

CASE REVIEW BRIEFING REPORT

Using the Schema Theory from Cognitive Psychology to understand police failings in addressing antisocial behaviour in a local authority, and suggestions of new working practices/measures based upon knowledge of the cognitive mechanisms proposed by the theory.

BACKGROUND TO THE BRIEFING REPORT

In the South Wales community of Glynafonshire, there has been a recent and significant rise in instances of antisocial behaviour (AB) from a group of individuals who have moved to the area in the past few years. Such AB includes noise disturbances, reckless driving, public intoxication, vandalism and general public disturbance. Despite members of the community frequently reporting this behaviour, perceptions of police action are unsatisfactory among residents. For example, at one violent altercation, police reportedly took 53 minutes to arrive at the scene after the first concerned call. Furthermore, Glynafonshire police have been criticised for their lack of follow-up investigations and contact with victims and witnesses, poor response times, inadequate police presence, misallocation of resources, and poor community engagement, all of which contribute to the unchecked growth of AB and a loss of faith in the police. As a result, residents report feeling unsafe and unsupported in the community, as police action fails to meet public expectations, leading to a gradual breakdown of trust between the community and police. Glynafonshire's local business economy has also been impacted by reduced footfall in areas of high AB and being victims of vandalism. The lack of consequences witnessed by perpetrators and young community members has further encouraged AB.

In a case review of these circumstances, Glynafonshire police have released a statement regarding the concerns over rising AB and outlined contributing factors that the police face when combating situations. These factors include resource constraints and limitations due to budget cuts, increased call volume resulting from rising reports, the need for multi-agency approaches (substance abuse/mental health experts), and legal/procedural constraints (obtaining court orders and issuing warnings), which slow their ability to act. Regardless of these factors, members of the Glynafonshire community continue to feel unsafe among the rising instances of AB in the area. The local police state that they are committed to improving public order, and a strategic overhaul is necessary for improvements. This case review briefing report will draw from the Schema theory of cognitive psychology to begin to explain why AB continues to outmatch police strategies and how cognitive theories can help to develop new procedures.

THE SCHEMA THEORY

Schema Theory is a cognitive theory of memory (which heavily influences decision making) that proposes that we can draw upon generalised information about objects, people, and situations based on previous experiences to help interpret and process information quickly, based on expectations about what has happened or what we have learned beforehand (Eysenck & Keane, 2015). The concept of schemas was first introduced by Frederic Bartlett in 1932. Bartlett suggested that memory has less to do with the retrieval of exact details but relies more on reconstructions that prior knowledge and expectations about an event can influence. Through his investigation, Bartlett drew three primary conclusions: 1) Unfamiliar details of an event are often omitted from recollection as people do not have existing schemas for this information and have a hard time encoding it to long-term memory, 2) Strange aspects of information are familiarised into information that fits into existing schemas and 3) Illogical information is rationalised through the framework of existing schemas and 'strange' content of information was subconsciously changed to be more appropriate with the themes of the information, i.e.; things that did not make sense or were unusual were changed to make sense for ease of memory storage (Bartlett, 1932).

Schema theory is also associated with Piaget's theory of cognitive development in which he proposes that, in short, infants are born with innate schemas such as grasping and sucking that they use to interact with the world and gradually develop cognition by developing new schemas as they adapt to the world. Children develop and learn new schemas to process and accommodate new information if it cannot be assimilated into an existing schema (e.g. if a child understands that dogs have four legs, they may initially identify cats as dogs until they develop a schema that identifies cats as a separate animal) (Piaget & Cook, 1952). As we age, our schemas become more numerous and complex as we rationalise the world around us through the lenses of our existing schemas; however, given that many schemas are developed in early life and adolescence, some may be maladaptive when it comes to incorporating new information as an adult. Bem (1981) describes how children develop schemas about their gender and opposite genders based on muddled information from an early age and go on to regulate behaviour and make decisions based on stereotypically categorised gender information that may damage relationships and thinking as an adult and may be difficult to alter (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017).

HOW DOES THE THEORY RELATE TO THE OUTCOME FROM THE LOCAL AUTHORITY?

Understanding the schemas that we individually learn through life experiences can begin to explain why unchecked AB occurs so frequently in certain areas and between certain groups of people, and why police responses to such behaviour may be outdated.

AB typically results from a person's inability to respect other people's rights and manifests in behaviours such as vandalism, public disturbance, theft and assault (Gaik et al., 2010). Such delinquent behaviour often begins in childhood or adolescence with less severe (but also undesirable) behaviour such as bullying, aggression, impulsiveness, early drug and alcohol use and running away, which are usually associated with various behavioural disorders (Farrington, 2005). AB is usually associated with antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), which in turn is the result of negative cognitive-behavioural representations due to maladaptive schemas acquired during developmental stages (Özdel et al., 2015). For example, children who grow up observing repeated AB (neglect, violence, intoxication), especially if this behaviour is seen as effective and without consequence, will likely develop schemas which tell them that this behaviour is a normal and effective response to threatening/undesirable situations (De Wit-De Visser et al., 2023). One study found that detained antisocial adolescents who also demonstrated depression often perceived their parents as 'cold, unstable, unreliable, and unpredictable' (Van Vlierberghe et al., 2007). Furthermore, learned schemas relating to the grandiosity/justification of violence predict delinquent and aggressive behaviour (particularly in boys) (Calvete, 2008) and schemas surrounding low frustration tolerance, mistrust, poor self-control and the need for dominance (which can stem from traumatic upbringing) contribute to impulsivity and AB (Chakhssi et al., 2014). To relate this to the case, children who have repetitive and negative interactions with authority figures such as parents or teachers will likely learn to associate these social cues with authority as inherently threatening when in adulthood, and their responses towards police will be hostile and antagonistic (Dodge & Coie, 1987).

Officers also often hold their own schemas about crime, AB and the individuals and groups that commit them. These schemas are developed from training, cultural stereotypes, prolonged experience, and exposure to these situations (Fridell & Lim, 2016). As per the case vignette, most AB in Glynafonshire is committed by a vague and undisclosed 'group' of individuals. Police who frequently deal with this behaviour often begin to associate it with certain appearances or demographics that are commonly seen to be offenders. Schemas are then developed to help with quick decision making in these scenarios based on what an officer has learned to expect, and these expectations can become stereotypes (Kleider et al., 2008). These types of situations can create a feedback loop of perpetrator groups feeling marginalised and antagonised by police based on their negative schemas of authority, which will only encourage behaviour. In turn, this group's stereotype is reinforced in the eyes of the police; this is notoriously an ongoing problem between young black individuals and the police force in the US (Goff et al., 2014). In terms of police responses, police typically have to adhere to standard procedure when dealing with AB (as highlighted by point 4 of the police response statement). Police training creates schemas within officers and chiefs that these procedures are the best way to deal with AB, with little consideration given to flexible or alternate strategies. Yet, perpetrators of AB have no such limitations and act as they please, usually in ways that circumnavigate existing police responses and render them less effective, particularly when different officers hold different schemas about the best strategies (O'Malley & Grace, 2021).

SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW PROCEDURES BASED ON THE THEORY

1. Schema Awareness Training

Schema theory can explain why new or updated standard training on managing antisocial behaviour may not be sufficient to improve or change police behaviour and responses. If new information from updated training contradicts officers' long-held schemas, there is a greater chance that this information will be ignored or not remembered (Özdel et al., 2015). This resistance to change contributes to the community's perception that the police force is ineffective. For meaningful changes in action to occur, new schemas must be established through Schema-Aware Engagement Training, which will help officers reshape maladaptive or oversimplified schemas that contribute to implicit bias (Fridel & Lim, 2016; Mugford et al., 2013). Such new training should aim to override existing schemas and stereotypes by having a focus on schema recognition, helping officers identify when their actions are being controlled by schemas. During this training, officers may participate in role-playing and be educated on the adverse childhood events that can contribute to anti-social behaviour in later life (Chakhssi et al., 2014). Furthermore, this fresh training may wish to incorporate community engagement and reflections that can help rebuild community trust and allow officers to investigate new schemas in practice within the public (Deller-Wessels et al., 2022).

2. Early Offender Intervention Programs

As stated previously, early maladaptive antisocial schemas often go unchallenged through to adulthood, where offenders then see poor police responses as further justification to continue AB (Farrington, 2005). Early intervention programs for young offenders will require the police to work with social services to implement cognitive-behavioural exercises for detained youths to reframe maladaptive schemas of AB, authority figures and violence to prevent young offenders from entering the point of no return and reduce the number of AB offenders on the streets in the following years. (De Wit-De Visser et al., 2023; Van Vlierberghe et al., 2007).

3. Cognitive Flexibility and Schema Reflection

Continuing from the idea of introducing new training procedures. Cognitive flexibility training can help officers challenge their maladaptive schemas by taking part in scenario exercises that will require them to adapt strategies and think dynamically to scenarios to reduce reliance on existing and outdated

AB procedures and challenge ingrained responses. Cognitive flexibility is a key aspect of being able to rewrite maladaptive schemas (Piaget & Cook, 1952). Resultantly, police officers will be able to respond to different scenarios more dynamically and effectively without the reliance on old methods that may no longer be effective (Eysenck & Keane, 2015) and regular exposure to new scenarios will create more accurate schemas that are less concerned over stereotypes (Van Knippenberg et al., 1999).

Officers should also be encouraged to actively reflect on their experiences with schemas, most importantly during incident reports. As part of these reports, officers should ask questions such as “What judgments did I make?” and be encouraged to explore non-stereotypical explanations for AB offences. Bem (1981) states that metacognitive awareness is a key mechanism in changing schema-prone judgements and promoting behavioural and cognitive change.

4. Re-evaluation of patrol tactics

Both community members and AB offenders have developed their own schemas that current police strategies are ineffective and slow to respond, allowing AB to continue. In response to the case review, police should aim to implement patrols in areas of high AB at atypical times. With help from high visibility PCSO patrols, offenders' expectations will be defied, prompting community and offenders to create new schemas about police presence and effectiveness (Bartlett, 1932). This may result in offenders' behaviour being temporarily subdued, allowing for other strategic overhauls to be introduced.

5. Community Feedback

Given the general consensus of the case review, it will be important for the police to get feedback on new procedures from the community to assess improved perception of police presence and effectiveness. Such feedback sessions can be held in meetings with community members or through online surveys. Positive feedback because of effective changes will help to facilitate the effectiveness of new strategies in the eyes of officers and rebuild trust within the community (O'Malley & Grace, 2021).

EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE OF THEORY

Schema Theory can be applied to a policing context in that patrol officers, due to their learned schemas, occasionally approach a situation with judgments regarding ethnicity, appearance, or social class. These judgements are formed through repeated experiences, training, and institutionalised cultural assumptions and can affect an officer's ability to effectively approach an AB offence based on specific circumstances rather than through stereotypical assumptions (Goff et al., 2014; Kleider et al., 2008). Schema theory can also give a practical explanation for why AB is often developed among certain demographics who may have experienced neglect, trauma, and adverse childhood experiences, and why individuals with antisocial personality traits may develop a disregard for authority/community, and aggression, due to maladaptive schemas justifying this behaviour as effective (Calvete, 2008; Young et al., 2006).

On the other hand, schemas are internal and personal constructs that are difficult to observe or measure with a high degree of certainty (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). As a result, it would be difficult to empirically test the extent to which schemas influence real-world police work, particularly since schemas can vary between officers and in different situations. Additionally, schema theory relies heavily on the cognitive factors influencing this behaviour and underemphasizes other economic, sociological, and influencing factors that can also significantly shape AB and a community's relationship with its police force (Simons & Burt, 2011). I.e. while schema theory can be useful in explaining individual-level behaviour, its focus on internal cognition overlooks broader societal issues that contribute to AB and police strategies as a whole.

This case review has also suggested several implementations surrounding schema theory that can be used to improve police responses to AB. However, research has found mixed outcomes for interventions such as implicit bias training when used to change police behaviour (Lai et al., 2014). These mixed findings imply that if such training is not implemented in a wider police reform, negligible differences will be noticed if only used in a small community. Finally, while schema and social learning theory can explain some individuals' predisposition to certain antisocial behaviours (Bandura, 1977), they do not consider personal agency when approaching situations. Individuals (officers, offenders) can actively act against established schemas if given enough motivation, support, and reflection on their behaviour, giving individuals a degree of rational choice over how their schemas dictate their thoughts and actions (Ajzen, 1991).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the rise of AB in Glynafonshire results from factors such as police limitations and restraints, community issues, and individual-level cognitive schemas that influence behaviour. Schema theory can be used to observe and analyse reasons why maladaptive schemas from early childhood development, paired with environmental feedback, justify AB for offenders (Calvete, 2008; Özdel et al., 2015). Similarly, poor responses to AB can also stem from schemas held by officers within the police force that frame AB as a stereotype of certain groups, leading to bias from repeated AB exposure, training, and rigid procedures (Fridell & Lim, 2016; Kleider et al., 2008). Despite schema theory's overreliance on cognition and overlooking other contributing factors to AB (Simons & Burt, 2011), it can be used to implement new police procedures and interventions such as schema-aware and cognitive flexibility training, along with early intervention programs for antisocial youths aimed at reshaping maladaptive thoughts and beliefs of offenders and officers alike (Chakhssi et al., 2014; Deller-Wessels et al., 2022; Mugford et al., 2013), moving towards more satisfactory police action for the benefit of the Glynafonshire community. Due to such training showing mixed efficacy results for a relatively small community (Lai et al., 2014), this case report concludes that schema theory should be considered system-wide to reshape AB stereotypes and police actions, and an applied integration that focuses on both cognition and context can yield the best results concerning effective police action, a reduction in AB, and improved police-community relations.

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AI declaration

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