

Learning theories

These theories see criminality as normal learned behaviour. Some behaviour is instinctive and is possessed by an individual at birth; the possession of this is determined by biological factors. Learned behaviour depends upon knowledge, skills, habits and responses that have been developed as a result of experience, or the need to adjust to environment.

Classical conditioning or classical learning theory

It is characterised by the work of Pavlov. He noticed that certain external stimuli always produced certain responses and that these responses seemed to be natural. The example usually chosen is that a dog always salivates when it is given meat, but it does not salivate when presented with most other stimuli, e.g. a bell ringing. Pavlov tried to alter this. He persistently rang a bell when giving the dogs meat and after a time he stopped presenting them with meat and discovered that they still salivated when they heard the bell

Operant conditioning

The individual interacts with the environment, and thereby learns what behaviour will bring about the desired end. Skinner is the best known proponent of this type of theory. Its basis is that behaviour is learnt through the use of rewards and punishments. Behaviour which is rewarded will be reinforced and become more frequent in order to maximise the rewards, and behaviour which is punished or which meets with aversive consequences will be discouraged.

Classical and operant learning are very similar, but in operant learning behaviour is not just affected by the environment, but operates on the environment to attain various ends. This theory is based on what the individual finds rewarding or unpleasant, and assumes that everybody seek to maximise rewards and minimise punishment.

Cognitive learning

It considers the ability to understand. It might explain how people understand concepts and solve problems, and also how they arrange the information they obtain from response theories so as to give their behaviour meaning. It includes an understanding of the physical world as well as learning and shaping attitudes and beliefs about the world

In particular it involves learning about other people, their behaviour and how we interact with them. It thus includes learning respect for the feelings of others, learning to take responsibility, learning to make rational choices about behaviour, learning to control impulsive desires and behaviours, learning to develop powers of moral reasoning, and learning to solve interpersonal problems.

Multimodal programmes

Programmes intended to produce behavioural changes using cognitive ideas usually need to deal with a number of aspects and are referred to as multimodal programmes. They work on areas such as information processes, problem solving, skills training, emotional control training and moral reasoning.

These learning processes can take place through a number of different modes. The learning can take place through direct experiences, but learning can also be observational or based on models. That is, learning can take place by watching the behaviour of others and seeing whether it is rewarded or punished. This type of learning is thought to be most powerful for children, who may model their behaviour on family, teachers or peer groups.

Differential association

(Edwin H. Sutherland)

It is a theory of learning. It asserts that crime is learnt by association with others.

Sutherland argued that all behaviour was learnt, and to decide whether someone would be criminal you needed to split criminal behaviour from non-criminal behaviour

The central hypothesis is that crime is not unique or invented by each criminal separately but, like all other forms of human behaviour, it is learnt from direct contact with other people.

Second hypothesis: behavioural learning takes place through personal contacts with other people.

A third assertion is that the learning involves both the techniques for committing the offences and the motives, drives, rationalisations, values and attitudes for its committal.

Finally, whether a person takes part in criminal activities depends on the amount of contact they have with criminal activities or with those who support or are sympathetic towards criminal activities.

Criminal input or definitions come from criminal offenders and those who may verbally approve of such behaviour, or those who may verbally disapprove of crime but who are nevertheless willing to participate in certain types of criminal activity.

*A person becomes criminal if
there is an excess of definitions
favourable to the violation of the
law over definitions unfavourable
to violation of the law*

The longer and more frequently one is exposed to a particular type of behaviour or attitude, the more effect it is likely to have.

The earlier the attitude is experienced, the more forcefully it is likely to affect later behaviour.

It is important to note that Sutherland does not consider that offenders are driven by different goals and desires from non criminals, but rather that they choose different means of achieving those ends