

An Overview of Psychological Theories of Crime Causation

Professor James Byrne

Nov.2, 2010 Lecture

Graduate Criminology Seminar

The Psychology of Crime

- **Psychologically-based criminologists** explain criminal behavior as the consequence of individual factors, such as negative early childhood experiences, and inadequate socialization, which results in criminal thinking patterns and/or incomplete cognitive development.
-

Psychological Theory and the Criminal Justice System

- ❑ The field of psychology has influenced community corrections in a number of important areas:
 - ❑ (1) the classification of offenders risk and needs,
 - ❑ (2) the development of case management plans and offender supervision strategies,
 - ❑ (3) the techniques used to interview, assess, and counsel offenders, and
 - ❑ (4) the strategies used to foster compliance with the basic rules of community supervision.
-

Psychological Theories: An Overview

- ❑ First, they have focused on *failures in psychological development* --an overbearing or weak conscience, inner conflict, insufficient moral development, and maternal deprivation with its concomitant failure of attachment.
 - ❑ Second, they have investigated *the ways in which aggression and violence are learned* through modeling and direct experience.
 - ❑ Third, they have investigated the *personality characteristics* of criminals and found that criminals do tend to be more impulsive, intolerant, and irresponsible than non-criminals.
 - ❑ Fourth, psychologists have investigated the *relation of criminality to such mental disorders as psychosis and psychopathy*
-

Psychoanalytic Theories

- ❑ Psychoanalytic theorists, such as Sigmund Freud (1856- 1939), explain criminal behavior as follows:
 - ❑ "(1)The actions and behavior of an adult are understood in terms of childhood development.
 - ❑ (2)Behavior and unconscious motives are intertwined, and their interaction must be unraveled if we are to understand criminality.
 - ❑ (3) Criminality is essentially a representation of psychological conflict."
-

Psychoanalytic Theory: Implications for Policy and Practice

- Advocates of *psychoanalytic* explanations would emphasize the need for both short and long-term individual and family counseling by trained therapists.
 - A wide range of treatment models are based (in whole or part) on these theoretical assumptions (e.g. individual therapy, group therapy, reality therapy, guided group interaction).
-

Research Testing Psychoanalytic Theory

- ❑ Case Studies by Freud have been challenged for a number of reasons.
 - ❑ One reason is obvious: Freud focused on only a subgroup of the general population,
 - ❑ Psychoanalytic Theory is difficult to evaluate using traditional research methods.
-

Social Learning Theories

- ❑ Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association
 - ❑ Ron Akers Social Learning Theory
 - ❑ Elijah Anderson's Code of the Street
 - ❑ Lonnie Athens Violentization Theory
-

What is Social Learning Theory?

- Adherents of *social learning theory* make a common-sense claim: behavior is learned when it is reinforced, and not learned when it is not reinforced.
 - Key terminology: differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, imitation
-

Differential Association

- ❑ Criminal Behavior is learned
 - ❑ Criminal Behavior is learned in interactions with other persons in a process of communication
 - ❑ The principle part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups
 - ❑ The learning includes techniques of crime commission, and the motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes
 - ❑ The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal code as favorable or unfavorable
 - ❑ A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law
 - ❑ Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity
-

Cognitive Development Theory

- Cognitive development theories, initially developed by the Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget and then refined by Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues, essentially argue that offenders have failed to develop their moral judgment capacity beyond the *pre-conventional* level.
-

Stages of Cognitive Development

- ❑ in stage one, the ***preconventional stage***, children (age 9-11) think, "If I steal, what are my chances of getting caught and punished?"
 - ❑ Stage two is the ***conventional level***, when adolescents think "It is illegal to steal and therefore I should not steal, under any circumstances."
 - ❑ Stage three is the ***post-conventional level*** (adults over 20 years old), when individuals critically examine customs and social rules according to their own sense of universal human rights, moral principals, and duties
-

Cognitive Development and Criminal Thinking

- ❑ Kohlberg observed that we learn morality from those people we interact with on a regular basis—our family, friends, and others in the community.
 - ❑ It appears that a subgroup of our population has criminal thinking tendencies
 - ❑ There is a thin line between teaching morality in a cognitive development treatment program and practicing religion
-

Research testing Cognitive Development Theory

- Treatment programs based on this theory are among the most effective in the field according to the most recent evidence-based review
 - However, these programs may need to be redesigned to address the need for gender-specific, culture-specific, and age-specific programming
-

Criminal Personality Theories

- ❑ a number of prominent criminologists have argued that " the root causes of crime are not...social issues[high unemployment, bad schools] but deeply ingrained features of the human personality and its early experiences.
 - ❑ Low intelligence, an impulsive personality, and a lack of empathy for other people are among the leading individual characteristics of people at risk for becoming offenders"
 - ❑ Hans Eysenck has completed numerous studies on the impact of personality characteristics on criminality. He theorizes that criminal behavior may be a function of both personality differences (i.e. offenders are more likely to be neurotic and extroverted) *and* conditioning, in that some individuals are simply more difficult to "condition" than others. Since we "develop a conscience through conditioning," it is not surprising that antisocial behavior is more likely when this process breaks down for some reason.
 - ❑ Eysenck argues that there are two sources of poor conditioning:
 - ❑ (1) personality types -extroverts are more difficult to condition; and
 - ❑ (2) physiological factors -in particular low cortical arousal. See Eysenck (1977,1989), or the summary of his research included in Siegel(2007)and Hagan (2002) .
-

Policy and Practice Implications of Criminal Personality Theories

- ❑ Since "criminal personality" theory is based on the assumption that offenders have erroneous thinking patterns, it seems certain that intensive, individual therapy would be required to address this problem.
 - ❑ Based on this theory, a range of correctional interventions involving direct confrontation of thinking errors and behavior modification techniques can be envisioned
-