

How could psychology help in understanding criminal behaviour – does society create criminals?

“Psychological criminology may be succinctly defined as the scientific study of the behaviour of mental processes that contribute to an understanding of crime and criminals.”¹ To many, the idea of criminal behaviour seems unfathomable and many find it hard to reconcile how criminal behaviour exist. Such behaviour is often shrouded in judgement and confusion, with people posing countless questions such as why would someone commit this? Or why doesn't this punishment deter them? Are they set to commit crime from birth?

In this essay, I will contemplate five psychological debates outlined in Richard Wortley's *Psychological Criminology: An Integrative Approach*. The debates posed are used to identify the cause of crime. Not only will they help to answer how criminals are made and how criminal behaviour becomes fully formed in a person, but they will also show how psychology can answer many of these seemingly unanswerable questions. These debates will also provide some insight as to whether society creates criminals since many of them contain explorations for social and biological factors concerning criminal behaviour.

1. Free will versus determinism

“Most people intuitively adhere to a philosophy of free will”². This puts forward the idea that people make their own choices. They have the power to decide what they want and don't want. For many, this is very comforting since it makes one feel they have the control in their life. Free will; however, makes explaining criminal behaviour difficult since there is a random element to it. If one can spontaneously choose to commit a crime, then, there's not much

¹ Psychological Criminology: An Integrative Approach by Richard Wortley

² Psychological Criminology: An Integrative Approach by Richard Wortley

left to explain. Thus, most theories nowadays assume some degree of determinism. "These theories assume that all behaviour is ultimately caused by factors outside the individual's personal control"³. There is an assumption that a person can simply be more disposed to partaking in criminal behaviour due to the cards they are dealt, in terms of genetics and environment. A wholly deterministic theory does give support to the idea that society creates criminals since a person's environment is influenced and moulded by society. On the contrary, it should be recognised that a person is not simply influenced only by free will or by deterministic factors. The mix of biosocial factors and the interaction between genetics and environment are what can be used to explain criminal behaviour. Therefore, a psychological theory that contains degrees of free will and determinism can reveal explanations for criminal behaviour and highlight the leading cause of a person's crime.

2. Nature versus nurture

The second debate puts biological factors and environmental factors head-to-head.

"Biological explanations explore the role in criminal behaviour of genetics, psychophysiology, biochemical process, neurological factors and physical traumas"⁴. Given this, nature poses an argument against society's creation of criminals since society isn't the mastermind behind one's genetics. In relation to crime, the explanation of nature has been shunned since there was and still is a discomfort with the idea a person is born to commit crime and is tainted at birth. Especially in the 1960s, "as people reacted against Nazi doctrines of racial superiority that underpinned practices of genocide and forced sterilisation"⁵, there would be no mention of biological causes when relating to criminal behaviour. Also, the idea someone is born criminal seems too simplistic an idea with no real substantial explanation provided alongside it. While one's genetics may mean one is more predisposed to crime, there is no

³ Psychological Criminology: An Integrative Approach by Richard Wortley

⁴ Psychological Criminology: An Integrative Approach by Richard Wortley

⁵ Psychological Criminology: An Integrative Approach by Richard Wortley

indication that one is destined to demonstrate criminal behaviour. Thus, nature and nurture are combined when approaching behaviour. These “Environmental explanations [that] look to the formative role in behaviour of child-rearing practices, family dynamics, school experiences, peer group influences, and so forth”⁶, are just as important in understanding what influences criminal behaviour as biological explanations are.

3. Normal versus pathological

This debate poses the following questions: Is criminal behaviour learned in the same way and driven by the same motivation as other behaviours i.e., a drive for wealth or reputation? Or, is criminal behaviour an illness? If it is an illness, can it therefore be cured? Is criminal behaviour a manifestation of some underlying trauma/dysfunction? The normal side of this argument states that criminality isn't caused by a notable psychological explanation. It is often learned, a matter of circumstance or a survival tactic in order to gain materialistic needs. If criminals are normal, this agrees with the idea that society creates criminals, since this gives the impression that criminality is learned. If a person comes from a position where criminality is either a necessity, learned or normalised, this is an issue with how society is built. Whereas, if a criminal is pathological, they are predisposed to crime. It gives the impression that a person can be plagued with the illness of criminal behaviour and therefore is in need of assistance to unlearn this behaviour. That, perhaps, one person's drive for basic human interests, like wealth and reputation, is more aggressive and controlling than another's.

4. Driving forces versus restraining forces

This debate seeks to answer what leads a person to engage in criminal behaviour and what stops them from doing so. We are all born with different drives and needs. Similarly, we will encounter different events that influence our behaviour. The answer to this debate poses

⁶ Psychological Criminology: An Integrative Approach by Richard Wortley

that “criminals do not learn to commit crimes, but rather, they fail to learn not to commit them.”⁷ This poses the idea that criminals are people who lack the same control another person has. This provides a somewhat blurred answer as to whether society creates criminals as while there is a sense that one can be born with the lack of impulse control over criminal behaviour, it also puts forwards the idea that events in one’s life can contribute to criminal behaviour. This argument is more humanising since this can direct the blame to other people such as parental figures as the cause for a person’s criminal behaviour rather than solely themselves.

5. The person versus the situation

The final debate seeks to answer whether criminal behaviour is down to one’s personality and genetics or whether it is due to one’s external factors that they happen to be in. This debate is very close to the nature versus nurture debate but the key difference is that the person versus the situation debate seeks to understand “proximal causes (i.e., factors occurring at the time the behaviour is performed)”.⁸ Therefore, if the person is to blame for criminal behaviour, then, society is not. If the situation is to blame, then, society is as equally at fault.

Overall, these different debates combine to create interesting and usable theories which are applied to answer questions surrounding criminal behaviour. These theories identify the differing factors in criminology and how not just one factor is the defining one to answer criminal behaviour. How criminal behaviour is, in fact, not purely terrible impulses but is a combination of differing factors that create the eventual cause. Psychology is so important in terms of criminal behaviour because it allows one to create such theories and therefore, understand why people commit what they do. Furthermore, this provides the opportunity for more informed contemplation on how to stop such

⁷ Psychological Criminology: An Integrative Approach by Richard Wortley

⁸ Psychological Criminology: An Integrative Approach by Richard Wortley

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crime and how to create a safer society. I would argue these debates have also shown that while society has a great deal of impact on people, it is not the only cause in criminal behaviour. Society can influence people and, as discussed, environmental factors are extremely influential. If one is suppressed by the foundations society is built on, it is easy to see how one can turn to criminal behaviour. But it must always be acknowledged that biological factors will always play a part into one's disposition to criminal behaviour. One can simply have a genetic makeup that makes criminal behaviour come more naturally to them or elicits an addictive feeling of ecstasy or joy when partaking in criminal activity. One may have a more intense and uncontrollable drive for materialistic things that are out of reach or one could simply have no way to control their own impulses. These psychological theories allow all these factors to be addressed and continues to create answers to reasons for criminal behaviour and society's role in that.