

# Theories to explain offending behaviour

## Offending behaviour - why do people do it?

Human behaviour is complex and individuals act in response to many factors including socio-economic status, neighbourhood, peer group, personality and so forth. Finding single causes to explain why some people offend, and some offend repeatedly, is probably not very productive. In this section of the module we will overview the big theories to date before unpacking Andrews and Bonta's theory on a general personality and social psychological approach which tries to blend the complexities. So let's get started.

### Psychodynamic Theory

Psychodynamic theory has roots in the psychoanalytic perspective of Sigmund Freud. Freud argued that human personality, our ego and superego interact with the immediate environment (these are the thinking parts) and the 'id' draws us to immediate gratification. Psychological maturity means that we can learn to delay gratification for a longer term gain, to love and be loved and to be socially productive. A strong super ego allows us to manage to comply with society's rules and norms, whereas ego allows us to cope with the day-to-day life.

Criminal behaviour is constructed as a reflection of psychological immaturity and particularly weak self-control in specific situations. The major risk factors are therefore seen as impulsivity, disturbed interpersonal relationships, low success in school or work, a weak superego which equates with little guilt, disregard for rules, antisocial attitudes and early misconduct, a weak super ego which translates into problems in the family or relationships.

### Social Location Theory

Social location theories of criminal behaviour suggests that behaviour is a reflection of where one is located within the social system. Depending on class position, access to wealth, power and prestige are either achieved through pro-social or antisocial means. For example being poor, young, and a member of a disadvantaged ethnic group may all conspire to contribute to a motivation for crime.

The key idea from social location theory is that criminal behaviour reflects personal distress (strain) that may be linked to social disadvantage. Within this model major risk factors include lower class origins, low levels of success at school and work, feelings of alienation, perceptions of limited opportunity in combination with desire for conventional success, being a gang member, or adoption of lower class values.

### Differential Association Theory

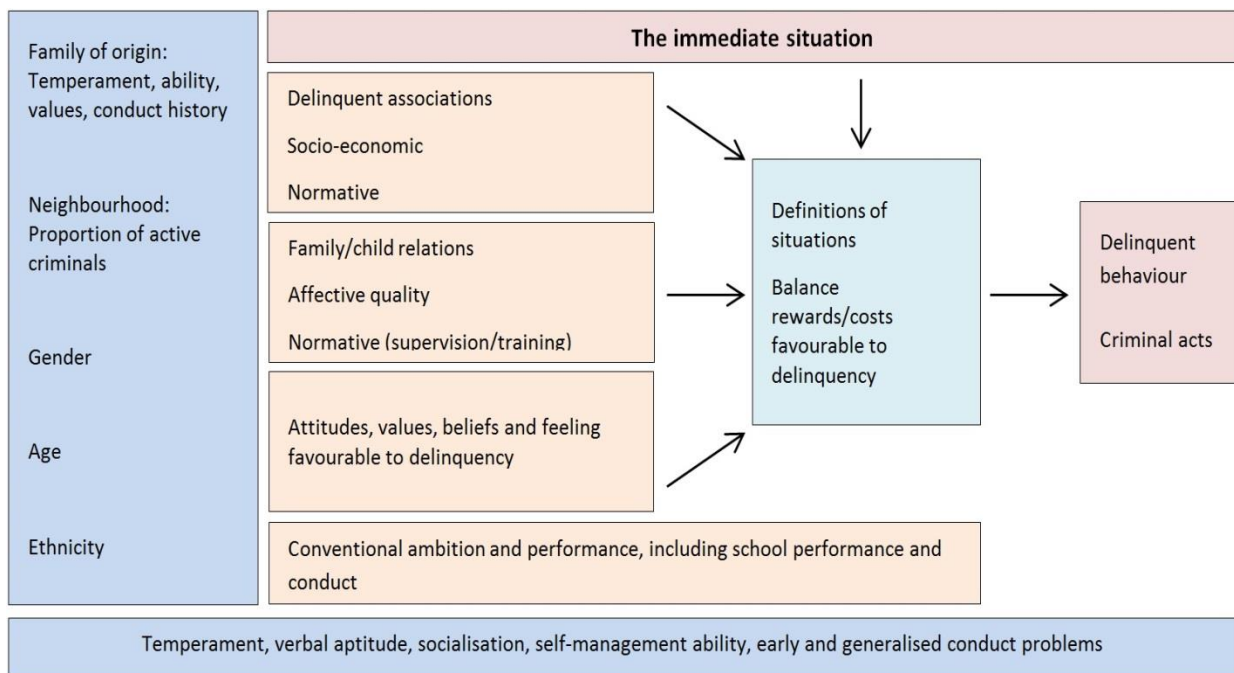
Differential association theory is based upon contact with the attitudes, values, beliefs and rationalisations that occur through contact and exposure to pro-criminal and anti-criminal patterns. The major part of social learning occurs in relationship to contact with others, so peer relationships often dictate the level of criminality a person is likely to engage in. Criminal behaviour is seen as an expression of differentials and the reinforcement and

punishment of criminal and non-criminal alternative behaviour. From a risk perspective antisocial attitudes and antisocial peers are the targets of intervention.

**A general personality and social psychological approach**

Founded within a general personality and social psychological explanation of human behaviour, a Psychology of Criminal conduct (PCC), though interested solely in the individual differences of criminal behaviour and the elements of behavioural control, also accounts for “the social” in its psychology. These are factors beyond the individual influencing behaviour and behavioural control. Prior to the formulation of a PCC, suggesting it is the interplay of a system of rewards and punishments from each of these locations that eventually determines human behaviour. According to this model, criminal behaviour, like other dimensions of human behaviour is under the influence of an interactive system of personal, interpersonal and community rewards, or PIC-R.

In this model, explanations for behaviour rely on the basic principles of Behaviourism, especially Radical Behaviourism, and the influences of: Classical (respondent) conditioning; Operant conditioning (instrumental behaviours, those that influence changes in the environment); Consequent control (experience with the immediate environmental results, consequences of the act); Rewards (behaviours that elicit reinforces for the behaviour); Punishments (consequences that reduce the chances of an act recurring); and Modelling (behaviour learned through watching others). Critical to behaviour are immediately preceding internal or external conditions acting to influence the chances that an act will occur. Such Antecedent controls can include images and fantasies, thoughts, beliefs about one’s own abilities, mood states, the presence of others who may act as sources of reward or punishment and perceived consequences. The PIC-R model (Andrews, 1982a) holds that all behaviour is always under consequent and antecedent control.



The Psychology of Criminal Conduct maintains that criminal behaviour increases when the perceived density (number, quality and magnitude) of rewards for that behaviour are strong. Criminal behaviour decreases when the perceived density (number, quality and magnitude) of costs increases. The perception of the reward/cost balance places a person's behaviour within his personal control when he "reads" the signals he is getting from his own antisocial attitudes and signalled rewards and costs from his social support network. The latter, of course, are dependent on whether the social support is antisocial or pro-social in nature. The individual also "reads" the signalled reward/cost ratio received from other sources such as a rewarded history of criminal conduct, and his own disposition towards pro-social or pro-criminal behaviour.

Therefore, to understand an individual criminal act, we must come to understand the individual's own estimation of the balance of rewards (benefits) and punishments (costs), and the "density" of each. We know that these emanate from within the individual (the personal), between individuals (interpersonal) and from the surrounding environment (the community). Our understanding must include the knowledge that behaviour is under the control of those conditions existing immediately before the act in the personal, interpersonal and community-based domains (Antecedent control). Also the individual's estimation of events that will follow the act (Consequent control) may influence whether or not he or she engages in the act in the first place. When these conditions are analysed correctly, one begins to see the route towards helping an individual change and not engage in criminal behaviour or repeat a criminal act, which is one of the goals of correctional programming.

## **The big 4 factors**

Let's look at this theory in greater detail as it tries to bring together the range of perspectives into a unifying theory of criminality. The Personal, Interpersonal and Community-Reinforcement Perspective (PIC-R) (Andrews & Bonta, 2010, pp131-155) argues substantial individual differences in initial and repeated criminal involvements and we can use it to predict who is likely to continue on with offending behaviour. The 'Big Four' predictors of criminal conduct are well established and major components of model. They are:

- 1. History of antisocial behaviour**
- 2. Antisocial associates**
- 3. Antisocial attitudes**
- 4. Antisocial personality pattern**

## **The 'Moderate' and 'Minor' four**

There is another group known as the 'Moderate Four' which are:

- 1. Family/Marital Circumstances**
- 2. School/Work Performance/Involvement**
- 3. Leisure/Recreational Involvement/Satisfaction**
- 4. Substance Use**

A number of minor risk factors have also been associated with offending and they are:

- **Lower Class Origins**
- **Fear of Official punishment (Deterrence)**
- **Personal Distress/Psychopathology**
- **Verbal Intelligence**

While the last group may be 'minor' in terms of general predictive validity, they may be significantly causal for the individual you have in front of you. There is still a lot not known about predictors of criminal behaviour – individual differences and protective factors are important aspects of individualised case formulation.

### What do we know about the links?

The theory is based upon the idea that human behaviour is outcome-oriented and most behaviour, including criminal behaviour is under antecedent (precursor) and outcome (pay-off) control. In other words criminal behaviour is viewed as a reflection of the density of rewards (signalled and actual) and costs for criminal and non-criminal alternative behaviours.

The sources of signalled and actual rewards are:

- Personal (e.g., attitudes, values, beliefs, self-control/regulation skills),
- Interpersonal (e.g., associates, social support), and
- Automatic (i.e., individualised conditioned or learned responses to antecedents – e.g., habitual responses to contingencies for substance use or sexual stimulation)

For prediction and formulation purposes assessment of the 'Big Four' (and 'Central Eight') reflects the extent to which outcome contingencies are favouring criminal activity.

So these factors are very helpful in formulating offending behaviour but how they combine (causally) for this individual and assessing what else is causal for this individual person are also key to a comprehensive case formulation (otherwise we are just ticking boxes).

Predictive Validity of Central Eight (Andews & Bonta, 2010, page 65)

Factors	Mean correlations with offending
Big four	0.26
Moderate four	0.17
Minor risk factors	0.03

The major risk factors to be targeted therefore include antisocial attitudes, antisocial associates, antisocial behaviour history, antisocial personality, problem solving around home, work and leisure. Andrews and Bonta go on to argue that by addressing criminogenic needs we can achieve a large effect size. For higher risk offenders this means the more criminogenic needs are dealt with the larger the change. The figure below indicates the level of change predicted when targeting a number of criminogenic needs. Note that -1 to -3 indicates the impact of addressing non-criminogenic needs in that we get a negative effect size (i.e. we make people worse and increase their rate of re-offending)

