Module 1  Theories of Crime (I) - Psychological

Objectives

• Understand and describe the different Psychological Theories of crime

• Understand and describe the main features of the different Psychological Theories of crime

• Recognise strengths and weaknesses in theories

• Understand why theories are criticised

Introduction

In any given year in the UK, there are hundreds of thousands of babies born. For example, in the 2011-2012 period, official statistics record over 800,000 births. As unfortunate as it sounds, a percentage of these children will go on to rob, burglarise people in their homes, rape and kill. One of the burning questions, constantly debated by psychologists, is how to work out which one of this cohort of children will go on to commit crime? In this particular module, you will gain a thorough grounding in the various psychological theories of crime, psychological research into the criminal personality and will study the potential psychological factors affecting the onset and development of crime.

Psychodynamic Theories

The basis of the psychodynamic approach is that human functioning is based upon the interaction of drives and forces within the person, particularly the unconscious, and between the different structures of the personality. It assumes that our behaviour and feelings, rooted in our childhood experiences, are powerfully affected by unconscious motives. In addition, all psychodynamic theories are based on the assumption that the personality is made up of three parts, the id, ego, and superego. The id is the self-serving and pleasure-seeking aspect of the personality and is also known as the ‘animal’ part, governed by instinctual drives like food, drink and sex. The motivation for our behaviour comes from two instinctive drives which are rooted in the id: Eros (the sex drive and life instinct); and Thanatos (the aggressive drive and death instinct). The superego plays the critical and moralizing role, governed by the need to behave in ways our parents would approve of. The ego is the organised, realistic part (considered to be the conscious part of the mind) that tries to balance out the demands and desires of the id with the constraints of the superego. The superego can stop you from doing certain things that your id may want you to do. It is clear to see that there would be a constant conflict between the unconscious mind (the id and superego) and the conscious part (the ego).

Psychodynamic theorists would, therefore, try and explain criminal behaviour in a number of ways, as a result of the manifestation of id impulses (i.e. resulting in highly anti-social behaviour) and from an inadequate or dysfunctional superego (e.g. a
A weak superego would mean a person would feel less, if any, guilt or anxiety over anti-social acts. The anti-social behaviour favoured by the id, would only manifest if there is a problem with the superego and its moral rules. This problem arises from an abnormal relationship with the parents during childhood. For example, where a young boy has a good relationship with a criminal father and therefore internalises the father’s values in the usual course of development.

**Key People: Sigmund Freud**

The psychodynamic approach is based around the ideas of perhaps the most well-known psychologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). However, Freud’s original ideas, known as psychoanalysis, have been subject to a lot of modification and development which has been undertaken by other researchers who followed Freud. For example, Jung (1964), Adler (1927), and Erikson (1950) all developed theories that are psychodynamic in their approach. Psychodynamic ideas, therefore, 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 complex structure which is built up through various stages of development, at which time various instincts reach expression. You may have heard of, for example, the ‘oedipus complex’, where a child desires their parent (i.e. a boy desiring his mother, a girl desiring her father). Freud thought that later psychological problems arose when there were distortions in the expression of the basic instincts at different stages of development.

The problem with psychodynamic theories is they are hard to test with any scientific rigour, and this has been one of their major criticisms. The majority of early work, on which the psychodynamic approach is based, comes from case studies which are, by their very nature, subjective. Because they focus on internal conflicts and unconscious processes, it is impossible to prove or disprove their correctness and, as a result, there is a distinct lack of empirical support. It also rests on the notion that there is no free-will involved; it is deterministic, and therefore ignores thinking and memory as possible influences. Despite this, there are some useful shared assumptions with other, non-psychodynamic, theories. Psychodynamic research into
crime focuses on the idea that socialisation depends on childhood experiences and that poor quality parent-child interaction is related to later delinquency. One of the key psychodynamic researchers who promoted these assumptions was John Bowlby.

A psychologist, who was strongly influenced by the ideas of Freud, Bowlby (1907-1990), took particular interest in the close relationship formed between a parent and a child which he termed “attachment”. Attachment refers to the social and emotional bond between an infant and its carer. He argued that the bond works both ways with both carer and child providing comfort and warm feelings for one another. He argued that the attachment bond is critical in shaping the future behaviour of the infant (Bowlby, 1951). Bowlby looked at a sample of 44 juvenile delinquents who had all been arrested for theft and who were all referred to a child guidance clinic. He found that compared to a non-delinquent control group, a much higher proportion of the delinquents (almost 40% compared to 5%) had experienced complete separation from their mothers for more than 6 months in the first five years of their lives. Bowlby’s (1951) suggestion, that a failed or damaged attachment was likely to cause long term difficulties for a child, was termed the Maternal Deprivation Theory.

Various researchers have heavily criticised Bowlby’s delinquency study, citing the inadequate distinction between the types of attachment as a key weakness (Rutter, 1971). There are a number of different attachment forms which could have an influence on later criminal behaviour: disruption; privation (where there is no primary attachment figure); and deprivation (where there is a loss of the primary attachment figure). Hollin (1989) pointed to the unrepresentative nature of the sample of delinquents as a weakness in attempting to generalise the results, since they all came from the same clinic. In addition, he highlights the poor matching of the control group on several factors as being crucial. Despite the fact that Bowlby’s research was criticised as being flawed, Woods (2004) cites Rutter (1982) when he suggests his emphasis on bonding and attachment is correct. Rutter et al (2007) studied Romanian adoptees who had suffered trauma as a result of institutional deprivation, producing convincing evidence that early influences in life, particularly the influence or lack of parental care, can have profound effects on the development of the child (known as ‘post birth trauma studies’). Similarly, West and Farrington (1973) found that delinquency was twice as common in boys from families where relationships were strained and where there was marital conflict than for boys from families where relationships were generally harmonious. All this evidence does seem to be consistent with the idea that early relationships with the mother are important. However, it is also consistent with other psychological models, which we will cover later in this module, based on the notion of ‘early social learning’ and ‘attachment’ on delinquency.

**Behaviourist Theories**

Whilst Freud proposed that our behaviour is the result of tension and conflict between psychodynamic forces which cannot be seen, other theorists proposed an approach which focussed much more on actual observable behaviour. This new theoretical approach began at the turn of the century with the work of 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 20th century.
Key People: Ivan Pavlov

Pavlov’s first significant discovery came about by chance, when he was studying the digestive systems of dogs. Whilst it is quite expected 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) and that the response can become conditional on the stimuli. For this reason, another name for learning by association is ‘classical conditioning’. The main tenet of this new approach was that people’s behaviour could be explained, not by forces within the person (as in psychodynamic theory), but by the nature of the interaction between the person and their environment. Behaviour could be learned through interaction with the world.

This new approach to psychology was termed Behaviourism and was expanded upon by many researchers after Pavlov. For example, Watson argued that humans, like some animals, are born with various innate stimulus response reflexes, through ‘learning by association’, humans can 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, namely Learning Theories.

This perspective of crime examines the role of family and peer group, as the major influences in the development of criminal behaviour. It is influenced by the ideas of reward (reinforcement) and punishment (extinction). In simple terms, if a behaviour is rewarded, it is likely to be repeated; if punished, it is likely to reduce and die out. Generally speaking, learning theories view crime as a set of behaviours learned in the same way as any other. The earliest of these theories arose out of disenchantment with the biological approaches to understanding criminal behaviour.

Differential Association Theory

In the 1920s and 1930s, a group of researchers, known as ‘The Chicago School’, developed the idea that crime was not the result of individual factors, but was instead the product of social forces. They noted that people who lived in areas of social disorganisation, with poor social fabric, had an increased risk of being delinquent. They hypothesised that once a delinquent culture became established in a particular neighbourhood, other youths would be drawn into this subculture by association.

Differential association theorists suggest that there are two types of conditions likely to make a crime happen: 1) There are background factors highlighted by the research as being more likely to be a precursor to criminal behaviour e.g. low intelligence, family criminality, or poor parental techniques; 2) The ‘setting’ events, at the time of the criminal act, are of equal importance, i.e. there are environmental cues which indicate to the offender whether or not their behaviour is likely to be rewarding. For example, if an empty house is characterised by ease of access, it is more likely to be burgled. Crimes can be rewarding in many ways: they can be materially rewarding in terms of financial gain; however, they can also be rewarding in terms of peer status. Yet, conversely, they can also have aversive effects, such as imprisonment and the subsequent disruption of family relationships. Each individual