

Psychology and crime

Example essay

A) Review theories of criminal behaviour

There are three main theories of what causes criminal behaviour, biological theory, learning theory and a psychodynamic theory. The biological theory believes that criminal behaviour is determined by your genetic make-up. To investigate this many studies have been carried out on identical twins because if this theory is correct identical twins have the same genetic make-up, and therefore if one behaves criminally then the other should also do this. This is referred to as concordance rates. Yoshimasu compared to the concordance rate between identical twins and non-identical twins. He found there was a much higher concordance rate for the identical twins and there was for the non-identical twins this suggests that your genetic make-up does have some influence on whether you act criminally or not.

The biological theory also believes that brain activity can affect the likelihood of someone acting in a criminal way. Raine et al carried out a study in which the brain activity of a group of murderers who were all pleading not guilty for reasons of insanity was compared to a control group. He compared the brain activity using a PET scan of the subjects who were performing a continuous performance task. He found that there were differences between the activity of the brains of the murderers when compared with the control groups PET scans. This suggests that differences in brain activity may be connected to criminal behaviour.

The learning theory believes that you can learn to behave criminally by rewards and by imitating the behaviour of role models. Bandura et al carried out a study using young children as participants. The children watched an adult playing with the Bobo doll either passively or aggressively. The children were then observed playing with the Bobo doll themselves. It was found that children who had seen an aggressive role model playing with the doll themselves acted a lot more aggressively than those children who have seen a passive adult. This suggests that aggression can be learned by imitation. Another study based on learning theories suggests that the way in which you are punished and rewarded can also affect whether you will behave criminally or not later in life. Hoffmann observed families and found that there was a link between delinquency and power assertion. Power assertion refers to the way in which some parents continuously nag and criticise their children and give them very little reward or praise.

The psychodynamic theory of what causes someone to behave criminally is based on the work of Freud, who believed that adult personality and behaviour was driven by unconscious wishes and desires and that childhood experiences can determine your behaviour. Freud believed the subconscious mind was made up of three parts, the id (which demands instant gratification) the ego and the superego (which is the moral conscience and causes anxiety and guilt). Freud said people are born being governed by their id but gradually the other parts of personality develop during childhood. Children have to resolve the Oedipus conflict, which is a conflict between sexual desires for opposite sex parent and fear of punishment by same sex parent. Freud thought that these conflicts could cause anxiety and guilt to be repressed and this could cause problems to people later in life. This could suggest that criminal behaviour may be the

result of unresolved conflicts. Staub & Healey argued that criminal behaviour was caused by an inability to move from the pleasure principle (responding to the demands of the id) to the reality principle (where the ego controls the id's demands). This would suggest that criminal behaviour is caused by an over dominant id.

b) Evaluate theories of criminal behaviour

All the psychological research on which theories are based is limited in a number of ways. One important issue is that of ethical guidelines which are a set of rules psychologists need to follow when carrying out research to ensure participants are protected. The study by Bandura et al breaks ethical guidelines as it encouraged young children to behave aggressively. In contrast to this the study by Hoffman is more ethical as it was carried out using observations having obtained informed consent of those observed.

Another evaluation issue is generalisability, which means the extent to which research findings can be generalised to people other than the participants of the actual study. For example the study carried out by Raine used participants who were all pleading NGRI to murder, but there were other important factors about this sample that made them rather unique - many of them suffered from personality disorders or had experienced brain damage, some were epileptic and others had been drug or alcohol abusers. It is therefore difficult to generalise to other criminals from their results. In comparison psychodynamic theories such as those of Freud and Staub & Healey are devised using evidence from case studies and are therefore based on a very small number of people who are also not representative of any one population.

Similarly studies psychologists carry out should try to reflect how people behave in the real world, this is called ecological validity. Studies such as those by Bandura are carried out in a laboratory and therefore are testing behaviour in rather artificial conditions. This means the findings may not be reflective of how aggression is learned in real life. In contrast the twin studies by Yoshimasu are carried out simply by gathering data and testing for relationships such as correlations in the data. Since the psychologists are not manipulating anything in these studies ecological validity is very high.

However one problem here is the issue of cause and effect, in other words can we be certain that one variable is influencing another. The correlations used in twin studies suggest a relationship between genetics and crime but since no variables are isolated in this study other factors which may also be causing criminal behaviour such as environmental causes, cannot be eliminated. In comparison the study of Hoffman used observations and therefore again no variables were controlled. This may mean that again other factors could be causing behaviour and cause and effect cannot be shown in this study.

Another issue which should lead to caution in accepting the results of some studies is that of reductionism. This means that psychologists carrying out research are reducing the explanations of a complex behaviour to a single explanation. As has been seen this is highly applicable in theories of criminal behaviour as very often factors, which may be relevant, are ignored. For example psychodynamic theories reduce explanations to the idea that unconscious urges are governing behaviour and that experiences of childhood

effect later behaviour. This cannot explain why some people do commit crimes and others do not. In comparison biological theories such as the twin studies of Yoshimasu suggest that genetic factors determine behaviour, even though concordance rates show that whilst genes are a factor it would be incorrect to conclude that all criminal behaviour is genetically determined.

Overall we can see that there are many issues which would lead to caution in accepting any one theory as being able to explain all criminal behaviour. It is clear that a combination of factors from each theory would be needed to explain why people commit crimes.

c) Suggest reasons why a 17 year old girl may steal a car

There are a variety of factors which may combine to explain why a 17-year-old girl may steal a car. Research suggests that one reason may be that her criminal behaviour is innate, or that she was born with it. Evidence such as twin studies by Yoshimasu and other biological evidence such as studies of brain activity by Raine seem to suggest that criminal behaviour may be partly determined by biological factors. However there is other research which suggests that environmental factors may play a part in criminal behaviour. For example research by Bandura suggested that aggressive behaviour is learned by imitation and this could suggest the girl is imitating the behaviour of a role model in stealing the car. Learning theory also suggests that the way in which we are punished and rewarded can affect behaviour and research by Hoffman suggested that when parents are particularly critical and give very little praise there is higher incidence of delinquent behaviour. So in this case the girl may have had particularly power assertive parents and stealing the car may be her reaction to this.

Finally psychodynamic theories suggest childhood conflicts can influence adult behaviour, the girl may have unresolved repressed conflicts which are causing her delinquent behaviour, or it may be that she is responding to an over demanding id seeking instant gratification in stealing the car, and her desires are not being controlled by her superego. This relates to theories by Freud and Staub & Healey.

It is probable that it is a combination of these kinds of factors which are influencing the girl's behaviour.