

Lecture 6: Learning theories

SOCIOL 3410: Criminology

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Learning Theories

- Differential Association (Sutherland)
- Social Learning Theory (Akers)
- Warr's Companions in Crime
- Code of the Street (Anderson)

Differential Association

- Major premise: criminal behavior is learned through social interactions
- Culture conflict: criminal vs. conventional
- Individual level: Differential association
- Aggregate level: Differential social organization



Principles of Differential Association (Sutherland & Cressey)

- 1) Criminal behavior is learned
- 2) Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication
- 3) The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups

Principles of Differential Association (Sutherland & Cressey)

- 4) When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime, which sometimes are very complicated, sometimes simple; (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalization, and attitudes
- 5) The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of legal codes as favorable and unfavorable
- 6) A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of the law. *This is the principle of differential association.*

Principles of Differential Association (Sutherland & Cressey)

- 7) Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity
- 8) *The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning*
- 9) While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by them since noncriminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values



Early research on differential association

- Sutherland
 - ▣ Professional thief
 - ▣ White-collar crime
- Becker
 - ▣ Marijuana smoking



Conclusions from current research

- Drug use
- Males
- In general, there is a relationship between:
 - ▣ Having deviant friends
 - ▣ Holding deviant attitudes
 - ▣ Committing deviant acts
- However, all the principles listed have not been proved due in part to the sheer difficulty of studying some of them...

Criticisms

- Hard to test (Empey; Pfohl; Vold & Bernard)
- Properly socialized to deviant subculture vs. improper socialization to normative culture (Akers)
- Origin of deviant definitions
- Self-selection (Burgess & Akers)

Social learning theory (Akers)

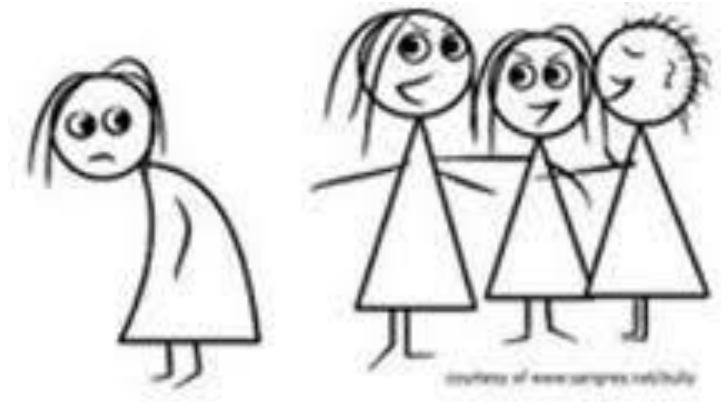
- Two steps
 - ▣ Initial involvement: imitation or definitions
 - ▣ Continuation: differential reinforcement
- Role of significant others and groups
- Evidence



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Companions in Crime (Warr)

- Sutherland's theory vs. the evidence
- Mechanisms for producing conformity among adolescents in a peer group:
 - ▣ Ridicule
 - ▣ Loyalty
 - ▣ Status
- Gender and peer groups
- Virtual peer group
- Parental attachment
- Age-crime curve explanation: life-course transitions (e.g. marriage) weaken ties to deviant peer group



Code of the Street (Anderson)

- Lack of trust in ability of state to ensure personal safety → take safety into own hands
- Lack of resources means status and respect must be achieved through non-traditional avenues
- Decent vs. street families
 - ▣ Fronting to survive



Policy implications

- Reverse offenders' criminal learning
- Correctional rehabilitation
- [Akers specifically:] Locate offenders in settings where they will receive prosocial reinforcement
- [Warr specifically:] encourage young adult life course transitions, encourage families to spend more time with their kids