

Psychosocial theories in criminal justice

[Law](#), [Criminal Justice](#)



PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORIES in the APPLICATION of CRIMINAL JUSTICE Mark P.

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COLLEGE July 30, 2012 There are several Psychosocial Theories pertaining to human behavior. The relation of some of these theories can be directly applied to the Criminal Justice field. Theories focus on why some behavior develops, when and where the development begins, who is affected by it and may be particularly more susceptible, what signs or behaviors to look for, and what may be done to prevent it.

Psychologist Terrie Moffitt proposed her Developmental Theory identifying two developmental ' paths' or ' patterns' in which an individual may exhibit. Moffitt claims that criminal behavior can mainly be classified into one of these categories. Moffitt states that the ' Life-Course-Persistent (LCP) offender' continues their antisocial ways and behavior across or throughout all kinds of conditions and situations, and throughout the life course (or life p).

This is a developmental path in which the offender shows various psychological and antisocial difficulty, and defiance on a consistent basis at an early age, on through youth and adolescence, and further into adulthood and beyond. It appears as though once LCP's become involved in a deviant and offensive lifestyle they continue and increase their offending as they grow older. Young children as LCP's often show evidence of this developmental ' path' in ways such as wild temper tantrums and mood swings, to biting and hitting.

As adolescents, LCP's show signs such as truancy, shoplifting and substance abuse. This may seem like rather common or somewhat 'normal' behavior for many younger individuals, and in many cases it is. However, when the young person or adolescent does not 'grow-out' of this phase or behavioral 'pattern', it can progress into adulthood. The adult LCP may often develop such behavior as robbery, rape, child abuse, even murder. Adult LCP's show high levels of antisocial behavior, and are almost exclusively male in gender.

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The offending might even escalate, with the offenses and behavior becoming more violent in nature, more erratic, and unpredictable. As stated earlier, some criminal behavior may be seen or viewed as relatively 'normal' behavior for younger individuals, especially males. In fact, most young individuals do 'grow-up and out' of this, and choose (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) another developmental pathway. They may offend or display some type of criminal or 'bad' behavior as children, adolescents, or young adults, but usually stop in their late-teens to early twenties.

Terrie Moffitt states that these 'youths' are 'Adolescent-Limited (AL) offenders', and these individuals usually do not have or display the early developmental, persistent antisocial, or problem behavioral histories as their LCP counterparts. However the case may be, there is an occasional commonality between LCP and AL youth. Often times, the frequency and severity of offending among LCP and AL youth, is 'mirrored'. The patterns of offending between them can be almost identical, but with the onset of young adulthood looming near, these patterns then abruptly change.

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For many reasons, the AL youth realizes that continued offending will not lead to any sort of positive outcome, and he or she then stops. Ultimately, when applied in a criminal justice setting, Moffitt's developmental theory of the LCP person and the AL person shows that the AL 'criminals' or 'delinquents' have the ability, or at the very least, are more likely to regain control of their lives. They desist in their malevolent and/or devious behavior when they begin to mature and evolve into a more social, conventional, realistic, and 'acceptable' person.

The LCP 'criminal' or 'delinquent' maintains their malevolent behavior, possibly and usually escalating into a more antisocial, unpredictable and dangerous person. LCP's generally have long histories wrought with aggressive and violent crimes, with genuine 'disregard' for legality, posing as a 'threat' to everyone. Psychologist Erik Erikson proposed another theory of Psychosocial Development, which focuses on 'Stages'. He states that each stage plays a major role in the development of personality and psychological 'skills'.

Erikson says there are a series of eight stages, coinciding with infancy to late adulthood, in which a person experiences different 'challenges'. Each stage requires the successful completion of the prior stage to move onto the next, otherwise incomplete stages may reappear in the future and pose potential problems. However, absolute perfection or mastery of a stage is not necessary. Erikson's developmental stages are as follows: 1. Hopes: Trust vs. Mistrust (Oral-Sensory, Birth – 2 yrs) 2. Will: Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt

(Muscular-Anal, 2 -4 yrs) 3. Purpose: Initiative vs. Guilt (Locomotor-Genital, Preschool, 4 -5 yrs) 4.

Competence: Industry vs. Inferiority (Latency, 5 – 12 yrs) 5. Fidelity: Identity vs. Role Confusion (Adolescence, 13 – 19 yrs) 6. Love: Intimacy vs. Isolation (Young Adulthood, 20 – 24, or 20 – 40 yrs) 7. Care: Generativist vs.

Stagnation (Middle Adulthood, 25 – 64, or 40 – 64 yrs) 8. Wisdom: Ego Integrity vs. Despair (Late Adulthood, 65 – death) In regards to Erik Erikson's developmental theory of the ' Stages', there is particular importance in relation to the criminal justice field. Stage 5, (Fidelity: Identity vs. Role Confusion) plays a key role in psychosocial ability and behavior. ' Identity' is unique to every individual.

There may be a distinct correlation between identity and why some people stray from the ' norms' of society and venture off into a life of deviant or criminal activity. This is especially true when it involves young people. Young people/persons are quite easily influenced, and impressionable. It is a very critical and important time in one's life, trapped somewhere between childhood and adulthood. It is a period of extreme change, extreme choices, and big decisions. Lack of one's own identity, confusion, and the need and desire to belong, or to ' fit in' somewhere, can and often does provoke irrational thought.

The inability or difficulty to become accepted by one's peers gives way to potentially ' bad' choices. This can be especially difficult for certain cultural, ethnic, and societal groups. For example, inner-city youth (regardless of race) who grow up in areas with higher crime rates and/or criminal activity,

or lower-income families (many with only one parental figure) are by default, at higher risk of 'exposure' to criminal activity. They in essence, have little or almost no chance of meeting or interacting with (or being influenced by) someone from the suburbs, or the country (rural areas), where criminal activity is lower.

These inner-city youths are more frequently exposed to crime (it is sometimes all they see and know), and without 'positive' influence, they are more susceptible to adopt an 'identity' relative and according to what they experience on a regular basis. They believe that is the 'norm' and in turn, they tend to lean towards what they believe. Rather than having no identity at all, and having the desire to 'fit in' somewhere, they naturally fall into place. Unfortunately, the choice(s) for these youths are often very limited, and this is a major problem. This may be a reason why Hans J.

Eysenck developed his psychosocial development theory of Personality and Crime. Hans J. Eysenck's theory is regarded as one of the most influential psychological perspectives on crime today. (Cale, 2006) Eysenck states that criminal behavior is the result of an interaction between certain environmental conditions and certain features of the nervous system. In other words, certain types of personalities, combined with certain types of surroundings, lead to certain types of criminal activity. This equates to a perfect combination of attributes which are a recipe for juvenile, delinquent, and/or criminal behavior.

This theory is unlike most contemporary theories of crime, because Eysenck heavily emphasizes that genetic predispositions are largely responsible for

antisocial and criminal conduct. Theoretically, some people are just 'born different' from the majority of the population, and their genetics result in their inability to adapt and conform to society's rules, regulations, and expectancies. Therein lays the problem. To assist Eysenck in measuring different variables of, and predisposure to commit crimes and offenses, he developed several 'questionnaires'. The best known questionnaire would be the British Maudsley Personality Inventory (MPI).

Additional editions would be the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI), the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ), and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised (EPQ-R). These questionnaires can be very helpful in providing researchers with valuable insight on how personality traits may coincide with criminality however it is not yet 'conclusive' research.

Although Eysenck's theory of Personality and Crime cannot be definitively proven, it is still worth looking at. Criminal justice practitioners would be wise to examine and contemplate its useful and unique suggestions.

While there are still several theories on psychosocial development to be discussed, Gerald Patterson's 'Coercion Developmental Theory' is in alignment with Terrie Moffitt's theory. Patterson states and believes that 'early starters are at greater risk for more serious criminal offending'. (Bartol and Bartol, p. 65) Patterson theorizes that while early starters are at greater risk, he focuses on how the parents and their roles with their children are more important, and much more instrumental. Essentially when young children experience different types of 'traumatic' events (e. g. ivorce, familyviolence, inconsistent parental discipline), they are prone to or are at

greater likelihood to begin using or displaying 'coercive behavior'. Coercive behavior can become the child's way of avoiding or escaping his or her immediate (parental, social) environment. This 'coercive' behavior could be as minor or unassuming as lying, temper tantrums, or whining. Eventually this coercive behavior becomes the child's 'go to' strategy to obtain the desired result(s) he or she wants. If left unchecked, or uncorrected by parents, the problem behavior can be prolonged, well into adolescence and on to adulthood.

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Therefore, parents need to gain and maintain control, in a non-threatening, non-demanding, appropriate way, as early as the coercive behavior is recognized. Summarizing that society has no shortage of people with some type of developmental disability that inhibits or prohibits their behavior, it can usually be traced back or down to its source. In conclusion, the theories discussed here can assist in narrowing down the 'root' causes of or perhaps the reasons why some individuals seem to veer astray from societal normality.

Whether the causes or reasons are psychological, developmental, or environmental in nature, criminal justice practitioners can utilize these theories to evaluate, and possibly explain the behavior of those in question.

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