

Essay Competition

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

The old-age question of crime

What influences people to lead a life of crime? Do they think about the benefits and the risks? And at the same time, why is crime present in our society?

People throughout history have tried to explain what causes abnormal social behaviour such as criminal activity. It is important to be aware that there are numerous reasons as to why people commit crimes, whether these reasons be biological, sociological, psychological, or economic. One of the main reasons I'll be focusing on is the psychological explanations for crime, which looks at the associations of learning, intelligence, personality, and criminal behaviour.

I am going to discuss two key psychological theories of crime: Psychodynamic Theory, and Behavioural Theory, as well as the cognitive theory and Nature Vs. Nurture. I will then go on to explain why I believe that to an extent, society does create criminals.

I. Psychodynamic Theory: The Structure of Personality

The first theory I would like to introduce is the psychodynamic approach. This approach- originated by Sigmund Freud- suggests that an individual's personality is driven by unconscious mental processes that are established in early childhood. He argued that human nature consisted of instinctual drives, known as the 'id', that demanded constant gratification whilst disregarding concern for others. This is known as the pleasure principle and is predominant when discussing criminal behaviour. In the media, we often hear stories of criminals who have no concern for anyone but themselves. Could this show us that criminals are driven by instinctual drives? We then go on to develop an 'ego', Freud suggested that the ego mediates between the unrealistic id and the external world, keeping individuals within the boundaries of society. The ego is guided by the reality principle. Lastly, we have the

‘superego’, this develops once a person incorporates the moral standards/values of society and their role models, i.e., Parents. The superego passes judgement on the actions of individuals and is driven by the morality principle. The ego will then go on to balance the Id’s desire for instant gratification and the strict morality of the superego.

So, how does this give us a better understanding of criminal behaviour? Well, we can presume that young adults, as well as adults, understand right from wrong. However, when a crime is committed, people like Freud would suggest that this occurred because the offender has an underdeveloped or weak superego.

To summarise, the psychodynamic theory implies that people who partake in criminal activity are aggravated and frustrated, with a weak (or inadequate) superego resulting in the id having ‘free reign’. Research also suggests that there could be a link between having a deficient/inadequate superego, poor social etiquette, and immaturity. Furthermore, inadequate superegos also lead to the ego’s excessive use of defence mechanisms and individuals are more likely to engage in substance abuse.

II. Behaviourism: Social Learning Theory

Another key psychological theory is behaviourism, in particular, Albert Bandura’s social learning theory (which is commonly used by sociologists to understand crime). Using the ideas of this theory, it would be said that people engage in crime since they associate with others who engage in crime. If a person is around someone who condones or rewards criminal behaviour (especially an authority figure), then the person will be more likely to engage in criminal behaviour.

Two mechanisms that lead to individuals learning to engage in crime are reinforcement and modelling.

Reinforcement tells us that people can teach others crime by reinforcing or punishing mannerisms, this is done in two ways: 1. If the crime is greatly rewarded (social acceptance, pleasure, or money)

with little punishment; 2. If the crime is frequently reinforced and infrequently punished. Gangs are a prime example of reinforcement, as people are often rewarded with gifts and gadgets for their behaviour as well as protection and power, this would explain why people continue to interact with gangs and engage in criminal activity.

Individuals often imitate or model the behaviours of others especially if said person is someone they admire/look up to or hold some sort of authority. An example of this is, if an individual sees someone they admire committing a crime, they'll be more likely to commit a crime themselves. This also links to the differential association theory: a person is more likely to associate with a crime depending on the positive or negative attitude they're exposed to. When a young person imitates behaviour that has been learnt by observing their role model, who is it that society blames and punishes?

III. Cognitive Theory: Moral Development

The third theory I would like to look at is the cognitive theory which focuses on how an individual views the world and how these views govern their thoughts, emotions, and actions. Using Kohlberg's theory of moral development, it would be said that every individual passes through three stages of moral development: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, and it is argued that criminals do not develop moral judgement beyond the pre-conventional level, which is the stage where an individual is most likely to engage in criminal activity. Cognitive theorists say that to possess a fully developed moral conscience, individuals must be able to regulate their behaviours and emotions to fit the societal rules of what is right and wrong.

Like the social learning theory, moral development starts from childhood, with the pre-conventional stage being how we learn the external consequences of our actions as we grow. Children with an absence of moral judgement are more likely to develop conduct disorders, causing them to be viewed as antisocial by society due to the inability of being able to regulate their behaviour. This could then escalate to them engaging in criminal activity, continuing into adulthood. Could this show us that society does create criminals?

Kohlberg stated that moral development would continue into adulthood. In England and Wales, the age of criminal responsibility is ten years old, meaning children can be prosecuted for offences even though they are still unaware of the consequences of their actions. An example of this is the James Bulger case of 1993 where two 10-year-old boys murdered two-year-old James Bulger. After both boys were prosecuted and did their time, one of the boys ended up being arrested again. Using this scenario as an example, it could show that individuals may rely on faulty cognitive processes thus drawing them to criminal behaviour.

IV. Nature Vs. Nurture: The Cause of Criminal Behaviour

When looking for answers to the reason criminal behaviour exists, the debate of Nature Vs. Nurture is continuously brought up. So, is the reason for individuals committing crimes a result of their biology, or the environment they are in?

Although there isn't a unanimous agreement as to whether nature or nurture plays a bigger role in criminal behaviour. It can be said that both do play a role in this kind of behaviour. Twin studies are often done in psychology, and this can help us to understand how the debate of nature vs nurture can explain criminal behaviour.

Using twin studies, in particular identical twins, if we were to say that our nature (e.g., genetics) didn't have a role in the development of our personalities, then we could say that they would be alike despite the differences of their genes (nature). Although, research has shown that identical twins can still exhibit similar personalities even when separated from their twin. Furthermore, if our environment (nurture) didn't have a role in our behaviour and traits, then it could be said that identical twins would theoretically be the same even if brought up separately. However, from past studies, it has been found that identical twins are never the same but are very much similar in most aspects.

So, what can twin studies tell us about nature vs. nurture? That both our nature and nurture can influence our thoughts and actions, potentially leading people into a life of crime. A good example of

this is testosterone and a poor upbringing. We are aware that higher levels of testosterone in men is associated with an increase in physical aggression and anger. Now add a poor upbringing in a violent household into the mix, and you could potentially end up with an engagement in criminal behaviour.

As expressed, we have learnt that there are many ways in which psychology can help in understanding criminal behaviour and the mental processes that occur, as well as how our environment and upbringing can also factor in. Now going back to the start of the discussion, does society create criminals?

There are many reasons why I believe society does create criminals, but one key reason is the lack of support from other members of society and the government. Whether this is the taboo of mental illnesses and disorders or the alienation of certain individuals. One way I would like to explain this is through the backstory of the Batman villain, Joker. In the film, the audience is made aware that the joker is mentally ill, and we see him alienated and frowned upon by society. This could be explained through Social Identity Theory. The Joker is only given the option of identifying with a criminal subsection of society as he is seen as an abnormality. A key line from the film that I think can help with my reasoning is, 'what do you get when you cross a mentally-ill loner with a system that abandons him and treats him like trash?'. This line is said just before the chaos begins.

Now, how does a fictional story about a villain in a superhero film link to society creating criminals? As I stated before, through the ignorance of members of society and the lack of understanding towards individual differences, criminals are born, believing that they have no other option and no one to turn to.

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