Psychological Theories of Juvenile Delinquency – A Criminological Perspective

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Abstract: The second branch of trait theories focuses on the psychological aspects of crime, including the association among intelligence, personality, learning, and criminal behaviour. Psychological theories of crime have a long history. In The English Convict, Charles Goring (1870–1919) studied the mental characteristics of 3,000 English convicts. He found little difference in the physical characteristics of criminals and non-criminals, but he uncovered a significant relationship between crime and a condition he referred to as defective intelligence, which involves such traits as feeblemindedness, epilepsy, insanity, and defective social instinct. Goring believed criminal behaviour was inherited and could, therefore, be controlled by regulating the reproduction of families who produced mentally defective children. Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904) is the forerunner of modern day learning theorists. Tarde believed people learn from one another through a process of imitation. Tarde’s ideas are similar to modern social learning theorists who believe that both interpersonal and observed behaviour, such as a movie or television, can influence criminality. Since the pioneering work of people like Tarde and Goring, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals have long played an active role in formulating criminological theory. In their quest to understand and treat all varieties of abnormal mental conditions, psychologists have encountered clients whose behaviour falls within categories society has labelled as criminal, deviant, violent, and Antisocial. This paper is organized along the lines of the predominant psychological views most closely associated with the causes of criminal behaviour. Some psychologists view antisocial behaviour from a psychoanalytic or psychodynamic perspective: Their focus is on early childhood experience and its effect on personality. In contrast, behaviourism stresses social learning and behaviour modelling as the keys to criminality. Cognitive theory analyzes human perception and how it affects behaviour.

Key words - psychodynamic, behavioural, cognitive, intelligence quotient, social learning theory, personality and crime

INTRODUCTION

Some experts view the cause of delinquency as essentially psychological. After all, most behaviour labelled delinquent—for example, violence, theft, sexual misconduct—seem to be symptomatic of some underlying psychological problem. Psychologists point out that many delinquent youths have poor home lives, destructive relationships with neighbours, friends, and teachers, and conflict with authority figures in general. These relationships seem to indicate a disturbed personality structure. Furthermore, numerous studies of incarcerated youths indicate that the youths’ personalities are marked by negative, antisocial behaviour characteristics. And because delinquent behaviour occurs among youths in every racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic group, psychologists view it as a function of emotional and mental disturbance, rather than purely a result of social factors, such as racism, poverty, and class conflict. Although many delinquents do not manifest significant psychological problems, enough do to give clinicians a powerful influence on delinquency theory. Because psychology is a complex and diversified discipline, more than one psychological perspective on crime exists. Three prominent psychological perspectives on delinquency are the psychodynamic, the behavioural, and the cognitive.

Psychodynamic Theory

According to psychodynamic theory, whose basis is the pioneering work of the Austrian physician Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), law violations are a product of an abnormal personality structure formed early in life and which thereafter controls human behaviour choices. In extreme cases, mental torment drives people into violence and aggression. The basis of psychodynamic theory is the assumption that human behaviour is controlled by unconscious mental processes developed early in childhood. According to Freud, the human personality contains three major components.

1 For a thorough review of this issue, see David Brandt and S. Jack Zlotnick, The Psychology and Treatment of the Youthful Offender (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1988)
**Psychodynamics of Delinquency**

Applying these concepts, psychodynamic theory holds that youth crime is a result of unresolved mental anguish and internal conflict. Some children, especially those who have been abused or mistreated, may experience unconscious feelings associated with resentment, fear, and hatred. If this conflict cannot be reconciled, the children may regress to a state in which they become id dominated. This regression may be considered responsible for a great number of mental diseases, from neuroses to psychoses, and in many cases it may be related to criminal behaviour. Delinquents are id-dominated people who suffer from the inability to control impulsive drives. Perhaps because they suffered unhappy experiences in childhood or had families who could not provide proper love and care, delinquents suffer from weak or damaged egos that make them unable to cope with conventional society. Adolescent antisocial behaviour is a consequence of feeling unable to cope with feelings of oppression. Criminality actually allows youths to strive by producing positive psychic results: helping them to feel free and independent; giving them the possibility of excitement and the chance to use their skills and imagination; providing the promise of positive gain; allowing them to blame others for their predicament (for example, the police); and giving them a chance to rationalize their own sense of failure (“If I hadn’t gotten into trouble, I could have been a success”). The psychodynamic approach places heavy emphasis on the family’s role. Antisocial youths frequently come from families in which parents are unable to provide the controls that allow children to develop the personal tools they need to cope with the world. If neglectful parents fail to develop a child’s superego adequately, the child’s id may become the predominant personality force; the absence of a superego results in an inability to distinguish clearly between right and wrong. Their destructive behaviour may actually be a call for help. In fact, some psychoanalysts view delinquent behaviours as motivated by an unconscious urge to be punished. These children, who feel unloved, assume the reason must be their own inadequacy; hence, they deserve punishment. Later, the youth may demand immediate gratification, lack compassion and sensitivity for the needs of others, disassociate feelings, act aggressively and impulsively, and demonstrate other psychotic symptoms. Antisocial behaviour, then, may be the result of conflict or trauma occurring early in a child’s development and delinquent activity may become an outlet for violent and antisocial feelings.

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Mental Disorders and Crime

According to the psychodynamic approach, delinquent behaviour is a function of unconscious mental instability and turmoil. People who have lost control and are dominated by their id are known as psychotics; their behaviour may be marked by hallucinations and inappropriate responses. Psychosis takes many forms, the most common being schizophrenia, a condition marked by illogical thought processes, distorted perceptions, and abnormal emotional expression. The most serious types of violence and antisocial behaviour might be motivated by psychosis. Of a less serious nature are a variety of mood and/or behaviour disorders that render people histrionic, depressed, antisocial, or narcissistic. These mood disorders are characterized by disturbance in expressed emotions. Some suffer from alexithymia, a deficit in emotional cognition that prevents people from being aware of their feelings or being able to understand or talk about their thoughts and emotions; they seem robotic and emotionally dead. Others may suffer from eating disorders and are likely to use fasting, vomiting, and drugs to lose weight or to keep from gaining weight. One such disorder is discussed more fully in the Focus on Delinquency feature “Disruptive Behaviour Disorder.”

Is the Psychodynamic View Valid?

There is a great deal of empirical evidence showing that kids who suffer from these and other psychological deficits are prone to violence and antisocial behaviour. Violent youths have been clinically diagnosed as “overtly hostile,” “explosive or volatile,” “anxious,” and “depressed.” Many delinquents exhibit indications of such psychological abnormalities as schizophrenia, paranoia, and obsessive behaviours; female offenders seem to have more serious mental health symptoms and psychological disturbances than male offenders. Antisocial youths frequently come from families in which parents are unable to give love, set consistent limits, and provide the controls that allow children to develop the necessary personal tools to cope with the world in which they live. Although this evidence is persuasive, the association between mental disturbance and delinquency is unresolved. It is possible that any link is caused by some intervening variable or factor:

- Psychologically troubled youth do poorly in school and school failure leads to delinquency.
- Psychologically troubled youth have conflict-ridden social relationships that make them prone to commit delinquent acts.
- While good parenting is considered a barrier against delinquency, youth who maintain abnormal psychological characteristics such as low self-control, a hostile view of relationships, and acceptance of deviant norms may neutralize the influence of positive parenting on controlling their conduct.
- Kids who suffer child abuse are more likely to have mental anguish and commit violent acts; child abuse is the actual cause of both problems. Living in a stress-filled urban environment may produce symptoms of both mental illness and crime.
- Kids who are delinquent have reduced life chances. They do poorly in school and as adults are relegated to lower-class economic status. Educational failure and status deprivation are related to depression and other psychological deficits. It is also possible that the link is spurious and caused by the treatment of the mentally ill: The police may be more likely to arrest the mentally ill, giving the illusion that they are crime prone. However, some recent research by Paul Hirschfield and his associates gives only mixed support to this view: while some mental health problems increase the risk of arrest, others bring out more cautious or compassionate police responses that may result in treatment rather than arrest.

Behavioural Theory

Not all psychologists agree that behaviour is controlled by unconscious mental processes determined by parental relationships developed early in childhood. Behavioural psychologists argue that a person’s personality is learned throughout life during interaction with others. Based primarily on the works of the American psychologist John B. Watson (1878–1958) and popularized by Harvard professor B. F. Skinner (1904–1990), behaviourism concerns itself solely with measurable events and not the unobservable psychic phenomena described by psychoanalysts.

References:

11. Ibid.
Behaviourists suggest that individuals learn by observing how people react to their behaviour. Behaviour is triggered initially by a stimulus or change in the environment. If a particular behaviour is reinforced by some positive reaction or event, that behaviour will be continued and eventually learned. However, behaviours that are not reinforced or are punished will be extinguished or become extinct. For example, if children are given a reward (ice cream for dessert) for eating their entire dinner, eventually they will learn to eat properly as a matter of habit. Conversely, if children are punished for some misbehaviour, they will eventually learn to associate disapproval with that act and avoid it.

Social Learning Theory
Not all behaviourists strictly follow the teachings of Watson and Skinner. Some hold that a person’s learning and social experiences, coupled with his or her values and expectations, determine behaviour. This is known as the social learning approach. The most widely read social learning theorists are Albert Bandura, Walter Mischel, and Richard Walters. In general, they hold that children will model their behaviour according to the reactions they receive from others, either positive or negative; the behaviour of those adults they are in close contact with, especially parents; and the behaviour they view on television and in movies. If children observe aggression and see that the aggressive behaviour, such as an adult slapping or punching someone during an argument, is approved or rewarded, they will likely react violently during a similar incident. Eventually, the children will master the techniques of aggression and become more confident that their behaviour will bring tangible rewards. By implication, social learning suggests that children who grow up in a home where violence is the norm will perceive physical punishment as the norm during conflict situations with others. Adolescent aggression is a result of disrupted dependency relationships with parents. This refers to the frustration and anger a child feels when parents provide poor role models and hold back affection and nurturing. Children who lack close dependent ties to their parents may have little opportunity or desire to model themselves after them or to internalize their standards of behaviour. In the absence of such internalized controls, the child’s aggression is likely to be expressed in an immediate, direct, and socially unacceptable fashion such as violence and aggression.

Cognitive Theory
A third area of psychology that has received increasing recognition in recent years is cognitive theory. Psychologists with a cognitive perspective focus on mental processes—the way people perceive and mentally represent the world around them, and how they solve problems. The pioneers of this school were Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), Edward Titchener (1867–1927), and William James (1842–1920). The cognitive perspective contains several subgroups. Perhaps the most important for criminological theory is the moral and intellectual development branch, which is concerned with how people morally represent and reason about the world. Jean Piaget (1896–1980), the founder of this approach, hypothesized that a child’s reasoning processes develop in an orderly fashion, beginning at birth and continuing until age 12 and older. At first, during the sensorimotor stage, children respond to the environment in a simple manner, seeking interesting objects and developing their reflexes. By the fourth and final stage, the formal operational stage, they have developed into mature adults who can use logic and abstract thought. Lawrence Kohlberg applied the concept of developmental stages to issues in criminology. He suggested that people travel through stages of moral development, during which the basis for moral and ethical decision making changes. It is possible that serious offenders have a moral orientation that differs from that of law-abiding Citizens. Kohlberg’s stages of development are as follows:

Stage 1. Right is obedience to power and avoidance of punishment.
Stage 2. Right is taking responsibility for oneself, meeting one’s own needs, and...
Leaving to others the responsibility for themselves.

**Stage 3.** Right is being good in the sense of having good motives, having concern for others, and “putting yourself in the other person’s shoes.”

**Stage 4.** Right is maintaining the rules of a society and serving the welfare of the group or society.

**Stage 5.** Right is based on recognized individual rights within a society with agreed-upon rules—a social contract.

**Stage 6.** Right is an assumed obligation to principles applying to all humankind—Principles of justice, equality, and respect for human personality.

Kohlberg classified people according to the stage on this continuum at which their Moral development has ceased to grow. In studies conducted by Kohlberg and his Associates, criminals were found to be significantly lower in their moral judgment Development than noncriminal of the same social background. The majority of noncriminal was classified in stages 3 and 4, whereas a majority of criminals were in stages 1 and 2. Moral development theory, then, suggests that people who obey the law simply to avoid punishment or who have outlooks mainly characterized by self-interest are more likely to commit crimes than those who view the law as something that benefits all of society and who honour the rights of others. Subsequent research with delinquent youths has found that a significant number were in the first two moral development categories, whereas non delinquents were ranked higher. In addition, higher stages of moral reasoning are associated with such behaviours as honesty, generosity, and nonviolence, which are considered incompatible with delinquency.16

### Information Processing

Cognitive theorists who study information processing try to explain antisocial behaviour in terms of perception and analysis of data. When people make decisions, they engage in a sequence of cognitive thought processes. They first encode information so that it can be interpreted. They then search for a proper response and decide upon the most appropriate action; finally, they act on their decision. According to this approach, adolescents who use information properly, who are better conditioned to make reasoned judgments, and who can make quick and reasoned decisions when facing emotion-laden events are the ones best able to avoid antisocial behaviour choices.18 In contrast, delinquency-prone adolescents may have Cognitive deficits and use information incorrectly when they make decisions. They have difficulty in making the “right decision” while under stress. One reason is that they may be relying on mental “scripts” learned in their early childhood that tell them how to interpret events, what to expect, how they should react, and what the outcome of the interaction should be.19 Hostile children may have learned improper scripts by observing how others react to events; their own parents’ aggressive and inappropriate behaviour would have considerable impact. Some children may have had early and prolonged exposure to violence, such as child abuse, which increases their sensitivity to teasing and maltreatment. They may misperceive behavioural cues because their decision making was shaped by traumatic life events. Oversensitivity to rejection by their peers is a continuation of sensitivity to rejection by parents. Violence becomes a stable behaviour because the scripts that emphasize aggressive responses are repeatedly rehearsed as the child matures. They view crime as an appropriate means to satisfy their immediate personal needs, which take precedent over more distant social needs such as obedience to the law. Violence-prone kids see the world around them as filled with aggressive people. They are overly sensitive and tend to overreact to provocation. As these children mature, they use fewer cues than most people to process information. Some use violence in a calculating fashion as a means of getting what they want; others react in an Overly volatile fashion to the slightest provocation. When they attack victims, they may believe they are defending themselves, even though they are misreading the situation. Adolescents who use violence as a coping technique with others are also more likely to exhibit other social problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse. There is also evidence that delinquent boys who engage in theft are more likely to exhibit cognitive deficits than non delinquent youth. For example, they have a poor sense of time, leaving them incapable of dealing with or solving social problems in an effective manner.10

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Personality and crime

Personality can be defined as something that makes us what we are and also that which makes us different from others. Ideally, personality is stable over time. Examinations of the relationship between personality and crime have often yielded inconsistent results. One of the most well-known theories of personality used to examine this relationship is the Big Five model of personality. This model provides a vigorous structure into which most personality characteristics can be categorized. This model suggests that five domains account for individual differences in personality: (1) Neuroticism, (2) Extraversion, (3) Openness, (4) Agreeableness, and (5) Conscientiousness (Clark et al., 2007). Neuroticism involves emotional stability. Individuals who score high on this domain often demonstrate anger and sadness and have irrational ideas, uncontrollable impulses, and anxiety. In contrast, persons who score low on Neuroticism are often described by others as even tempered, calm, and relaxed. The second domain, Extraversion, is characterized by sociability, excitement, and stimulation. Individuals who score high on Extraversion (extraverts) are often very active, talkative, and assertive. They also are more optimistic toward the future. In contrast, introverts are often characterized by being reserved, independent, and shy (Clark et al., 2007). The third domain is Openness, referring to individuals who have an active imagination, find pleasure in beauty, are attentive to their inner feelings, have a preference for variety, and are intellectually curious. Individuals who score high on Openness are willing to entertain unique or novel ideas, maintain unconventional values, and experience positive and negative emotions more so than individuals who are closed minded. In contrast, persons who score low in Openness often prefer the familiar, behave in conventional manners, and have a conservative viewpoint (Clark et al., 2007). The fourth domain is Agreeableness. This domain is related to interpersonal tendencies. Individuals who score high on this domain are considered warm, altruistic, soft-hearted, forgiving, sympathetic, and trusting. In contrast, those who are not agreeable are described as hard-hearted, intolerant, impatient, and argumentative. Conscientiousness, the fifth domain, focuses on a person’s ability to control impulses and exercise self-control. Individuals who score high on Conscientiousness are described as organized, thorough, efficient, determined, and strong willed. In addition, those who are conscientious are more likely to achieve high academic and occupational desires. In contrast, people who score low on this domain are thought to be careless, lazy, and more likely assign fault to others than to accept blame themselves (Clark et al., 2007). One personality study discovered that the personality traits of hostility, impulsivity, and narcissism are correlated with delinquent and criminal behavior. Furthermore, research conducted by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck during the 1930s and 1940s identified a number of personality traits that were characteristic of antisocial youth (Schmalleger, 2008). Another important figure who examined the criminal personality is Hans Eysenck (1916–1997). Eysenck identified two antisocial personality traits: (1) extraversion and (2) neuroticism. Eysenck suggested that individuals who score at the ends of either domain of extraversion and neuroticism are more likely to be self-destructive and criminal (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). Moreover, neuroticism is associated with self-destructive behavior (e.g., abusing drugs and alcohol and committing crimes). Enduring relationships, impulsivity, risk taking, egocentricity, manipulativeness, forcefulness and cold-heartedness, and shallow emotions (Jacoby, 2004). The origin may include traumatic socialization, neurological disorder, and brain abnormality (Siegal, 2008). Interestingly, if an individual suffers from low levels of arousal as measured by a neurological examination, he or she may engage in thrill seeking or high-risk behaviors such as crime to offset their low arousal level. Other dynamics that may contribute to the psychopathic personality is a parent with pathologic tendencies, childhood traumatic events, or inconsistent discipline. It is important to note that many chronic offenders are sociopaths. Thus, if personality traits can predict crime and violence, then one could assume that the root cause of crime is found in the forces that influence human development at an early stage of life (Siegal, 2008).

Criminologists have suggested for centuries that there exists a link between intelligence and crime (Dabney, 2004). Some common beliefs are that criminals and delinquents possess low intelligence and that this low intelligence causes criminality. As criminological research has advanced, scholars have continued to suggest that the Holy Grail is causality. The ability to predict criminals from non-criminals is the ultimate goal. The ideology or concept of IQ and crime has crystallized into the nature-versus-nurture debate (Jacoby, 2004). The nature versus-nurture debate is a psychological argument that is related to whether the environment or heredity impacts the psychological development of individuals (Messner & Rosenfield, 2007). Science recognizes that we share our parents’ DNA. To illustrate, some people have short fingers like their mother and brown eyes like their father. However, the question remains: Where do individuals get their love of sports, literature, and humour? The nature-versus-nurture debate...
addresses this issue. With respect to the nature side, research on the
Prison population has consistently shown that inmates typically score low on IQ tests (Schmalleger, 2008). In the early decades of the 20th century, researchers administered IQ tests to delinquent male children. The results indicated that close to 40% had below-average intelligence (Siegel, 2008). On the basis of these data and other studies, some scholars argue that the role of nature is prevalent. However, can researchers assume a priori that heredity determines IQ, which in turn influences an individual’s criminal behaviour? One criticism of this perspective is the failure to account for free will. Many individuals in our society believe in the ability to make choices. Last, there are many individuals who have a low IQ but refrain from committing crime. With respect to nurture theory, advocates ground themselves on the premise that intelligence is not inherited. There is some recognition of the role of heredity; however, emphasis is placed on the role of society (i.e., environment). To demonstrate, parents are a major influence on their children’s behaviour. At an early age, parents read books; play music; and engage their children in art, museum, and sporting events. Some parents spend no quality time with their children, and these children are believed to perform poorly on intelligence test. Other groups important in a child’s nurturing are friends, relatives, and teachers. Ultimately, the child who has no friends or relatives and drops out of school Is destined for difficult times. Research has demonstrated that the more education a person has, the higher his or her IQ. The nature-versus-nurture debate will continue. The debate has peaks and valleys. For years, the debate subsides, and this is followed by years of scrutiny and a great deal of attention. One of two major studies that highlighted this debate was conducted by Travis Hirschi and Michael Hindelang (1977). These scholars suggested that low IQ increases the likelihood of criminal behaviour through its effect on school performance. This argument seems somewhat elementary. Their argument is that a child with a low IQ will perform poorly in school. In turn, this school failure is followed by dropping out. Given the poor school performance, a child is left with very few options (Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977). This ultimately leads to delinquency and adult criminality. Support of this position has been widespread. Furthermore, it is important to note that U.S. prisons and jails are highly populated with inmates who only have an average of eighth-grade education. At the same time, these same inmates at the time of their offense were unemployed. The second nature-versus-nature study that warrants attention was conducted by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (1994). In their book *The Bell Curve*, these scholars suggested individuals with a lower IQ are more likely to commit crime, get caught, and be sent to prison. Importantly, these authors transport the IQ and crime link to another level. Specifically, they suggested that prisons and jails are highly populated with inmates with low IQs; however, what about those criminals who actions go undetected? Through self-reported data, the researchers discovered that these individuals have a lower IQ than the general public. Thus, research concludes those criminal offenders who have been caught and those who have not have an IQ lower than the general population (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994).

Conclusion

The relation between psychology and criminal behaviour is significant. For centuries, scholars have been attempting to explain why someone commits a crime and what the reason behind this criminality is? This paper examined the role of psychodynamic theory as developed by Sigmund Freud a Viennese psychiatrist (1856-1939). Included here are the roles of the id, ego, and super ego in criminal behaviour. This was followed by a discussion of mental disorders and crime. Under examination here were conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder. Through both disorders, we learned that children possess many characteristics associated with delinquency and adult criminality, ultimately concluding that treatment is a necessity and early intervention is paramount. Discussed next was the role of mental illness and crime. Bipolar disorder and schizophrenia are two of the most serious Disorders. Research suggests that there is a correlation between individuals with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and delinquency and/or criminal behaviour. The second major psychological theory is behaviourism. As previously mentioned, behavioural theory suggests human behaviour is fostered through learning experiences. At the forefront of this theory is the premise that individuals change their behaviour according to reactions from others. In the real world, there exists the assumption that behaviour is reinforced via rewards and eliminated by a negative reaction or punishment. Social learning theory, which is a branch of behaviour theory, is the most relevant to criminology. Moreover, the most prominent social learning theorist is Albert Bandura. The third psychological theory examined is cognition.

Here, an importance of mental processes of individuals is examined. A discussion followed on how individuals perceive and mentally represent the world. Furthermore, how do individuals solve problems? Two important sub disciplines examined
were Kohlberg’s moral development theory and information-processing theory. Ultimately, we can conclude that criminal offenders are poor at processing information and evaluating the world around them. The next major topics discussed were personality and intelligence. Concerning personality, we learned that personality can be measured via the domains of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. We learned that Extraversion and Neuroticism are related to criminal behaviour. Last, the intelligence debate has existed for centuries, and data demonstrate that individuals with a low IQ are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour. Important to the discussion of intelligence and IQ is school performance. Research studies that have examined future delinquency and adult criminality have consistently demonstrated the link between the two. In reality, it is not difficult to understand why a person who fails or drops out of school is limited in his or her career or future options. Occupations that have desirable salaries often require a high school degree as well as a bachelor’s or master’s degree. In sum, when citizens and scholars attempt to understand why people commit a crime, recognition must be given to psychological theories. Not doing so would be a serious error in judgement.

References
