

AQA Psychology A-level

Option 3: Forensic Psychology

Summary Notes

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Part 1: Defining and Measuring Crime

Crime refers to behaviour that **breaks the law** and can result in legal punishment. However, definitions of crime can change depending on **time and culture**.

Historical differences: What is considered criminal can change over time. For example, homosexual acts between men were partly decriminalised in **England and Wales in 1967** through the **Sexual Offences Act 1967**. This shows that definitions of crime can reflect the **social values of the time**.

Cultural differences: What counts as criminal behaviour can also vary between **cultures and countries**. Behaviour that is accepted in one society may be viewed as criminal in another. For example, attitudes and laws surrounding **physical punishment of children** differ between countries.

Measuring crime

There are **three main methods** of measuring crime:

Method	What it involves	Strengths/Limitation
Official Statistics	The number of crimes reported to and recorded by the police .	Provide large-scale information about crime trends , but underestimate crime because some offences are not reported or recorded .
Victim Surveys	Members of the public are asked about crimes they have experienced , including crimes that may not have been reported to the police.	Can reveal unreported crime and provide a broader picture of victimisation, but rely on people remembering and reporting their experiences accurately.
Offender surveys	Offenders are asked to provide information about the crimes they have committed , including the types and frequency of offending over a specified period.	Can provide information about patterns and risk factors for offending , but offenders may lie, forget or under-report their crimes.



AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of **victim surveys** is that they can reveal the “**dark figure**” of crime that is missing from official statistics. Victims can report crimes that they **did not report to the police**, meaning victim surveys provide a broader picture of the true level of offending. This is particularly useful for crimes where victims may fear **revenge or distrust the police**. Therefore, victim surveys may provide a **more complete measure of crime** than official statistics.

A further strength of **offender surveys** is that they have **real-world applications for crime prevention**. They can identify **patterns and risk factors** associated with offending, such as the age at which offending begins or the types of crimes commonly committed. This information can be used by **police, probation services and rehabilitation programmes** to identify individuals at greater risk of offending and develop targeted interventions. Therefore, offender surveys can be **useful for preventing and managing crime**.

A limitation of **official statistics** is that they can conceal the “**dark figure**” of crime. Many crimes are never reported to the police, while changes in police recording practices can also affect the figures. **Farrington and Dowds (1985)** found that an apparent increase in theft was partly explained by a **change in police recording policy**, where thefts under £10 began to be recorded. This suggests that changes in recorded crime do not necessarily reflect changes in the **actual level of crime**. Therefore, official statistics may provide an **inaccurate picture of crime rates**.

A limitation of **victim and offender surveys** is that they rely on **self-report**, meaning **participants may not remember or report events accurately**. For example, **telescoping** can occur when victims mistakenly report a crime as happening more recently than it actually did, while offenders may **exaggerate their offending** to appear more impressive or minimise it to avoid responsibility. Therefore, although self-report surveys can uncover information missing from official statistics, their findings may still be affected by **memory errors and response bias**.



Part 2: Offender Profiling: The Typology Approach

The **typology approach** uses a **pre-established classification system** to place offenders into categories based on characteristics of the crime scene. The FBI's approach classifies offenders as either **organised or disorganised**.

Profile generation

The FBI approach involves **four stages**:

1. **Crime scene classification** – identifying features of the crime scene.
2. **Crime reconstruction** – working out how the offence was likely carried out.
3. **Data assimilation** – combining information from the crime scene, victim and other sources.
4. **Profile generation** – using this information to produce a profile of the likely offender.

Organised vs Disorganised offenders

Organised offender	Disorganised offender
Plans the offence carefully.	Little or no planning .
More likely to be socially and sexually competent .	More likely to be socially and sexually incompetent
Chooses a specific type of victim .	The victim is more likely to be chosen randomly .
Attempts to control the crime scene and may remove evidence	More likely to leave evidence and clues , such as blood or hair.
May move or dispose of the body .	More likely to leave the body at the crime scene .
The crime scene appears controlled and orderly .	The crime scene appears chaotic and disorganised .
More likely to live an apparently stable life .	More likely to live alone and experience social difficulties.
Travels further from home / plans travel	Offends close to home / opportunistically

The **organised/disorganised classification** is intended to help police **narrow the pool of suspects**. This gives investigators a more focused area of enquiry and may increase the likelihood of **identifying and catching the offender**.



AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of the **top-down approach** is that it can be **useful for narrowing down suspects in serious crimes**. The organised/disorganised classification provides investigators with a **structured way of interpreting crime-scene evidence**, such as whether the offender planned the crime, controlled the victim or attempted to remove evidence. This can help police **prioritise suspects and guide an investigation**, particularly in serious offences such as murder and rape. Therefore, the approach has **practical usefulness for police investigations**.

A further strength is that there is **some research support for the organised offender type**. **Canter et al. (2004)** analysed **100 US murders** using smallest space analysis and found evidence for an **organised offender pattern**, although they did not find clear evidence for a separate disorganised type. This suggests that at least part of the organised/disorganised distinction may reflect **genuine differences between offenders**, increasing the validity of the top-down approach.

A limitation of the **top-down approach** is that it is **too narrow to be applied to all types of crime**. It was developed mainly from research into **serious, violent offences** where there are obvious crime-scene characteristics, such as murder and rape. It is therefore less useful for offences such as **burglary or financial fraud**, where there may be little evidence about the offender's personality or behaviour. This limits the **generalisability and practical usefulness** of top-down profiling.

A further limitation is that the **organised/disorganised classification may oversimplify offenders**. **Keppel and Walter (1999)** argued that focusing on the **motives of offenders** may provide a more accurate profile because offenders may show characteristics of both categories. For example, an offender could plan some aspects of an offence but act impulsively in others. Therefore, forcing offenders into only two categories may **reduce the validity of the profile** and make it less useful for identifying individual offenders.



Part 3: Offender Profiling: The Data Driven Approach

The **data-driven approach**, also known as the **bottom-up approach**, does not use a **pre-established typology**. Instead, the offender profile is developed from **evidence collected from the crime scene**, witness accounts and previous crimes. The two main techniques are **investigative psychology** and **geographical profiling**.

1. Investigative psychology

Investigative psychology uses **statistical analysis and databases** to identify patterns across crimes. Information from offences can be recorded and compared with previous crimes to build a picture of the offender, including their:

- **Characteristics**
- **Background**
- **Behaviour**
- **Motives**

A key idea is **interpersonal coherence**. This is the idea that the way an offender behaves towards a **victim during a crime** may reflect how they behave in their **everyday relationships**. For example, an offender who is **controlling or aggressive** towards a victim may behave similarly towards people outside of the crime.

Investigative psychologists also look at **patterns in time and place**. Comparing **when and where offences happen** can help identify links between crimes and suggest whether they may have been committed by the **same offender**.

2. Geographical profiling

Geographical profiling uses the **locations of crimes** to identify the offender's likely **operational base**. By mapping where crimes have occurred, investigators can identify a likely **centre of gravity** – the area from which the offender operates.

The pattern of crimes can then be used to create a **geographical profile** and predict areas where future offences are more likely. A **jeopardy surface** shows areas with different levels of likelihood that the offender lives or operates there.



Marauders and commuters

Canter and Larkin (1993) identified two patterns of geographical offending:

Marauder	Commuter
Offends close to their operational base .	Travels away from their operational base to offend.
Crime locations tend to cluster around the centre of gravity .	Crimes occur further away from the centre of gravity .

The approach assumes that offenders show some **consistency in their behaviour**, including their **modus operandi (MO)** – the methods they use to commit offences.

AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of the **bottom-up approach** is that it is **more scientific than the top-down approach**. It uses **statistical techniques**, such as **smallest space analysis**, to identify patterns between different aspects of offending. This means profiles are based on **evidence and psychological theory**, rather than simply placing offenders into broad categories. Therefore, the bottom-up approach has greater **scientific validity** than the top-down approach.

A further strength is that **geographical profiling has practical applications** for police investigations. **Lundrigan and Canter (2001)** analysed **120 serial murder cases** using smallest space analysis and identified patterns of **spatial consistency**, including the offender's **centre of gravity** and **jeopardy surface**. This can help police predict where an offender may **live or commit future offences**, allowing resources to be concentrated in particular areas. Therefore, geographical profiling can be **highly useful for narrowing the field of enquiry**.

A limitation is that bottom-up profiling **does not necessarily identify the offender correctly**. **Copson (1995)** found that offender profiles were useful in **83% of cases**, but actually contributed to identifying the offender in only **3%**. This suggests that profiles can help investigators **narrow down suspects**, but they should not be relied upon as the main method of identifying the offender. Therefore, the practical usefulness of bottom-up profiling may be **limited if it is treated as a definitive identification tool**.

A further limitation is that **geographical profiling may not work equally well for all offenders**. The distinction between **marauders**, who offend close to their home base, and **commuters**, who travel further to offend, assumes that offenders' geographical patterns are relatively consistent. However, some offenders may deliberately **change their locations or travel unpredictably** to avoid detection. Therefore, geographical profiling may be less accurate when an offender's behaviour **does not follow a consistent spatial pattern**, reducing its reliability.



Part 4: Biological Explanations: Genetic and Neural Explanations

Genetic explanations focus on the **heritability** of criminal behaviour and the role of **candidate genes** in increasing an individual's vulnerability to offending.

1. **Twin studies** provide evidence for a genetic influence because:

- **MZ twins** share almost **100% of their genes**.
- **DZ twins** share around **50% of their genes**.
- Therefore, if MZ twins have a higher **concordance rate** for criminal behaviour than DZ twins, this suggests a **genetic contribution**.

Christiansen (1977) found:

- **33% concordance** for **87 MZ twin pairs**
- **12% concordance** for **147 DZ twin pairs**

This suggests a **moderate genetic or heritable basis** for criminal behaviour.

However, the concordance rate for MZ twins was **not 100%**, showing that genes cannot completely determine criminality. This suggests that **genetic and environmental factors interact** to produce criminal behaviour.

Mednick et al. (1984) suggested that criminality may result from an interaction between an inherited **genetic vulnerability** and **environmental influences**. This fits the **diathesis-stress model**, where a genetic vulnerability increases the risk of offending but does not guarantee that criminal behaviour will develop.

2. **Candidate genes** are specific genetic variations that may increase an individual's **vulnerability to criminal behaviour**.

Two candidate genes associated with violent offending are:

- **MAOA** – involved in the breakdown of neurotransmitters including **serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline**, which are important in regulating behaviour.
- **CDH13** – involved in **neuronal development and functioning**.

Tiihonen et al. (2014) found that particular variations in **MAOA and CDH13** were associated with **extremely violent behaviour**. This provides further support for the idea that genetic factors can create a **diathesis for violent offending**.

Importantly, these genes do **not** act as a single “crime gene”. They may increase **vulnerability**, while environmental factors influence whether this vulnerability develops into criminal behaviour.

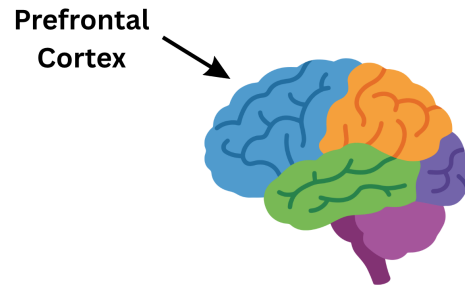


Neural Explanations of Offending

Neural explanations suggest that differences in **brain structure and functioning** may increase the risk of criminal behaviour. These explanations are particularly linked to **antisocial personality disorder (ASPD)**, which is common among offenders.

The **prefrontal cortex** is involved in:

- **Decision-making**
- **Impulse control**
- **Emotional regulation**
- Considering the **consequences of behaviour**



Abnormalities in the prefrontal cortex may therefore make it harder for individuals to **control impulses**, regulate emotions and make appropriate decisions.

Raine et al. (2000) found an approximately **11% reduction in prefrontal grey matter** in individuals with **ASPD** compared with controls.

This suggests that reduced prefrontal functioning may contribute to:

- **Poor decision-making**
- **Impulsivity**
- Difficulties with **emotional regulation**
- Increased risk of **antisocial behaviour**

Empathy may also act as an important restraint against criminal behaviour. Being able to recognise and respond to another person's **distress** can discourage us from harming them.

Some individuals with **psychopathic traits** show reduced **spontaneous empathy**, meaning they do not automatically respond to the emotions of others. However, **Keyzers et al. (2011)** found that individuals with psychopathic traits could still show **empathic neural responses when specifically instructed to empathise**.

This suggests that they may not be **unable to empathise**, but may have difficulty experiencing empathy **automatically**. This could make it easier to **ignore the suffering of victims** and engage in criminal behaviour.



AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of genetic explanations of criminality is that there is **research support for a genetic influence**. **Mednick et al. (1984)** analysed the criminal convictions of **14,427 adoptees** and found that adoptees were more likely to have criminal convictions when their **biological father had a criminal record**, particularly when biological siblings also showed similar patterns of offending. This suggests that criminality may have a **heritable component**, supporting the idea that genetic factors contribute to criminal behaviour. Therefore, genetic explanations have some **empirical support**.

A further strength is that genetic explanations have **practical applications for understanding individual differences in criminality**. If some individuals inherit a **biological vulnerability** towards aggression or impulsivity, this may help explain why people exposed to similar environments do not all become criminals. This could help researchers identify **risk factors for offending** and develop earlier interventions for individuals who are particularly vulnerable. Therefore, genetic explanations may have **usefulness in understanding why some individuals are more likely to offend**.

A limitation of genetic explanations is that they can be **too deterministic, as they fail to consider the interaction between genes and the environment**. **Mednick et al. (1984)** actually provides support for this criticism because the strongest relationship with criminality occurred when **genetic vulnerability was combined with environmental influences**. This supports a **diathesis-stress explanation**, where genes create a vulnerability but environmental stressors influence whether criminal behaviour develops. Therefore, genes **alone cannot provide a complete explanation** of criminality.

A further limitation is that **twin studies cannot completely separate genetic and environmental influences**. MZ twins share more genes than DZ twins, but MZ twins are also more likely to experience **very similar environments**, including being treated more similarly by parents. Therefore, higher concordance rates in MZ twins may partly reflect their **shared environment rather than their greater genetic similarity**, making it difficult to establish a clear **cause-and-effect relationship** between genes and criminality.



Part 5: Psychological Explanations: Eysenck's Theory

Eysenck (1964) proposed that there is a **criminal personality**, which is partly influenced by inherited differences in the **nervous system**. He initially described personality using two dimensions: **extraversion–introversion** and **neuroticism–stability**. **Eysenck (1970)** later added a third dimension, **psychoticism**.

Personality dimension	Characteristics linked to criminal behaviour
Extraversion	Extraverts are impulsive, sensation-seeking and excitement-seeking . Eysenck argued that they have an underactive nervous system , so they seek additional stimulation.
Neuroticism	Highly neurotic individuals are more emotionally unstable, anxious and reactive , which may make them more likely to respond impulsively to stressful situations.
Psychoticism	Associated with aggression, impulsivity, hostility and a lack of empathy , which may increase the risk of antisocial behaviour.

Criminal Socialisation

Eysenck (1964) argued that personality affects how easily an individual learns through **socialisation and conditioning**.

Children normally learn that antisocial behaviour is undesirable through **punishment and conditioning**, while socialisation also teaches **self-control and delayed gratification**.

However, individuals with a **neurotic-extravert personality** may be more difficult to socialise:

- **Extraverts** tend to be more **impulsive and stimulation-seeking**.
- **Neurotic individuals** tend to be more **emotionally reactive**.

These characteristics may make it harder for them to develop **strong conditioned responses to social rules**. They may therefore be less likely to learn to control antisocial impulses, increasing the likelihood of **criminal behaviour**.



Measuring personality

Personality can be measured using **Eysenck's Personality Inventory (EPI)**, which measures **extraversion** and **neuroticism**.

The **Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ)**, developed by **Eysenck and Eysenck (1975)**, measures all three dimensions: **extraversion**, **neuroticism** and **psychoticism**.

These questionnaires allow psychologists to **identify and compare personality traits** in individuals and investigate whether people who engage in criminal behaviour show higher levels of particular traits. This provides a way of **testing Eysenck's criminal personality theory empirically**.

AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of Eysenck's criminal personality theory is that it provides a **clear and measurable way of explaining criminal behaviour**. The EPI measures personality using **three dimensions: extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism**, allowing researchers to compare individuals objectively. This makes the theory **testable** and means psychologists can investigate whether particular personality characteristics are associated with offending. Therefore, Eysenck's theory has **scientific value** because its concepts can be measured and tested.

A further strength is that the theory has **practical applications for predicting and preventing offending**. If certain personality characteristics, such as **high psychoticism and extraversion**, are associated with a greater risk of criminal behaviour, this can help identify individuals who may be more vulnerable to offending. Interventions could then focus on **developing self-control and appropriate responses to social situations**, particularly in young people showing multiple risk factors. Therefore, Eysenck's theory may have **practical usefulness in crime prevention**.

A limitation of Eysenck's theory is that it takes a **reductionist approach to personality**. **Mischel (1988)** argued that personality cannot necessarily be reduced to just a few stable traits because behaviour can change depending on the **situation and social context**. Eysenck's three dimensions may therefore fail to capture the complexity of an individual's personality and how they actually behave in different circumstances. Therefore, the theory may provide an **overly simplistic explanation of criminal behaviour**.

A further limitation is that Eysenck's theory may suffer from **cultural bias**. **Bartol and Holanchock (1979)** studied Hispanic and African American offenders and found they were **less extraverted** than a non-offender control group, which contradicts Eysenck's prediction that offenders are highly extraverted. This suggests that the relationship between personality and offending may **vary between cultures**. Therefore, Eysenck's theory may lack **generalisability** and cannot necessarily be applied to all populations.



Part 6: Cognitive Explanations for Offending Behaviour

Cognitive explanations suggest that offending can be influenced by **how individuals think, interpret situations and make moral decisions**. Offenders may have less developed moral reasoning or **cognitive distortions** that allow them to justify their behaviour.

Moral reasoning

Kohlberg (1969) proposed that moral reasoning develops through **three levels**, with each level representing increasingly sophisticated ways of deciding what is right and wrong

Level	Type of Reasoning	Relation to offending
Pre-conventional	Behaviour is guided by punishment and rewards .	An individual may avoid crime only because they fear punishment , rather than because they understand that the behaviour is wrong.
Conventional	Behaviour is guided by social rules and maintaining social order .	Individuals are more likely to follow laws because they understand the importance of rules and expectations .
Post-conventional	Behaviour is based on individual rights, principles and moral values .	Individuals can consider broader principles such as justice and the rights of others .

Kohlberg et al. (1973) found that offenders tended to show **lower levels of moral reasoning** than non-offenders. They were less likely to reach the **conventional and post-conventional levels** than non-offenders, suggesting that offenders may have a **less developed understanding of morality**. This provides support for a link between **moral development and offending**.



Cognitive distortions

A second cognitive explanation focuses on **cognitive distortions**. These are **errors or biases in thinking** that can lead offenders to interpret situations inaccurately or justify their behaviour.

Two important cognitive distortions linked to offending are **hostile attribution bias** and **minimisation**.

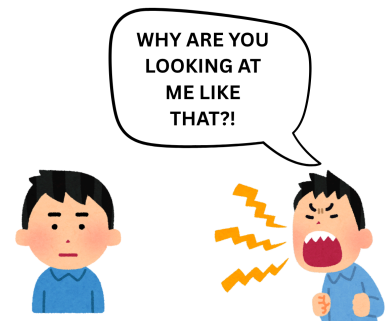
1. Hostile attribution bias

Hostile attribution bias is the tendency to interpret **ambiguous behaviour as hostile or threatening**, even when there is no clear evidence that someone intended harm.

This may make an offender more likely to see another person's behaviour as a **provocation**, increasing the likelihood of an aggressive response.

Schönenberg and Jusyte (2014) studied **55 incarcerated antisocial violent offenders** and matched controls. Participants were shown **emotionally ambiguous facial expressions**. The offenders showed a stronger tendency to interpret ambiguous faces containing some angry features as **hostile**.

This suggests that some violent offenders may **misinterpret social cues**, causing them to perceive threat or provocation where none was intended.



Dodge and Frame (1982) also found that aggressive boys were more likely to **overattribute hostile intentions** to other people's behaviour. Their findings suggested that these biased interpretations could occur before an aggressive response.

2. Minimisation

Minimisation involves **downplaying the seriousness of an offence** or its consequences for the victim. It can help offenders reduce feelings of **guilt, shame or responsibility** for what they have done.

This is particularly common among **sexual offenders**, who may attempt to make their behaviour appear less harmful or present themselves as having had more positive intentions than they actually did.

Pollock and Hasmall (1991) identified different forms of **justification and minimisation** used by child sex offenders. For example, **36%** used the idea that sexual activity with children was not wrong or that the child was **"consenting"**, while other offenders used explanations that reduced the perceived harmfulness of their behaviour.

This allows offenders to **reframe their behaviour in a less negative way**, reducing personal responsibility and making it easier to maintain a positive view of themselves.



AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of cognitive explanations is that they have **practical applications in offender rehabilitation**. Cognitive distortions such as **minimalisation** can lead offenders to downplay the seriousness of their behaviour or blame the victim. **CBT** can challenge these distorted thoughts and encourage offenders to take greater responsibility for their actions. This is particularly relevant to **sex-offender treatment**, where challenging offence-supportive beliefs may help reduce the likelihood of reoffending. Therefore, cognitive explanations are **useful because they can inform effective rehabilitation programmes**.

A further strength is that cognitive explanations can help explain **why offenders may interpret situations differently from non-offenders**. **Hostile attribution bias** suggests that some individuals are more likely to interpret ambiguous behaviour as threatening or hostile, making an aggressive response more likely. This can help explain why the same situation may result in **aggression from one person but not another**. Therefore, cognitive explanations can provide a **useful account of individual differences in offending**.

A limitation is that **cognitive explanations may be too narrow to explain all offending**. **Thornton and Reid (1982)** found that different types of offenders showed different patterns of moral reasoning, while some crimes, particularly **impulsive offences**, may occur with little conscious reasoning. This suggests that cognitive factors are likely to be **more important for some offences than others**. Therefore, cognitive explanations cannot provide a **complete explanation of all criminal behaviour**.

A further limitation is that **moral reasoning may be influenced by social and cultural factors**. **Kohlberg's** theory places considerable emphasis on reaching **post-conventional morality**, but what is considered morally appropriate can vary between cultures and social groups. This means that applying one universal hierarchy of moral reasoning to all offenders may be **culturally biased**. Therefore, the cognitive explanation may lack **generalisability across different cultures**.



Part 7: Psychological Explanations: Differential Association Theory

Sutherland (1924) proposed that **criminal behaviour is learned through interactions with other people**. Criminal behaviour is learned in the **same way as other behaviours**, rather than being something a person is born with.

People learn both the **attitudes towards crime** and the **knowledge and skills needed to commit crime** from those around them. This includes learning **motives, techniques and rationalisations** that support offending.

The main source of this learning is **close social groups**, particularly **criminal peers**. For example, someone may learn criminal behaviour from friends, family members or other offenders within a **prison environment**.

Pro-criminal and Anti-criminal attitudes

Individuals are exposed to both:

- **Pro-criminal attitudes** → beliefs that support or justify crime.
- **Anti-criminal attitudes** → beliefs that discourage or condemn crime.

According to **Sutherland**, the likelihood of becoming a criminal depends on the **balance between these influences**.

If an individual's exposure to **pro-criminal attitudes** is greater in terms of **frequency, duration, priority and intensity** than their exposure to anti-criminal attitudes, they are more likely to develop **criminal behaviour**.

This means that crime is not simply learned by copying a specific criminal act. Instead, repeated exposure to criminal influences can gradually **shape a person's attitudes towards crime and make offending more likely**.



AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of Differential Association Theory is that it provides a **useful environmental explanation of crime**. Rather than assuming that criminality is caused by biological or personality factors within the individual, Sutherland argues that offending is **learned through interaction with others**. This shifts attention towards factors such as **family, peers and social environment**, which can be targeted through crime-prevention strategies. Therefore, the theory provides a **less deterministic and more socially focused explanation** of offending.

A further strength is that the Differential Association has **practical applications for preventing crime**. If criminal behaviour is learned through exposure to **pro-criminal attitudes**, reducing this exposure and increasing contact with **pro-social role models** could reduce offending. For example, interventions can target **young people at risk of offending** by providing positive peer groups, education and mentoring. Therefore, the theory is useful because it suggests **modifiable environmental factors** that can be targeted to prevent crime.

A limitation is that the **frequency and intensity of criminal attitudes are difficult to measure objectively**. Sutherland argues that the amount and strength of exposure to pro-criminal attitudes influences offending, but these factors are difficult to quantify accurately. Researchers may have to rely on **self-report**, which can be affected by **memory decay and social desirability bias**. Therefore, it is difficult to establish a reliable relationship between exposure to criminal attitudes and later offending, reducing the **validity** of the theory.

A further limitation is that Differential Association can be **too deterministic**. Being exposed to more pro-criminal attitudes does not mean that an individual will inevitably become a criminal, as people respond differently to the same environment. Labelling someone as likely to offend could also contribute to a **self-fulfilling prophecy**, particularly if they are treated as a criminal before offending. Therefore, the theory may **underestimate individual differences** and could have negative consequences if used to predict criminal behaviour.



Part 8: Dealing with Offending Behaviour: Custodial Sentencing

Custodial sentencing involves removing an offender from society and placing them in **prison**. There are **four main aims** of custodial sentencing:

Aim	Meaning
Deterrence	To discourage the offender from committing further crimes and to discourage others in society from offending.
Incapacitation	To protect society by removing the offender from the community, preventing them from committing crimes for the duration of their sentence.
Retribution	To punish the offender for the crime they have committed. The punishment should be proportionate to the seriousness of the offence .
Rehabilitation	To help the offender change their behaviour and reduce the likelihood of reoffending. This can involve education, training, therapy and treatment programmes .

Psychological effects of imprisonment

Although imprisonment aims to punish and rehabilitate offenders, it can have a number of **negative psychological effects**, including **stress, depression, institutionalisation and prisonisation**.

- **Institutionalisation** occurs when prisoners become accustomed to the **routine, rules and restrictions of prison life**. Over time, this can make it difficult to **adjust to normal life after release**, as they may have become dependent on the structure and lack of independence provided by prison.
- **Prisonisation** refers to the process of adopting the **behaviours, attitudes and norms of the prison environment** in order to adapt to prison life. This may include becoming more distrustful, aggressive or accepting of prison subculture.

Fazel and Seewald (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of **33,588 prisoners across 24 countries**. They found that **10.2% of male prisoners and 14.1% of female prisoners** had **major depression**, providing evidence that depression is relatively prevalent among prison populations.



Custodial sentencing and recidivism

A major problem with **custodial sentencing** is that it may not always achieve its aim of **rehabilitation**. High rates of **recidivism** (reoffending after release) suggest that imprisonment does not always prevent future offending.

One possible explanation is **prisonisation**. While in prison, offenders are exposed to other criminals and may adopt **criminal attitudes, values and behaviours**. These behaviours can then continue after release, making **reoffending** more likely.

There is evidence that a greater focus on rehabilitation may be more effective. **Norway** places greater emphasis on **rehabilitation and reintegration** rather than punishment alone.

- Prisoners are encouraged to develop **skills and routines** that can help them return to life outside prison.
- The system aims to prepare offenders for **employment, relationships and independent living** after release.
- Norway has historically reported **lower reoffending rates than the UK**.

This suggests that imprisonment may be more effective at reducing **recidivism** when it focuses on helping offenders **change their behaviour and successfully reintegrate into society**, rather than focusing primarily on punishment.

AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of **custodial sentencing** is that prison provides opportunities for **rehabilitation and behaviour change**. Prisoners can access programmes designed to target the causes of their offending, such as **CBT for sex offenders**, anger management for violent offenders and **token economies** to encourage positive behaviour. These interventions can address **cognitive distortions, poor emotional control and antisocial behaviour**, rather than simply punishing the offender. Therefore, custodial sentencing can have **practical value for reducing reoffending**.

A further strength is that prison can **protect the public by removing offenders from society**. Individuals who pose a serious risk, particularly those convicted of **violent or dangerous offences**, cannot directly harm the public while they are incarcerated. This makes custodial sentencing particularly useful for **high-risk offenders**. Therefore, prison can provide an immediate way of **protecting society as well as punishing the offender**.

A limitation is that **prison does not affect everyone in the same way**. Its effects can depend on factors such as the offender's **personality, previous prison experiences, sentence length and type of prison**. For example, someone who has already experienced prison may respond very differently from a first-time offender. This means that the same sentence may have **different effects on different individuals**, reducing the validity of viewing custodial sentencing as a universally effective response to crime.



A further limitation is that custodial sentencing can be influenced by **political and public pressure rather than effectiveness**. **Davies and Raymond (2000)** suggested that politicians may support **tougher prison policies** because the public often wants offenders to be punished severely. However, high levels of **recidivism** suggest that imprisonment does not always successfully reduce reoffending. Therefore, custodial sentencing may sometimes be used because it **appears tough on crime**, rather than because it is the most effective method of rehabilitation.



Part 9: Dealing with Offending Behaviour: Behaviour Modification in Custody

Behaviour modification is based on the principles of **operant conditioning**, where behaviour is changed through its **consequences**. In prisons and other custodial settings, the main method used is the **token economy**.

Reinforcement increases the likelihood that a behaviour will be repeated. In custody, this means that **socially desirable behaviours** can be encouraged by providing rewards when offenders display them.

Token economies

A **token economy** is a system where offenders receive **tokens** for displaying desirable behaviour. The tokens act as **secondary reinforcers** because they have no value by themselves, but can be exchanged for a **primary reinforcer**, such as a reward or privilege.

For example:

- An offender displays **cooperative or non-aggressive behaviour**.
- They receive a **token**.
- Tokens can be exchanged for a **privilege**, such as additional exercise time or access to a preferred television programme.
- Receiving the reward makes the offender **more likely to repeat the desirable behaviour**.



The tokens therefore allow desirable behaviours to be **reinforced consistently**, encouraging offenders to replace antisocial behaviours with more socially acceptable ones.

Hobbs and Holt (1976) – Key study

Aim	To investigate the effectiveness of a token economy in increasing desirable behaviour among juvenile offenders.
Participants	125 male juvenile offenders at the Alabama Boys Industrial School , living across three residential cottages .



Procedure	• A token economy was introduced across the three cottages. • Boys were given tokens for displaying desirable behaviours, such as cooperating and following rules. • The tokens could then be exchanged for rewards or privileges. • Researchers monitored the boys' behaviour over 14 months to assess whether desirable behaviour increased.
Findings	There was a significant increase in desirable behaviour across the majority of boys in all three cottages during the 14-month period.
Conclusion	Token economies can be effective in increasing socially desirable behaviour among offenders in custody, suggesting that operant conditioning can be used to modify behaviour in custodial settings.

AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of **behaviour modification** is that it is **flexible and relatively easy to implement**. Token economy systems can be adapted to the needs of different institutions, such as **maximum-security prisons or psychiatric hospitals**, by changing which behaviours are rewarded. **Bassett and Blanchard (1977)** found that consistent implementation of token economy rules was associated with improvements in **prisoner conduct**. Therefore, behaviour modification has **practical usefulness** because it can be adapted to different settings and offender groups.

A further strength is that **behaviour modification can produce observable improvements in behaviour**. Prisoners receive tokens for desirable behaviours, such as **following rules or participating in rehabilitation**, which can then be exchanged for rewards. This gives offenders a clear and immediate incentive to behave appropriately, making the approach particularly useful for **managing behaviour within prisons**. Therefore, behaviour modification can be an **effective short-term method of improving prisoner behaviour**.

A limitation is that **behaviour modification may only produce short-term changes in behaviour**. The behaviour is maintained by **external rewards**, but these rewards may not be available once the offender leaves prison. An offender therefore has to learn to follow social rules **without receiving immediate rewards** in everyday life. This means that token economies may change behaviour inside prison without addressing the **underlying causes of offending**. Therefore, behaviour modification may have **limited effectiveness in reducing long-term recidivism**.

A further limitation is that **token economies raise ethical concerns**. **Moya and Achtenburg (1974)** questioned the compulsory use of these programmes, particularly when prisoners can lose opportunities such as **family visits or phone calls** if they fail to earn tokens. These could be considered **basic rights rather than rewards**, meaning prisoners may be pressured into changing their behaviour. Therefore, the effectiveness of behaviour modification must be balanced against **ethical concerns about coercion and prisoners' rights**.



Part 10: Dealing with Offending Behaviour: Anger Management

Novaco (1975) described **anger management** as an approach that helps offenders **recognise and manage the emotions that precede anger**, rather than trying to prevent anger altogether. It is an **eclectic approach**, as it combines techniques from different areas of psychology. For example:

- **Cognitive techniques** – such as **positive self-talk**, where offenders challenge unhelpful thoughts.
- **Social techniques** – such as **communication skills**, helping offenders respond to situations without becoming aggressive.

The overall aim is to increase offenders' **self-awareness** of their anger and their **self-efficacy**, meaning their belief that they can successfully control their responses.

The 3 stages:

Stage	What happens
Cognitive preparation	Offenders identify and examine the thoughts, emotions and situations that occur before, during and after an angry episode. This helps them recognise their triggers , understand patterns of anger and predict when they are likely to become aggressive.
Skills acquisition	The therapist teaches techniques for controlling anger and preventing it from escalating. These include: • Controlled breathing • Meditation and relaxation • Positive self-talk • Communication and social skills This involves direct learning, as the therapist demonstrates the techniques and the offender learns to use them.
Application practice	Offenders practise using the techniques in situations that would normally trigger anger . This can involve role-play , where the offender responds to a simulated provoking situation while applying the skills they have learned.

Successful use of the techniques is **positively reinforced** by the therapist, encouraging the offender to use them again in real-life situations.



Keen et al. (2000) – Key study

Aim	To investigate the effectiveness of the National Anger Management Package in helping prisoners control their anger.
Participants	Prisoners who took part in the National Anger Management Package.
Procedure	Prisoners completed an anger management programme based on the three stages of anger management . Their ability to control anger and awareness of their own anger were assessed before and after the programme
Findings	The majority of prisoners showed improved anger control and greater awareness of their anger after completing the programme
Conclusion	Anger management programmes can be effective in helping offenders recognise and control anger , potentially reducing aggressive behaviour

AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of anger management is that it is a **multi-approach treatment** rather than focusing on just one cause of offending. It combines **cognitive techniques**, such as identifying thoughts that trigger anger, with **behavioural techniques**, such as practising alternative responses and using **positive reinforcement**. This means it can address both the **thoughts and behaviours** involved in aggression. Therefore, anger management provides a **more comprehensive approach to reducing aggressive behaviour**.

A further strength is that anger management can have **practical applications within prisons**. Offenders can learn to recognise their **triggers**, challenge aggressive thoughts and practise more appropriate ways of responding to conflict. This can improve **prisoner conduct** and may help offenders develop skills that can be used outside prison. Therefore, anger management can be **useful for rehabilitation**, particularly for offenders whose aggression is linked to poor emotional control.

A limitation is that anger management may make the **incorrect assumption that anger causes violent offending**. **Loza and Loza-Fanous (1999)** found little difference in anger between violent and non-violent offenders, suggesting that violent behaviour is not necessarily caused by an inability to control anger. Therefore, anger management may be **ineffective for offenders whose violence has other causes**, reducing its validity as a treatment for violent offending.

A further limitation is that anger management may have **limited long-term effectiveness**. **Blackburn (1993)** argued that the techniques learned in therapy may not transfer easily to real-life situations because the **therapist is no longer present to reinforce appropriate behaviour**, while offenders may encounter the same environmental triggers that previously led to aggression. Therefore, anger management may improve **behaviour inside prison** without necessarily reducing **reoffending after release**.



Part 11: Dealing with Offending Behaviour: Restorative Justice

Restorative Justice (RJ) takes a different approach to sentencing because it focuses on **repairing the harm caused by the offence**, rather than simply punishing the offender.

According to **Braithwaite (2004)**, RJ aims to “**give the survivor a voice**” and help the offender understand the **emotional and practical consequences** of their actions.

RJ focuses on achieving **positive outcomes for both the victim and offender**. This can involve **mediated discussions** between the offender and victim, which do not necessarily take place within a traditional courtroom.

RJ can involve the offender:

- **Apologising** to the victim.
- Paying for **damage to property**.
- **Repairing or replacing** damaged property themselves.
- Taking responsibility for the **harm caused by their actions**.

The **Restorative Justice Council** provides guidelines for the roles and responsibilities of **victims, offenders and mediators** during restorative justice processes.

Latimer et al. (2005) – Key study

Aim	To investigate whether restorative justice programmes are more effective than traditional non-restorative approaches.
Participants	Researchers conducted a meta-analysis of research into restorative justice programmes, comparing RJ with more traditional approaches to dealing with offenders.
Procedure	The researchers combined and statistically analysed the results of previous studies comparing restorative justice programmes with traditional approaches to dealing with offenders. They examined the effects of RJ on victim and offender satisfaction, compliance with restitution and recidivism .
Findings	Restorative justice was significantly more effective at increasing victim and offender satisfaction , improving compliance with restitution and reducing recidivism .
Conclusion	RJ appears to be an effective alternative to traditional approaches because it can repair harm, improve satisfaction and reduce reoffending .



AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of **restorative justice (RJ)** is that it is **flexible and can be adapted to different settings**. RJ can be used in **prisons, schools and psychiatric institutions**, with the process changed depending on the needs of those involved. It can also encourage **non-violent conflict resolution** by allowing offenders to understand the consequences of their actions and take responsibility for them. Therefore, RJ has **practical usefulness** as an alternative to purely punitive approaches.

A further strength is that RJ can encourage **offender accountability and rehabilitation**. Meeting the survivor can allow offenders to understand the **personal impact of their behaviour**, rather than simply receiving a prison sentence. This may encourage genuine **remorse and responsibility**, which are important for reducing future offending. Therefore, RJ may be useful because it focuses on **changing attitudes and behaviour**, rather than punishment alone.

A limitation is that RJ may make the **naïve assumption that offenders will feel genuine remorse**. Some offenders may participate because they expect a **reduced sentence or other benefits**, rather than because they genuinely accept responsibility. Equally, survivors may experience strong emotions such as **anger or a desire for revenge**, making a constructive meeting difficult. Therefore, RJ may be **less effective in practice** than it appears in theory.

A further limitation is that RJ may be **inappropriate where there is a major power imbalance, particularly in cases of domestic abuse**. Feminist critics argue that bringing the offender and survivor together may place pressure on the survivor and allow the offender to **minimise or shift responsibility** for their behaviour. The process could also be **traumatic or distressing** for the survivor. Therefore, RJ cannot be applied safely to **all types of offending**, limiting its overall utility.

