

# Reviewing biological and psychological crime theories criminology essay



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Man's attempt to understand the causes of crime and deviance predates written history. Prehistoric skeletal remains show evidence of primitive cranial surgical procedures. This appears to indicate that, during these more primitive times, people thought spiritual evils in the mind caused crime and deviance. Cranial surgery was the effort to open the mind and allow the unwanted spiritual influences to escape. Since these early times, many theoretical perspectives concerning crime and deviance have emerged. Biological, psychological, and sociological theories are the most widely known. This paper will focus on Cesare Lombroso's biological theory of anthropological criminology (atavism) and Gabriel Tarde's psychological modeling theory of imitation.

Biological crime theories began in the 16th century with the ideas of J. Babbiste della Porte (1535 - 1615). He was the founder of human physiognomy. Human physiognomy is the study of physical features to determine an individual's characteristics. Early biological theorists studied physical features to make assessments about a person's criminal propensity (Kroeber, 2006). Fundamentally, if criminality is inherited, then an offender can be distinguished by physical atavistic stigmata. The physical appearance, they believed, distinguishes criminal types and the positivist method was the biological approach these scholars chose. These ideas differed from the ideas of contemporary scholars in that they also believed in lower forms of life, anecdotes, and folk wisdom as explanations of crime (Farrington, D., 1996).

The biological explanations of crime available today include abnormalities of the brain, brain damage, head trauma, genetic predispositions, vitamin

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deficiencies, hormonal imbalances, hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), lack of serotonin (neurotransmitters) in the brain, and blood abnormalities. Since many criminologists academically center on the social sciences, theories of deviant behavior based on biology are not widely accepted in the field of criminology. Society tends to reject biological explanations of crime because of the belief that “biological” equals “hopelessness.” Schmallegger (2006) states that some biological theories simply show abnormalities to be facilitators of crime, rather than determinants of criminal behavior. Biological crime theories involve various fundamental assumptions. These assumptions are the brain is the center of behavior and personalities, the manifestations of behaviors, to include criminal propensities, are in some form genetically predisposed, differences in crime rates among races and gender are a result of biological differences but will only show in certain environments, biological crime facilitators and determinants may be passed to succeeding generations, and human behavior is instinctive and characteristic of all organisms (Schmallegger, 2006, p. 144).

One of the most renowned scientific biological theorists was Cesare Lombroso (1836-1909). Lombroso coined the term “atavism” to suggest that criminal behaviors were the result of primitive impulses that successfully survived the evolutionary process. Lombroso and his students used the ideas of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and discredited the classical ideas of Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham. Lombroso believed in determinism rather than the ideas of free will. Free will is the idea that all individuals have an equal opportunity to make choices and to act criminal. Lombroso’s class

of thought is known as the Italian School. Lombroso theorized physical characteristics would represent primitive impulses. The characteristics that he found to be common among criminals, he labeled, " atavistic" (Ellwood, 2000).

Atavism is a real or supposed evolutionary throwback. Atavists possess an unexpected appearance resembling the primitive traits of man or the reversion of such a trait that was present in the lineage of the past. This representative trait is not seen often in intervening generations after primitive creatures. Atavisms can occur when the previous genes for such phenotypical features are preserved in DNA and are dominantly shown. These genes may be present in organisms but not expressed in dominate features (Farrington, D. 1996).

Social Darwinists frequently used the ideas of atavism. This class of thinkers claimed that inferior races would display atavistic traits and those individuals expressing atavistic characteristics are an inferior form of their primitive race. The notion of atavism is saturated with the ideas of evolution as a progress towards a greater complexity and superior ability of man (Farrington, D. 1996). Statistical evidence and the idea that physical traits indicate criminality has not been substantiated. However, the concept that physical traits can indicate the likelihood of criminal behavior is still popular in some circles.

Lombroso's work was the result of studying postmortem bodies of executed offenders and deceased criminals. He measured the body in many different ways. He took measurements from 65 executed criminals and 832 living

offenders and compared them with the measurements taken from 390 soldiers. Lombroso used this data to identify consistencies between traits and characterized his findings as criminal features. Among the traits he found to be predictive of criminal behavior, were index finger length, fleshy cheeks, close eyes, large teeth, lobe-less ears, high defined cheek bones, crooked nose, large lips, abnormal number of ribs, and different eye colors. Lombroso hypothesized that possession of certain combinations of traits could be used to identify a specific type of offender. For example, the classification for habitual homicide is cold, glassy eyes, a large nose, a strong jaw; large cheekbones, thin lips; and dark, curly hair (Schmallegger, 2006, p. 147).

Psychological crime theories available today include Frustration-Aggression Theory, Modeling Theory, Behavior Theory, and Self-Control Theory. Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904) first introduced the psychological modeling theory of imitation. This psychological perspective states that people learn how to behave by modeling themselves like others whom they have observed. The suppositions that provide the basis for his theory, as with most early theories, are analysis of the individual, personality is the major motivational element, criminal behavior is purposeful for the individual, normality is defined by social consensus, and crime results from inappropriate mental processes. Furthermore, inappropriate mental processes have many causes to include diseases of the mind, inappropriate learning or improper conditioning, and poor role models (Schmallegger, 2006, p. 183).

Psychocriminologists generally focus on personality disorders that include

psychopaths, sociopaths, and antisocial personalities to explain criminal behavior.

Gabriel Tarde believed that the laws of imitation were the basis of any society. He rejected the biological theories of crime proposed by Cesare Lombroso and other criminologists of his time, stating that certain inferences of law or regularities govern the social world. Tarde developed a behavior theory based on three laws of imitation. Tarde's first law of imitation states that individuals that regularly and closely interact with each other behave similarly. The application of this law can be seen in groups such as white supremacists. These individuals focus most of their time and attention on ideas of white superiority and actively promote these ideas. Due to their close interaction with one another, they tend to exhibit the same behavior. The second law rests on the premise that imitation follows a hierarchical pattern. In the United States Marine Corps, Marines of junior rank often emulate their leaders. This idea of hierarchical imitation is positively reinforced through education and training. Tarde's third law is that of insertion. This law conveys the notion that new ideas, modus operandi, or methods reinforce prior successful patterns or replace failed or less efficient methods. In the Marine Corps, leadership ideas that have been used for over 230 years are reinforced everyday because they are successful. At the same time, new methods for implementing those ideas are replacing outdated, less efficient methods (Schmallegger, 2006, p. 194).

There are presumed advantages and disadvantages to both biological and psychological crime theories. In the criminology field, biological theories are advantageous because they provide a basis for the hypothesis that criminal

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behavior can be predicted by physical traits, chemical make-up, and genetic factors. In theory, once identified, criminal behavior can be treated through various medical therapies to include behavior modification, hormonal therapy, and gene therapy. The disadvantages of biological crime causation theories generally lie with methodological problems and the types of analysis employed to gather statistical data. Schmallegger (2006) states that biological studies often fail to include proper testing groups resulting in flawed forms of analysis. Glenn D. Walters and Thomas W. White, critics of biological perspectives, note the shortcomings of biological crime theories. They assert that the degree of criminality is improperly established, often based on one arrest, sample groups are not varied or realistically selected, results are left open for interpretation thus detracting from the integrity of the research, and findings from outside of the United States may not be applicable (Schmallegger, 2006, p. 172). Another disadvantageous aspect of biological crime theories is the potential impact on public policy. If biological studies are conducted that show credible information to the public regarding a certain biological trait for criminality, the outcry for legislation would be great. For example, if all criminals have gene-x, the people would demand laws be put in place that protected society from gene-x carriers. However, data obtained from biological crime studies is not consistent but can be “interpreted.” Furthering the x-gene example, while all criminals have the x-gene not all carriers of the x-gene are criminals. This could result in unfair practices against some innocent carriers. Psychological crime theories are beneficial to investigations today because they provide the framework used in developing typologies of psychological profiles utilized to identify

personality characteristics of criminal individuals. Psychological explanations  
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assist the investigator in understanding the criminal mind thereby increasing the chances of apprehension. Additionally, if crime causation factors are identified, offenders may be treated more efficiently, possibly reducing recidivism. Psychological crime causation theories also pose disadvantages to the field of criminology. D. A. Andrews and James Bonta (1994) discredit contemporary psychological theories stating that psychological and sociological criminology findings are not obtained through objective and empirical means therefore representing weak psychology in mainstream society. Another disadvantage of psychological theories is that they are more often applicable to sexual and violent crimes, include untestable postulations, and fail to account for situational factors (O'Connor, T. 2004).

In conclusion, it can be inferred that no one theory definitively explains crime. Biological and psychological crime theories address crime and deviance explanations from different, but equally feasible perspectives. The early biological ideas of Cesare Lombroso stimulated the emergence of more contemporary theories. Although his crime explanations are not widely used today, they provided a foundation for further thought in the criminology field. Similarly, Gabriel Tarde proposed an alternate crime explanation with his theory of imitation. Tarde's thoughts encouraged social thinkers to expound on his ideas and develop more contemporary crime theories that are in practice today. Both biological and psychological explanations for criminality and deviance present advantages and disadvantages but it must be noted that each provide practical value to criminologists today.