



2024-25 FALL FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

WEEK 3

Developmental and Psychological Theories of Offending



DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES

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- **Developmental and life-course criminology (DLC)** is concerned mainly with three topics:
 - (a) the **development of offending and antisocial behaviour** from the womb to the tomb;
 - (b) the **influence of risk and protective factors** at different ages; and
 - (c) the **effects of life events** on the course of development.

DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES

- Whereas **traditional criminological theories** aimed to explain **between-individual differences in offending**, such as why lower-class boys commit more offences than upper-class boys,
- **DLC theories** aim to explain **within-individual changes in offending** over time.
- **DLC theories** carry out **prospective longitudinal surveys**.

I. Moffitt: *Adolescence-Limited Versus Life Course-Persistent Offending*

- **Moffitt (1993)** proposed that there are **two qualitatively different categories** of antisocial people (differing in kind rather than in degree):
 - 1. Life course-persistent offenders (LCP)** and
 - 2. adolescence-limited offenders (AL).**

1. Adolescence-Limited Offenders

- The ALs have a **short criminal career** largely limited to their teenage years.
- The ALs commit predominantly “**rebellious**” **non-violent offences** such as vandalism.
- The ALs are encouraged by “**maturity gap**” (their **inability to achieve adult rewards** such as material goods during their teenage years) and **peer influence**.

1. Adolescence-Limited Offenders

- **Decision-making** in criminal opportunities is supposed to be **rational** for the ALs (who **weigh** likely **costs** against likely **benefits**)
- The ALs **cease offending** when they enter **legitimate adult roles** and can achieve their desires legally.
- The ALs **can easily stop** because they have **few neuropsychological deficits**.
- The ALs are **influenced by teenage boredom**.

2. Life course-persistent Offenders

- The LCPs **start offending at an early age and persist beyond their twenties.**
- The LCPs **commit a wide range of offences including violence.**
- The LCPs are **encouraged by cognitive deficits, an under-controlled temperament, hyperactivity, poor parenting, disrupted families, teenage parents, poverty and low socioeconomic status.**

2. Life course-persistent Offenders

- The **neuropsychological risk** of the LCPs interacts multiplicatively with a **disadvantaged environment**.
- The LCPs **seek out opportunities** and **victims**.
- **Decision-making** in criminal opportunities is **not** supposed to be **rational** for the LCPs (who largely follow well-learned “**automatic**” **behavioural repertoires** without thinking).
- The LCPs are mainly influenced by utilitarian motives.

I. Moffitt: *Adolescence-Limited Versus Life Course-Persistent Offending*

- Moffitt (1993) argued that:
 - There were **no true adult onset offenders**.
 - People, who were **first arrested or convicted** as adults, had **previously offended** but had **not been caught**.

II. Lahey & Waldman: Developmental Propensity Theory

- Lahey and Waldman (2005) aimed to explain the **development of conduct disorder and juvenile delinquency**, focusing particularly on **childhood and adolescence**.
- Their key construct is **antisocial propensity**:
 - tends to **persist over time**,
 - has a wide **variety of behavioural manifestations**,
 - reflecting the **versatility** and **comorbidity** of antisocial behaviour.

components of antisocial propensity

1. low cognitive ability
 2. prosociality (negative)
 3. daring
 4. negative emotionality
- **These four factors** are said to have a **genetic basis**.
 - Lahey and Waldman (2005) discuss **gene-environment interactions**.

III. Thornberry & Krohn: Interactional Theory

- Thornberry and Krohn (2005) focus on **factors encouraging antisocial behaviour at different ages.**
- They suggest that the **causes of antisocial behaviour vary for children** who start at different ages.
- The most **distinctive feature** of interactional theory is its emphasis on **reciprocal causation.**

the most important influencing factors

- **(birth to 6):** neuropsychological deficits, difficult temperament, parenting deficits, structural adversity
- **(6–12):** neighbourhood and family factors
- **(12–18):** school and peer factors, deviant opportunities, gangs and deviant social networks
- **(18–25):** low intelligence and poor school performance

III. Thornberry & Krohn: Interactional Theory

- **Late starters** (ages 18–25) will show **more continuity** in antisocial behaviour over time **than earlier starters** (ages 12–18) because the late starters have **more cognitive deficits**.
- **Desistance** was caused by **changing social influences, protective factors** and **intervention programmes**.

IV. Sampson & Laub: Age Graded Informal Social Control Theory

- Sampson and Laub (2005) aimed to explain **why people do not commit offences**, on the assumption that:
 - why people want to **offend is unproblematic** (presumably caused by **hedonistic desires**),
 - **offending is inhibited** by the strength of **bonding to society**.
- The **strength of bonding** depends on **attachments** to parents, schools, delinquent friends and delinquent siblings.

IV. Sampson & Laub: Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory

- This theory emphasises **change over time** rather than consistency.
- It emphasises the importance of **individual free will and purposeful choice** in the decision to **desist**.
- It also proposes that **official labelling** (e.g. a conviction) leads to an **increase in offending** through its effects on **job instability and unemployment**.



PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES



I. Bowlby: Attachment Theory

- **Bowlby (1969)** emphasised the importance of the **attachment between a child and a primary caretaker** (usually the mother).
- It was very **important for a child** to have a **continuous, warm, loving relationship** with a mother figure during the first two years of the child's life.

I. Bowlby: Attachment Theory

- If a child suffered a **prolonged period of maternal deprivation** during the first five years of life (especially a “broken home”), this was likely to have **irreversible negative effects**, including becoming a cold “**affectionless character**” and a **delinquent**.



II. Eysenck: Personality Theory

- **Behavioural consistency** depends primarily on the **persistence of underlying tendencies** to behave in **particular** ways in particular situations.
- These **tendencies** are termed **personality traits**, such as *impulsiveness, excitement seeking, assertiveness, modesty* and *dutifulness*.

II. Eysenck: Personality Theory

- Eysenck (1996) viewed offending as **natural** and even **rational**, on the assumption that human beings were **hedonistic**, sought **pleasure** and avoided **pain**.
- **Delinquent acts** such as theft, violence and vandalism were essentially **pleasurable or beneficial** to the offender.
- The **hedonistic tendency** to commit crimes was **opposed by the conscience**.

II. Eysenck: Personality Theory

- Eysenck proposed that **the conscience was built up in childhood**. (classical conditioning)
- **After** children had been **punished several times** for the same act, **fear tended to stop** them committing it.
- According to this theory, this **conditioned fear response** was the **conscience**, and it would be **experienced subjectively as guilt** if the child committed a **disapproved act**.
- On the Eysenck theory, people who **commit offences** are those who have **not built up strong consciences**, mainly because they have **poor conditionability**.

III. Patterson: Social Learning Theory

- Patterson (1982) developed a version of social learning theory focusing on ideas of **coercion**, based on systematic observation of **interactions between parents and children**.
- Patterson found that **parents of antisocial children were deficient** in their methods of child-rearing. These parents failed to:
 - **tell** their children how they were expected **to behave**,
 - **monitor** their behaviour to ensure that it was **desirable**, and
 - **enforce rules** promptly and unambiguously with appropriate **rewards and penalties**.
- The parents of antisocial children used **more punishment** (such as scolding, shouting or threatening), but failed to use it consistently or make it contingent on the child's behaviour.

III. Patterson: Social Learning Theory

- The basic idea of social learning theory is very simple:
 - **actions** that are **rewarded** are **more likely to occur** subsequently, and
 - **actions** that are **punished** are **less likely to occur** subsequently. (operant conditioning)
- The main idea is that **children who are raised in coercive families learn to use coercive behaviour.**
- In contrast, **skilful parents use positive reinforcement** (rewards) for desirable behaviours and **ignore or use time out** (sending the child to his/her room) for undesirable behaviours.

IV. Walters: Lifestyle Theory

- Walters (2006) proposed a theory that mainly aimed to explain the **development of a criminal lifestyle** and subsequent **change and desistance** processes.
- He defined the **principal features of a criminal lifestyle** as including:
 - **social rule-breaking** (e.g. offending),
 - **irresponsibility** (e.g. in jobs and relationships),
 - **self-indulgence** (e.g. substance abuse, tattoos) and
 - **interpersonal intrusiveness** (e.g. violence).
- This lifestyle was **linked to** certain **cognitions, self-beliefs** and **thinking styles**.

IV. Walters: Lifestyle Theory

- how this lifestyle developed:
 - **hedonistic motivation,**
 - **excitement-seeking,**
 - **a desire for personal advantage,**
 - **constructive or defensive reactions to fears and threats.**
- defensive reactions:
 - **aggression,**
 - **withdrawal,**
 - **immobilisation,**
 - **appeasement.**
- how people gave up the criminal lifestyle:
 - **changes in self-concept,**
 - **taking responsibility,**
 - **increases in self-confidence,**
 - **understanding the impact of a person's action on other people.**

V. THE ICAP THEORY

- This “**Integrated Cognitive Antisocial Potential**” (or ICAP) theory was primarily designed to explain **offending by lower class males**.
- Its **key construct is antisocial potential (AP)**; and it assumes that the **translation from antisocial potential to antisocial behaviour depends on cognitive (thinking and decision-making) processes** that take account of opportunities and victims.

V. THE ICAP THEORY

- People with **high AP** are **more likely to commit** many different types of **antisocial acts** including different types of offences.
- Therefore, **offending and antisocial behaviour are versatile rather than specialised.**
- The **ICAP** theory appears **static rather than dynamic.** It does **not explain changes in offending at different ages:**
 - **Parents are more important in influencing children,**
 - **Peers are more important in influencing adolescents,**
 - **Spouses and partners are more important in influencing adults.**

Long-term Risk Factors

- **The most important childhood risk factors for later offending:**
 - **hyperactivity-impulsivity- attention deficit,**
 - **low intelligence or low school attainment,**
 - **family criminality,**
 - **family poverty,**
 - **large family size,**
 - **poor child-rearing,**
 - **disrupted families.**

Long-term Risk Factors

- **The main factors that potentially lead to high long-term AP:**
- **desires for material goods,**
- **status among intimates,**
- **excitement,**
- **sexual satisfaction.**

Long-term AP

- Long-term **AP** also **depends on attachment** and **socialisation** processes.
- **AP** will be **low** if parents **consistently and contingently reward** good behaviour and **punish** bad behaviour.
- Children with **low anxiety** will be **less well socialised**, because they **care less** about parental punishment.
- **AP** will be **high** if children are **not attached to (prosocial) parents**, for example if parents are cold and rejecting.
- **Disrupted families** (broken homes) may **impair both attachment and socialisation** processes.

SUMMARY

- **Developmental theories** aim to explain the **development of offending** from childhood to adulthood.
- **Psychological theories** aim to explain **why some individuals**, rather than others, **become offenders**.
- **Psychological theories** focus especially on **individual and family factors**, including personality, impulsiveness, child-rearing methods and broken homes.

SUMMARY

- Many theories try to explain why there is **continuity in antisocial behaviour** from childhood to adulthood, and **why offenders are versatile** rather than specialised in their antisocial behaviour.
- Some theories (e.g. Moffitt) suggest that **different explanations are needed for different types** of offenders.
- Many theories identify **early risk factors for offending that can be targeted by prevention techniques**.