

Chapter 3: Early Biological Perspective on Criminal Behavior.

The Field of Criminology has been slow to give credence to biological theories of deviant behavior, because early criminology was rooted in social sciences (Sutherland: Criminology was pure sociology, 1924).

-Today, the field of criminology is interdisciplinary, recognizing contributions from many disciplines. We will successively review the following points.

A. Principles of Biological Theories

B. Early biological Theories

C. Sociobiology

D. Critique of Early Biological Theories of Criminal Behavior

A. Principles of Biological Theories

-Generally, speaking, biological theories focus on the brain as the center of the personality and the major determinant in controlling human behavior.

-Unlike the classical and neo-classical traditions, however, which consider free will and external forces as the cause of behavior, biological theories look to internal sources, including genetic and physical makeup as they influence mental process

-Early biological theorists (generally, prior to 1960s or 1970s) focused primarily on physical features and heredity as the source of criminal behavior.

-They considered such physical **traits** as facial features, body type, and shape of the skull as significant causes of criminality.

-Several early theorists proposed that criminality ran in families and could be inherited, being passed down from one generation to another. Today, these theories are very simplistic, when compared to modern biosocial perspectives.

-In contrast, contemporary biological theorists (mostly after 1990) have taken a more in-depth look at human biology, leading them to examine a variety of influences on behavior, including genes and chromosomes, diet, hormonal issues, environmental contaminants, and neuro-physical conditions.

B. Early Biological Theories

-Early biological theories of crime are especially, significant because they built upon the scientific tradition of positivism.

Positivism, is associated with the belief that all valid knowledge is acquired only through observation and not through the mere exercise of reason or blind adherence to belief.

-Early positivism was built upon two important principles: (1) an unflagging acceptance of social determinism or the belief that human behavior is determined not by the exercise of free choice but by causative factors beyond the control of the individual, and (2) the application of scientific techniques to the study of crime and criminology.

-The term of Positivism had its roots in the **writings of Auguste Comte (1798-1857)**. He proposed use of the scientific method in the study of society in his

1851 work called: “A system of Positive Polity”.

Comte, who also is known as the “father of Sociology”, believed that social phenomena could be observed, explained, and measured in objective and quantitative terms.

Elements used in Early Biological Theories

-Physical Features and crime:

Some of the earliest studies in the field of criminology used data from the field of biology and anthropology to identify physical abnormalities that early criminologists thought could be used to distinguish criminal offenders from other people.

One of the earliest attempts to use bodily features to identify criminals was proposed by European anatomist Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828) in his theory of (also called Craniology).

-Gall believed that the shape of the human skull was related to the personality and could be used to distinguish criminals from normal men and women. He built his theory on 4 themes:

1. The brain is the organ of the mind.
2. Particular aspects of personality are associated with specific locations in the brain.
3. Portions of the brain that are well developed cause personality characteristics associated with them to be more prominent in the individual under study, whereas poorly developed brain areas lead to a lack of associated personality characteristics.
4. The shape of a person's skull corresponds to the shape of the underlying brain and is therefore indicative of the personality.

Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776-1853) was one of Gall's student and was a German physician. He brought phrenology theory to America and helped to spread its influence through a series of lectures and publications on the subject. Phrenology's prestige in America extended into the twentieth century, finding a place in Classification schemes employed to evaluate newly admitted prisoners.

The Italian School

Cesare Lombroso (1836-1909) was known as the first who developed scientific biological theorist. He used the term **Atavism** to suggest that criminality was the result of primitive urges that survived the evolutionary process in modern day human throwbacks. Lombroso work was mostly on postmortem studies of the bodies of executed offenders and deceased criminals, and measured them in different ways.

-He claimed that, using his system, not only, could criminal offenders be separated from the general population, but even specific types of criminal could be identified. Lombroso described “**the nature of the criminal**” as an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts.

-For him, criminals are born that way.

Sociobiology.

It is a new paradigm in social sciences since 1975. It comes or built upon the work of ethnologists, including John H. Cook and Austrian Zoologist Konrad Lorenz. They look on to the roots of human aggression. This theory is based on Human

behavior. According to Lorenz, aggression in the animal kingdom stems from the need of defense of the species from predators. Sociobiology is no longer accepted due to its relationship to the Eugenic movement (very racist idea about genes and people or race).

Critique of Early biological theories of criminal behavior

-A central concern with all biological theories of criminal behavior has to do with the fact that they seemed to relegate the role of free will in human behavior to a kind of philosophical dustbin. If a person's behavior is largely determined, for example, by inherent and unchangeable atavistic features, then he or she may be expected to have little positive effect on future behavior.

-Because of all of this, some people continue to shy away from biological explanations for criminality and disordered behavior because phrases like "genetic determinism", which are often voiced by the popular media, have come to be synonymous with inevitability. ---People with little education in criminology or modern biology tend to believe that

“biological” equals “hopeless” as the physical makeup of a person is hard to change.

-Other concerns stem from aligning the concept of crime with biological variables because crime is itself a social construction and its meaning varies from place to place and from time to time.