Chapter Five

Trait Theory

Dennis Souther – Pfeiffer University, Misenheimer, NC
Development of Trait Theory

• **Trait Theory**
  – The view that criminality is a product of abnormal biological or psychological traits.
  – Trait theories can be subdivided into two major categories:
    1. Those that stress biological makeup
    2. Those that stress psychological functioning

• **Sociobiology**
  – The view that human behavior is motivated by inborn biological urges to survive and preserve the species.
Contemporary Trait Theory

• Differential Trait Susceptibility
  – Crime producing interactions involve:
    ▪ Personal traits
    ▪ Environmental factors

• Vulnerability model
  – Direct link between traits and crime

• Differential susceptibility model
  – Some traits make the individual more susceptible to environmental influences.
Class Discussion/Activity

Read about Michael King who kidnapped, raped, and killed Denise Amber Lee and later claimed that his actions were caused by a brain abnormality. After reading, get together in groups of four and decide whether he should have received the death penalty or whether a different punishment would have been more appropriate.
Biological Trait Theories

Personal Characteristics Make Each Person Unique
- Biochemical makeup
- Genetic code
- Neurological condition

Social Environment Influences Behavior
- Parents
- Peers
- Schools
- Neighborhood

Traits → Environment → Ability to learn and achieve → Human behavior → Conformity, Crime
Biological Trait Theories

- Biochemical Conditions and Crime
  - Diet
  - Hypoglycemia
  - Hormonal influences
    - Androgen
    - Testosterone
  - Premenstrual syndrome
  - Lead exposure
  - Environmental contaminants
Biological Trait Theories

– Neurophysiological Conditions and Crime
  • Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
  • Brain Chemistry
    – Neurotransmitters
  • Arousal Theory
Biological Trait Theories

- Genetics and Crime
  - Parental deviance
  - Adoption studies
  - Twin Behavior
    - Monozygotic twins
    - Dizygotic twins
Biological Trait Theories

• The Evolution of Gender and Crime
  – Focuses on gender differences
  – Survival of the gene pool
  – Aggressive males have had the greatest impact on the gene pool
## Biological Trait Theories

### CONCEPT SUMMARY 5.1 Biosocial Theories of Crime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biochemical</th>
<th>Neurological</th>
<th>Genetic</th>
<th>Evolutionary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The major premise of the theory is that crime, especially violence, is a function of diet, vitamin intake, hormonal imbalance, or food allergies.</td>
<td>• The major premise of the theory is that criminals and delinquents often suffer brain impairment. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and minimal brain dysfunction are related to antisocial behavior.</td>
<td>• The major premise of the theory is that criminal traits and predispositions are inherited. The criminality of parents can predict the delinquency of children.</td>
<td>• The major premise of the theory is that as the human race evolved, traits and characteristics became ingrained. Some of these traits make people aggressive and predisposed to commit crime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The strengths of the theory are that it explains irrational violence and shows how the environment interacts with personal traits to influence behavior.</td>
<td>• The strengths of the theory are that it explains irrational violence and shows how the environment interacts with personal traits to influence behavior.</td>
<td>• The strengths of the theory include the fact that it explains why only a small percentage of youths in high-crime areas become chronic offenders.</td>
<td>• The strengths of the theory include its explanation of high violence rates and aggregate gender differences in the crime rate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The research focuses of the theory are diet, hormones, enzymes, environmental contaminants, and lead intake.</td>
<td>• The research focuses of the theory are CD, ADHD, learning disabilities, brain injuries, and brain chemistry.</td>
<td>• The research focuses of the theory are twin behavior, sibling behavior, and parent–child similarities.</td>
<td>• The research focuses of the theory are gender differences and understanding human aggression.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Psychological Trait View

• The Psychodynamic Perspective
  – Id
  – Ego
  – Superego

• Attachment Theory
Psychological Trait View

• The Behavioral Perspective: Social Learning Theory
  – Behavior theory
  – Social learning theory

• Social learning and violence
  – Behavior Modeling
    • Family interactions
    • Environmental experiences
    • Mass media

• Social learning
Psychological Trait Theory

• Cognitive theory
  – How people perceive and mentally represent the world around them and solve problems

• Information Processing Theory
  – Mental scripts
# Psychological Trait Theory

## Concept Summary 5.2 Psychological Theories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Major Premise</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Research Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychodynamic</td>
<td>The development of the unconscious personality early in childhood influences behavior for the rest of a person’s life. Criminals have weak egos and damaged personalities.</td>
<td>Explains the onset of crime and why crime and drug abuse cut across class lines.</td>
<td>Mental illness and crime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>People commit crime when they model their behavior after others they see being rewarded for the same acts. Behavior is reinforced by rewards and extinguished by punishment.</td>
<td>Explains the role of significant others in the crime process. Shows how media can influence crime and violence.</td>
<td>Media and violence; effects of child abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Individual reasoning processes influence behavior. Reasoning is influenced by the way people perceive their environment.</td>
<td>Shows why criminal behavior patterns change over time as people mature and develop their reasoning powers. May explain the aging-out process.</td>
<td>Perception; environmental influences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personality and Crime

• Personality
  – Reasonably stable patterns of behavior
  – Distinguish one person from another

• Hans Eysenck
  – Psychoticism, Extraversion, Neuroticism
  – Extreme extroverts or introverts at risk for antisocial behavior

• Psychopathic Personality
  – Antisocial personality
Intelligence and Crime

• Nature Theory
  – Intelligence is largely determined genetically and is linked to criminality.

• Nurture Theory
  – Intelligence is not inherited but is largely a product of the environment.
  – Low IQ may result from the same environmental factors.
Intelligence and Crime

• IQ and Criminality
  – Travis Hirschi and Michael Hindelang suggest a link exists between intelligence and crime.
    • Low IQ in youths and poor performance in school are highly related to delinquency and adult crime.
  – Crime and Human Nature
    • James Q. Wilson and Richard Herrnsten
    • Poor school performance linked to chances of criminality.
Mental Disorders and Crime

- Possible links:
  - Genetic predisposition
  - Traumatic family and upbringing
  - Brain trauma
  - Substance abuse
Mental Disorders and Crime

- Crime and Mental Illness
  - Mood disorder
  - Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)
  - Schizophrenia
  - Bipolar disorder
Evaluation of Trait Theory

• Critics argue that some trait theories are racist and faulty.

• Do trait theories suggest that people in the South, Midwest, and inner cities are more genetically inferior and psychologically impaired?

• Contemporary trait theories argue that some people have potential to be violent or criminal and these traits may be triggered environmentally.
Class Discussion/Activity

Discuss why critics argue that trait theory is racist. If trait theory is racist is it still a valid theory based on scientific knowledge?
Social Policy and Trait Theory

• Primary Prevention Programs
  – Seek to treat personal problems before they manifest as crime

• Secondary Prevention Programs
  – Provide treatment to youths and adults after they have violated the law