Chapter Five

Trait Theories
Introduction to Trait Theories

- Since the 19th century, some criminologists have thought that biological and psychological traits may influence behavior.
- Machiavelli believed that some people, genetically, are evil.
- Lombroso believed that some are “born criminal”.

Foundations of Trait Theories

- The inheritance school found research evidence to support their theory that criminal tendencies were based on genetics (Henry Goddard).
  - Crime prone families (ex. “Jukes” & “Kallikaks”)

- The somatotype school theorists believed that criminals have distinct body builds, making them susceptible to particular types of criminal behavior (William Sheldon).
Foundations of Trait Theories

1. **Mesomorphs**: well-developed muscles (active, aggressive, violent)
   - Most likely to become criminal

2. **Endomorphs**: heavy build
   - Engage in less strenuous criminal activities (ex. steal property)

3. **Ectomorphs**: tall and thin
   - More intellectual than the other types
Foundations of Trait Theories

- **Biophobia** is the view that no serious consideration should be given to biological factors in attempting to understand human nature.

- **Sociobiology**—this theory holds that biological and genetic conditions affect how social behaviors are learned and perceived.
  - Although they believe that environment and experience also have an impact on behavior, their main premise is that most actions are controlled by a person’s “Biological Machine”
Contemporary Trait Theories

- No single biological or psychological attribute can explain all criminality.
- Each offender is unique, physically and mentally.
- Trait theorists focus on basic human behavior and drives that are linked to antisocial behavior patterns.
Contemporary Trait Theories

- Theorists are most likely to support the idea of equipotentiality—the combination of physical traits and the environment that produces individual behavior patterns.
- Because not all humans are born with equal potential to learn and achieve
Contemporary Trait Theories

- Trait theories can be divided into two major subdivision
  1) Biological trait
  2) Psychological trait
Biological Trait Theories

Biosocial Theory

- Biocriminologists believe physical, environmental and social conditions are in concert in producing human behavior.
- Biochemical conditions and crime—both those traits that are genetically predetermined and those acquired through diet and environment control and influence antisocial behavior.
- See p.132 Figure 5.1
Biological Trait Theories

- Chemical and mineral influences—minimum levels of these groups are needed or normal brain functioning and growth, especially in one’s early years.
- Over-or under-supply can lead to depression, mania, cognitive problems, memory loss and abnormal sexual activity.
Biological Trait Theories

- **Food additives** have been linked to problem behavior.
- **Imbalances** lead to cognitive and learning deficits and problems linked to antisocial behaviors.
- **Diet** and crime (violent & aggressive) may also be significantly related.
Research has linked glucose (sugar) metabolism/hypoglycemia (blood falls below level for normal brain functioning) to antisocial behavior and violence.

- The brain is sensitive to the lack of blood sugar because it is the only organ that obtains its energy solely from the combustion of carbohydrates.

There may also be an association between violent behavior episodes and hormone levels, particularly:

- Abnormal levels of male sex hormones (androgens) produce aggressive behavior.
- Testosterone ↑ violence & aggression ↑
Biological Trait Theories

How Hormones Influence Behavior

- Hormones cause areas of the brain to become less sensitive to environmental stimuli.
- High androgen levels (male) require people to seek excess stimulation and be willing to tolerate pain for experiencing thrills.
- Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) — menstrual cycle releases excessive amounts of female sex hormones, affect antisocial and aggressive behavior.
Biological Trait Theories

Allergies

- Cerebral allergies (brain) cause excessive reaction in the brain.
- Neuroallergies affect the nervous system.
  - There appears to be a connection between allergies and hyperemotionality, depression, aggressiveness and violent behavior.
- Both neuroallergies and cerebral allergies have been linked to hyperactivity and antisocial behavior in children.
Biological Trait Theories

- **Environmental contaminants** are believed to cause not only illness or death, but also are linked to emotional and behavioral disorders.
- **Lead levels** are also linked to aggressive behavior.
Neurophysiological Conditions and Crime

- Neurophysiology is the study of brain activity.
- Some researchers believe that neurological and physical abnormalities are acquired in as the fetal or prenatal stage or through birth delivery trauma and that they control behavior throughout life.
Biological Trait Theories

- The association between neurological disorder and antisocial behaviors include:
  - Direct association
    - Brain abnormalities including epilepsy, traumatic brain injury, childhood encephalitis or meningitis causing brain damage, genetic disorder, and unspecified brain damage
  - Indirect association
    - Development of personality traits (ex. Self-control)
  - Interactive cause
    - neurological deficits may interact with another trait
Biological Trait Theories

- Measuring neurological impairment is typically done by recording the electrical impulses given off by the brain (electroencephalograph--EEG).
- Brain activity may result in a lack of control over antisocial behaviors.
Biological Trait Theories

- **Minimal Brain Dysfunction (MBI)**—an abnormality in cerebral structure is linked to violent crime.
- **Learning Disabilities (LD)**—a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language.
  - Causes include susceptibility rationale (side effects of LD) and school failure rationale.
Biological Trait Theories

- Symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) include:
  - Lack of attention
  - Impulsivity
  - Hyperactivity
Biological Trait Theories

- Children with ADHD are more likely:
  - to use illicit drugs, alcohol and cigarettes in adolescence,
  - to be arrested,
  - to be charged with a felony and
  - to have multiple arrests.
Biological Trait Theories

- Many children with ADHD have conduct disorder and continually engage in aggressive and antisocial behavior in early children.
Neurophysiological Conditions and Crime

- Tumors, lesions, injury and disease are all linked to brain abnormalities.
- Brain chemistry—neurotransmitters are chemical compounds that influence or activate brain functions.
  - Abnormal levels of these chemicals are associated with aggression.
  - Drugs are used to control these levels; referred to as chemical restraints or chemical straitjackets.
Biological Trait Theories

Arousal Therapy

- For a variety of genetic and environmental reasons, some people’s brains function differently in response to environmental stimuli.
- Obtaining thrills is a crime motivator.
- Suspected factors determining level of arousal include:
  - Brain chemistry (and brain structure)
  - Heart rate
  - Autonomic nervous system
Biological Trait Theories

- Teen-age behavior—the brain matures at different rates; the resulting instability can result in high-risk behaviors, vulnerability to substance abuse and mental distress.

- Adolescent aggressive behavior is of two types: proactive (planning to hurt or bully) and reactive (unplanned response to trigger from environment).
Biological Trait Theories

- Rather than having social or environmental basis, antisocial behavior is a function of how the brain influences decision-making and impulse control.
Biological Trait Theories

- Genetics and crime—antisocial behavior characteristics and mental disorders may be inherited.
- According to this: antisocial behavior is inherited; the genetic makeup of parents is passed on to children and genetic abnormality is linked to a variety of antisocial behaviors.
Biological Trait Theories

- Research data has found delinquent youth grow up to become the parents of antisocial children.
- Possibility exists that environmental, genetic, psychological or childbearing factors responsible for linkage between generations.
- This link might also have some biological basis.
Biological Trait Theories

- There are similarities in behavior between siblings.
- In twin studies similarities between twins are due to genes, not the environment.
- Some critics believe there is inadequate research designs and weak methodologies involved in the genetic-crime studies.
Biological Trait Theories

- The contagion effect – genetic predispositions and early experiences make some people, including twins, susceptible to deviant behavior, which is transmitted by the presence of antisocial siblings in the household.
Biological Trait Theories

- Adoption studies have indicated that some relationship exists between biological parents’ behavior and the child’s behavior when contact has been nonexistent.
- Evolutionary theory—some believe that human traits that produce violence and aggression are produced through the long process of human evolution.
Some criminologists suggest violent offenses are often driven by evolutionary and reproductive factors.

Gender and evolution—crime rate differences between the genders may be less a matter of socialization than inherent differences in mating patterns that have developed over time.
Biological Trait Theories

- Biological theory divides people into criminals and non-criminals on the basis of genetic and physical makeup.
- This ignores self-reports that almost everyone has engaged in some type of illegal activity during one’s lifetime.
- The most significant criticism of biosocial theory has been the lack of adequate empirical testing.
Psychological Trait Theories

- This includes the associations among intelligence, personality, learning and criminal behavior.
- Defective intelligence involves such traits as epilepsy, insanity and defective social instinct.
Psychological Trait Theories

- Psychodynamic theory—conscious experience and its interaction with the unconscious in addition to the role that social factors play in development.
- Focuses on the influence of early childhood experiences on the development of personality, motivation and drives.
Psychological Trait Theories

- Elements of psychodynamic theory—three part structure of personality:
  - Id: the primitive part of mental makeup at birth; follows the pleasure principle (requires instant gratification without concern for the rights of others).
  - Ego: develops early in life and guides actions; follows the reality principle (what is practical by societal standards).
Psychological Trait Theories

- Superego: develops as result of incorporating within personality the moral standards and values of parents, community and significant others.
  - Superego divided into two parts: conscience-what is right and wrong and the ego ideal
Psychosexual Stages of Human Development

- The most basic human drive present at birth
  - Eros—the instinct to preserve and create life; expressed sexually.
  - Thanatos—the death instinct which is expressed as aggression.
Psychosexual Stages of Human Development

- Freudian terms:
  - Oral stage (first year of life)
  - Anal stage (second and third years of life)
  - Phallic stage (during the third year)
  - Oedipus complex—males have sexual feelings for their mothers
  - Electra complex—girls have the same for their fathers.
  - Latency—feelings of sexuality are repressed.
Psychosexual Stages of Human Development

Psychodynamics of antisocial behavior:
- Inferiority complex: those who have feelings of inferiority and compensate for them with drive for superiority.
- Identity crisis: a period of serious personal questioning people undertake in an effort to determine their own values and sense of direction.
Psychosexual Stages of Human Development

- The psychodynamic model of criminal offenders depicts aggressive, frustrated persons dominated by events early in childhood.
- Offenders may suffer from many mood and/or behavior, such as depression, antisocial, narcissism and,
- Bipolar disorder alternates between periods of wild elation and deep depression.
Psychosexual Stages of Human Development

- Attachment theory attached to psychodynamic tradition
- The ability to form attachments has lasting psychological implications that follow people across life span.
- Failing to develop proper attachment may cause people to fall to a number of psychological disorders.
- Children with attachment problems lack trust and respect for others.
Mood Disorders and Crime

- Disruptive behavior disorder has two forms:
  - Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and
  - Conduct disorder (CD)

- Children with ODD are uncooperative, defiant and exhibit hostile behavior.
- Children with CD don’t follow rules and are severely antisocial.
Mood Disorders and Crime

- Some people suffer from alexithymia—a deficit in emotional condition that prevents them from being aware of their feelings or being able to understand or talk about their thoughts and emotions;
- they seem robotic and emotionally dead; many suffer eating disorders.
The most serious forms of psychological illness are:

- Psychosis: severe mental disorders, such as depression, bipolar disorder and,
- Schizophrenia: extreme impairment of ability to think clearly, respond emotionally, communicate effectively, understand reality and behave appropriately.
- Paranoid schizophrenics suffer from delusions of persecution
Is Mental Illness a Direct Cause of Crime and Violence?

- The mentally ill may harm themselves or act aggressively toward others.
- They usually have criminal histories, substance abuse and family dysfunction.
- The factors that cause mental illness also cause antisocial behavior.
- Lack of financial resources, bad neighborhoods, and being targets for arrest by police add to the distress.
Behavioral Theory

- Crimes are viewed as learned responses to life situations that do not necessarily represent psychologically abnormal responses.
- An important subset to this theory is the social learning theory.
Social Learning Theory

- Social learning theorists agree that mental or physical traits may predispose a person toward violence but that activating these violent tendencies is due to factors in the environment.
Behavior Modeling

- Social learning theorists believe violence is learned through three sources of behavior modeling:
  - Family interaction
  - Environmental experiences
  - Mass media
In addition, social learning theorists claim that four factors may contribute to violent or aggressive behavior:

- An event that heightens arousal
- Aggressive skills
- Expected outcomes
- Consistency of behavior with values
Cognitive Theory

- Psychologists with this perspective focus on mental processes and how the world is perceived and mentally represented.
- There are several sub-disciplines in this area:
  - Moral and intellectual development theory
  - Humanistic psychology
  - Information processing
Violent Media = Violent Behavior?

- Not all experts believe that media violence is a direct cause of violence, but many agree that this contributes to aggression.

- Attributes that make some people prone to the effects of media violence:
  - Predisposition for aggressive or antisocial behavior
  - Rigid or indifferent parenting
  - Unsatisfactory social relationships
  - Low psychological well-being
  - Diagnosed as having disruptive behavior disorders
Psychological Traits and Characteristics

- Personality: two traits associated with antisocial behavior—extrovert/introvert and stability/instability.
- Personality inventories aid in assessment of behavior.
Psychopaths

- Disturbed personalities usually frustrated and unstable.
- They are incapable of forming relationships and continual deviant behavior, such as risk taking, substance abuse and impulsivity.
- They are prone to criminal and violent behavior; usually chronic offenders.
Psychopaths

- The causes of psychopathy include:
  - Traumatic socialization
  - Neurological disorder
  - Brain structure (suspect damage to frontal and temporal lobes of brain—creating above average stimulation)
Intelligence and Crime

- Levels of intelligence may affect crime.
- Interestingly, criminals test at both high and low levels and may be dependent on one of two beliefs:
  - Nature theory: IQ is determined genetically
  - Nurture theory: IQ is determined environmentally
Public Policy Implications of Crime Theories

- Primary prevention programs: dealing with personal problems before they manifest in criminal activity.
- Secondary prevention programs: treatment, such as psychological counseling to youth and adults with legal violations.
- Tertiary prevention programs: when criminal activity has occurred, intense therapy utilized as part of a probation order, diversionary sentence or aftercare treatment program.