and found they were more likely than the control group to have been arrested as juveniles, as adults and for violent crimes. Two things that must be borne in mind though when considering research into people who have suffered abuse are firstly that it is hard to know exactly who has been abused as many people never

report the abuse, and secondly that the research can be problematic as the sample sizes are often small, making the research harder to form generalizations from.

School characteristics

There has been found to be a consistent correlation between academic ability and delinquency. However more important than ability, it has been found that actual performance is the key measure in predicting delinquency (i.e. how the child actually performs at school regardless of how capable they may be academically). The relationship between performance and delinquency is robust and remains when other factors associated with delinquency have been controlled for (Patterson and Dishion 1985). Those who fail academically at school are at increased risk of delinquency regardless of whether the outcome measure of success is self-report or using official criteria (Elliott and Voss 1974).

Interestingly, despite individual variation between pupils, the prevalence of delinquency is not evenly distributed between schools (Farrington 1972). Owing to this finding, some theorists have attempted to explain delinquency in terms of the actual school itself. For example Power et al. (1967) looked at the delinquency rate of 20 inner London schools. They calculated the delinquency rate of each school for six years, using the measure of the number of court appearances of children. They found that rates of delinquency did not relate to the catchment area, and concluded it must be something within the school itself which caused the difference in rates. On the other hand some researchers argue that the individual characteristics of pupils lead to so-called delinquent schools. Farrington (1972) studied boys from six primary schools with similar delinquency rates and found that when the boys moved on at age 11 there were differences in delinquency rates between the schools. Farrington therefore argued that the 'delinquency proneness' of the schools' intake has an effect on its delinquency rates. In summary the relationship between school factors and delinquency is a complex one, with the nature of the association between the school and delinquency being quite unclear. It seems unlikely that the school itself can cause delinquency. However is is possible that the school can act as a catalyst for conduct problems.

This section has covered just a few of the social factors which have been shown to have some link with criminality. However there are many more that we have not had the opportunity to explore in more detail, for example family size and poverty. It must be borne in mind that no one social factor can really be taken out of context and seen as an explanation in isolation. In reality several social, as well as individual, factors will interrelate, to play a role in someone potentially engaging in criminal behaviour.

SUMMARY

This chapter has endeavoured to show that many different psychological theories have all tried to explain the same phenomenon – why people engage in criminal activity.

Through a series of reflective question breaks you have had the opportunity to start to think about these different types of theory, and point out both their strengths and also their weaknesses. In so doing you have started to learn how to analyse different theories critically. In addition, we have introduced some of the different methods which psychologists have used to try to research the question of why people become criminal. In learning these different methods you have had the chance to gain an insight into the ways psychologists study human behaviour, and have learned that sometimes, as in any area of social science, these methods seem less than ideal.

There is no doubt that in trying to predict who becomes criminal a whole range of theories and explanations are likely to be at play and it would be naive to expect a simple explanation. Hopefully this broad review of psychological explanations has allowed you to become a step closer to formulating your own opinions as to the relative importance of different types of factors.

FURTHER READING

Ainsworth, P. B. (1999) *Psychology and Crime: Myths and Reality*. London: Longman. An accessible introduction to the basic concepts that relate to psychological explanations of criminal behaviour. As its name suggests, this book attempts to explore many of the misconceptions people have about psychology and its application to crime.

Blackburn, R. (1995) *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct: Theory, Research and Practice*. London: Wiley. This is probably the most comprehensive book on the market and covers in detail all the major theories and applications of psychology to criminal behaviour. This book is essential reading for all students of forensic psychology and criminology.

Howitt, D. (2006) *Introduction to Forensic and Criminal Psychology* (2nd edition). Harlow: Pearson. The text is excellently laid out and provides the reader with an easy understanding of the major theories and concepts in forensic and criminal psychology.

WEBSITES

http://www.jdi.ucl.ac.uk/. The Jill Dando Institute for Crime Science at the University of London – Specifically aimed at reducing crime, this website provides a wealth of information on various aspects of crime from some of the world's leading academics.

http://scienceandresearch.homeoffice.gov.uk/hosdb/. The Home Office Scientific Development Branch – although this is not exclusively related to psychology and crime, there are many high-quality publications available to read and download.