

How have psychological approaches specifically informed

[Psychology](#)



In order to try and answer the question- ' How have psychological approaches specifically informed evidence led practice in the Probation Service', - I will try to explain why the use of Cognitive Behavioural approaches has overtaken everything else in the Probation Service' quest to find 'something works'. Psychology and evidence led practice appear to be two sides of the same coin, each different but totally reliant upon the other for survival in Probation practice.

Evidence led practice has previously been defined as 'interventions with offenders based on the best available evidence of what will reduce the likelihood of re-offending'. (HMIP 1998. 1). In practice, psychological approaches are seen as 'offender programmes that have a track record of reducing re-offending' (Wallace 2001. 2). McGuire explains how results from large scale experimentation with offenders give significant credence to the premise that repeat offending behaviour can be reduced by the application of Cognitive Behavioural Approaches (McGuire 2001. 13).

Presently cognitive behaviourism, as a model of intervention is at the absolute heart of evidence led practice. The development of cognitive behaviourism is the culmination of the convergence of distinct schools of thought in Behaviourism, cognitive theory and social learning theory. Historically, psychology developed as a philosophical discipline of structuralism and functionalism. Structuralism focussed on what individuals thought when certain things happened and the importance of breaking the experience down into 'bite sized' components, whereas Functionalism tried to explain why certain individuals thought or behaved in a certain way, be that pro or anti-social. Both of these two separate schools of thought

<https://assignbuster.com/how-have-psychological-approaches-specifically-informed/>

influenced the foundation of a totally new concept. This new school of thought was, and is now known as Behaviourism (Browne 2002. 1).

Browne went on to explain that behaviourists worked around the traditional concept of explaining why people commit crime i. e. the classical and the deterministic views. The classical view suggested that the criminal act be carried out with a free will. The offender will be a rational thinker who makes conscious decisions based upon the availability of opportunity. On the other hand the deterministic view is that the criminal act is the cumulative effect of some other aspect of the offenders life. This might involve a genetic or even an environmental influence in the actual offence. Behaviourism is very interested in the environment and how this environment affects criminal behaviour.

The founder of behaviourism, Watson, criticised the traditional approach by pointing out the lack of objectivity in the study of behaviour and the unscientific nature due to its reliance on the 'conscious mind'. Watson argued that the physical mind could not be observed or the mechanisms monitored. His goal was to develop an experimental and totally objective science. Therefore, his focus was on explaining how the different elements in the person's environment stimulated responses in the organisms. This is the reason why behaviourism is often referred to as stimulus and response. (McGuire 2001. 4).

Pavlov's, now infamous experiment with dogs is an excellent example of classical conditioning. The experiment showed that a neutral stimulus, which did not elicit any response from, dogs e. g. a bell when paired with

<https://assignbuster.com/how-have-psychological-approaches-specifically-informed/>

conditioned stimulus i. e. food, produced the same result i. e. salivation.

(Browne 2002. 2) Reinforcement can take the form of both positive and negative as well as the punishment, but both can produce the desired results as we find in Skinners experiment.

Skinner's experiment was based on the belief that all organisms responded to their environment in an adaptive manner. Skinner used rats for his particular experiment. He placed these rats in a box and either reinforced 'positive' behaviour or punished 'negative' behaviour to decrease the likelihood of that behaviour occurring. Thorndike's law of effect states that 'When behaviour is rewarded or reinforced by environmental events that follow, it becomes stronger. When behaviour is punished or not rewarded, it is more likely to stop. (Cassel and Bernsteine 2001 cited in Browne 2002. 2)

Bandura and his social learning theory conducted the other side of Thorndike and Skinner's work. Bandura explains learning by watching others rather than experiencing reward or punishment (Brown 2002. 2) this theory tries to show that people can learn to behave in a certain manner without directly experiencing reward or punishment. He termed this 'observational learning'. In some people, behaviour would result in imitation but in others it would be determined by observation of others reward and punishment. The connection between imitation through observation and considering others behaviour is placed at cognitive level. Browne 2002. 2)

Two other important figures in the study of behaviourism are Sutherland and Jeffery. Sutherland's Differential association theory sees people as being influenced not only by associating with criminal elements but also by

<https://assignbuster.com/how-have-psychological-approaches-specifically-informed/>

exposure to patterns of behaviour, which may or may not endorse criminal activity. Browne explains that this process takes place in intimate groups and involves learning attitudes towards crime and criminal techniques.

Jeffrey's Differential reinforcement theory proposes that criminal behaviour is based on the reinforcement of the consequences or rewards which could be emotional, material or social. These rewards quite simply reinforce criminal behaviour and give out the message that 'crime does pay'! Behaviourism and learning theories are seen as instrumental in explaining behaviour as directly observable and quantifiable. They also go a long way in explaining criminal behaviour and why some individuals turn to crime whilst others don't.

The other main contributor to the formation of present cognitive behavioural approaches is cognitive theory or cognitive psychology. Cognition has been termed as 'Mental activity involving perceiving, thinking, remembering or problem-solving (Dworetzky 1991 cited in Browne 2002. 3.) Cognitive psychologists therefore are interested in answering questions like why people argue on different sides of a moral debate? What is a mental image? And how do people solve problems etc. (Browne 2002. 3)

One of the most influential cognitive theories is Piaget's theory of cognitive development. This theory is crucial to the understanding of criminal and delinquent behaviour. According to Piaget infants form mental pictures of the world and adapt them according to their own personal experiences. Children could assimilate new information or accommodate information they already possess. These separate mental processes are used to adapt schemas to

<https://assignbuster.com/how-have-psychological-approaches-specifically-informed/>

progress through the four stages of cognitive development. (Browne 2002. 3). These stages explain intellectual development from early sensory perceptions to complex and abstract judgement. By the final stage of 'formal operations', the child is thought to consider implications of his /her and others behaviours. They can realise different outcomes to different events and accept that some of the reasoning they adopted for a long time may be flawed. It is thought that some people fail to reach this stage of development. This explains why some people with schemas of dysfunctional behaviour may respond in a similar manner showing an inability to differentiate logical and concrete reasoning (Browne 2002. 3).

Social cognition theory tries to apply its concepts to social situations. It is described as 'the process by which people make sense of themselves, others, relationships and social interactions'. (Weston 2000 cited in Browne 2002. 3). Social cognition is directly linked with cognitive or learning styles. The schemas from Piaget used in cognitive development are imported to explain how individuals perceive others in social situations. Individuals continuously develop mental pictures of people and form expectations about how people will behave. Many individuals differ in the way they perceive events from others. These people's cognitive styles are considered to be responsible for the ways in which they engage in anti-social behaviour. (Ross and Fabiano 1985 cited in Browne 2002. 3)

In short, cognitive psychology can be seen as attempting to explain criminal behaviour by looking at people's thoughts, information processing, moral reasoning and interpretation of social skills.

McGuire (2000) describes the way in which the ideas from behaviourism, cognitive psychology and learning theories were integrated in the 1970's into a new approach to understand the complex, dynamic relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviour. In his view, behaviourism contributed to the role of environment in learning, the importance of breaking complex behaviour to simple units and the importance of monitoring and evaluation of the process. Cognitive psychology contributed by explaining the role of language and inner speech, centrality of cognitive process in self-regulation and perception. Crucially CB is not one theory but a family of methods, techniques and conceptual statements outlined above. The CB model draws from the above-mentioned concepts to manifest in the form of techniques and programmes commonly described as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). The therapeutic approaches thus draw from the confluence of the previously mentioned theories to form offender focussed programmes, which include behaviour modification, behaviour training, social skills training, self-instructional training, problem solving training, cognitive therapy and rational emotive therapy.

The cognitive behavioural model seeks to change thinking patterns responsible for offending behaviour, since it is considered that such cognitive deficits are learned rather than inherited. Behaviourism and cognitive psychology on their own could not identify the problems and certain possible solutions due to their inherent limitations and singular focus. It is now clear that Cognitive Behavioural Theory has become the heart of evidence led practice in the Probation service. Explaining the main features and the driving principles behind cognitive behavioural theory and the way that it

<https://assignbuster.com/how-have-psychological-approaches-specifically-informed/>

has informed evidence led practice in the Probation field, McGuire (2001. 1) states that 'It is theoretically driven and based on a rigorous, extensive and logically coherent conceptual framework. It is also grounded in considerable volumes of empirical research drawn from meta-analysis of these ideas being tested and experimented upon. Reviews of the outcomes from work with offenders lend significant credence to the view that repeated offending behaviour could be reduced'.

Other commentators such as Raynor and Vanstone (1996) and Bhui (1996) see the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural programmes in terms of better value financially, this option being far cheaper than incarceration. 'no doubt the fact that working with offenders in group programmes uses fewer financial and human resources'. (Bhui 1996)

Gorman (2001) is very critical of the meta-analysis used to evaluate these programmes. He contends that there is insufficient study available in the United Kingdom regarding interventions with adult offenders. He classifies evaluations based on studies from Canada, on the White Male offenders dating back to the 1950s and 60s as alien. He sees the use of cognitive behavioural programmes as the result of fine marketing and re-packaging by the programme designers in Canada and the UK. He argues that Cognitive Behavioural programmes score highly in meta-analysis because of the inherent grouping of these under one generic classification in contrast to other psychodynamic approaches like individual counselling or group and family counselling. Quoting Lipsey (1995. p73) he stresses that 'under the circumstances it is best not to single out one treatment as superior to

another'. Gorman felt that it was wrong of the Home Office and the Probation service to endorse the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioural Programmes by opting a national roll out of such programmes.

Bhui (1996) is in favour of programmes using CBA but he has some reservations regarding the notion of programme integrity and duplication. He argues that practitioners modify programmes, a practice that 'blurs or loses the effectiveness of the original design'.

From the evidence I have seen it is painfully clear that CBA present numerous problems primarily in the field of programme delivery. But it is also apparent that the evidence gleaned from the American and Canadian programmes support the Home Office and Probation services views that this is a field well worth exploring and maintaining. As McGuire said in 2000. 13 'This is not to suggest that these approaches have all the answers. That would be an arrogant and unrealistic claim. There are still many questions to be asked and numerous problems to be solved. There is also room for many innovations and developments.