

Learning theories of offending

Is criminality learned?

Learning theories of offending are based on the assumption that offending is a set of behaviours that are learned in the same way as other behaviours. Two examples of learning theories are Sutherland's (1939) differential association theory and Bandura's (1973) social learning theory. These types of theory emphasise the family and the peer group as a potential source of criminal behaviours. Social learning theory also raises the possibility that some types of antisocial behaviour may be learned from media sources like television, films and videogames.

Differential association theory

Sutherland (1939) suggested that there were two prerequisites for a person to develop into an offender. They need to learn a set of values and attitudes that support offending, and they need to learn specific behaviours for committing crimes. These are all learned within the family and peer group. The people that surround a developing child will demonstrate a range of attitudes towards the law and crime, some favourable and some unfavourable. Sutherland argued that if the child acquires more attitudes that are favourable to crime than unfavourable ones, the result will be that they regard criminal behaviour as acceptable. They may also learn specific methods for committing crimes from those around them. The types of crime the person then goes on to commit will depend heavily on the precise nature of the deviant attitudes they have learned. For example, they might regard it as unacceptable to rob someone, but acceptable to falsify one's tax returns.

Evidence for differential association theory

The basic prediction of differential association theory is that people who become offenders will have been socialized in families and groups where there are some pro-criminal norms. There should therefore be evidence of pro-criminal norms and probably criminal activity in the families and peer groups of offenders. This is indeed the case. A certain amount of evidence suggests that criminal behaviour tends to run in families. Whilst this is frequently offered in support of a genetic contribution to offending some of the evidence is equally consistent with differential association theory. For example, Osborne and West (1982) found that where the father had a criminal conviction, 40% of sons also acquired one by the age of 18, compared with only 13% of the sons of non-criminal fathers. A great deal of research suggests that criminality is concentrated in a small number of families. Walmsley et al found that a third of UK prisoners claimed to have a family member also in prison. Matthews (1968) also found that juvenile delinquents are more likely than non-delinquents to report having peers who engage in criminal activity.

Evaluation of differential association theory

Whilst all of this is consistent with differential association theory, Blackburn (1993) raises two problems. First, this pattern seems confined to petty acts of criminality such as vandalism. Second, because the data are correlational it is equally likely that adolescents with deviant tendencies seek out deviant peers. A further problem with differential association theory is that some of its constructs are rather vaguely specified. It is difficult to see, for example, how the number of pro-criminal attitudes a person acquires could be measured with any precision, and Sutherland does not specify by how much pro-criminal attitudes must outnumber pro-law ones in order for the person to become an offender. Like many general theories of criminality, differential association theory runs into problems when required to explain criminal behaviour on an individual level. For example, it is not clear why some people raised in persistent contact with 'criminogenic' influences do not go on to commit offences. A final problem for differential association theory is that it does not adequately explain the developmental pattern of offending. Criminal behaviour in adolescence is relatively common: 40% of offences are committed by people under 21 years and about half of males and a

third of females report having committed at least one offence before the age of 25 (Newburn, 2002). However, offending declines rapidly after adolescence: many youth offenders do not remain offenders in adulthood. It is not clear how differential association theory could explain this pattern.

Social learning theory

Bandura's social learning theory (SLT) suggests that behaviour of all kinds is learned through the observation of models. Models are selected on the basis of a range of characteristics including attractiveness, status and perceived similarity with the observer. Whether or not a model's behaviour is imitated depends on the observed consequences of their actions. If the model is observed to be reinforced (and the reinforcement has value for the observer) then imitation becomes likely. If the model is punished then imitation becomes less likely (although the behaviour may still have been learned, it is its *expression* that observed punishment inhibits). In SLT, criminal behaviour is regarded as qualitatively no different from any other behaviour. In this respect, SLT shares many ideas with differential association theory. However, it is rather more precisely specified, lacking many of the vaguer concepts of differential association.

Evidence for social learning theory

The most compelling evidence for social learning theory comes from a series of classic laboratory studies carried out by Bandura and colleagues in the 1960s. These studies focused on children's acquisition of aggressive responses from adult models. For example, Bandura et al (1963) showed children an adult model behaving aggressively towards an inflatable 'bobo' doll. The model was either reinforced (rewarded with sweets) or punished (told off) for her behaviour. A control group saw the model behave aggressively but with no consequence, good or bad. When the children were allowed to play in a room that contained a bobo doll, those who had seen the model punished were significantly less likely to imitate her actions. An alternate source of evidence for the social learning of aggression is research into the effects of media aggression on behaviour. A natural experiment by Williams (1986) examined children's levels of aggression before and after the introduction of television into an isolated community. Williams found that over a two year period aggression in this community's children rose steadily whilst in a similar community where there already was television there was no increase. One possible interpretation of this is that the children learned to behave aggressively from models in the TV programmes they watched.

Evaluation of social learning theory

There is a large body of research that shows that children can learn behaviour through observation and that their willingness to imitate these behaviours is affected by the observed consequences of a model's actions. However, there is a substantial difference between children hitting a bobo doll in a lab and people committing criminal offences in the real world. Social learning theorists have largely neglected naturalistic research (Blackburn, 1993) and this means we should be cautious about assuming that the processes demonstrated in the laboratory apply in the same way outside it.

In the absence of evidence that criminality is 100% genetic it is fairly obvious that learning plays a role in offending. But SLT has little to say about the conditions under which violence and criminality are learned. It also underplays the role of cognition in criminal behaviour. For example, it is well known in our society that criminals are frequently caught and imprisoned, a fairly salient observed punishment. It is also the case that most people work in legitimate employment to acquire reinforcements such as money and status, another very obvious set of models and observed reinforcements. This being the case it is not clear why people behave criminally at all if the vast majority of models and reinforcements should promote non-criminal behaviour (Howitt, 2009). Clearly there is more to offending than SLT would imply.