The Psychology of Criminal Behavior:

Theories from Past to Present

Arista B. Dechant

Fort Hays State University, Kansas
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Personal Relevance Preface

I have been involved in extensive research since undergraduate school surrounding criminals and how they operate. There are many ideas surrounding the cause of antisocial behavior and criminality. Through this independent study class for Fort Hays State University’s Justice Studies (Graduate) Program, I felt I would have the perfect opportunity to explore many of the theories which have developed, over time, to explain criminal behavior.

It is my hope that this research paper will provide an extensive and educational look at how the psychology of a criminal impacts the activity which is produced. It seems that every year brings new ideas, but I feel that the following is a conclusive look of research compiled from the beginning of criminality to the present.

I have also provided a history of criminality and how it has developed into what we now understand as forensic psychology. This field will always remain fluid with discovery, and my greatest pleasure would come from being part of it in the future.
Abstract

This advanced research project examines the history and theories surrounding criminal behavior. The history and theories of criminal behavior continue to influence the work of today’s Forensic Psychologist. Many theories used are continuing to be modified; however, the information provided is as accurate and up to date as possible. I use a mixture of primary and secondary sources with one graph for example.
History

The History of Forensic Psychology

The application of psychology in the criminal and civil justice system is known as forensic psychology. Hugo Munsterberg (1863 – 1916), a German-American psychologist was the first to pioneered the application of criminal psychology in research and theories. His research extended to witness memory, false confessions, and the role of hypnosis in court (http://ezinearticles.com).

In 1889, psychology students were beginning to take courses related to law such as “Crime and Modern Theories of the Criminal,” but for the most part, American psychologists did not immediately embrace the study of legal issues (Bersoff, Ogloff, & Tomkins, 1996). For reasons unstated, the study of psychology and law began to wane after World War II (Bersoff, Ogloff, & Tomkins, 1996). In the 1960’s, psychologists were beginning to “be called on” to make predictions of dangerousness, make clinical assessments relevant to insanity defense pleas, and make assessments and/or offer testimony about other mental health issues in the courts (Bersoff, Ogloff, & Tomkins, 1996). In the early 1980’s law, criminal justice, and social science would become embraced in legal education. Interdisciplinary and specialized training was introduced at the doctoral, internship, post-doctoral, and continuing educational levels. Textbooks began devoting themselves to forensic testimony and assessment. (Bersoff, Ogloff, & Tomkins, 1996). “Nearly three quarters of a century, from the time that Munsterberg had called for an application of psychology to law, his call had been answered” (Bersoff, Ogloff, & Tomkins, 1996).
Theories of Criminal Behavior

Rational Choice Theory

Dr. William Glasser, MD coined the term choice theory. According to many criminologists, choice theory is perhaps the most common reason why criminals do the things they do. This theory suggests that the offender is completely rational when making the decision to commit a crime (Siegel, 2005, p. 73). The variety of reasons in which one offends can be based on a variety of personal needs, including: greed, revenge, need, anger, lust, jealousy, thrills, and vanity. The rational choice theory has its root in the classical school of criminology which was developed by Italian “social-thinker” Cesare Beccaria (Siegel, 2005, p. 74). Classical criminology suggests that “people have free will to choose criminal or conventional behaviors...and that crime can be controlled only by the fear of criminal sanctions (Siegel, 2005, p. 74).

Inside the rational choice theory there are three models of criminal behavior: rational actor, predestined actor, and victimized actor. The rational actor proposed that individuals choose whether to commit a crime. With this belief, crime could simply be controlled by increasing the penalty of offending (Burke, 2001). The predestined actor proposes that criminals cannot control their personal urges and environment, thus, inducing them to commit crime. The way to solve this problem would then be to change the biological, sociological, and psychological environment of the offender (Burke, 2001). Finally, the victimized actor model proposes that crime is the result of the offender being a victim of an unequal society. Thus, the crime could be controlled by reforming legislation (Burke, 2001).

Eysenck’s Theory of Personality and Crime

The late Hans J. Eysenck, British psychologist, is most well known for his theory on personality and crime. His theory proposed that “criminal behavior is the result of an interaction
between certain environmental conditions and features of the nervous system” (Bartol & Bartol, 2005, p. 99). This is certainly not one of the contemporary theories of crime, rather, Eysenck’s emphasis is placed on the genetic predisposition toward antisocial and criminal behavior.

Followers of his theory believe that each individual offender has a unique neurophysiological makeup that when mixed with a certain environment, therefore, can’t help but result to criminality (Bartol and Bartol, 2005, p. 99). It is important to note that Eysenck was not suggesting that criminals are born, rather that the combination of environment, neurobiological, and personality factors give rise to different types of crimes, and those different personalities were more susceptible to specific criminal activity. To further understand this theory, Eysenck explains it as follows:

It is not itself, or criminality that is innate; it is certain peculiarities of the central and autonomic nervous system that react with the environment, with upbringing, and many other environmental factors to increase the probability that a given person would act in a certain antisocial manner (Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989, p. 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Trait</th>
<th>Neurobiological Influence</th>
<th>High Scores</th>
<th>Low Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>RAS, CNS</td>
<td>Stimulation Seeking</td>
<td>Stimulation Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>Autonomic. NS</td>
<td>Nervous, unstable</td>
<td>Stable, calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychoticism</td>
<td>Excessive androgen</td>
<td>Tough-minded</td>
<td>Tender-minded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When looking at the above table, Eysenck shows three main factors for temperament, being extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism. A large majority of crime research today focuses precisely on the first two traits. Eysenck did not actually identify psychoticism until later, when he found a need to identify behavior that cannot be explained as extraversion and neuroticism.

Eysenck’s studies showed that the typical extravert tends to lose his temper quickly, becoming aggressive and unreliable (Bartol & Bartol, 2005, p. 102). He then believed that
extraverts need a higher level of excitement and stimulation, known as “arousal theory.” The need for high amounts of stimulation then lead to more likely encounters with the law. “They enjoy pranks and practical jokes and find challenge in opportunities to do the unconventional, or even to engage in antisocial behavior” (Bartol & Bartol, 2005, p. 102). The physiological bases of extraversion are related to the Reticular Activating System (RAS). The RAS arouses the cerebral cortex and keeps it alert to incoming stimuli (Bartol & Bartol, 2005, p. 103).

The base of neuroticism is frequently linked to the emotional area of the brain. This dimension reacts to how one successfully deals with stressful events. Whereas the extraversion center of the brain is linked to the central nervous system, neuroticism relates to the autonomic nervous system (Bartol & Bartol, 2005, p. 105). Neurotic individuals are believed to achieve an emotional level quickly and then remain at that level for a longer amount of time than non-neurotic individuals (Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989, p. 13).

As mentioned earlier, Eysenck used the word psychoticism as a word to identify behaviors that are not explained by neuroticism and extraversion. Eysenck used his research to categorize individuals who exhibited cold, cruel, unemotional, and insensitive characteristics, not the clinical definition of psychotic which means out of touch with reality (Bartol & Bartol, 2005, p. 107).

To sum up the Eysenck’s Theory of Criminality, offenders as a whole will demonstrate low levels of extraversion (cortical arousal), high levels of neuroticism (autonomic arousal), and are more tough-minded in the psychotic sense. Although there is much research that refutes this theory, researchers believe that if new data were modified, the theory as a whole may still be promising and useful (Bartol & Bartol, 2005, p. 111).
Trait Theory

Trait theory is a more extreme version of Eysenck’s theory. The view is that criminality is a product of abnormal biological or psychological traits. The root of trait theory can be traced back to Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso. His research regarding trait theory is still considered historical curiosity, not scientific fact, but it is a theory none the less (Siegel, 2005, p. 98). Lombroso believed that offenders were atavists. The word atavism refers to “an ancient, ancestral trait that appears in modern life.” He stated, “[Criminals were] Neanderthal-like beings born, by some unexplained evolutionary glitch, into the modern world (Schechter, 2003, p. 248). Because offenders were considered “throwbacks to the prehistoric past,” there were certain characteristics that were supposed to be identifiable. These features were considered to look more primitive and ape-like. These distinguishing characteristics were: small skulls, sloping foreheads, jutting brows, protruding ears, bad teeth, barrel chests, disproportionately long arms, and various other traits (Schechter, 2003, p. 248). Unfortunately, Lombroso’s trait theory has been compared to the “nineteenth century pseudoscience of phrenology” (Schechter, 2003, p. 248). We know today that criminals come in all shapes and sizes.

Contemporary trait theorists do not suggest that a single physical or biological attribute explains all criminality. Rather, each criminal has a unique set of characteristics that explain behavior. The understanding is now split among many possibilities. Some may have inherited criminal tendencies, some may have neurological problems, and yet other research shows some criminals may have blood chemistry disorders which heighten antisocial activity (Schechter, 2003, p. 98). There is a definite link between behavior patterns and chemical changes in the brain and nervous system.

Biocriminologists believe that criminals are genetically predetermined. They maintain that the body needs a stable amount of minerals and chemicals for normal brain functioning and
growth. “Chemical and mineral imbalance leads to cognitive and learning deficits...and these factors in turn are associated with antisocial behavior” (Schechter, 2003, p. 100). Researched studies have lined hypoglycemia to violence and abnormal levels of male sex hormones produce aggressive behavior (Schechter, 2003, p. 100). Other physiological correlates of crime and antisocial behavior are low serotonin, low autonomic arousal, and impaired prefrontal cortical functioning. Many of the genes associated with crime affect the neurotransmitter systems. “A gene that confers sensitivity to dopamine may increase sensation seeking—which is a characteristic of antisocial behavior” (Wiebe, 2004).

Psychodynamic Trait Theory

Psychodynamic (Psychoanalytical) therapy was developed by Sigmund Freud in the late 1800’s and has then become a significant theory in the history of criminality (Siegel, 2005, p. 111). Freud believed that every individual carries “[the] residue of the most significant emotional attachments of our childhood, which then guides our future interpersonal relationships” (Siegel, 2005, p. 111). The theory is a three-part structure made up of the id, the ego, and the super ego. The id is considered the underdeveloped or primitive part of our make-up. It controls our need for food, sleep, and other basic instincts. This part is purely focused on instant gratification. The ego controls the id by setting up boundaries. The superego is in charge of judging the situation through morality (Siegel, 2005, p. 112).

Psychodynamic theorists believe that offenders have id-dominated personalities. In other words, they lose control of the ego and the id’s need for instant gratification takes over. This causes impulse control problems and increased pleasure-seeking drives. Other problems associated with a damaged ego are immaturity, poor social skills, and excessive dependence on others. The idea is that negative experiences in an offenders childhood damages the ego, therefore, the offender is unable to cope with conventional society. (Siegel, 2005, p. 113).
Other psychoanalytical theorists believe that many criminals are driven by an unconscious need to be punished for previous sins (either real or imaginary). Therefore, “crime is a manifestation of feelings of oppression and people’s inability to develop the proper psychological defense and rationales to keep these feelings under control (Siegel, 2005, p. 113).

**Social Structure Theory**

If biology could explain criminality, then why is the majority of crime and violence in poor, underdeveloped neighborhoods? To ignore environmental and social aspects contributing to crime would be a mistake. People who live in the United States live in what is called a “stratified society” (Siegel, 2005, p. 126.) Stratification refers to, “a hierarchical arrangement...compromising three main layers: upper class, middle class, and lower class” (www.wikipedia.com). There are three mini theories which fall under the Social Structure Theory which attempt to explain how one’s environment and social circle can aid to crime. The following information can be found in *Criminology*, (2nd ed.) on page 138:

**Social disorganization theory:** focuses on the urban conditions that effect crime rates. A disorganized area is one in which institutions of social control, such as family, commercial establishments and schools have broken down and can no longer perform their expected or stated functions. Indicators of social disorganization include high unemployment and school dropout rates, deteriorated housing, low income levels and large numbers of single parent households. Residents in these areas experience conflict and despair, and as a result, antisocial behavior flourishes.

**Strain theory:** holds that crime is a function of the conflict between people’s goals and the means they can use to obtain them. Strain theorists argue that although social and economic goals are common to people in all economic strata, the ability to obtain these goals is class-dependent...members of the lower class are unable to achieve [symbols of]
success through conventional means. Lower class citizens can both accept their
conditions and live socially responsible...or they can choose an alternative means of
achieving success, such as theft or violence.

Cultural deviance theory: combines elements of both strain and social disorganization
theories. Because of this view...a unique lower-class culture develops in disorganized
neighborhoods. Criminal behavior is an expression of conformity to lower class sub-
culture values and traditions, not a rebellion against traditional society.

Social Process Theory

Social process theorists believe that criminality is a “function of individual socialization,
and the interactions people have with organizations, institutions, and processes of society”
(Siegel, 2005, p. 155). Perhaps the most common approach to the social process theory is
learning theory. Albert Bandura, an influential psychologist of the twentieth century, was the
first to experiment with this idea. His observations began with animals and showed that they do not have to actually experience certain events in their environment to learn
effectively (Barlow & Durand, 2006, p. 59). In relation to criminality, one can learn to be
aggressive by observing others acting aggressively. An example being: if “A” beats up other
children on the playground and steals money from the victims, his little brother “B” is observing
this situation. When “A” then uses the money to buy toys, “B” witnesses his big brother getting
rewarded for the violent act through purchasing fun things to play with. In reality, it didn’t
matter that “A” was wrong; his behavior resulted in a positive result.

There are two other approaches to social process theory. Social control theory is when
one’s behavior is groomed through the close associations of institutions and individuals. The
second is social reaction theory. If an individual is already viewed (labeled) as a criminal from an
early age, then it is more likely that this person will see becoming a criminal as fulfilling a prophecy, thus beginning his criminal career (Siegel, 2005, p. 159).

Social Conflict Theory

Social conflict theorists believe a person, group, or institution has the power and ability to exercise influence and control over others (Farrington & Chertok, 1993). Conflict theorists are concerned with:

1. The role government plays in creating a crimogenic environment,
2. The relationship between personal or group power and the shaping of criminal law,
3. The prevalence of bias in justice system operations, and
4. The relationship between a capitalist, free enterprise economy and crime rates

They define crime as “a political concept designed to protect the power and position of the upper classes at the expense of the poor (Siegel, 2005, p. 186). The idea is that each society produces its own type and amount of crime. They have their own way of dealing with crime, and thus, get the amount of crime that they deserve (Siegel, 2005, p. 186). In other words, to control and reduce crime, societies must change the social conditions that promote crime.

Conclusion

Although there are differences in the many theories which have been presented, they all share a common belief. Criminal behavior is in many aspects of society, and it needs to be addressed. Through theories, researchers hope to develop a deeper understanding of how one can prevent criminal behavior before it reaches adolescent age or older. Choice theories really focus on the individual’s decision and control over who they are and what they will be. Trait theories rely on research which proves that one’s neurological process and conditioning is a large contributing factor to the criminal affect. Social theories lean toward the idea of environmental influences which govern one’s state of being. Together, each one of these
theories has relevant research and validity. Certainly, there are people who recognize each of these ideas and develop a combination theory of which to educate and direct therapy from. Overall, theories will continue to be developed, tested, and researched. The field of criminality is a large one of which many can and will continue to contribute.
References


