

Use of Historical Information in Psychology: Crime in Historical Documents

INTRODUCTION

Information about the past can be used in psychology in a number of ways and from a number of sources:

i) Longitudinal studies - showing how behaviour has changed over time.

An ideal longitudinal study will follow the group studied prospectively (ie: from the start of the study), but often it is a method used retrospectively (ie: working backwards). However, the latter use may be dependent on the recall of the participants.

Table 1 compares the advantages and disadvantages of retrospective and prospective longitudinal studies.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
RETROSPECTIVE	
- low cost	- recall accuracy of participants
- quick results	- behaviour may be interpreted based on current view/feelings
- small samples only	
PROSPECTIVE	
- less bias as information recorded before outcome	- high cost: large sample over long period of time
- multiple outcomes studied	- periodic examination of participants may influence outcome

Table 1 - Comparison of retrospective and prospective longitudinal studies.

ii) Therapists and psychiatrists - how events in the individual's past can affect their behaviour now.

Psychoanalysis, for example, is based on the assumption that early childhood experiences influence adult behaviour and personality. Thus psychoanalytic sessions are solely concerned with discovering the past.

But finding out about the individual's past is also a core aspect of the clinical interview used by psychiatrists. This interview is sometimes known as the Present State Examination (PSE) (Wing et al 1974) (table 2).

The interview session(s) contains certain elements (Gelder et al 1996):

a) History-taking - details of the patient (ie: present condition and circumstances). Usually supplemented from other sources, like relatives, later. It includes family history, personal and psychiatric history (including current complaint and history of present disorder), and assessment of the personality.

b) Mental State Examination (MSE) - this part of the interview concentrates on the mental state now.

c) Physical examination - a medical examination may be necessary in some cases.

d) The use of psychometric measures - more structured tests may be appropriate in certain situations.

FOCUS OF CLINICAL INTERVIEW	EXAMPLE
- family history	genetic basis to certain mental disorders, or living with family members with that problem
- childhood problems	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often seen in individuals who are diagnosed as Anti-Social Personality Disorder in adulthood
- leisure activities	collecting newspapers and hoarding things with no use could be sign of obsession
- appearance	clothes, make-up, hair, and facial expressions all different between mania and depression
- occupations	series of jobs leaving suddenly could be sign of solitary behaviour or problems with social interactions
- speech	speed and content also different between mania and depression
- attitudes	belief that world is against them and bad things that happen are deliberately caused by others is sign of possible paranoia
- insight	lack of insight about own behaviour is characteristic of psychosis

Table 2 - Examples of how parts of clinical interview can help in diagnosis of mental disorders.

iii) Historical documents.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

Chase (1995) included three groups of data from historical sources:

- i) Memory data sources - eg: autobiography.

EXAMPLE:

In his book, "Anatomy of Depression", Lewis Wolpert (2001a) recounted his experience of suffering serious depression. Wolpert (2001b) concentrated on the stigma of depression, and the consequent self-stigmatisation that makes sufferers ashamed and secretive about their depression.

"I am repeatedly congratulated for being so brave, even courageous, in talking so openly about my depression. I, in fact, am a 'performer', and there is no bravery, but these comments show how others view depression and that it is highly stigmatised" (Wolpert 2001b p222).

Ultimately, Wolpert argued, the shame and stigma can stop individuals with depression coming forward for treatment.

- ii) Representational data sources: including media records, manuscripts and writings, and official data. For example, material from the Mass Observation surveys (archived at the University of Sussex; Garfield 2005) begun after the Second World War could be very useful.

EXAMPLE:

Kay Redfield Jamison (1995) made use of historical sources to show how many creative individuals suffered from manic-depression (bipolar disorder). But, in particular, she concentrated on the music composer, Robert Schumann.

Jamison was able to show a relationship between his moods and the number of pieces of music composed. For example, in 1833, the year of a suicide attempt, Schumann composed two pieces of music. While in 1840, a year of being "hypomanic", he produced twenty-four. There was a similar pattern in 1844 (severely depressed) and 1849 (hyomanic). Other years, the average output was three to five pieces in a year.

EXAMPLE:

Seaborne and Seaborne (2001) found 198 cases of self-killing in the Eyre records (judicial and

administrative inquiry) between 1227-1330. Hanging was most common for men (59 of 135 male self-killings), and this was followed by drowning, and the use of sharp objects.

The same three methods were most popular for women, but many less self-killings (63 in total).

iii) Artefactual data sources (indirect sources)- eg: gravestones as representations of death over time.

Table 3 gives the main advantages and disadvantages of using historical documents.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
- unobtrusive	- necessary material sometimes hard to obtain
- possible to examine trends over long period of time	- reliability and validity of documents
- shows continuity of behaviour over time	- limited sampling only
- shows social context for understanding social construction of behaviour	- interpretation by reader today

Table 3 - Advantages and disadvantages of historical sources.

PRIMARY RESEARCH

The use of newspaper and magazine stories can be helpful to psychologists in understanding behaviour and society at a particular time. Obviously there are limitations including the style, and focus of writing for the audience. However, it is interesting to see how crime was reported, for example, in the past.

The "Essex Countryside" was a magazine reporting topics of interest about the history of Essex. Five stories about criminal events were chosen at random. The aim was to see how useful such material would be to psychologists wanting to understand criminal behaviour and motivation. Table 4 lists the details of the articles.

1. "Murder at Moat Farm"

This article tells of the "self-styled captain, convicted forger, suspected fire-raiser and ungallant woman hunter" Samuel Dougal, who murdered his lover in

AUTHOR/TITLE	CRIME AND DATE	LENGTH (A4 pages)	"ESSEX COUNTRY-SIDE"
D.A.Thomas "Murder at Moat Farm"	murder of young woman in 1899	3/4	Winter 1956-7
G.W.Martin "The tragedy of the Alresford twins"	attempted murder in 1899	1 with original drawing	September 1960
G.Caunt "One of the greatest liars of all time"	John Price and history of lying c1678-1718	3/4	August 1961
J.Copeland "The Coggeshall Gang"	house-breaking gang in 1844-8	1	September 1961
E.McAdam "An Essex villain who went lightly to the scaffold"	Joseph Wilson 1787-1817	1 & 3/4	January 1977

Table 4 - Five articles used from "Essex Countryside" magazine.

1899. Most of the article focuses on the police investigation to find the body of the murdered woman.

There are a number of references to Dougal's scandalous behaviour, both before and after the murder, like his sexual advances towards the maids. He also forged the dead woman's signature on cheques for a while. Leaving aside the social norms for behaviour of the time, a pattern appears of criminal behaviour of various kinds by Dougal. His ability to charm and deceive individuals as well - for example, the "seduction" of a "devoutly religious middle-aged spinster" (the murdered woman) who was persuaded to buy an isolated farm. These are some of the characteristics of the criminal psychopath as portrayed in the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R) (Hare 1991).

Table 5 lists the characteristics (out of 20) shown by Dougal in the article.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| - cunning/manipulative | - parasitic lifestyle |
| - promiscuous sexual behaviour | - many short-term marital relationships (Dougal was married) |
| - criminal versatility | - grandiose sense of self worth |
| - superficial charm | (eg: "self-styled captain") |

Table 5 - Characteristics shown by Dougal from PCL-R.

Obviously there is limited information from the

article to make an accurate diagnosis of psychopathy (or Anti-social Personality Disorder), but it is interesting to see evidence of (possible) criminal psychopathy from the past. For those researchers who are arguing that psychopathy is a behaviour that existed long before its classification, then historical evidence is supportive.

2. "The Tragedy of the Alresford Twins"

This article is about the stabbing of a youth by one of the "Davies twins", who were "queer creatures indeed - queer in looks, in habits, and in dress". Two identical twins, local fishermen, they were taunted for entertainment by the locals, particularly in the public houses. The stabbing took place after provocation and drinking on both sides.

Two interesting aspects of this report stand out. Firstly, how individuals who are different, particularly in appearance, are treated by local communities. Patterson et al (1989) noted social rejection in childhood as one of the factors leading to adult delinquency.

Secondly, the role of alcohol in relation to crime and violence. For example, Home Office figures for 1990 estimated that 50% of "street crime" and 85% of crime in pubs and clubs was linked to alcohol (Alcohol Concern 2001).

3. "One of the greatest liars of all time"

Born around 1678 and hanged in 1718, John Price was called "one of the greatest liars of all time". His "criminal lifestyle" was based on lying, but also included theft and swindling, and, finally, murder. Though he married and had a "respectable" job (hangman) for a while, he reverted to his old ways and eventually, to murder.

One of the great debates in criminology is about human nature. Are some individuals born bad and will always remain so, irrelevant to life events, or can individuals change for the good (ie: reform)? Obviously, the answer to this question will influence the view on ex-offenders and prisoners who have served their time.

If criminal behaviour has a biological basis, then individuals cannot change, and can only, at best, keep their tendencies under check.

Recidivism and re-offending rates will depend upon the punishment imposed, and/or whether treatment is provided as well. For example, in one London borough in 2001, re-offending rates, after twelve months, varied between 46.2% for community penalties and 66.7% for

custody (London Borough of Havering 2004). However, these figures did not distinguish between types of crimes.

While treatment programmes including social skills training and post-release assistance help reduce re-offending among ex-prisoners (Brewer 2000). But many factors influence the success of rehabilitation programmes in prison. Finding ways to change criminal behaviour and reduce recidivism is one of the "holy grails" of psychology.

4. "The Coggeshall Gang"

Between 1844 and 1848, a brutal gang of house-breakers was active in rural Essex. Not only did they steal valuables, but also food and drink including feasting with captors. They appeared to be well organised and worked well as a group. However, one of their members was captured by the police, and he gave up the other members of the gang. The reason being that the other members had failed to look after his wife as agreed for his silence.

This is a real life example of the "prisoner's dilemma" (PD) game (Axelrod 1984) which is used to study co-operation in psychology.

In the basic scenario, two prisoners are kept separately (without communication), and each must decide whether to confess to the police (known as defecting) or keep quiet (known as co-operating). There are different lengths of prison sentence depending on who defects or not. Usually this scenario is now played with points gained as in the payoff matrix in figure 1.

	PLAYER B	
	CO-OPERATE	DEFECT
PLAYER A		
CO-OPERATE	5 5	6 1
DEFECT	1 6	2 2

Figure 1 - Payoff matrix of "prisoner's dilemma" game.

Figure 2 shows the possibilities for the gang member in police custody.

	GANG CO-OPERATE	DEFECT
GANG MEMBER IN CUSTODY	look after wife	do not look after wife
CO-OPERATE	goes to prison without giving up gang members (situation A)	goes to prison without giving up gang members (situation B)
DEFECT give up gang members	risk of revenge from other gang members (situation C)	save own skin (situation D)

Figure 2 - PD as applied to Coggeshall gang member in police custody.

In situation A, the gang member pays the penalty for the good of his wife (and other gang members). This is altruism with benefits for his family. Situation B means the individual loses out, and makes no sense other than "misplaced loyalty". If the gang member is in situation C, then he risks the revenge of the others on him or his wife. Though this is the best strategy for his kin.

But situation D is what happened. An agreement was broken. Research on co-operative games found that individuals punish "free-riders" even at their own expense (Fehr and Renninger 2004).

5. "An Essex villain who went lightly to the scaffold"

This article is about the life of "a desperate rogue" called Joseph Wilson, who was hanged in Chelmsford in 1817. Though it was written with some sympathy for the individual: "he was perhaps a victim of the harsh times in which he lived".

During much of his life, Wilson was "in daily contact with crooks of all descriptions, and he must have been learning the tricks of the trade". The influence of others (or the peer group) is a concern today as the cause for individuals committing criminal behaviour. In particular, spending time in prison or with prisoners, as Wilson did.

However, Dennis (2000) has argued against prisons as "schools of crime". Based on questionnaire research with fifteen burglars and fifteen robbers in prisons, it was found that their knowledge of property break-ins was not increased by time spent in jail. The key variable in re-offending was risk-taking.

It is interesting that the influence of others to

change good individuals for the worse is used here, but, in other situations (eg: article 3), an individual is seen as born bad and unable to change for the good. The good individual is vulnerable to the powerful influences of the bad, whereas bad individuals are too strong to be changed for the good. As with many ideas, there are contradictory discourses at work.

The reasons for criminal behaviour are multi-layered, and also depend upon the crime being studied. The motivations for "visible crimes" (like robbery), which most people think of as crime, are usually different to those of sexual-related crimes, "white-collar crime", or driving faster than the speed limit, for example.

CONCLUSIONS

The strength of using historical documents is that they show how things may or may not have changed. Haralambos and Holborn (1995) argued that without historical documents "a rather static view of social life" is produced. Looking at social change is important because individual behaviour is always in a social context, if not socially constructed.

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