



Cognitive Explanations of Crime

This Factsheet aims to give you an overview of explanations of criminal behaviour using **cognitive** theories. Words in bold are defined in the glossary and the worksheet allows the opportunity to practice what you have learned.

The examiner expects you to be able to:

- Describe key cognitive theories
- Apply these cognitive theories to explain the causes of crime
- Evaluate cognitive theories of crime
- Apply cognitive theories to explain the criminal behaviour in a novel scenario.

Exam Hint: Make sure to check the specification of the exam board you are studying to know exactly what you are required to learn. Cognitive explanations of crime are a suggested theory as part of the Criminal Psychology Topic in the WJEC/Eduqas course. Cognitive explanations are also a required part of the Forensic Psychology module for AQA. While cognitive explanations of crime are not required for Edexcel, it would be useful to understand these theories to enhance your understanding of cognitive treatments for crime. OCR requires an understanding of a “non-physiological” theory of crime, which could include cognitive explanations.

Introduction

Cognitive psychology is an approach that sees the human mind as being akin to a computer. Just as a computer has inputs, processes and outputs, so the mind could be seen as an information processor. Inputs into our mind are the information received through the senses.



Why do some people become criminals? Perhaps it's because of how they think

Outputs are the behaviour and thoughts produced. In this analogy, the hardware (i.e. the physical computer itself) would be the brain, and the software (the programmes that run on the computer) are the **internal mental processes** that process the information that we receive through our senses and produce our behaviour and thoughts. It is these internal mental processes that are of interest to cognitive psychologists.

Cognitive psychologists are interested in thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, and they study how these direct our behaviour. Criminal behaviour, according to cognitive psychologists, is a product of faulty information processing, or problems in thinking leading to **cognitive errors**. These errors may distort the way in which some people process information, leading to criminal behaviour.

Some cognitive psychologists have argued that criminals suffer from several cognitive errors. These are patterns of thinking that do not reflect reality, and may account for some of the behaviour of criminals. Some possible cognitive distortions that may explain

criminal behaviour are errors in **attribution** (including hostile attribution bias), **minimalisation** and a poorly working **Theory of Mind**.

Exam Hint: It is likely that during your studies, you have already learned about cognitive explanations of behaviour. Before reading on, it would be beneficial to read over your notes for cognitive psychology. Synoptic thinking (being able to see the links between the different elements of psychology) is a key skill that is examined during the A Level course.

Errors in Attribution (including hostile attribution bias)

Attribution is the “process by which an, individual attempts to construct causal explanations for his or her behaviour and the behaviour of others” (Gudjonsson and Singh, 1988). Attribution is the process of explaining the behaviour of other people as well as ourselves. When we observe other people’s behaviour, or we think about our own behaviour, we unconsciously try to find explanations.



Cognitive psychologists see the human mind as being like a computer

These attributions can generally be grouped into two types. Internal (or **dispositional**) attributions happen when we believe the behaviour is due to a personality trait. External (or **situational**) attributions are when the behaviour is attributed to factors in the environment. For example, if a person is served by a rude shopkeeper, we may assume that the shop keeper has had a

busy day and is tired (external attribution) or we may assume that they are just a rude person (internal attribution). Previous research has shown that attributions are far from accurate. For example, most people will be more likely to attribute the behaviour of others to dispositional (internal) factors rather than situational (external) factors. This is known as the **Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)** and was identified by Heider (1958).



Some criminals blame their behaviour on external factors, such as society, circumstances or even the victim

Gudjonsson (1984) argued that criminals may be more prone than non-criminals to making particular errors when attributing their own behaviour. He developed the **Blame Attribution Inventory**, which measures the ways in which offenders attribute their own behaviour. He claims that criminals are more likely to blame their actions on their social circumstances, society, or even the victim (all external attributions). They are also more likely to make a mental element attribution, blaming their behaviour on a mental illness, or a lack of self-control. This type of attribution is particularly common in violent offenders (Gudjonsson and Singh, 1988).

223. Cognitive Explanations of Crime



People with a hostile attribution bias perceive neutral behaviour as hostile

Another error in attribution that could be linked to criminal behaviour is the hostile attribution bias, first identified by Nasby et al (1980). This is a bias in attribution where an individual perceives the behaviour of others to be antagonistic, even when the behaviour is harmless. For example, a person with a hostile attribution bias may interpret the accidental nudge of a stranger to be a violent act, even when there is no evidence for this attribution. This may then lead to an aggressive response from the person, leading potentially to criminal behaviour, in particular, violent crime.

There is some evidence that violent and antisocial offenders are more likely than non-offenders to show hostile attribution bias. Schönberg et al (2014) found that violent offenders were much more likely than controls to interpret ambiguous faces as being hostile. They argued that this tendency to misinterpret nonverbal cues may explain some of the aggressive behaviour in some offenders.

Exam Hint: When explaining these cognitive errors, a good way to add depth and detail to your explanation is to give an example to demonstrate. After explaining the hostile attribution bias for example, you could illustrate this concept by describing a man starting a fight after a stranger accidentally spilled their drink on him.

Minimalisation

Much like attribution, **minimisation** (and its opposite, **maximisation**) are cognitive errors that are common in all people. These two terms refer to our beliefs about the consequences of our actions. A maximisation response would overemphasise the negative consequences, while a minimisation response would downplay or ignore these consequences.

It has been argued that criminals tend to hold beliefs that minimise the consequences of their actions. They are more likely to see the consequences (both to themselves and the victim) as minor and unimportant.



People who commit crimes such as theft may underestimate the cost of their actions

Example: Shoplifting

Magnification response: There is no way I can steal this item, as it will be really obvious to the security guard if I try. If I do steal this item, I might get caught and go to prison. The shop may suffer because of my theft, and could lose money. Someone might get fired because of my actions.

Minimisation response: It will be easy to steal this item; no-one is watching. I could steal it, and will probably get away with it. Even if I did get caught, it is unlikely that I will go to prison. The shop won't even notice that the item has been stolen. They are a big company, and won't lose money because I stole one item. The shop expects to be stolen from.



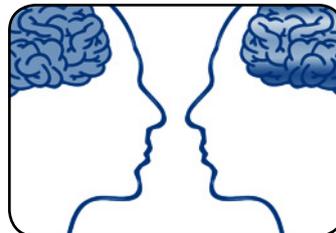
Criminals often downplay the consequences of their actions

It has been argued that criminals are prone to minimalistic thinking. They underplay the consequences of their actions, meaning that criminal behaviour can be engaged in with minimal guilt and other negative emotions. This is supported by Kennedy and Grubin (1992) who found that many sexual offenders downplayed the seriousness of their behaviour, and many even deny that a crime had occurred.

Exam Hint: These cognitive errors do not work in isolation. A high-level answer will show an understanding of the interaction between these various processes. For example, can you see how the example of the minimisation response above also contains elements of an external attribution ("The shop expects to be stolen from")?

Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind (ToM) refers to our ability to understand that we have our own minds, that other people have their own minds, and that our minds are different and distinct. ToM helps us understand that our own desires and points of view are not necessarily the same as others. ToM is also important for having **empathy**, as without it we cannot understand the emotional states of others. We are not born with a ToM. It starts to develop in children around the age of 2-3 years old, but does not become fully formed until much later in childhood. A poorly functioning ToM has been linked with disorders such as **autism** and **schizophrenia**.



A working theory of mind allows us to understand the thoughts and motivations of others

It has been proposed that criminals may have deficits in their ToM. Criminal behaviour could be explained by the criminal having an insufficient understanding of the thoughts, feelings and motivations of others. They may struggle to understand how their actions negatively affect others, and are therefore unable to have empathy for their victims.

Spenser et al (2015) investigated 46 young-adult male offenders, and found that when compared to controls, they showed significant deficits in their ToM. They also showed reduced performance in the skill of empathic understanding; this is the ability to understand and react to the emotions of others. It could be argued that deficits in both skills allow offenders to more easily commit crimes as they are not troubled by the feelings of guilt that arise when an individual is aware that they have caused harm to another.

Exam Hint: If asked to apply a cognitive explanation of crime to a given example in the exam, take care to choose only those cognitive errors that may be applicable to the scenario. Not every cognitive error will be applicable to all crimes.

223. Cognitive Explanations of Crime

Evaluation of Cognitive Explanations of Crime

One issue raised by cognitive explanations of crime is that while they may be good at describing the thinking styles of criminals, there is little explanation of where these cognitive errors came from. Minimisation for example may explain why someone is more likely to commit a crime, but not why they are prone to minimise. Perhaps the tendency to minimise the consequences of criminal behaviour was learned in childhood by observing role models such as parents. However, the cognitive approach does not address the origin of the cognitive errors, making it an incomplete theory.



When cognitive explanations are combined with biology, they may provide a more accurate explanation of crime than cognitive theories alone.

A related issue that arises when relying on cognitive explanations for human behaviour is that they overlook biological causes. For example, there is a substantial body of evidence that suggests that there may be a genetic component to criminal behaviour. Ishikawa and Raine (2002) found that the **concordance rate** for criminal behaviour was 44% for identical twins, and 21.6% for non-

identical twins. As the environment shared by both sets of twins is the same, the higher concordance rate for identical twins could be argued to be due to their identical genes. Perhaps therefore the higher concordance rate in identical twins is due to the more similar cognitive processes the twins share; cognitive processes that are determined (at least in part) by their shared genes.

Another issue with cognitive theories is that many people possess the same cognitive errors and biases that criminals have but do not display criminal behaviour. Attributing our bad behaviour to external causes, and minimising the consequences of our actions are common behaviours that nearly all people demonstrate from time to time. Maruna and Mann (2006) argued that these cognitive errors are a part of “normal” behaviour. This poses the question; if all people show some of the cognitive errors associated with being a criminal, why don’t all people engage in criminal behaviour? It suggests that while cognitive explanations may be able to explain some of the thought processes that underlie criminal behaviour, cognitive theories alone cannot be a complete explanation of crime.

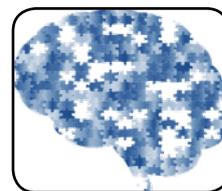
There is also an issue of cause and effect. There are many studies that suggest that cognitive errors are common in criminals. However, arguing that the criminal behaviour is caused by the cognitive errors may not be valid. An alternative explanation may be that engaging in criminal behaviour causes changes to cognitive processes. For example, someone who steals, may then be more likely to use minimalistic thinking in response to their own behaviour. If this is the case, then cognitive explanations are the result of criminal behaviour, not the cause.

There is some research that contradicts the theory that a poorly functioning ToM is the cause of criminal behaviour. Dolan et al (2004) investigated people with antisocial personality disorder (a disorder that is common in criminal populations) and found that they showed no impairments in their ToM. Similarly, Richell et al (2003) found that **psychopaths** showed no impairments in ToM. These findings suggest that while certain types of criminals may be able to understand the thoughts and feelings of others, they remain indifferent to them.



Cognitive theories can be used as the basis of treatments for crime, such as Anger Management

One strength of these theories is that they provide a good basis for the treatment of criminal behaviour. If we can identify the cognitive errors that are common in criminal populations, interventions can be used to alter these thinking processes. **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** has had some success with improving outcomes for offenders. A sub type of CBT known as **Anger Management** aims to tackle the cognitive errors (such as the hostile attribution bias), which underlie violent behaviour. Taylor and Novaco (2006) examined dozens of studies into the effectiveness of Anger Management, and found an average improvement rate of 75%.



Cognitive explanations alone do not provide a complete explanation of criminal behaviour

One final issue is that crime is complex. There are many different types of crime that vary in cause and severity. There also exists huge cultural difference with regards to attitudes towards crime, as well as differences in the legal definition of what is and is not legal. For example, smoking cannabis is illegal within the UK, but legal in countries such as the Netherlands. Likewise, homosexuality, which is legal in the UK, would be considered a criminal act in many countries. If someone were to be considered a criminal in one country for a certain act, but not a criminal in another country for the same act, is it valid to refer to them as a criminal? This is an issue for the cognitive explanation of crime, as we may not be able to generalise these cognitive errors to all cultures due to the varying attitudes towards what constitutes criminal behaviour. There are also gender differences in how crime is perceived, the types of crime committed by men and women, and the causes of these crimes. We cannot therefore assume that male and female offenders demonstrate the same cognitive errors. To conclude, cognitive explanations may go some way to explaining the thought patterns of offenders, but they are unable to completely explain all aspects of what is a complex psychological, social and legal issue.

Exam Hint: Although cognitive explanations do have many weaknesses and are unlikely to provide a complete explanation of criminal behaviour, they do have some strengths, for example their application in treatments such as CBT. If asked in the exam to evaluate cognitive theories, don't forget to include positive as well as negative evaluation.

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Glossary

Amygdala

An almond sized part of the brain which is involved in the regulation of emotions.

Anger Management

A type of CBT which aims to reduce aggressive behaviour and thoughts.

Attribution

The process where we try to find explanations for the behaviour of ourselves and others.

Autism

A disorder characterised by difficulties in communication and social relationships.

Blame attribution inventory

A questionnaire that measures an offender's perception of the causes of their criminal behaviour.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

A therapy which aims to alter the negative thought patterns that affect behaviour.

Cognitive errors

A thinking pattern that does not reflect reality.

Cognitive psychology

A field of psychology that sees the mind as an information processor.

Concordance rate

The degree of relatedness between two people on a particular variable.

Dispositional attributions

Placing the cause for an individual's behaviour on their personality.

Empathy

The ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

External (situational) attribution

Attributing the cause of a behaviour on an element of the environment.

Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)

The predisposition most people have towards making internal rather than external attributions.

Hostile attribution bias

When an individual perceives neutral behaviour as more threatening than it is.

Internal (dispositional) attribution

Attributing the cause of a behaviour on an individual's personality.

Internal mental processes

Operations that occur in the mind.

Maximisation

Over emphasising the consequences of an action.

Minimalisation

Underplaying the consequences of an action.

Psychopath

Someone showing unstable, violent or antisocial behaviour.

Theory of Mind

The ability to understand the thoughts, feelings and motivations of others.

Situational attributions

Placing the cause for an individual's behaviour on an element of their environment.

Schizophrenia

A mental illness characterised by hallucinations and delusions.

Worksheet: Cognitive Explanations of Crime

Name: _____

1. Identify the cognitive error demonstrated in each of the following quotes:

“I stole the bike because I thought I would get away with it. The person I stole from looked really rich. They can afford to buy a new one.

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“I guess I didn’t really think how much my actions would hurt the victim. I didn’t think speeding was such a big deal until I caused that accident.”

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“I don’t believe that I even did anything wrong. Downloading a pirated movie is a victimless crime. If movie studios didn’t want us to steal, they shouldn’t make cinema tickets so expensive.”

.....

“I didn’t even think about it. I just saw his face, and I lost control. He was smirking at me, and I knew he was about to start a fight, so I started it first.”

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2. Describe how the hostile attribution bias can explain criminal behaviour.

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3. Explain one way that cognitive theories of crime have been applied in a treatment of criminal behaviour.

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4. *“Cognitive explanations cannot provide a complete explanation of criminal behaviour.”*

To what extent do you agree with the above statement? Explain your view using examples and evidence.

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