CultureCase

Using theatre to engage people in neuroscience and criminal justice

This research was conducted by **Robert Blakey** at the **University of Oxford**

Summary

This paper looked at whether people's attitude to youth justice can be changed by watching a play about neuroscience. After watching the play, people recommended a slightly higher age of criminal responsibility than is currently the case in the UK and attributed less moral responsibility to a hypothetical young offender. Their attitudes changed after watching a play, Brainstorm, at the National Theatre in 2016. The play is about teenage brain development, specifically the way in which teenage brains are affected by uncontrollable mechanisms and are plastic (they can change).

Brainstorm is a play about teenage brain development

The play itself tries to convey the following messages, that 'the teenage brain is not a dysfunctional version of the adult brain. The teenage brain has evolved to generate behaviours that facilitate development, such as risk-taking and self-consciousness.' And secondly because of differences between areas of development in the brain teenagers 'can behave like a car without brakes, exhibiting behavioural displays of emotion that adults would ordinarily inhibit, such as aggression.'

728 participants responded to four questions at performances of Brainstorm at the National Theatre in London

The surveys were carried out at all six performances of the play. Participants were asked to identify 'the minimum age at which people can be arrested and

charged with a crime?' and three further questions that asked people to respond to a hypothetical offender and hypothetical crimes he may commit.

The play touches on some profound questions of criminal justice

It asks people to let the findings of neuroscience inform the extent to which someone is morally responsible for their actions. 'If people are not truly responsible for their brains, offenders may not be truly responsible for their crimes. In this respect, neurocriminology may threaten a critical foundation of the retributive justification for punishment.'

Keywords

UK **survey** **criminal justice** **theatre**

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