

Briefly describe research into the rationality of criminals [6]

One piece of research which explored the rationality of criminals is that of Gillis. Gillis attempted to investigate the theory of planned behaviour in relation to newly released prisoners who were seeking employment. The sample was composed of 106 newly released prisoners who were all based entirely within the US. The participants completed a questionnaire upon release, six weeks after release and finally six months after release. From the answers to the questionnaires Gillis found that those prisoners who stated a clear intention to seek employment were more likely to gain employment than those who did not. Similarly, those who felt they had a good chance of gaining employment or those who had a high level of social support were also more likely to do so. Gillis suggests that it is intention which is the key factor in determining whether released offenders gain employment and that a prisoner's ability to gain employment is affected by the individual's level of self-efficacy and others' expectations of them.

Discuss the methodological problems of researching the rationality of criminals [10]

Methodological issues often arise as a consequence of the data collection methods such as interviews or questionnaires. An example of this would be social desirability. Social desirability is defined as the tendency for participants to report answers that they believe are acceptable to society rather than answers that are a true reflection on the participants. An example of this can be found in Gillis' study which employed questionnaires to find out about prisoners' attitudes to employment. Participants may have not given truly reflective answers and this in turn leads to the issue of validity as research may not actually end up measuring what it intended to measure.

Another methodological issue that arises as a consequence of self-reported data is that of ethics. The use of questionnaires and interviews can lead to ethical implications. Ethics are a set of guidelines composed to maintain the well-being of participants. This is a methodological issue that arises when researching the rationality of criminals due to the use of sensitive questions. In the case of the Gillis study this may have been an issue because of the embarrassment or anxiety that may have been caused when questioning newly released criminals about their employment. Offenders who did not manage to seek employment for example may have felt like they had failed somewhat or had not been successful. It is important to remember that ethics guidelines are indeed just guidelines and as long as there is not a substantial disregard for these outlines, it is unlikely that participants will suffer.

The scale on which such data collection methods are collected may also raise methodological problems when researching the rationality of criminals. If a questionnaire is conducted on a small scale it may result in poor generalisability. Using once more, the case of Gillis, the use of an entirely US sample may result in the inability to apply research on a wider scale. Some may suggest that the use of an entirely US sample means that this research and its findings could not be applied to other countries which may be made up of different cultures. In reality however, it is unlikely that criminals in the USA would have a different rationality to that of criminals in Canada or similar western countries.

Self report measures may also make use of retrospective data. Retrospective data is data that is based on memories or accounts of past events. The use of retrospective data proves to be an issue as it may not be wholly accurate. Participants may have to refer to prior memories in regards to their rationality which may prove to lower the validity of a study. Memories are not always accurate accounts and this in term may affect the reliability of the study as someone who is relying on their memory may not necessarily give the same response twice.