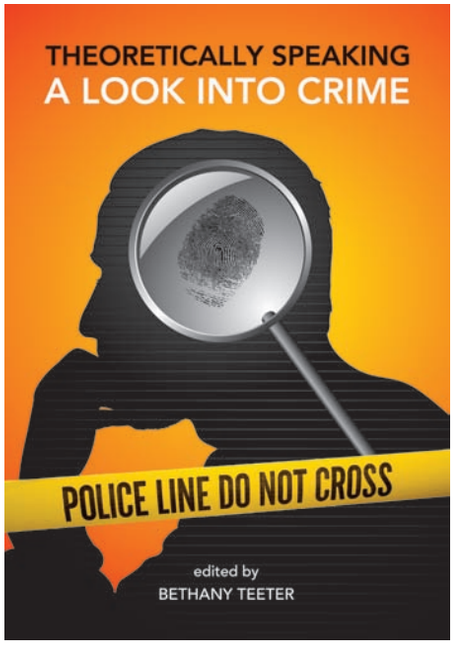

Theoretically Speaking
A Look into Crime

Edited by Bethany Teeter

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Theoretically Speaking
A Look Into Crime

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San Diego, CA

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Contents

Introduction

Theoretically Speaking: A Look into Crime is unlike most typical course textbooks because it is an anthology (collection of works) by several authors. These articles were selected to highlight several of the most important and well-known theories in criminology. This anthology exposes students to not just the basic theories but also some additional topics not usually covered in a standard textbook such as crime theory mapping and female violence.

Each of the articles addresses a specific theory in the world of criminology. These theories will help students gain a better understanding of how and why crime is committed. In order for students to understand crime and criminals they must first learn how theories were formed and their importance. These topics and articles will help students understand the theories as many of them are written by actual criminologists who give perspectives not offered by other textbooks. These articles provide a solid foundation for each student as they pursue their careers in criminology.

Theoretically Speaking: A Look into Crime is a great anthology that contains some of the best and most noteworthy names in the field of criminology including Edwin Sutherland, Donald Cressey, Emile Durkheim and George Vold. Although Sutherland was a sociologist, he also became an important part of criminology by coining the term "white-collar crime" and was best known in the field for his "differential association" theory of crime. Cressey was a professor and author and was most noted as being a national expert in the sociology of crime. Durkheim was a sociologist, but he is known in criminology for his belief that crime and deviance brought a society together. Finally, Vold was a criminologist, professor and author who specialized in criminal sociology. All these men have provided the field of criminology with thoughts and theories that are still relevant today.

A Social Learning Theory of Crime—associated with Albert Bandura—is a significant theory within criminology. Social learning theory suggests that we learn through observations in society and that behavior can be changed through punishment or imitation and is considered the most relevant behavioral theory within criminology. Bandura was a psychologist, professor and author who believed that aggressive behaviors were

indeed learned by behavior modeling. The inclusion of this article is valuable to all students in the field.

Edwin Sutherland was a well-known leading criminologist who brought us the article *A Theory of Differential Association,* which is significant criminology because it looks at the idea that deviance and crime are learned behaviors. Many debates still exist whether crime is learned or whether it is biological. Sutherland's theory states that violation of norms and acts of crime are learned through our interactions and communication of individuals. This article is important reading.

There are many theories that exist to determine why individuals commit crimes and how they become deviants. *Toward a Theory of Race, Crime and Urban Inequality* is an article that addressed the theory that race plays a factor in crime. This is not a common theory that is discussed in criminology courses but one that helps make this anthology unique. In order to help explain criminal behavior and the criminal mind it is critical to explore as many theories as possible, and this article explores yet another important one.

Students and scholars of criminology alike all explore the strain theory, which states that society tends to encourage criminal acts. The strain that is placed on people within society may be the reason why some turn to crime. Two important articles help explain this significant theory, *Strain Theories* and *Gender and Crime: A General Strain Theory Perspective,* both of which offer a good look into the variations of strain theories. Robert Agnew, the author of *Strain Theories*, helped bring this theory back into light in more recent years. Agnew suggests that the general strain theory helps explain the difference between male and female crimes and how gender roles may affect crime.

Control Theories takes a different approach to criminological theory. It looks at why more people don't commit crime rather than why they do commit crime. When personal and social controls fail, delinquency is likely to occur. There have been several variations of the control theories, which were originally formed in the early 1950s. This article presents another key theory for students to consider.

While we study the various theories within criminology, it is important to note how these theories are formed. A good way to visualize how theories are put together is by looking at *Mapping Criminological Theory.* This article explains how theories are put together with clear visuals of the charts and maps. This is similar to a flow chart and can be created by anyone studying theories. The mapping is a good way to help put key elements of a theory together.

Criminal Mind is a short but interesting article that was written by Cesare Lombroso, who was a Professor and Criminologist known worldwide for his contributions to criminology. His work is included in criminology courses throughout the country. His early work included the idea of phrenology. He believed that certain physical characteristics played a role in criminal behavior or the tendency to commit crime.

Gender, as mentioned in a prior article, is a significant variable in determining how and why crime is committed. The article *Beyond Bad Girls: Meanness, Violence and Gender* is a different approach than many chapters in textbooks, yet brings an interesting element to the anthology. Years ago it was not common to see many female criminals, but today we see more and more crime being committed by women. Violent crime was typically only committed by men but this is no longer the case. This article will be an excellent addition to any textbook and course.

The final article in the anthology is *The Social Functions of Crime* written by Emile Durkheim, whose work is a must-read for any criminology student. Although he has been referred to as the "Father of Sociology," his work is important in both disciplines. His article on *The Social Functions of Crime* is an excellent resource and supplement for any criminology course and text. Durkheim describes social facts and provides thorough examples using our everyday lives to help the reader better understand the functions of crime.

In every society, a code of conduct is imposed upon its members. These legal and moral values that determine what is socially acceptable and what is considered criminal. In order to understand what makes a specific act criminal, it is necessary to establish the non-criminal functions of a society. In the article *The Social Functions of Crime,* Durkheim discusses this relationship between what an individual is taught and how this affects his or her attitudes and actions while interacting with others as well as the actions of the individual on a private, personal level.

Theoretically Speaking: A Look into Crime presents a unique perspective as it draws on the expertise of many well-known authors in the field. Some of the key elements within our society are covered throughout this anthology. Together these articles can serve as a great textbook for Introduction to Criminology, Advanced Criminology or other theory-based courses or an excellent supplement to many criminology courses.

A Social Learning Theory of Crime

By Ronald L. Akers

As Akers points out in this selection, his social learning theory is a reformulation and extension of Sutherland's differential association theory. Differential association theory argues that criminal behavior is learned in interaction with others, but it does not specify the mechanisms by which such behavior is learned. Burgess and Akers (1966) and Akers (1985, 1998, 2004) draw on several theories of learning, particularly behavioral theory and social learning theory in psychology, to more precisely describe how crime is learned.

Akers' theory is compatible with Sutherland's theory. Like Sutherland, Akers argues that we learn to engage in crime through exposure to and the adoption of definitions favorable to crime. Akers, however, more fully describes the nature of such definitions. In doing so, he draws heavily on Sykes and Matza's description of the techniques of neutralization—although he also argues that the definitions favorable to crime include more than neutralization techniques (i.e., he argues that there are both positive and neutralizing definitions favorable to crime).

At the same time, Akers extends differential association theory. He argues that crime may also be learned through imitation and differential reinforcement. Akers' theory, then, is much broader than that of Sutherland. In fact, Akers (1985, 1998) has argued that his theory is capable of subsuming most of the major sociological theories of crime. As Akers points out in this selection, his theory has received much empirical support. As a consequence, social learning theory is one of the leading theories of why individuals engage in crime. Further, Akers (1998) has recently extended social learning theory to the macro-level, with the theory being used to explain group differences in crime rates, including differences between sociodemographic groups (e.g., class and gender groups), communities, and societies. As described in

this selection, features of the larger social environment, as well as the individual's position in the larger environment, affect crime partly through their effect on the individual's "exposure to criminal associations, models, definitions, and reinforcement." Preliminary data provide some support for this argument (see Akers and Jensen, 2003; Akers and Sellers, 2004).

Development of the Theory

Sutherland asserted in the eighth statement of his theory that all the mechanisms of learning are involved in criminal behavior. However, beyond a brief comment that more is involved than direct imitation (Tarde, 1912), he did not explain what the mechanisms of learning are. These learning mechanisms were specified by Burgess and Akers (1966b) in their "differential association-reinforcement" theory of criminal behavior. Burgess and Akers produced a full reformulation that retained the principles of differential association, combining them with, and restating them in terms of, the learning principles of operant and respondent conditioning that had been developed by behavioral psychologists. Akers followed up his early work with Burgess to develop social learning theory, applying it to criminal, delinquent, and deviant behavior in general. He has modified the theory, provided a fully explicated presentation of its concepts, examined it in light of the critiques and research by others, and carried his own research to test its central propositions (Akers, 1973; 1977; 1985; 1998).

Social learning theory is not competitive with differential association theory. Instead, it is a broader theory that retains all the differential association processes in Sutherland's theory (albeit clarified and somewhat modified) and integrates it with differential reinforcement and other principles of behavioral acquisition, continuation, and cessation (Akers, 1985:41). Thus, research findings supportive of differential association also support the integrated theory. But social learning theory explains criminal and delinquent behavior more thoroughly than does the original differential association theory (see, for instance, Akers et al., 1979; Warr and Stafford, 1991).

Burgess and Akers (1966b) explicitly identified the learning mechanisms as those found in modern behavioral theory. They retained the concepts of differential association and definitions from Sutherland's theory, but conceptualized them in more behavioral terms and added concepts from behavioral learning theory. These concepts include differential reinforcement, whereby "operant" behavior (the voluntary actions of the individual) is conditioned or shaped by rewards and punishments. They also contain classical or "respondent" conditioning (the conditioning of involuntary reflex behavior); discriminative stimuli (the environmental and internal stimuli that provides cues or signals for behavior), schedules of reinforcement (the rate and ratio in which rewards and punishments follow behavioral responses), and other principles of behavior modification.

Social learning theory retains a strong element of the symbolic interactionism found in the concepts of differential association and definitions from Sutherland's theory (Akers, 1985: 39–70). Symbolic interactionism is the theory that social interaction is mainly the exchange of meaning and symbols; individuals have the cognitive capacity to imagine themselves in the role of others and incorporate this into their conceptions of themselves (Ritzer, 1992). This, and the explicit inclusion of such concepts as imitation, anticipated reinforcement, and self-reinforcement, makes social learning "soft behaviorism" (Akers, 1985:65). As a result, the theory is closer to cognitive learning theories, such as Albert Bandura's (1973; 1977; 1986; Bandura and Walters, 1963), than to the radical or orthodox operant behaviorism of B.F. Skinner (1953; 1959) with which Burgess and Akers began.

The Central Concepts and Propositions of Social Learning Theory

The word *learning* should not be taken to mean that the theory is only about how novel criminal behavior is acquired. "Behavioral principles are not limited to learning but are fundamental principles of performance [that account for] … the acquisition, maintenance, and modification of human behavior" (Andrews and Bonta, 1998: 150). Social learning theory offers an explanation of crime and deviance which embraces variables that operate both to motivate and control criminal behavior, both to promote and undermine conformity. The probability of criminal or conforming behavior occurring is a function of the balance of these influences on behavior. The basic assumption in social learning theory is that the same learning process in a context of social structure, interaction, and situation, produces both conforming and deviant behavior. The difference lies in the direction … [of] the balance of influences on behavior.

The probability that persons will engage in criminal and deviant behavior is increased and the probability of their conforming to the norm is decreased when they differentially associate with others who commit criminal behavior and espouse definitions favorable to it, are relatively more exposed in-person or symbolically to salient criminal/deviant models, define it as desirable or justified in a situation discriminative for the behavior, and have received in the past and anticipate in the current or future situation relatively greater reward than punishment for the behavior. (Akers, 1998: 50)

As these quotations show, while referring to all aspects of the learning process, Akers' development of the theory has relied principally on four major concepts: *differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement*, and *imitation* (Akers et al., 1979; Akers, 1985; Akers, 1998).

Differential association. Differential association refers to the process whereby one is exposed to normative definitions favorable or unfavorable to illegal or law-abiding behavior. Differential association has both behavioral interactional and normative

dimensions. The interactional dimension is the direct association and interaction with others who engage in certain kinds of behavior, as well as the indirect association and identification with more distant reference groups. The normative dimension is the different patterns of norms and values to which an individual is exposed through this association.

The groups with which one is in differential association provide the major social contexts in which all the mechanisms of social learning operate. They not only expose one to definitions, they also present them with models to imitate and with differential reinforcement (source, schedule, value, and amount) for criminal or conforming behavior. The most important of these groups are the primary ones of family and friends, though they may also be secondary and reference groups. Neighbors, churches, school teachers, physicians, the law and authority figures, and other individuals and groups in the community (as well as mass media and other more remote sources of attitudes and models) have varying degrees of effect on the individual's propensity to commit criminal and delinquent behavior. Those associations that occur earlier (priority), last longer and occupy more of one's time (duration), take place most often (frequency and involve others with whom one has the more important or closer relationship (intensity) will have the greater effect on behavior.

Definitions. Definitions are one's own attitudes or meanings that one attaches to given behavior. That is, they are orientations, rationalizations, definition of the situation, and other evaluative and moral attitudes that define the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified.

In social learning theory, these definitions are both general and specific. General beliefs include religious, moral, and other conventional values and norms that are favorable to conforming behavior and unfavorable to committing any deviant or criminal acts. Specific definitions orient the person to particular acts or series of acts. Thus, one may believe that it is morally wrong to steal and that laws against then should be obeyed, but at the same time one may see little wrong with smoking marijuana and rationalize that it is all right to violate laws against drug possession.

The greater the extent to which one holds attitudes that disapprove of certain acts, the less one is likely to engage in them. Conventional beliefs are negative toward criminal behavior. Conversely, the more one's own attitudes approve of a behavior, the greater the chances are that one will do it. Approving definitions favorable to the commission of criminal or deviant behavior are basically positive or neutralizing. Positive definitions are beliefs or attitudes which make the behavior morally desirable or wholly permissible. Neutralizing definitions favor the commission of crime by justifying or excusing it. They view the act as something that is probably undesirable but given the situation, is nonetheless all right, justified, excusable, necessary, or not really bad to do. The concept of neutralizing definitions in social learning theory

incorporates the notions of verbalizations, rationalizations, techniques of neutralizations, accounts, disclaimers, and moral disengagement (Cressey, 1953; Sykes and Matza, 1957; Lyman and Scott, 1970; Hewitt and Stokes, 1975; Bandura, 1990). (See the discussion of neutralizations in Chapter 12.) Neutralizing attitudes include such beliefs as. "Everybody has a racket," "I can't help myself, I was born this way," "I am not at fault," "I am not responsible," "I was drunk and didn't know what I was doing," "I just blew my top." "They can afford it," "He deserved it," and other excuses and justification for committing deviant acts and victimizing others. These definitions favorable and unfavorable to criminal and delinquent behavior are developed through imitation and differential reinforcement. Cognitively, they provide a mind-set that makes one more willing to commit the act when the opportunity occurs. Behaviorally, they affect the commission of deviant or criminal behavior by acting as internal discriminative stimuli. Discriminative stimuli operate as cues or signals to the individual as to what responses are appropriate or expected it a given situation.

Some of the definitions favorable to deviance are so intensely held that they almost "require" one to violate the law. For instance, the radical ideologies of revolutionary groups provide strong motivation for terrorist acts, just as the fervent moral stance of some anti-abortion groups justifies in their minds the need to engage in civil disobedience. For the most part, however, definitions favorable to crime and delinquency do not "require" or strongly motivate action in this sense. Rather, they are conventional beliefs so weakly held that they provide no restraint or are positive or neutralizing attitudes that facilitate law violation in the right set of circumstances.

Differential reinforcement. Differential reinforcement refers to the balance of anticipated or actual rewards and punishments that follow or are consequences of behavior. Whether individuals will refrain from or commit a crime at any given time (and whether they will continue or desist from doing so in the future) depends on the past, present, and anticipated future rewards and punishments for their actions. The probability that an act will be committed or repeated is increased by rewarding outcomes or reactions to it, e.g., obtaining approval, money, food, or pleasant feelings—positive reinforcement. The likelihood that an action will be taken is also enhanced when it allows the person to avoid or escape aversive or unpleasant events—negative reinforcement. Punishment may also be direct (positive), in which painful or unpleasant consequences are attached to a behavior; or indirect (negative), in which a reward or pleasant consequence is removed. Just as there are modalities of association, there are modalities of reinforcement—amount, frequency, and probability. The greater the value or amount of reinforcement for the person's behavior, the more frequently it is reinforced, and the higher the probability that it will be reinforced (as balanced against alternative behavior), the greater the likelihood that it

will occur and be repeated. The reinforcement process does not operate in the social environment in a simple either/or fashion. Rather, it operates according to a "matching function" in which the occurrence of, and changes in, each of several different behaviors correlate with the probability and amount of, and changes in, the balance of reward and punishment attached to each behavior (Herrnstein, 1961; Hamblin, 1979; Conger and Simons, 1995).

Reinforcers and punishers can be non-social; for example, the direct physical effects of drugs and alcohol. However, whether or not these effects are experienced positively or negatively is contingent upon previously learned expectations. Through social reinforcement, one learns to interpret the effects as pleasurable and enjoyable or as frightening and unpleasant. Individuals can learn without contact, directly or indirectly, with social reinforcers and punishers. There may be a physiological basis for the tendency of some individuals (such as those prone to sensation-seeking) more than others to find certain forms of deviant behavior intrinsically rewarding (Wood et al., 1995). However, the theory proposes that most of the learning in criminal and deviant behavior is the result of social exchange in which the words, responses, presence, and behavior of other persons directly reinforce behavior, provide the setting for reinforcement (discriminative stimuli), or serve as the conduit through which other social rewards and punishers are delivered or made available.

The concept of social reinforcement (and punishment) goes beyond the direct reactions of others present while an act is committed. It also includes the whole range of actual and anticipated, tangible and intangible rewards valued in society or subgroups. Social rewards can be highly symbolic. Their reinforcing effects can come from their fulfilling ideological, religious, political, or other goals. Even those rewards which we consider to be very tangible, such as money and material possessions, gain their reinforcing value from the prestige and approval value they have in society. Nonsocial reinforcement, therefore, is more narrowly confined to unconditioned physiological and physical stimuli. In self-reinforcement the individual exercises self-control, reinforcing or punishing one's own behavior by taking the role of others, even when alone.

Imitation. Imitation refers to the engagement in behavior after the observation of similar behavior in others. Whether or not the behavior modeled by others will be imitated is affected by the characteristics of the models, the behavior observed, and the observed consequences of the behavior (Bandura, 1977). The observation of salient models in primary groups and in the media affects both pro-social and deviant behavior (Donnerstein and Linz, 1995). It is more important in the initial acquisition and performance of novel behavior than in the maintenance or cessation of behavioral patterns once established, but it continues to have some effect in maintaining behavior.

The Social Learning Process: Sequence and Feedback Effects

These social learning variables are all part of an underlying process that is operative in each individual's learning history and in the immediate situation in which an opportunity for a crime occurs. Akers stresses that social learning is a complex process with reciprocal and feedback effects. The reciprocal effects are not seen as equal; however. Akers hypothesizes a typical temporal sequence or process by which persons come to the point of violating the law or engaging in other deviant acts (Akers, 1998).

This process is one in which the balance of learned definitions, imitation of criminal or deviant models, and the anticipated balance of reinforcement produces the initial delinquent or deviant act. The facilitative effects of these variables continue in the repetition of acts, although imitation becomes less important than it was in the first commission of the act. After initiation, the actual social and non-social reinforcers and punishers affect whether or not the acts will be repeated and at what level of frequency. Not only the behavior itself, but also the definitions are affected by the consequences of the initial act. Whether a deviant act will be committed in a situation that presents the opportunity depends on the learning history of the individual and the set of reinforcement contingencies in that situation.

The actual social sanctions and other effects of engaging in the behavior may be perceived differently, but to the extent that they are more rewarding than alternative behavior, then the deviant behavior will be repeated under similar circumstances. Progression into more frequent or sustained patterns of deviant behavior is promoted [to the extent] that reinforcement, exposure to deviant models, and definitions are not offset by negative formal and informal sanctions and definitions. (Akers, 1985:60)

The theory does not hypothesize that definitions favorable to law violation only precede and are unaffected by the initiation of criminal acts. Acts in violation of the law can occur in the absence of any thought given to right and wrong. Furthermore, definitions may be applied by the individual retroactively to excuse or justify an act already committed. To the extent that such excuses successfully mitigate others' negative sanctions or one's self-punishment, however, they become cues for the repetition of deviant acts. At that point they precede the future commission of the acts.

Differential association with conforming and non-conforming others typically precedes the individual's committing the acts. Families are included in the differential association process, and it is obvious that association, reinforcement of conforming or deviant behavior, deviant or conforming modeling, and exposure to definitions favorable or unfavorable to deviance occurs within the family prior to the onset of delinquency. On the other hand, it can never be true that the onset of delinquency initiates interaction in the family (except in the unlikely case of the late-stage adoption of a child who is already delinquent who is drawn to and chosen by deviant parents). This is also hypothesized as the typical process within peer groups. While one may be attracted to deviant peer

groups prior to becoming involved in delinquency, associations with peers and others are most often formed initially around attractions, friendships, and circumstances, such as neighborhood proximity, that have little to do directly with co-involvement in some deviant behavior. However, after the associations have been established and the reinforcing or punishing consequences of the deviant behavior are experienced, both the continuation of old and the seeking of new associations (over which one has any choice) will themselves be affected. One may choose further interaction with others based, in part, on whether they too are involved in similar deviant or criminal behavior. But the theory proposes that the sequence of events, in which deviant associations precede the onset of delinquent behavior, will occur more frequently than the sequence of events in which the onset of delinquency precedes the beginning of deviant associations.

Social Structure and Social Learning

Akers has proposed a SSSL (social structure and social learning) model in which social structural factors are hypothesized to have an indirect effect on the individual's conduct. They affect the social learning variables of differential association, differential reinforcement, definitions, and imitation which, in turn, have a direct impact on the individual's conduct. The social learning variables are proposed as the main ones in the process by which various aspects of the social structure influence individual behavior (see Figure 12.1).

The social structural variables are indicators of the primary distal macro-level and meso-level causes of crime, while the social learning variables reflect the primary proximate causes of criminal behavior that mediate the relationship between social structure and crime rates. Some structural variables are not related to crime and do not explain the crime rate because they do not have a crime-relevant effect on the social learning variables. (Akers, 1998:322)

As shown in Figure 12.1, Akers (1998) identifies four dimensions of social structure that provide the contexts within which social learning variables operate:

(I) *Differential Social Organization* refers to the structural correlates of crime in the community or society that affect the rates of crime and delinquency including age composition, population density, and other attributes that lean societies, communities, and other social systems "toward relatively high or relatively low crime rates" (Akers, 1998:332).

(II) *Differential Location in the Social Structure* refers to sociodemographic characteristics of individuals and social groups that indicate their niches within the larger social structure. Class, gender, race and ethnicity, marital status, and age locate the positions and standing of persons and their roles, groups, or social categories in the overall social structure.

(III) *Theoretically Defined Structural Variables* refer to anomie, class oppression, social disorganization, group conflict, patriarchy, and other concepts that have been used in one or more theories to identify criminogenic conditions of societies, communities, or groups (see Chapters 7–10).

(IV) *Differential Social Location* refers to individuals' membership in and relationship to primary, secondary, and reference groups such as the family, friendship/peer groups, leisure groups, colleagues, and work groups.

The differential social organization of society and community, as well as the differential location of persons in the social class, race, gender, religion, and other structures in society, provides the general learning contexts for individuals that increase or decrease the likelihood of their committing crime. The differential location in family, peer, school, church, and other groups provides the more immediate contexts that promote or discourage the criminal behavior of the individual. Differences in the societal or group rates of criminal behavior are a function of the extent to which their cultural traditions, norms, and social control systems provide socialization, learning environments, and immediate situations conducive to conformity or deviance. The structural conditions identified in macrolevel theories can affect one's exposure to criminal associations, models, definitions, and reinforcement to induce or retard criminal actions in individuals. It is possible, therefore, to integrate these structural theories with social learning. Although this has not yet been accomplished, the SSSL model is a step in that direction.

Empirical Validity of Social Learning Theory: Critiques and Research on Social Learning Variables

The testability of the basic behavioral learning principles incorporated in social learning theory has been challenged because they may be tautological. The way in which the principle of reinforcement is often stated by behavioral psychologists makes the proposition true by definition. That is, they define reinforcement by stating that it occurs when behavior has been strengthened, that is, its rate of commission has been increased. If reinforcement is defined this way, then the statement "If behavior is reinforced, it will be strengthened" is tautological. If reinforcement means that behavior has been strengthened, then the hypothesis states simply, "If behavior is reinforced, it is reinforced." If the behavior is not strengthened, then by definition it has not been reinforced; therefore, no instance of behavior that is not being strengthened can be used to falsify the hypothesis.

Another criticism of social learning has to do with the temporal sequence of differential peer association and delinquency. Some have argued that youths become delinquent first then seek out other delinquent youths. Rather than delinquent associations causing

delinquency, delinquency causes delinquent associations. If there is a relationship between one's own delinquency and one's association with delinquent peers, then it is simply a case of "birds of a feather flocking together" rather than a bird joining a flock and changing its feathers. Differential peer associations with delinquent friends is almost always a consequence rather than a cause of one's own behavior. Association with delinquent peers takes place only or mainly after peers have already independently established patterns of delinquent involvement. No deviance-relevant learning takes place in peer groups. From this point of view, any association with delinquent youths has no direct effect on an adolescent's delinquent behavior. Therefore, association with delinquent friends has an effect on neither the onset nor acceleration, the continuation nor cessation, of delinquent behavior (Hirschi, 1969; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1993).

These criticisms, however, may be off the mark. Burgess and Akers (1966a) identified this tautology problem and offered one solution to it. They separated the definitions of reinforcement and other behavioral concepts from non-tautological, testable propositions in social learning theory and proposed criteria for falsifying those propositions. Others as well have proposed somewhat different solutions (Liska, 1969; Chadwick-Jones, 1976). Moreover, the variables in the process of reinforcement are always measured separately (and hence non-tautologically) from measures of crime and deviance in research on social learning theory. The theory would be falsified if it is typically the case that positive social approval or other rewards for delinquency (that are not offset by punishment) more often reduce than increase its recurrence. Also, as shown above, feedback effects are built into the reinforcement concept with both prior and anticipated reward/punishment influencing present behavior.

Furthermore, the reciprocal relationship between one's own conduct and one's definitions and association with friends is clearly recognized in social learning theory. Therefore, the fact that delinquent behavior may precede the association with delinquent peers does not contradict this theory. "Social learning admits that birds of a feather do flock together, but it also admits that if the birds are humans, they also will influence one another's behavior, in both conforming and deviant directions" (Akers, 1991:210). It would contradict the theory if research demonstrated that the onset of delinquency always or most often predates interaction with peers who have engaged in delinquent acts and/or have adhered to delinquency-favorable definitions. It would not support the theory if the research evidence showed that whatever level of delinquent behavioral involvement preceded association with delinquent peers stayed the same or decreased rather than increased after the association. Research has not yet found this to be the case. Instead, the findings from several studies favor the process proposed by social learning theory, which recognizes both direct and reciprocal effects. That is, a youngster associates differentially with peers who are deviant or tolerant of deviance, learns definitions favorable to delinquent behavior, is exposed to deviant models that reinforce delinquency, then

initiates or increases involvement in that behavior, which then is expected to influence further associations and definitions (Kandel, 1978; Andrews and Kandel, 1979; Krohn et al., 1985; Sellers and Winfree, 1990; Empey and Stafford, 1991; Elliott and Menard, 1991; 1996; Kandel and Davies, 1991; Warr, 1993b; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 1994; Menard and Elliott, 1994; Winfree et al., 1994a; Akers and Lee, 1996; Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998; Battin et al., 1998).

Kandel and Davies (1991:442) note that

> although assortive pairing plays a role in similarity among friends observed at a single point in time, longitudinal research that we and others have carried out clearly documents the etiological importance of peers in the initiation and persistence of substance use.

Warr (1993b) also refers to the considerable amount of research evidence showing that peer associations precede the development of deviant patterns (or increase the frequency and seriousness of deviant behavior once it has begun) more often than involvement in deviant behavior precedes associations with deviant peers. The reverse sequence also occurs and Warr proposes that the process is

> … a more complex, sequential, reciprocal process: Adolescents are commonly introduced to delinquency by their friends and subsequently become more selective in their choices of friends. The "feathering" and "flocking" … are not mutually exclusive and may instead be part of a unified process. (Warr, 1993b: 39)

This is, of course, completely consistent with the sequential and feedback effects in the social learning process spelled out above. Menard and Elliott (1990; 1994; Elliott and Menard, 1996) also support the process as predicted by social learning theory. Reciprocal effects were found in their research, but:

> [I]n the typical sequence of initiation of delinquent bonding and illegal behavior, delinquent bonding (again, more specifically, association with delinquent friends) usually precedes illegal behavior for those individuals for whom one can ascertain the temporal order. … [S]imilarly … weakening of belief typically preceded the initiation of illegal behavior. (Elliott and Menard, 1994: 174)

> These results are strong enough to indicate that serious forms of delinquent behavior such as index offending rarely, if ever, precede exposure to delinquent

> friends. Instead, in the vast majority of cases, exposure precedes index offending. (Elliott and Menard, 1996: 43)

> We were *not* able to reject the learning theory hypothesis that the onset of exposure to delinquent others typically precedes the onset of delinquent behavior. Instead, we found that exposure to delinquent peers preceded minor delinquent behavior in a majority of cases, and serious delinquency in nearly all cases where some order could be determined. … Having delinquent friends and being involved in delinquent behavior may influence one another, but the influence is not symmetric; the influence of exposure on delinquency begins earlier in the sequence, and remains stronger throughout the sequence, than the influence of delinquency on exposure. (Elliott and Menard, 1996: 61–62)

The preponderance of findings thus far shows a stronger effect of peer associations on the individual's delinquent behavior. However, some research finds stronger effects running in the other direction and some shows the relationship to be about equal depending on the measures and methods employed (Kandel, 1996; Krohn et al., 1996; Matsueda and Anderson, 1998).

Another criticism of the theory is that the strong relationship between self-reported delinquency and peer associations is entirely due to the fact that associations are often measured by the individual's report of the delinquency of his or her peers; they are the same thing measured twice. One is measuring the same underlying delinquent tendency, whether youngsters are asked about the delinquency of their friends or about their own delinquency. But research shows that the two are not the same and that the respondent's reports of friends' behavior is not simply a reflection of one's own delinquent behavior (Menard and Elliott, 1990; 1991; Agnew, 1991b; Warr; 1993b; Thornberry et al., 1994; Elliott and Menard, 1996; Bartusch et al., 1997).

Almost all research conducted on social learning theory has found strong relationships in the theoretically expected direction between social learning variables and criminal, delinquent, and deviant behavior. When social learning theory is tested against other theories using the same data collected from the same samples, it is usually found to account for more variance in the dependent variables or have greater support than the theories with which it is being compared (for instance, see Akers and Cochran, 1985; Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; White et al., 1986; Kandel and Davies, 1991; McGee, 1992; Benda, 1994; Burton et al. 1994). When social learning variables are included in integrated or combined models that incorporate variables from different theories, it is the measures of social learning concepts that have the strongest main and net effects (Elliott et al., 1985; Kaplan et al., 1987; Thornberry et al., 1994; Kaplan, 1996; Catalano et al., 1996).

There is abundant evidence to show the significant impact on criminal and deviant behavior of differential association in primary groups such as family and peers. The role of the family is usually as a conventional socializer against delinquency and crime. It provides anti-criminal definitions, conforming models, and the reinforcement of conformity through parental discipline; it promotes the development of self-control. But deviant behavior may be the outcome of internal family interaction (McCord, 1991b). It is directly affected by deviant parental models, ineffective and erratic parental supervision and discipline in the use of positive and negative sanctions, and the endorsement of values and attitudes favorable to deviance. Patterson has shown that the operation of social learning mechanisms in parent-child interaction is a strong predicter of conforming/deviant behavior (Patterson, 1975; 1995; Snyder and Patterson, 1995). Ineffective disciplinary strategies by parents increase the chances that a child will learn behavior in the early years that is a precursor to his or her later delinquency. Children learn conforming responses when parents consistently make use of positive reward for proper behavior and impose moderately negative consequences for misbehavior (Capaldi et al., 1997). In some cases, parents directly train their children to commit deviant behavior (Adler and Adler, 1978). And in general, parental deviance and criminality is predictive of the children's future delinquency and crime (McCord, 1991a). Moreover, youngsters with delinquent siblings in the family are more likely to be delinquent, even when parental and other family characteristics are taken into account (Rowe and Gulley, 1992; Lauritsen, 1993; Rowe and Farrington, 1997).

Delinquent tendencies learned in the family may be exacerbated by differential peer association (Simons et al., 1994; Lauritsen, 1993). Other than one's own prior deviant behavior, the best single predictor of the onset, continuance, or desistance of crime and delinquency is differential association with conforming or law-violating peers (Loeber and Dishion, 1987; Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). More frequent, longer-term, and closer association with peers who do not support deviant behavior is strongly correlated with conformity, while greater association with peers who commit and approve of delinquency is predictive of one's own delinquent behavior. It is in peer groups that the first availability and opportunity for delinquent acts are typically provided. Virtually every study that includes a peer association variable finds it to be significantly and usually most strongly related to delinquency, alcohol and drug use and abuse, adult crime, and other forms of deviant behavior. There is a sizable body of research literature that shows the importance of differential associations and definitions in explaining crime and delinquency. The impact of differential peer association on delinquent behavior is among the most fully substantiated and replicated findings in criminology. Only the well-known relationships of crime rates to basic sociodemographic variables like age and sex are as consistently reported in the literature.

One special context of peer association is participation in delinquent gangs. Delinquent gangs and subcultures have received a great deal of attention in criminology for a long time (see Chapter 7). And research continues to find the strong influence of gang membership on serious delinquency. Battin et al. (1998) found that, controlling for prior delinquency, adolescents with delinquent friends are more likely to engage in delinquent conduct and come before the juvenile court on delinquency charges, even if they are not part of a gang. But they are even more likely to do so if they and their friends are members of an identified delinquent gang. Whatever the frequency and seriousness of one's previous delinquency, joining a gang promotes an even higher level of his or her delinquent involvement, in large part because

> group processes and norms favorable to violence and other delinquency within gangs subsequently encourage and reinforce participation in violent and delinquent behavior. (Battin et al., 1998:108)

These findings suggest that, compared to having one or more non-gang delinquent friends, gang membership produces more frequent, intense, and enduring association with delinquent friends, exposure to delinquent models and definitions, and reinforcement for delinquent behavior. Other research from the GREAT (Gang Resistance Education And Training) project by Winfree et al. (1994a; 1994b) shows that both gang membership itself and delinquency (gang-related as well as non-gang delinquency) are explained by social learning variables (attitudes, social reinforcers/punishers, and differential association). This is true even controlling for "personal-biographical characteristics, including ethnicity, gender, and place of residence" (Winfree et al., 1994a: 167). The processes specified in social learning theory are

> nearly identical to those provided by qualitative gang research. Gang members reward certain behavior in their peers and punish others, employing goals and processes that are indistinguishable from those described by Akers. (Winfree et al., 1994a: 149)

Later research from the GREAT project by Esbensen and Deschenes (1998) found that while neither is especially strong, social learning models do a better job than social bonding models of distinguishing between gang and non-gang members among both boys and girls in the eighth grade.

Many studies using direct measures of one or more of the social learning variables of differential association, imitation, definitions, and differential reinforcement find that the theory's hypotheses are upheld (Elliott et al., 1985; Dembo et al., 1986 White et al., 1986; Sellers and Winfree 1990; McGee, 1992; Winfree et al., 1993 1994a; 1994b;

Mihalic and Elliott, 1997 Skinner and Fream, 1997; Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998). The relationships between the social learning variables and delinquent, criminal, and deviant behavior found in the research are typically strong to moderate, and there has been very little negative evidence reported in the literature.

Akers' Research on Social Learning Theory

In addition to the consistently positive findings by other researchers, support for the theory comes from research conducted by Akers and his associates in which all of the key social learning variables are measured (Akers, 1998). These include tests of social learning theory by itself and tests that directly compare its empirical validity with other theories. The first of these, conducted with Marvin D. Krohn, Lonn Lanza-Kaduce, and Marcia J. Radosevich, was a self-report questionnaire survey of adolescent substance abuse involving 3000 students in grades 7 through 12 in eight communities in three Midwestern states (Akers et al., 1979; Krohn et al., 1982; Krohn et al., 1984; Lanza-Kaduce et al., 1984; Akers and Cochran, 1985; Akers and Lee, 1999). The second, conducted with Marvin Krohn, Ronald Lauer, James Massey, William Skinner, and Sherilyn Spear, was a five-year longitudinal study of smoking among 2000 students in junior and senior high school in one Midwest community (Lauer et al., 1982; Krohn et al., 1985; Spear and Akers, 1988; Akers, 1992a; Akers and Lee, 1996). The third project, conducted with Anthony La Greca, John Cochran, and Christine Sellers, was a four-year longitudinal study of conforming and deviant drinking among elderly populations (1400 respondents) in four communities in Florida and New Jersey (Akers et al., 1989; Akers and La Greca, 1991; Akers, 1992a). The fourth and fifth studies were the master's and doctoral research of Scot Boeringer, conducted under Akers' supervision, on rape and sexual coercion among samples of 200 and 500 college males (Boeringer et al., 1991; Boeringer, 1992). The dependent variables in these studies ranged from minor deviance to serious criminal behavior.

The findings in each of these studies demonstrated that the social learning variables of differential association, differential reinforcement, imitation, and definitions, singly and in combination, are strongly related to the various forms of deviant, delinquent, and criminal behavior studied. The social learning model produced high levels of explained variance, much more than other theoretical models with which it was compared.

The combined effects of the social learning variables on adolescent alcohol and drug use and abuse are very strong. High amounts (from 31 to 68 percent) of the variance in these variables are accounted for by the social learning variables. Social bonding models account for about 15 percent and anomie models account for less than 5 percent of the variance.

Similarly adolescent cigarette smoking is highly correlated with the social learning variables. These variables also predict quite well the maintenance of smoking over a three-year period. They fare less well, however, when predicting which of the initially abstinent youngsters will begin smoking in that same period. The social learning variables do a slightly better job of predicting the onset of smoking over a five-year period. The sequencing and reciprocal effects of social learning variables and smoking behavior over the five-year period are as predicted by the theory. The onset, frequency, and quantity of elderly drinking is highly correlated with social learning, and the theory also successfully accounts for problem drinking among the elderly.

The social learning variables of association, reinforcement, definitions, and imitation explain the self-perceived likelihood of using force to gain sexual contact or committing rape by college men (55 percent explained variance). They also account for the actual use of drugs or alcohol, non-physical coercion, and physical force by males to obtain sex (20 percent explained variance). Social bonding, self-control, and relative deprivation (strain) models account for less than 10 percent of the variance in these variables.

The research by Akers and others has also included some evidence on the hypothesized relationship between social structure and social learning. This research has found that the correlations of adolescent drug use and smoking, elderly alcohol abuse, and rape to socio-demographic variables of age, sex, race, and class are reduced toward zero when the social learning variables are taken into account. Also, differences in levels of marijuana and alcohol use among adolescents in four types of communities (farm, rural-nonfarm, suburban, and urban), and the differences in overall levels of drinking behavior among the elderly in four types of communities, are mediated by the social learning process. These and other findings from other research show some support for the SSSL theory (Warr, 1998; Mears et al., 1998; Akers and Lee, 1999). However, at this time there has not been enough research to confirm that social learning is the principal process mediating the relationship of social structure and crime as expected by the theory.

Summary

Akers' social learning theory combines Sutherland's original differential association theory of criminal behavior with general behavioral learning principles. The theory proposes that criminal and delinquent behavior is acquired, repeated, and changed by the same process as conforming behavior. While referring to all parts of the learning process, Akers's social learning theory in criminology has focused on the four major concepts of differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation. That process will more likely produce behavior that violates social and legal norms

than conforming behavior when persons differentially associate with those who expose them to deviant patterns, when the deviant behavior is differentially reinforced over conforming behavior, when individuals are more exposed to deviant than conforming models, and when their own definitions favorably dispose them to commit deviant acts.

This social learning explanation of crime and delinquency has been strongly supported by the research evidence. Research conducted over many years, including that by Akers and associates, has consistently found that social learning is empirically supported as an explanation of individual differences in delinquent and criminal behavior. The hypothesis that social learning processes mediate the effects of socio-demographic and community variables on behavior has been infrequently studied, but the evidence so far suggests that it will also be upheld.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Much data indicate that associating with delinquents increases one's own level of delinquency. According to social learning theory, why might this be so?
2. Drawing on social learning theory, describe and give an example of the major types of "definitions" favorable to crime.
3. How does positive reinforcement differ from negative reinforcement?
4. Describe the social learning *process*—note how this process changes after the initiation into deviance and describe the feedback effects in this process.
5. How might Akers explain the fact that males have higher rates of crime than females?

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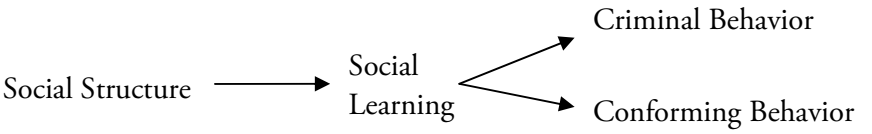
Figure 12.1. ***Social Structure and Social Learning***



I. Society Communication IV. Family Peers School Others	II. Age Gender Race Class	III. Social Disorganization Conflict	Differential Association Differential Reinforcement Definitions Imitation Other Learning Variables	Individual Behavior

I. Differential Social Organization
II. Differential Location in the Social Structure
III. Theoretically Defined Structural Variables
IV. Differential Social Location in Groups

(Adapted from Akers, 1998:331)

A Theory of Differential Association

By Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald R. Cressey

Before Sutherland developed his theory, crime was usually explained in terms of multiple factors—like social class, broken homes, age, race, urban or rural location, and mental disorder. Sutherland developed his theory of differential association in an effort to explain why these various factors were related to crime. In doing so, he hoped to organize and integrate the research on crime up to that point, as well as to guide future research.

Sutherland's theory is stated in the form of nine propositions. He argues that criminal behavior is learned by interacting with others, especially intimate others. Criminals learn both the techniques of committing crime and the definitions favorable to crime from these others. The sixth proposition, which forms the heart of the theory, states that "a person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to law violation over definitions unfavorable to violation of law." According to Sutherland, factors such as social class, race, and broken homes influence crime because they affect the likelihood that individuals will associate with others who present definitions favorable to crime.

Sutherland's theory has had a tremendous influence on crime research and it remains one of the dominant theories of crime. Studies on the causes of crime routinely attempt to determine whether individuals are associating with delinquent or criminal others. Although one can learn definitions favorable to crime from law-abiding individuals, one is most likely to learn such definitions from delinquent friends or criminal family members. These studies typically find that association with delinquent others is the best predictor of crime, and that these delinquent others partly influence crime by leading the individual to adopt beliefs conducive to crime (see Agnew, 2000; Akers, 1998; Akers and Sellers, 2004; Warr, 2001 for summaries of such studies).

Selected for The Social Issues Collection™ by Jean McGloin from Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald R. Cressey, "A Theory of Differential Association," in *Criminological Theory: Past to Present: Essential Readings*, ed. Francis T. Cullen and Robert Agnew, 122–125 (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Sutherland's theory has also inspired much additional theorizing in criminology. Theorists have attempted to better describe the nature of those definitions favorable to violation of the law. They have attempted to better describe the processes by which we learn criminal behavior from others. And they have drawn on Sutherland in an effort to explain group differences in crime rates. Sutherland's theory of differential association, then, is one of the enduring classics in criminology (for excellent discussions of the current state of differential association theory, see Matsueda, 1988, and Warr, 2001).

The following statement refers to the process by which a particular person comes to engage in criminal behavior:

1. *Criminal behavior is learned*. Negatively, this means that criminal behavior is not inherited, as such; also, the person who is not already trained in crime does not invent criminal behavior, just as a person does not make mechanical inventions unless he has had training in mechanics.
2. *Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication*. This communication is verbal in many respects but includes also "the communication of gestures."
3. *The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups*. Negatively, this means that the impersonal agencies of communication, such as movies and newspapers, play a relatively unimportant part in the genesis of criminal behavior.
4. *When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes very simple; (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes*.
5. *The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable*. In some societies an individual is surrounded by persons who invariably define the legal codes as rules to be observed, while in others he is surrounded by persons whose definitions are favorable to the violation of the legal codes. In our American society these definitions are almost always mixed, with the consequence that we have culture conflict in relation to the legal codes.
6. *A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law*. This is the principle of differential association. It refers to both criminal and anti-criminal associations and has to do with counteracting forces. When persons become criminal, they do so because of contacts with criminal patterns and also because of isolation from anti-criminal patterns. Any person inevitably assimilates the surrounding culture unless other patterns are in conflict; a Southerner does not pronounce "r"

because other Southerners do not pronounce "r." Negatively, this proposition of differential association means that associations which are neutral so far as crime is concerned have little or no effect on the genesis of criminal behavior. Much of the experience of a person is neutral in this sense, e.g., learning to brush one's teeth. This behavior has no negative or positive effect on criminal behavior except as it may be related to associations which are concerned with the legal codes. This neutral behavior is important especially as an occupier of the time of a child so that he is not in contact with criminal behavior during the time he is so engaged in the neutral behavior.

7. *Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity*. This means that associations with criminal behavior and also associations with anti-criminal behavior vary in those respects. "Frequency" and "duration" as modalities of associations are obvious and need no explanation. "Priority" is assumed to be important in the sense that lawful behavior developed in early childhood may persist throughout life, and also that delinquent behavior developed in early childhood may persist throughout life. This tendency, however, has not been adequately demonstrated, and priority seems to be important principally through its selective influence. "Intensity" is not precisely defined but it has to do with such things as the prestige of the source of a criminal or anti-criminal pattern and with emotional reactions related to the associations. In a precise description of the criminal behavior of a person these modalities would be stated in quantitative form and a mathematical ratio be reached. A formula in this sense has not been developed, and the development of such a formula would be extremely difficult.
8. *The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.* Negatively, this means that the learning of criminal behavior is not restricted to the process of imitation. A person who is seduced, for instance, learns criminal behavior by association, but this process would not ordinarily be described as imitation.
9. *While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values since non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values*. Thieves generally steal in order to secure money, but likewise honest laborers work in order to secure money. The attempts by many scholars to explain criminal behavior by general drives and values, such as the happiness principle, striving for social status, the money motive, or frustration, have been and must continue to be futile since they explain lawful behavior as completely as they explain criminal behavior. They are similar to respiration, which is necessary for any behavior but which does not differentiate criminal from non-criminal behavior.

It is not necessary, at this level of explanation, to explain why a person has the associations which he has; this certainly involves a complex of many things. In an area where the delinquency rate is high, a boy who is sociable, gregarious, active, and athletic is very likely to come in contact with the other boys in the neighborhood, learn delinquent behavior from them, and become a gangster; in the same neighborhood the psychopathic boy who is isolated, introverted, and inert may remain at home, not become acquainted with the other boys in the neighborhood, and not become delinquent. In another situation, the sociable, athletic, aggressive boy may become a member of a scout troop and not become involved in delinquent behavior. The person's associations are determined in a general context of social organization. A child is ordinarily reared in a family; the place of residence of the family is determined largely by family income; and the delinquency rate is in many respects related to the rental value of the houses. Many other aspects of social organization affect the kinds of associations a person has.

The preceding explanation of criminal behavior purports to explain the criminal and non-criminal behavior of individual persons. As indicated earlier, it is possible to state sociological theories of criminal behavior which explain the criminality of a community, nation, or other group. The problem, when thus stated, is to account for variations in crime rates and involves a comparison of the crime rates of various groups or the crime rates of a particular group at different times. The explanation of a crime rate must be consistent with the explanation of the criminal behavior of the person, since the crime rate is a summary statement of the number of persons in the group who commit crimes and the frequency with which they commit crimes. One of the best explanations of crime rates from this point of view is that a high crime rate is due to social disorganization. The term "social disorganization" is not entirely satisfactory and it seems preferable to substitute for it the term "differential social organization." The postulate on which this theory is based, regardless of the name, is that crime is rooted in the social organization and is an expression of that social organization. A group may be organized for criminal behavior or organized against criminal behavior. Most communities are organized both for criminal and anti-criminal behavior and in that sense the crime rate is an expression of the differential group organization. Differential group organization as an explanation of variations in crime rates is consistent with the differential association theory of the processes by which persons become criminals.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Sutherland mean by "definitions favorable to violation of law"? Give examples of such definitions.
2. According to Sutherland, our associations do not carry equal weight; some are more influential than others. What types of associations carry the greatest weight in influencing our behavior?
3. Strain theorists, described in the next section, argue that frustration is a major cause of crime. How would Sutherland respond to this argument?
4. What policy recommendations might Sutherland have made for controlling crime?

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