



Larry J. Siegel

[www.cengage.com/cj/siegel](http://www.cengage.com/cj/siegel)

# 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

### Biochemical

- The major premise of the theory is that crime, especially violence, is a function of diet, vitamin intake, hormonal imbalance, or food allergies.
- The strengths of the theory are that it explains irrational violence and shows how the environment interacts with personal traits to influence behavior.
- The research focuses of the theory are diet, hormones, enzymes, environmental contaminants, and lead intake.

### Neurological

- 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.
- The strengths of the theory are that it explains irrational violence and shows how the environment interacts with personal traits to influence behavior.
- The research focuses of the theory are CD, ADHD, learning disabilities, brain injuries, and brain chemistry.

### Genetic

- The major premise of the theory is that criminal traits and predispositions are inherited. The criminality of parents can predict the delinquency of children.
- 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.
- The research focuses of the theory are twin behavior, sibling behavior, and parent–child similarities.

### Evolutionary

- 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.
- The strengths of the theory include its explanation of high violence rates and aggregate gender differences in the crime rate.
- The research focuses of the theory are gender differences and understanding human aggression.

# 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

Theory	Major Premise	Strengths	Research Focus
<b>Psychodynamic</b>	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.	Explains the onset of crime and why crime and drug abuse cut across class lines.	Mental illness and crime.
<b>Behavioral</b>	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.	Explains the role of significant others in the crime process. Shows how media can influence crime and violence.	Media and violence; effects of child abuse.
<b>Cognitive</b>	Individual reasoning processes influence behavior. Reasoning is influenced by the way people perceive their environment.	Shows why criminal behavior patterns change over time as people mature and develop their reasoning powers. May explain the aging-out process.	Perception; environmental influences.

# 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 Herrnstein
    - 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