

Differential Association Theory

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Differential association theory represents one of the most important theoretical traditions in criminology. Historically, the theory brought a sociological perspective to the forefront of criminology and, with his path-breaking work on white-collar crime, established Edwin Sutherland as perhaps the most important criminologist of his generation (Matsueda 1988). Sutherland (1939, 1947) originally specified differential association theory in 1939 in the third edition of his influential text, *Principles of Criminology*, and revised it in the fourth edition in 1947. Over 50 years later, differential association theory continues to stimulate revisions, extensions, and original research into the causes of crime.

SUTHERLAND'S INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

Sutherland turned his attention to the problem of crime when he was asked to write a textbook on criminology. In reviewing the research literature on the causes of crime, he originally took an eclectic view, adopting the prevailing conception of crime as having multiple causes, including mental deficiency, broken homes, minority status, age, class, inadequate socialization, alcoholic parents, and the like. In 1933, however, Michael and Adler ([1933] 1971) published a stinging critique of the discipline, arguing that criminology had used unscientific methods, produced no valid scientific generalizations, and, therefore, should be replaced by a panel of scientists from other disciplines. Profoundly affected by this critique, Sutherland spent the rest of his career trying to make criminology scientifically respectable. He began by questioning his own multiple factor approach to theory.

Sutherland ([1942] 1973) concluded that a multiple factor approach by itself did not provide a scientific understanding of crime. The list of factors associated with crime was so long that it yielded an unparsimonious model of crime. Moreover, Sutherland was increasingly dissatisfied with the lack of explanatory power of any one factor. He noted that race and sex are highly correlated with delinquency, as males and Blacks commit

more delinquent acts than females and Whites. Nevertheless, even though they have a higher rate of delinquency, the overwhelming majority of males and Blacks *refrain* from delinquent behavior, and some females and Whites engage in delinquency. Therefore, by themselves, concrete conditions, such as race and sex, do not provide an adequate explanation of delinquent behavior.

Sutherland concluded that scientific criminology should go beyond a listing of correlates of crime and seek a universal explanation of criminal behavior. Such an explanation would identify those conditions that were always present when crime was present and always absent otherwise. The multiple factors should not be ignored, but rather should be treated as facts to be explained by a scientific generalization. That is, a scientific explanation would explain why males and Blacks have higher crime rates than females and Whites.

To arrive at such a scientific generalization, Sutherland proposed three methods of theory construction. First, "logical abstraction" calls for logically abstracting from the concrete conditions known to correlate with crime to general abstract propositions and universal mechanisms. He asked, "What do Blacks, males, and youth from broken homes and inner-city neighborhoods *have in common* that causes them to have higher rates of crime?" In other words, what common process, mechanism, or experience generates these correlates of crime? The answer to this question would specify the intervening mechanisms accounting for the observed correlations between these concrete conditions and crime. Second, "differentiation of levels of analysis," calls for focusing on a single level of explanation (for example, the individual), while holding other levels constant (for example, the group, the society, or history), rather than trying to explain all levels at once. The ultimate goal would be an integrated theory that explained individual, group, and societal variation in crime, but these would develop serially. Third, "analytic induction" calls for a case-by-case construction and test of an explanation highlighted by a search for negative

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cases. Pioneered by Thomas and Znaniecki (1927), analytic induction consists of a search for a necessary and sufficient explanation: (1) Roughly define the universe of a phenomenon; (2) formulate a tentative hypothesis and test its fit on a few cases; (3) if the hypothesis does not fit, either modify the hypothesis or redefine the universe; (4) continue searching for negative cases until the hypothesis appears to fit; (5) test the hypothesis by testing its fit on cases that fall outside the universe.

The substantive direction that Sutherland took in applying these methods was influenced by the intellectual context of his time. That general context consisted of the Chicago School of sociology, including the work of Park and Burgess on social organization and that of Mead, Dewey, and Thomas on social psychology. More specifically, Sutherland was influenced by three developments in criminology. First, Shaw and McKay (1969) found that neighborhood rates of delinquency remained high in inner cities despite the complete turnover of ethnic groups. They applied ideas of social disorganization and cultural transmission to explain their findings. Sutherland sought an individual-level theory that was consistent with these empirical patterns.

Second, Sutherland was influenced by his work on professional theft (Sutherland 1937), which suggested that professional theft rings were maintained by processes of selection, indoctrination, and tutelage. Not just anyone can become a professional thief; one had to be selected, indoctrinated, and tutored. New recruits are selected through informal associations on the basis of skills such as street smarts, fast talking, and larceny sense. They are indoctrinated by a belief system that neutralizes the law and their social isolation with elements such as "a sucker is born every minute," "never rat on a fellow thief," and "big-time thieves have high status." Finally, they are tutored in the technical skills of confidence games, pickpocketing, and shoplifting. Each of these elements would appear in differential association theory.

Third, Sutherland was influenced by the concept of culture conflict. Wirth (1931) had written a paper on culture conflict and crime. Sutherland and Sellin had worked together on a project on culture conflict and crime, concluding that conflicting cultures, particularly resulting from immigration in the United States, generated criminal behavior (Sellin 1938). Sutherland (1942) (1973) noted that in certain tribes in India, traditional religious culture clashed with the legal culture. The religious culture required killing certain outsiders, whereas the legal culture proscribed all killings; thus, following one cultural code meant violating the other. Sutherland asked whether this process underlay all criminal behaviors.

DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION THEORY

Sutherland stated differential association theory as a set of nine propositions, which introduced three con-

cepts—normative conflict, differential association, and differential group organization—that explain crime at the levels of the society, the individual, and the group.

Normative Conflict: The Root Cause of Crime in Society

At the level of the society, crime in society is rooted in normative conflict. For Sutherland, primitive, undifferentiated societies are characterized by harmony, solidarity, and consensus over basic values and beliefs. Such societies have little conflict over appropriate behaviors. They also have little crime. With the industrial revolution, however, modern industrial societies developed, with advanced divisions of labor, market economies, and increased conflict. Such societies become segmented into groups that conflict over basic interests, values, and behavior patterns. These societies are characterized by specialization rather than similarity, coercion rather than harmony, conflict rather than consensus. Moreover, they tend to have high rates of crime. From these observations, Sutherland hypothesized that high crime rates are rooted in normative conflict, which he defined as a society segmented into groups that conflict over the definition of appropriate behavior. More precisely, normative conflict refers to conflict over the appropriateness of the law: Some groups define the law as a set of rules to be followed under all circumstances, and others define the law as a set of rules to be violated under certain circumstances. Therefore, when normative conflict is absent in a society, crime rates will be low; when normative conflict is high, societal crime rates will be high. In this way, crime is ultimately rooted in normative conflict.

Differential Association Process: Individual Criminal Acts

At the level of the individual, the process of differential association provides a social psychological explanation of how normative conflict in society translates into individual criminal acts. According to differential association, criminal behavior is learned in a process of communication in intimate groups. The content of learning includes two important elements. First are the requisite skills and techniques for committing crime, which can range from complicated, specialized skills of computer fraud, insider trading, and confidence games to the simple, readily available skills of assault, purse snatching, and drunk driving. Such techniques are necessary but insufficient to produce crime. Second are definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime. These definitions are motives, verbalizations, or rationalizations that make crime justified or unjustified, and include Sykes and Matza's (1957) "techniques of neutralization" used by delinquents, and Cressey's (1953) "verbalizations" used by embezzlers.

For example, definitions favorable to income tax fraud include "Everyone cheats on their taxes," "It's not a real crime," "This is an easy way to make money," and "The government has no right to tax its citizens." Definitions favorable to drunk driving include, "I can drive fine after a few beers," "I only have a couple of miles to drive home," and "I won't get caught this time." Definitions favorable to violence include, "If your manhood is threatened, you have to retaliate"; "Sometimes in the heat of the moment, you can't help yourself"; and "Killing is wrong, but sometimes people ask for it."

These definitions favorable to crime help organize and justify a criminal line of action in a particular situation. They are offset by definitions unfavorable to crime, such as "Income tax fraud is wrong and immoral," "Tax fraud deprives Americans of important programs that benefit the commonwealth," "All fraud and theft is immoral," "Turn the other cheek," "Friends don't let friends drink and drive," and "Any violation of the law is wrong."

These examples illustrate several points about definitions of crime. First, some definitions pertain to specific offenses only, such as "Friends don't let friends drink and drive," whereas others refer to a class of offenses, such as "All fraud and theft is immoral," and others refer to virtually all law violation, such as "Any violation of the law is wrong." Second, each definition serves to justify or motivate either committing criminal acts or refraining from criminal acts. Third, these definitions are not merely *ex post facto* rationalizations of crime, but rather operate to cause criminal behavior.

Sutherland recognized that definitions favorable to crime can be offset by definitions unfavorable to crime, and, therefore, he hypothesized that criminal behavior is determined by the ratio of definitions favorable to crime versus those unfavorable to crime. Furthermore, he recognized that definitions are not all equal; some are more important. Sutherland identified at least four dimensions (or modalities) on which definitions vary in importance or weight: frequency (the number of times a definition is presented), duration (the length of time a person is exposed to a definition), priority (the earlier a definition is presented in a person's life), and intensity (the more intense relationship or prestigious the person presenting the definition).

Therefore, the individual-level hypothesis of differential association theory states that a person will engage in criminal behavior if the following three conditions are met (Matsueda 1988): (1) The person has learned the requisite skills and techniques for committing crime; (2) the person has learned an excess of definitions favorable to crime over unfavorable to crime; (3) the person has the objective opportunity to carry out the crime. According to Sutherland, if all three conditions are present and crime does not occur, or a crime occurs in the absence of all three conditions, the

theory would be wrong and in need of revision. Thus, in principle, the theory can be falsified.

The process of differential association with definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime does not occur in a vacuum, but is structured by the broader social organization in which individuals are embedded. This includes the structures and organization of families, neighborhoods, schools, and labor markets. This organization is captured by the concept of differential social organization.

Differential Social Organization: Group Rates of Crime

At the level of the group, differential social organization provides a structural explanation of how normative conflict in society translates into specific group rates of crime. According to differential social organization, the crime rate of a group or society is determined by the extent to which that group or society is organized against crime versus organized in favor of crime. In developing this concept, Sutherland extended the concept of social disorganization, which referred to weak community organization against crime. Shaw and McKay defined social disorganization as the inability of a community to solve its problems and achieve shared values. Identifying disorganized communities in inner cities, they argued that rapid urban growth undermined informal social controls through geographic mobility, poverty, family disruption, immigration, and the like. Local residents tended to be transient and failed to develop a sense of community, and, consequently, local institutions, such as families, schools, and community associations remained weak and isolated from one another. Thus, the community structure was ineffectual in controlling youth and keeping them off the streets.

The concept of weak organization against crime refers precisely to the concept of social disorganization. Sutherland, however, felt that disorganization was only half of the equation. The other half consists of "organization in favor of crime," which is made up of organization and structures that foster criminal behavior. Shaw and McKay (1969) provided an example of organization in favor of crime with their concept of cultural transmission, which posits that older street gangs in disorganized areas transmitted a delinquent tradition to groups of younger boys, resulting in high rates of delinquency across generations of youth. Sutherland argued that organization in favor of crime, along with his concept of organization against crime, could be applied to any group to determine its crime rate. Thus, compared with suburban neighborhoods, inner-city neighborhoods are weakly organized against street crimes and strongly organized in favor of such crimes. Compared with other groups, the Mafia is strongly organized in favor of crime and weakly organized against crime. Compared with the United States, Japan is strongly organized against crime and weakly organized in favor of crime.

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Moreover, we can link the group-level theory of differential social organization to the individual-level theory of differential association. Groups that are strongly organized in favor of crime display numerous and intense definitions favorable to crime. Conversely, groups that are strongly organized against crime display numerous and intense definitions unfavorable to crime. It follows that differential social organization explains group crime rates by influencing the availability of definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime within a group (Matsueda 1988). When groups are strongly organized in favor of crime and weakly organized against crime, they will present an abundance of definitions favorable to crime and few definitions unfavorable to crime. Thus, individuals in such a group have a high probability of learning an excess of definitions of crime. Whether they do depends on their actual learning. Even in high crime communities, some residents are isolated from the abundant criminal definitions and exposed to the few anticriminal definitions in the community. According to the theory, they will refrain from crime because of an excess of definitions unfavorable to crime. The opposite also holds. In low crime communities, some residents are exposed to the few criminal definitions in the community and are isolated from the abundant anticriminal definitions. Given the opportunity and skills, they will engage in crime because of an excess of definitions favorable to crime.

Origins of Definitions Favorable to Crime

Some critics of differential association have charged that the theory explains the diffusion of crime through society, but it does not explain how crime came into existence in the first place. Sutherland agreed, calling it one of the most important questions in criminology. His own writings reveal that he suggested four mechanisms by which definitions favorable

to crime developed. First, as symbolic interactionists have noted, there is an element of novelty in all behaviors, and, therefore, some crimes and their justifications may have been novel solutions to problematic situations. Second, some definitions that applied to non-criminal behavior may be transferred to justify criminal behavior. Third, definitions favorable to crimes may have existed before the behavior was outlawed. The process by which laws are passed is an expression of normative conflict itself. A politically powerful group organizes against a weaker group whose behavior violates an important value of the powerful group. The two groups are in normative conflict. The powerful group is able to mobilize political and economic resources to get the behavior outlawed. Once the law is passed definitions favorable to the behavior are now definitions favorable to crime. Fourth, taking a broader macrohistorical view, Sutherland (1947) argued that the cultural values of individualism and personal wealth developed with the rise of industrial capitalism, the breakdown of feudal structures, and simple moral integration. Individualism and the accumulation of wealth fostered justifications for crime, particularly white-collar and corporate crime. After his death, Sutherland's former students made significant advances on each of these theses. Cressey applied ideas of Durkheim and Merton to this historical explanation (Sutherland and Cressey 1978), while Cohen (1955) and Cloward and Ohlin (1960) developed explanations for the innovation of delinquent subcultures.

CAUSAL STRUCTURE AND EMPIRICAL TESTS

Taken together, differential social organization and differential association theories trace out a causal structure leading to delinquent behavior. This is diagrammed in Figure 1. Delinquency has three proximal causes—objective opportunities, learned skills and techniques,

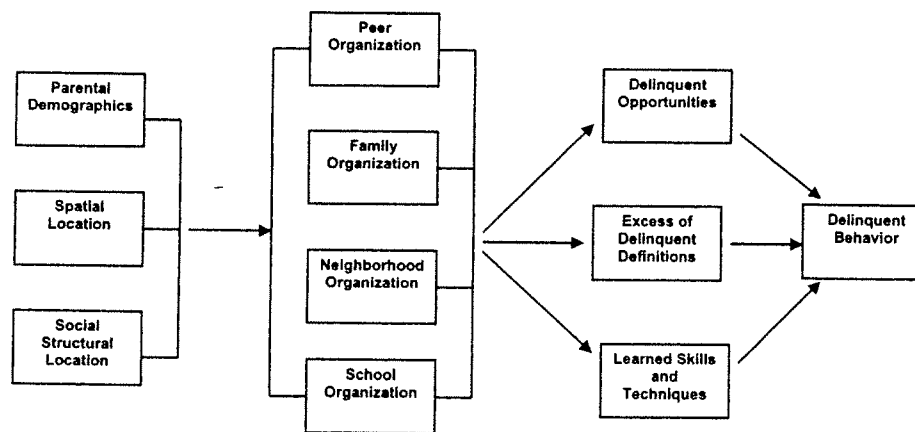


Figure 1. Diagram of differential social organization and differential association processes.

and the most important, learned excess of definitions favorable to delinquency. These proximal causes are rooted in a broader social organization of peers, families, neighborhoods, and schools. The important element here is the extent to which the group is organized in favor of delinquency versus organized against delinquency. Differential group organization determines the availability of definitions of delinquency, the opportunity to commit delinquent acts, and the availability of learning delinquency techniques. In turn these social organizations are determined by distal social structures, including parental demographics, the spatial location of the community, and the broader social structural location in society. This structure implies an important testable proposition—the learning of definitions of delinquency (combined with opportunities and learned delinquent techniques)—not only affects delinquency, but also mediates the effects of distal group organization and social structure, such as families, peers, schools, and social class.

Empirical research using survey data on adolescents has generally found support for this structure. Research finds that the process of learning definitions of delinquency is structured by delinquent peers, family structure, parental attachment, neighborhood problems, and social class. Moreover, the learning of definitions mediates much of the effects of such variables on delinquent behavior (e.g., Akers et al. 1979; Bruinsma 1992; Heimer 1997; Orcutt 1987; Thornberry et al. 1994; Tittle, Burke, and Jackson 1986). In particular, differential association has been supported over social control theory (Matsueda 1982; Matsueda and Heimer 1987). Additional support for the theory's causal structure derives from research using experimental designs—structural intervention into social service programs (Andrews 1980)—and qualitative interviews of women (e.g., Giordano 2000).

REVISIONS, EXTENSIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Over the past 50 years, differential association theory has been subjected to revision and extension. Perhaps the earliest attempt was Cressey's (1954) attempt to integrate a symbolic interactionist concept of role into the theory to explain compulsive crimes. Similarly, Glaser (1956) developed the hypothesis of differential identification, in which delinquency is the result of identification with delinquent versus nondelinquent roles. Sykes and Matza specified "techniques of neutralization" as operational indicators of definitions favorable to delinquency. A more significant development occurred when Burgess and Akers (1966) used Skinner's principles of operant conditioning to specify the precise mechanisms by which crime is learned. Their theory of differential reinforcement argued that crime is learned through classical and operant conditioning and

that definitions of crime served as discriminative stimuli. Akers (1973, 1998) later included Bandura's (1977, 1986) social learning principles into his social learning theory of crime, which included modeling and imitation as well as operant learning. Akers and his colleagues conducted a series of empirical studies that generally supported his principles (see Akers 1998).

Recently, Matsueda and Heimer have returned to the symbolic interactionist roots of the theory by using the concept of taking the role of the other to link organized groups to individual behavior (Heimer and Matsueda 1994; Matsueda 1992). Their differential social control theory specifies that delinquent behavior occurs in problematic situations in which individuals take the role of significant others and consider the others' reactions to alternative lines of action before selecting a delinquent or nondelinquent solution to the problem. This serial process of cognition invokes a multidimensional self, or identities—a view of oneself from the standpoint of others—in the process of informal social control. In this way, they integrated propositions about informal controls from labeling theory with propositions from learning theory. Their research found support for the centrality of the delinquent self as a reflected appraisal of others, as well as delinquent peers, attitudes, and anticipated reactions for both males (Heimer and Matsueda 1994; Matsueda 1992) and females (e.g., Bartusch and Matsueda 1996; Heimer 1995, 1996).

Although these revisions have been fruitful, they leave several important questions unanswered. First, what precisely is the theory of social structure that conditions communication and learning? Sutherland stated differential social organization as an abstract principle, devoid of concrete content. Akers (1998) has catalogued the variables and institutions relevant to crime, but remained agnostic on the precise theory of structure. A more precise theory would specify an explicit macro theory of structure, which could be applied to the spatial and temporal distribution of crime. Second, what is the theoretical explanation of crime viewed historically? Sutherland and Cressey (1978) wrote about the origins of normative conflict in the transition to industrial capitalism but did not state a formal theory (see also Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckenbill 1992). Such a theory would help distinguish the roles of structure and culture in differential association. Third, a cultural theory of the content of definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime is needed. Such a linguistic theory would include the rhetorical strength of an argument as a salient feature of definitions of crime (Matsueda 1997).

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