

U3A Crime and Justice Study Group

Session 3: Explaining Crime

Menu

- Explore some of the theories proposed to explain crime and anti-social behaviour
- Focus on the implications of the theories for crime control.

But first ...Case 1.

Derrick Bird (52) a local taxi-driver shot and killed 12 people (9 strangers and 3 people who were known to him) after going on a killing spree in NW Cumbria using licensed firearms in June, 2010.

If he had not killed himself how should he have been sentenced and why?

But first – Case 2.

In 1989 Kiranjit Ahluwalia (then aged 36) killed her husband Deepak by setting him on fire when he was sleeping after enduring 10 years of violence, humiliation and sexual assault. What was she guilty of, how should she have been sentenced and why?

The 'causes' of crime: main variants

- Three levels of explanation– individual (micro); social interactional (mezzo); and social structural (macro).
- Three types of explanation: cause (natural world); intention and choice (commonsense/religious/legal); and social action (rooted in some social sciences).

Levels

- Micro: individual biology (included inherited characteristics) and/or psychology (learning, emotional life, cognitive functioning).
- Mezzo: small group- including churches, families, 'gangs', organisations.
- Macro: broader social pressures rooted in differentials of class (wealth, job and housing markets), status and power (including patterns of deference and legitimacy) located historically and geographically.

Types of explanation

- Causal: based on determinism -natural world – people act because of forces they do not necessarily understand or control –electro-chemical, , emotional, social.
- Intention and choice: free will, goal orientated.
- Social action: human action results from causal processes and social meanings.

The 'causes' of crime: main variants

Level/type	Causal/'deterministic'	Intention and choice	Social meaning
Micro	Most biological and many psychological theories (Freudianism; learning theories).	Classical, neo-classical (the 3 'I's'*) opportunity theories (RER**) *Insanity, intoxication and infancy ** Risk, Reward and Effort.	Humanistic psychologies (cognitive)
Mezzo	Many social psychological and organisational theories.	Ignored except in the most perfunctory sense.	Humanistic sociologies
Macro	Some deterministic sociologies.	Ignored – 'there's no such thing as society.'	Humanistic sociologies

Possible issues: the causes of crime

- Is crime chosen?
- What are the key influences which affect criminal behaviour?
- What are the implications for dealing with crime of the main theories of crime (level and type)?

The implications for dealing with crime: main theories

Theory	Why crime?	CJ Intervention
Criminal law- classicist	Crime is chosen.	Deterrence. Desert
Neo-classicist	Crime is mostly chosen (the three 'I's' interfere though)	Incapacitation. Dangerousness.
Opportunity theorists	People commit crime where they find an opportunity	Reduce rewards and increase risks and effort.
Individual positivist	Crime is determined by forces (biological/ psychological) within the individual.	Social defence. Individual treatment. Training.
Social positivist	Crime is determined by social (poverty; repression) forces	Social defence and social engineering.
'Humanistic' theories	Crime is socially meaningful (partly chosen?), partly determined by individual and social forces.	Opportunity reduction/ Individual therapy and social engineering. Desert. Social defence