Class Activities

Chapter 5: Early Positivism: Biological Theories of Crime

**Class Activity 1: Early Biological Theories of Behavior**

**Critical Thinking (Paired Exercise)**

**Instructions:** Please read the following section of the textbook: “Early Biological Theories of Behavior.” Define the following terms:*eugenics, craniometry, phrenology,* and *physiognomy*. Answer the following questions. You will discuss your answers with the class.

1. Compare and contrast craniometry, phrenology, and physiognomy. What do the three perspectives have in common? What makes the three perspectives different?
2. What are the major theoretical or scientific flaws associated with craniometry, phrenology, and physiognomy?
3. Pick one and discuss how what we know about it might be applied to our understanding of criminality today.

**Class Activity 2: Lombroso as the Father of Criminology and Father of the Positive School**

**Debate**

**Instructions:** Read the following section of the textbook: “Lombroso as the Father of Criminology and Father of the Positive School.” Please answer the following questions. You will discuss your answers with the class.

1. Define the term *determinism*.
2. Discuss arguments in favor of determinism. Discuss arguments that refute determinism.
3. Do you believe in determinism? Why or why not?

**Class Activity 3: Post-Lombroso: The IQ Testing Era**

**Debate (Group Activity)**

**Instructions:** Please read the summary of *Buck v. Bell* (1927) below taken from Oyez.org. In groups of four, discuss the pros and cons (advantages and disadvantages) of sterilizing individuals who are deemed mentally deficient on intelligence tests. That is, two people should discuss the pros and two people should discuss the cons. Do you agree with the Supreme Court’s decision? Why or why not?

**Facts of the Case**

Carrie Buck was a feeble-minded woman who was committed to a state mental institution. Her condition had been present in her family for the last three generations. A Virginia law allowed for the sexual sterilization of inmates of institutions to promote the “health of the patient and the welfare of society.” Before the procedure could be performed, however, a hearing was required to determine whether or not the operation was a wise thing to do.

**Question**

Did the Virginia statute that authorized sterilization deny Buck the right to due process of the law and the equal protection of the laws as protected by the Fourteenth Amendment?

**Conclusion**

The Court found that the statute did not violate the Constitution. Justice Holmes made clear that Buck’s challenge was not upon the medical procedure involved but on the process of the substantive law. Since sterilization could not occur until a proper hearing had occurred (at which the patient and a guardian could be present) and after the Circuit Court of the County and the Supreme Court of Appeals had reviewed the case, if so requested by the patient. Only after “months of observation” could the operation take place. That was enough to satisfy the Court that there was no Constitutional violation. Citing the best interests of the state, Justice Holmes affirmed the value of a law like Virginia’s in order to prevent the nation from “being swamped with incompetence . . . Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”

**Class Activity 4: Case Study**

**Instructions:** Read the following case study carefully. Please answer the questions at the end of the case study.

Danny Green is in the eighth grade at Union Middle School. Danny lives with his mother and two younger brothers in a low-income housing development. The city commissioners have attempted numerous times to have the buildings condemned because of unsanitary and inhumane living conditions. However, each time the measure is voted down because local residents argue that if the housing development is condemned the people living there will have nowhere to go and will likely end up homeless. Danny’s teachers report that he is a “C” student at best and they feel that he really doesn’t make an effort to improve his academic standing. As a matter fact, Danny seems to do the minimum amount of work, which is just enough to keep his mother happy. Although Danny is not a stellar student, he has never been in any trouble at school. Lately, that has changed. He seems more aggressive and he has been verbally lashing out at his friends and some of his teachers. Recently, school officials learned that Danny may have been exposed to large doses of lead and manganese, which have been found in the housing development. (Manganese is used in steel production to improve hardness, stiffness, and strength of the steel.) Studies do show that exposure to these metals are significantly correlated with juvenile delinquency (e.g., Piquero, 1997). When brain chemistry is altered by exposure to heavy metals and other toxins, research suggests that people lose their ability to control violent behavior.

1. Do you think that Danny’s poor school performance may be linked to his exposure to the heavy metals? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that Danny’s aggressive behavior is linked to his exposure to the heavy metals? Why or why not?
3. As a city commissioner, what can you do about Danny’s situation? In other words, what policy recommendations would you make regarding Danny and the other citizens living in the housing development? Can your plan be reasonably implemented?
4. As a school official, what can you do about Danny’s situation? How would you try to get Danny (and his family) some help?