

Describe and evaluate cognitive explanations for offending. (16 marks)

Cognitive explanations for offending behaviour focus on how thinking affects a person's behaviour. Kohlberg was the first to apply the concept of moral reasoning to criminal behaviour, proposing people's decisions and judgments on issues of right and wrong could be summarised as a stage theory of moral development. His explanation proposes people progress through three stages in their moral development with each stage reflecting a more advanced form of moral understanding. The three levels are each further subdivided into two stages, and people progress through these stages due to biological maturity and an objective point of view. Criminals are more likely to be classified at the pre-conventional level (associated with less mature childlike reasoning), which is within the first two stages. While non-criminals generally progress beyond this to the conventional level and post-conventional level (tend to sympathise with the rights of others and display behaviors such as honesty, non-violence).

Kohlberg's level of moral development is supported by research suggesting offenders are more likely to be classed as within the first two stages. Kohlberg (1973) himself found that a group of violent youths were significantly lower in their moral development stages than non-violent youths. This supports the idea that lack of moral development can be linked to criminal behaviour. However, a weakness is this link is purely correlational and so we cannot be certain of cause and effect. For example, it may be that people with criminal tendencies have a lower moral development rather than lower moral development causing offending. Another issue is that his explanation does not explain why offenders have a lower level of moral reasoning and so this explanation when linked to crime is incomplete.

Kohlberg's theory was based on data from male samples and thus could be argued to be gender biased. The fact the crime rates between men and women are extremely different would suggest moral development between the genders may be different too which Kohlberg's theory ignores and therefore lacks universality. Gilligan argues men were concerned more about fairness and justice and women were concerned more about how their actions may affect others. Kohlberg's theory appears to be focused on a male androcentric perspective which may lack generalisation to both genders due to this gender bias.

Another cognitive explanation for offending behaviour comes from cognitive distortions. These are errors or biases in a person's information processing system which is characterised by faulty thoughts. These distortions twist an individual's perception of reality so what is perceived is not representative of reality. This allows an offender to justify, rationalise or deny their behaviour through the use of hostile attribution bias and minimalisation. Hostile attribution bias sees offenders misread and interpret people or situations as being confrontational when in truth they are not. For example, cues such as being looked at may be misinterpreted as threatening and thus offenders may react inappropriately with aggression. Minimalisation is where the consequences of a situation are either over or under exaggerated by an offender. For example, a burglar may argue the victims were wealthy and thus could afford the loss. This prevents the criminal from feeling bad about committing the crime, increasing the likelihood that it is repeated if left unchallenged.

Crick and Dodge found evidence to support relationship between hostile attribution bias and aggression in children and adolescence using hypothetical situations. This relationship was also apparent in real life situations which shows this theoretical explanation may have validity as it can be generalised to the real world. However, this data is correlational and thus we cannot be sure of cause and effect.