

What are the origins of criminal behavior criminology essay



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“ Which factors contribute the most to criminal behavior - biological, sociocultural or cognitive?” In this paper the origins of crime rooted in all of the three levels of psychological analysis are going to be introduced. At first the history of theories concerning crime origins is going to be introduced by looking at classical and neoclassical theories like the one by Cornish and Clarke’s (1986) followed by ecological theories and findings by Andre M. Guerry as well as more recent theories by Freud.

Later the biological level of analysis is going to be discussed by looking at twin studies for example Bouchard and Lykken (1990). Findings by Blair et al. (1999) are going to explain the other part of the contribution of biological level of analysis to crime - brain dysfunctions. Next the role of hormones and neurotransmitters in criminal behavior is going to be discussed. Cognitive level of analysis will be analyzed through cognitive distortions and rational choice theory by Cornish and Clark (1987). The last level of analysis - sociocultural is going to be discussed while looking and discussing poverty, unemployment and self- fulfilling prophecy followed by the research by Jahoda(1954) and Rosenthal and Jacoson (1986)

At the end the conclusion will gather all the information and answer the research question by explaining the importance of the interaction between the three levels of analysis.

Introduction :

Any behavior which has a criminal intent and is punishable by law can be defined as a criminal behavior. Many programmes on television are connected to crime. Solving criminal riddles or following court cases seems

to be entertaining and fascinating for people. That happens because crime involves so many aspects of life, biological, cultural and cognitive- therefore there are many plots in the shows which draw people's attention. The origins of criminal behavior are complex by taking an integrative look at this kind of behavior the approach of assessing which factors contribute the most to the criminal behavior can be taken. Psychologists struggle to answer the question of the origins of it as there are three approaches to this kind of behavior but none of those seems to be dominating the other. Some researchers claim that those three factors: biological, sociocultural and cognitive combined together equally contribute to the criminal behavior.

In the past people used to believe that certain types of people were becoming criminals. They were usually from ethnic minorities or they shared certain physical features. Even nowadays there stereotype connected to people involved in crimes exists. We are more prawn to accuse somebody who is tall, well built and has scars or tattoos on his body then a peacefully looking man. Maybe it is connected to the fact that biological level of analysis dominates the others when it comes to determination of criminals? If any of the factors from the psychological research is dominating the other maybe we can predict who is going to become a criminal looking only at some certain features. Maybe this kind of research can help us in criminal law? As all of these questions arise in many people's heads and it is worth to have a look at all three levels of analysis and discuss them to present the recent dispute concerning criminal behavior.

History of theories on the origins of crime :

While talking about criminology a short look back at the history needs to be taken. Demonological Theory of criminal behavior was established in the 18th century. It consisted of supernatural explanations of criminology which emerged from the fact that theological explanations of the reality were predominant. The Classical Theory which emerged later was based on free will and rationality and led to Neoclassical theories like the one by Cornish and Clarke's (1986), they argued that the criminals were rational in their actions however they weight the costs, opportunities and benefits of their crimes. In this theory individual traits and social factors were taken into consideration. The first theory which took data and statistics as a base was the Ecological Theory; it can be categorized as a geographical approach to crime, as ecology is a branch of biology which focuses on relationships between humans and the environment which they inhabit. This approach led to the findings by Andre M. Guerry, that the wealthier the environment was, the more crime was taking place, findings were based on France crime statistics. It was then concluded that the wealthier environment led to the greater opportunity of crime as more goods were available. Later Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quetelet used the available statistics to challenge the already existing Classical Theory which was based on rationality and free will and argued that crime is not based only on free will.

When it comes to modern criminology and psychological and biological theories there are several which need to be mentioned. One of the early biological theories is based on the outlook of the person; according to Ernest Hooton there seem to be certain features or body types which distinguish a

criminal: tattooing, thin body hair and beard, thin eyebrows, low and sloping shoulders, thin lips. Sheldon (1940) was a researcher who led to the invention of three somatypes which are the descriptions of the way the body is built. One of the somatypes - endomorphic seems to be related the most to the body type of criminals. Current Biological Theories focus on so called "nature vs. nurture problem" which focuses on explaining if criminal behavior has its roots in genetics or the environment. The genetic approach is studied mainly on Twin Studies as they provide prove for intelligence inheritance and check whether the criminal nature can be inherited as well. Psychological theories concerning criminal behavior have one thing in common: they search for criminal pathology in humans. Freudian Theory focuses on instinct and unconsciousness in human behavior. His theories in general were not targeted at criminal behavior but they help to explain it. Many Freudian theorists attribute criminal behavior to the personality conflicts or unsolved situations from childhood which unconsciously can lead people to criminal behavior. Other theory focuses on the relationship between IQ and crime, some researchers claim that the lower the IQ is the higher possibility of becoming a criminal. It is due to the bad results at schools or even at work which lead to frustration and humiliation which can be the cause of criminal behavior.

After mentioning a few of existing theories it is worth to move to different levels of analysis through which the criminal behavior can be analyzed. As it was mentioned before there are three levels of analysis: biological, sociocultural and cognitive. Biological level of analysis focuses on genetics and environment. It helps to understand how those two factors coexist.

Sociocultural level of analysis shows how the social context influences the behavior it is focused on individuals and groups and on the relationship between the individual and the group. It was proved that the individual can influence the group as well as the group can influence an individual. This level of analysis also takes a look at culture. Cognitive level of analysis focuses on structure and functions of the mind and investigates how people obtain knowledge as well as how do they use it later.

Biological level of analysis as a crime origin :

Biological level of analysis was proven to be one of the factors contributing to criminality based on twin studies. Bouchard and Lykken (1990) carried out a study on monozygotic twins. Their study focused on fifty six pairs of monozygotic twins which were reared apart. Those twins were compared with the monozygotic twins reared together. The twins which were growing up apart from each other were tested by personality questionnaires, intelligence tests, areas of interest questionnaires and some others. The environments in which they grew up were compared as well as their life stories and sexual life histories were checked. All those tests were carried out separately for each of the twins so that neither of them could influence the answer of the other. The data gathered provided prove for intelligence inheritance and not only. Monozygotic twins raised apart share basic personal and psychic features. This study can lead to the conclusion that as personal predispositions can be inherited than also the predispositions for becoming a criminal can. This is how biological level of analysis contributes to criminal behavior. Further studies which focused particularly on inheritance of criminal behavior confirm to the conclusions made on the

basis of the study by Bouchard and Lykken. Hutchings and Mednick (1975) found that biological factors combined with genetic factors can determine the behavior of people. They carried out a study on adopted kids and rate of criminal behavior amongst them. It occurred that the highest rate of criminals was raised up by an adoptive father who was a criminal himself and they had a biological father who was a criminal. If the biological father was a criminal and the adoptive one was not the rate was still pretty high. If only the adoptive father was a criminal the risk of kids becoming criminals was the lowest.

Some research shows that criminals may have brain dysfunctions. The study of Phineas Gage whose brain was damaged by an iron rod and who later displayed an antisocial behavior can prove this statement to be true. The area of the brain which was damaged in the highest extent was frontal lobe. The frontal lobe hypothesis states that there is a link between criminal behavior and malfunctioning of frontal cortex and limbic system. Findings by Blair et al. (1999) which are rooted in biological level of analysis also seem to support the hypothesis that interaction between frontal cortex and limbic system can influence criminal behavior. Blair by PET scanning convicted psychopaths was looking at the relationship between making decisions and emotions. The findings were that there were impairments of the pathways between the frontal lobe and amygdala. Those impairments affect the personality into a great extent as because of them the development of empathy or feeling of guilt becomes almost impossible. This may make people more prone to become a criminal as without feeling of guilt or empathizing with the others the person cannot see the consequences of the

crime committed as well as interacting with the rest of the society becomes more difficult with this kind of impairment.

Neurotransmitters amongst others regulate emotion and mood; hormones are chemical substances used by our organisms to exert the impact of neurotransmitters. Dopamine, one of the neurotransmitters and its overproduction was proven to be one of the causes of psychotic behavior and therefore linked to antisocial behavior and crime. People with low serotonin levels are also the ones who are more prone to behave in an aggressive and antisocial way and as a result more prone to commit a crime. Low serotonin levels have to coexist with certain personality traits to become responsible for aggressive behavior. Male sex hormone testosterone seems to be related to criminal and violent behavior. Studies on both - males and females convicted for crime show that level of testosterone of the offenders is increased. Study by Highley et al. (1996) showed that amongst people with low serotonin levels the higher levels of testosterone significantly raised the aggression levels.

Cognitive level of analysis as a crime origin :

Cognitive level of analysis also has its role in criminal behavior. The “cognitive distortions” or sometimes so called “cognitive errors” may be responsible for criminal behavior. Those are errors in thinking which may lead to the wrong assessment or approach to certain actions to protect oneself. Barriga, Landau, Stinson, Liao and Gibs (2000) distinguish between two kinds of cognitive distortions. Self-serving ones concentrate on protection of oneself from the crime which occurs in pushing away the guilt from oneself or promoting acts of violence towards the others. It serves the <https://assignbuster.com/what-are-the-origins-of-criminal-behavior-criminology-essay/>

avoidance of creating negative self- image. Self debasing distortions are opposite to self-serving ones. They make the individual to blame himself for the negative situations which occurred. The so called " self" cannot be protected. Self debasing distortions include four factors which the person follows: catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, personalizing and selective abstraction. Those factors lead the individual to the feeling of guilt and hopelessness as well as fear that similar actions in the future will have a bad outcome. It leads to the conclusion that overprotecting can lead to criminal behavior as the criminal simply does not feel guilty after all. Whereas the lack of protection of oneself, blaming and catastrophizing can lead to frustration and violent criminal behavior as the person feels helpless.

Rational choice theory proposed by Cornish and Clark (1987) to be a source of criminal behavior states that criminals are fully aware of what they are doing and that what they do is a result of a decision-making process.

According to this theory three models of criminal behavior can be found: victimized actor, predestined actor and rational actor. The victimized actor commits a crime which is a result of being mistreated by the society it can be perceived as revenge. The predestined actor model represents a person who cannot deal with his or her urges and cannot control the environment which is a factor pushing to crime out of helplessness. The rational actor is the one who commits the crime by his own choice and the decision is based on the benefits outweighing the costs of the crime. In generally this theory assumes that criminals simply seek for the benefit of their crimes.

Sociocultural level of analysis as a crime origin:

Poverty seems to play a big role in criminal behavior. It can be approached from different ways. One of them is a direct relation between poverty and crime which occurs because of the economic growth as for the last 40 years it caused higher crime rates. The crime rates when up when it comes to shoplifting, pick pocketing or for example robbery which are the actions leading to obtain money or valuable goods. That would mean that in so called " rich countries" the poverty leads people to stealing aiming in improving their material situation. The other relation is an inverse relation which can be seen in the rates of murders committed in countries with fast economical growth. Those rates fell down due o the money donated for education and different life style. In poor countries the crime rates are still high. It leads to the conclusion that poverty indeed influences crime.

Unemployment can also contribute to crime. Very often it is mixed up with poverty being the source of crime; however in some cases the lack of money is not a direct cause of criminal behavior. Unemployed people have a lower self esteem and can have a feeling of helplessness and lack of their usefulness in the society. Therefore the crimes are sometimes committed simply out of boredom or desperation. Many studies support this hypothesis as they show the correlation between unemployment and crime rates.

Labeling theory which is widely used in sociology has it's reflection in psychology, particularly in self - fulfilling prophecy. It means that if someone is labeled as an outcast or criminal it will simply come true because the labeled person will live up to it. Self- fulfilling prophecy is making the

assumptions which later turn out to be true. One of the studies carried out on <https://assignbuster.com/what-are-the-origins-of-criminal-behavior-criminology-essay/>

this topic shows that there is a link between the theory and crime. Jahoda (1954) carried out a study on Ghanan people. Boys were named there based on which day of the week they were born. The day of the week was believed to determine boy's character and temperament. Boys who were born on Mondays were believed to be peaceful whereas those born on Wednesday - aggressive. In the police reports it could be found that most of the arrested boys were born on Wednesday whereas very few convicts were born on Mondays. Jahoda assumed then that self- fulfilling prophecy took a big part in those outcomes. The boys were labeled as calm or aggressive and they were simply treated as they would be like that by the society and as a result they became what the society labeled them to become. The other experiment by Rosenthal and Jacoson (1968) on the IQ levels amongst students can also indirectly indicate that there may be a link between self-fulfilling prophecy and crime. This link can have a reflection on crimes nowadays, if we label a person as a criminal based on his or her looks the person may be treated like that by the society and as a result may actually become a criminal given the lack of other options because of the label which they carry.

Conclusion :

Answering the question:" Which factors contribute the most to criminal behavior - biological, sociocultural or cognitive?" is not easy. By analyzing each of those factors and the history of theories about origins of the crime it can be concluded that none of these factors is leading. They need to interact or there has to be a coincidence in them occurring together for the person to become a criminal. And even though those factors may occur the person does not necessarily have to become a criminal.

The old beliefs about the supernatural origin of crime having its roots in “bad forces” can be excluded however the theories on the higher crime rates in wealthier environment or certain body features being responsible for criminal behavior were not that wrong. Recent studies show that certain somatypes are more vulnerable to become criminals as well as that poverty can lead to crime. However looking in a certain way or being poor cannot determine a criminal on its own. However some levels of analysis interacting may let us suspect that they are the origins of criminal behavior. For example biological level of analysis interacting with sociocultural level of analysis can push a person to criminal behavior. For example a person with low serotonin levels who is generally more aggressive than the rest of the society can be perceived as a weird and dangerous person. As the society labels this person as an outcast or a criminal just because of the aggression the self-fulfilling prophecy may take place and the person may simply commit a crime out of despair.

Looking at how complex determining the origins of the criminal behavior is and how many factors are connected to criminal behavior it can be concluded that none of the levels of analysis : sociocultural, biological or cognitive contributes to the criminal behavior in the greatest extent. They need to coexist and interact for the criminal behavior to occur.