

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

“Experts say that children are not born criminals, nor pampered parasites. They are made that way by the environment in which they live.” — J. Edgar Hoover

Many quotes attempt to explain factors such as social and genetic influences that would affect criminal behaviour. However, most are based on our intuitive understanding rather than findings obtained from scientific research. In this case, psychological studies of genes and social influences can contribute to understanding how criminal behaviour is developed and how we could prevent further offending. Most theories and research which attempt to explain criminal behaviour represent the classical psychological debate of nature versus nurture: are criminals born with inherited genes related to offending or does the society create criminals? Although genes do contribute to different personalities such as impulsiveness and violence which will potentially lead to a more likelihood of committing crimes, I believe social factors, for example, education, culture, religious and peers are more essential in understanding criminal behaviour.

Some research which has demonstrated that criminal behaviour results from internal or innate characteristics will first be considered. Sheldon (1942) suggested three basic body types which are known as somatotypes that correlate with offending behaviour. These are Ectomorph, Mesomorph, and Endomorph, with mesomorph being muscular and identifies as the most likely criminals. Results indicated that 60% of the sample of offenders were mesomorphs while only 31% of the non-offender sample were.

This research demonstrated that the difference in somatotypes contributes to the

development of criminal behaviour. However, this might be due to the social judgements of the person that leads to offending. People develop their own beliefs of what criminals should look like which builds up to form schemas. These schemas usually come from media representations of criminals, for example, men with beards or strong broad shoulders. The facial and body stereotypes act as reinforcement to people's biased judgements to a specific person. Master and Greaves (1969) found that 60% of the prisoners of their sample had facial deformities. This strongly supports the view that individuals might commit crimes due to the social consequences of their appearance which alters the response of the individual according to the idea of reciprocal determinism. Therefore, innate characteristics haven't been shown in any cause and effect to prove the development of criminal behaviour.

An influential social cognitive theory of the social learning theory (SLT) by Albert Bandura (1977) can be used to explain how criminal behaviour is developed. The theory proposed that people learn through observation and imitation of others. In the SLT framework, children usually learn socially acceptable behaviours by observing the consequences of a behaviour. They only imitate if the behaviour has been rewarded rather than punished. Committing crimes is the result of social learning from the social context or failure to acquire social norms from the socialization process.

Identification suggests that people especially children are more likely to imitate the behaviours of whom they identify, called role models. In the meantime, if the individual is exposed to a social context that involves offending and violent behaviour, the individual is more likely to imitate others behaviour and commit crimes.

The SLT then leads us to consider an issue: does crime run in families? Young children

normally identify their parents as role models. Many research showed that criminal parents are more likely to have criminal children. For example, Osborn and West (1979) found that 40% of the sons of criminal fathers had criminal convictions compared with 13% of the sons of non-criminal parents. Some people believe that this is due to genetic transmission. However, Bandura's social learning theory can better explain this phenomenon. Children with criminal parents are exposed to early violence and offending behaviours, thus, they will observe and imitate this behaviour which seems normal and acceptable in his family. This suggests that criminal behaviour develops within a social context of inappropriate role models and dysfunctional reward patterns.

In fact, some studies into different families have found that many factors such as lifestyle, poverty, family size, or parental styles will influence the development of criminal behaviour. David Farrington (1997) researched young children and their families. He found that 20% of the sample had committed crimes by the age of 17 and most of them are repeated offenders. Additionally, he noted that these children are described as troublesome in early childhood and mostly come from poorer, larger families with harsh or erratic parenting.

Also, numerous data showed that families with poor parental supervision, parental conflict, an antisocial parent, a young mother, large family size, low family income, and coming from a broken family all contribute to delinquency.

The social learning theory also emphasizes the importance of media on children. Bandura (1961) recorded the behaviour of 12 boys and 12 girls who watched an adult behave in an aggressive way towards a Bobo Doll. They found that these children are more aggressive than

the children who observed a non-aggressive adult. This suggested that exposure to violence and aggression on televisions or games may lead to imitations of the behaviour in real life.

Although recent study from Oxford University found no correlation between playing video games and aggressive behaviour, this does not mean that some mechanics and situations in gaming do not provoke angry feelings or reactions in players as there has been antisocial behaviours such as trash-talking. This proposed that the effect of media on aggressive behaviour is still an interesting avenue for further research.

In the same study of BoBo Doll, Bandura also found that boys imitated more physically aggressive acts than girls, showing that gender role socialization is a significant feature in developing aggressive behaviour. Data suggests that more males commit crimes than females. On the one hand, this might be due to nature influences such as different levels of testosterone. But on the other hand, it could also mean that gender trigger different social responses which cause them to behave differently. Traditional gender stereotypes expect males to be aggressive, muscular, controlling, independent and risk-seeking while females are expected to be soft and gentle. Males who behave impulsively and take risks may be described as brave, such as jumping into a pool even though he is unable to swim. In order to fit in the stereotypes of males or achieve high social and peer status, boys from an early age might be involved in juvenile offending, for example, identifying with a gang. This suggests that the way our society responds to gender roles can potentially influence the development of criminal behaviour.

Apart from that, other social factors influencing criminal behaviour is attachment in early childhood. Bowlby (1944) suggested that disturbance of attachment bond between mother

and child might lead to deviance, because such children are not able to develop meaningful relationships with others, which is known as the effect of maternal deprivation. In his study, Bowlby selected 88 individuals between 1936 and 1939 from the clinic. Of these, 44 were juvenile thieves and had been referred to him because of their stealing, the rest referred to the clinic because of emotional problems and have not yet committed any crimes. They were tested and interviewed on periods of separation. He found that more than half of the juvenile thieves had been separated from their mothers for longer than six months during their first five years. Moreover, 14 of the young thieves (32%) showed 'affectionless psychopathy', 86% of the 'affectionless psychopaths' of the 44 thieves had experienced a long period of maternal separation before the age of 5 years. This enabled him to conclude that maternal deprivation may lead to delinquency in later life. Therefore, the study provides evidence that children raised in dysfunctional families were found to have long-term damage to their superego and conscience. A poorly-developed superego will result in a lack of control of antisocial behaviour and impulsiveness, which will eventually lead to criminal behaviour.

Despite this evidence for the role of society, we cannot conclude that nature would not contribute to offending behaviours. Alongside with environmental influences, gene inheritance is a significant factor as well. Early adoption studies by Crowe (1974) found that in a sample of 52 adopted children whose biological mother was imprisoned, 7 of them had at least one criminal conviction, showing that 13% of the child of criminals will commit crimes. This is a possible demonstration that genetic transmission may result in offending behaviour. Subsequent studies such as Mednick, Gabrielli and Hutchings (1987) found similar results supporting the idea that the biological parent's genetic contribution had a greater effect on

behaviour of convicting crimes than adoptive parents.

In my point of view, although nature and nurture both act as triggers to offending, social influences are more significant on the development of criminal behaviour. In many ways stated above, our society, including the environmental context that we live in has made us who we are. Our personalities and behaviour gradually change throughout life. Even though individuals might be born with offending tendencies, social factors are the catalyst that brings their life towards different paths and destinations.

Psychology provides more specific ways of investigating violent behaviour and gives systematically investigated answers that go beyond our common sense understanding of normal human behaviour. Psychological studies and research demonstrate the development of criminal behaviour and lead us to consider criminal behaviour from different approaches such as developmental psychology, social psychology, and psychoanalytic theories of crimes. Understanding criminal thinking patterns can prevent further conviction and contribute to crime reduction. Being able to recognize and identify how social factors influence individuals' behaviour will allow early control and prevention of future offending. Thus, it is important for everyone to understand that our society has indeed created criminals, as well as realize that offending behaviours are not fixed in our genes. In fact, it can be controlled and prevented from all stages of life.

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