Differential Association & Social Learning

Crime and the Life Course
SOC 401

Normative Conflict

- **Group Conflict Model of Society**:

  - Society is segmented into groups that conflict over values, attitudes, appropriate behavior

  - Consensus is not a given, but must be achieved

- **Normative (Culture) Conflict**:

  - In society, some groups define laws as rules to be observed, others as rules to be broken.

  - Amount of crime in a society is determined by normative conflict.
    - **Consensual societies**: Low division of labor, uniform values, absence of conflict.
    - **Conflict-ridden societies**: High division of labor, heterogenous values, conflict.

Differential Association Process

- Explains how normative conflict in society translates into individual criminal acts

- A social psychological process.

- Crime is learned in interaction in primary groups
  - Criminal techniques and skills
  - Definitions favorable and unfavorable to law violation (motives, verbalizations, attitudes

Definitions Unfavorable to Crime

- "The Justice Department should be going after real criminals, not me!"
- "It's technically not sex if there isn't penetration and if you don't touch her!"
- "I can drive after five beers, no problem."
- "If someone questions your manhood, you have to stand up for yourself."
- "Everyone cheats on their income taxes – it's not really a crime."
- "I was planning to give them money back after I solved my financial problem."
- "It's not a crime if no one gets hurt."

Definitions Unfavorable to Crime

- "Crime doesn't pay."
- "Marijuana causes brain damage and leads to cocaine and heroin."
- "Turn the other cheek when insulted."
- "Always be a law abiding citizen and you'll be respected."
- "Don't drink and drive – you can hurt someone."
- "Don't throw your life away by breaking the law!"
- "Sinners will be damned for eternity."
- "Never rat on a fellow criminal or hold out on them."

Techniques of Neutralization (Sykes and Matza

- Denial of responsibility
- Denial of injury
- Denial of the victim "he deserved it"
- Condemnation of the condemners "reject the rejecters"
- Appeal to higher loyalties

Excess of Definitions Favorable to Crime

- Criminal behavior occurs when a person has learned an excess of definitions favorable to crime
  - Refers to specific criminal offenses
- Four Modalities (weights for each definition):
  - Frequency
  - Duration
  - Priority
  - Intensity
- If DFC/DUC > 1.0, then crime will occur
  - DFC = weighted definitions favorable to crime
  - DUC = weighted definitions unfavorable to crime

## Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Crime

1. Person has learned an excess of <u>weighted</u> definitions favorable to crime.

2. Person has learned the necessary skills and techniques.

3. The opportunity to commit the crime is present.

   - If you can find <u>one</u> person who refrains from crime when these conditions are present, the theory is wrong.

   - If you can find <u>one</u> person who commits a crime when these conditions are not all present, the theory is wrong.

Differential Social (Group) Organization

- Explains how normative conflict causes group or societal rates of crime.
  - The crime rate of a society (group) is determined by differential social (group) organization.

- **Differential social organization**: the extent to which a society (group) is organized in favor of crime versus organized against crime.

- Important feature of social organization: how that organization influences the group's definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime.

Crime Rates Predicted by Differential Social Organization

Organization Against Crime	Organization in Favor of Crime	
	Low	High
Low	Moderate Rates	High Rates
High	Low Rates	Moderate Rates
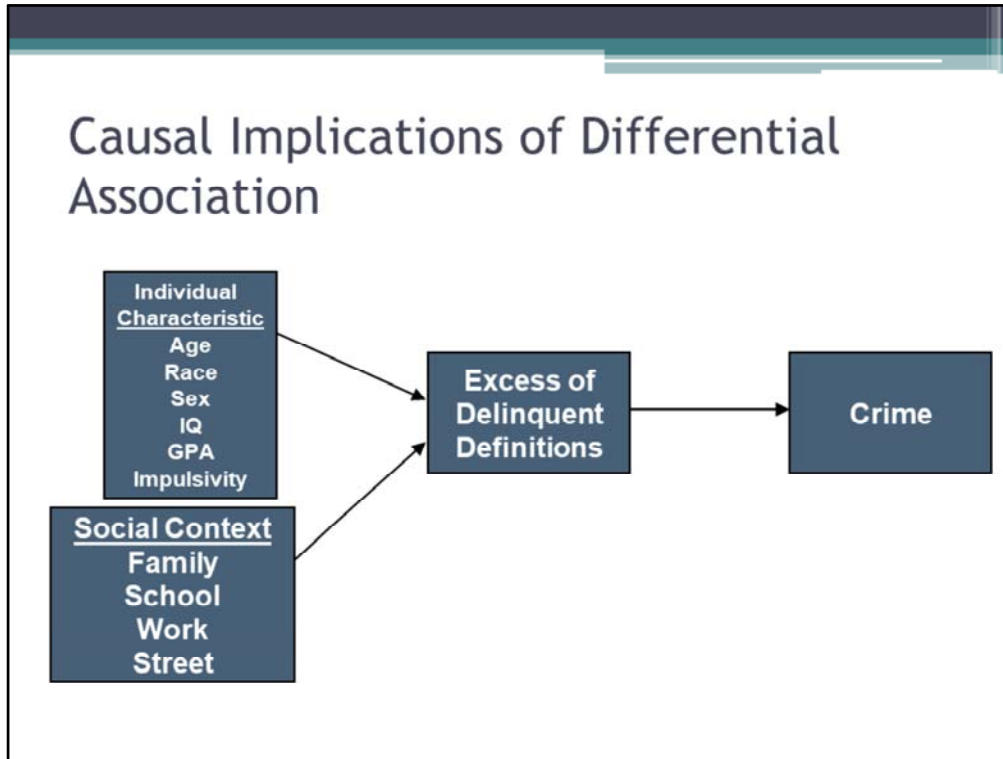
Criticisms of Differential Association Theory

- Assumes a deterministic model, which is unlikely to hold for social science
  - But we can translate the theory's propositions to a probabilistic model

- The social psychological hypothesis (ratio) is probably an oversimplification
  - Need to incorporate a situational decision-making model (e.g., rational choice)
  - Need a systematic cataloguing of definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime. Examples: Code of the street, legal cynicism, legal legitimacy.

- Differential social organization is underdeveloped: what is the theory of structure?

- Learning process needs to be specified more clearly (e.g., social learning theory).

Social Learning Theory

Ronald L. Akers

Burgess and Akers. 1996. "A Differential Association-Reinforcement Theory of Criminal Behavior." Social Problems 14:128-147.

Akers, Ronald L. 1998. *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Social Learning Theory (Ronald Akers)

- Add psychological learning theory to differential association.

- Burgess and Akers (1966) applied Skinnerian principles of operant conditioning, calling it "differential reinforcement theory."

- Akers later included Bandura's principles of social learning. In explaining crime Akers uses four concepts:

  - Differential Association with others provides definitions of crime as well as potential role models and reinforcers

  - Definitions of Crime: Definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime motivate one toward or away from crime.
    - Discriminative stimuli: Reinforcement occurs in a situation or social context containing stimuli or cues
    - The stimuli or cues in the situation of reinforcement signal what response is appropriate in such a situation.
   - Definitions of crime are examples of such cues.

Differential Reinforcement & Modeling

- □ Differential Reinforcement
  - From operant conditioning: Reinforcement refers to anything that increases the likelihood of a response
  - Positive reinforcement: a reward (positive stimulus) increases a response.
  - Negative reinforcement: removal of a punisher (aversive stimulus) increases a response.
  - Positive punishment: a punisher (aversive stimulus) reduces the response.
  - Negative punishment: removal of a reward reduces a the response.

- □ Imitation or modeling
  - Observational learning.
  - Vicarious reinforcement: observe someone's behavior being reinforced, reinforces the behavior for the observer

Social Structure and Social Organization

- Social structure: Distribution of reinforcement contingencies
  - Akers uses demographics (age, race, class, gender)
  - Akers uses differential social organization
  - Reference groups
    - Family
    - Peers
    - School
    - Work
    - Media
- Social structure affects crime by affecting the differential reinforcement process
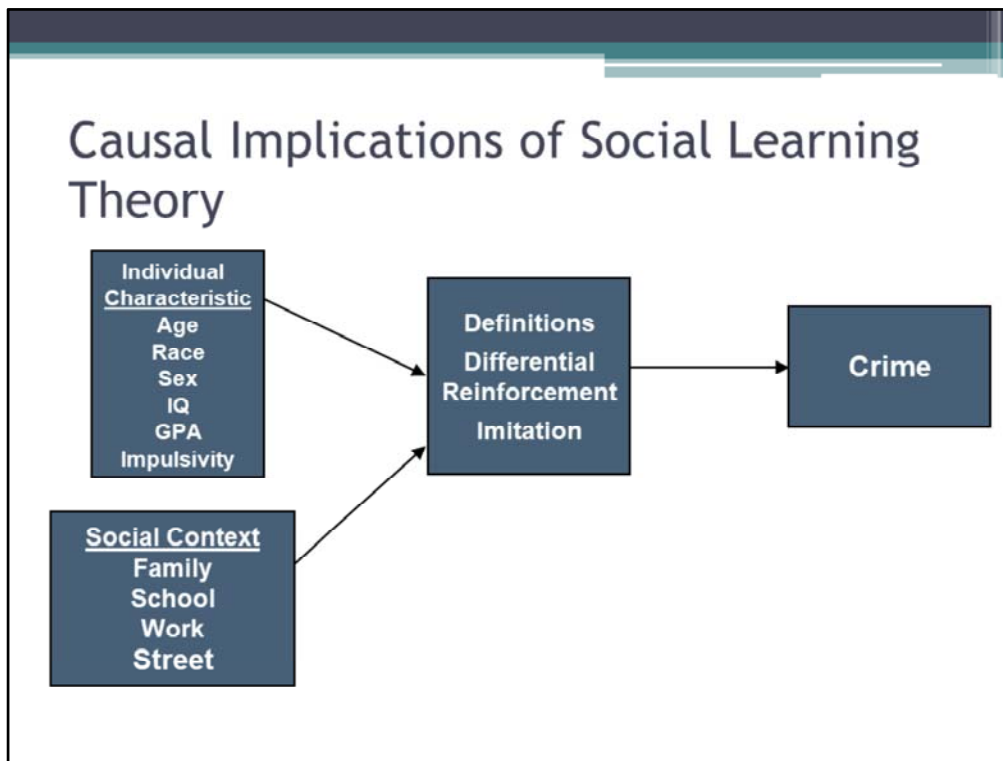
Criticisms of Social Learning Theory

- Emphasis on psychological processes
  - No real theory of social structure
  - Group processes not explained

- No theory of agency or cognition

- Why are social reinforcers distributed the way they are in society?

- All theories become social learning theory.