

DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION THEORY

Introduction

- **Edwin H. Sutherland** presented his theory of differential association in two versions, the first in 1939 and the final version on 1947.
- Sutherland created a general theory of criminal behavior by insisting behavior is *learned* in a social environment. In fact, for Sutherland, all behavior is learned in much the same way. Therefore, the major difference between conforming and criminal behavior is in *what* is learned rather than in *how* is learned.
- In the 1920s and 1930s, it was still common to assert that crime is the result of individual biological and mental defects. In one of his major works, *Principles of Criminology*, Sutherland criticized and rejected both of these positions and, in so doing, advanced the cause of sociological criminology.
- Sutherland's theory is probably the most popular criminological theory of the twentieth century.

The Social Heritage of the Differential Association Theory

- Many of the insights that shaped Sutherland's theory came from events of the 1920s.
- The Federal Bureau of Investigation had begun to produce yearly reports – The UCR. As a result, there was evidence that certain categories of people were more prone to criminality than others. In addition, official statistics seemed to support the view that crime is a part of the sociological domain rather than the biological or psychological disciplines.
- The Great Depression served Sutherland as a fertile ground for sociological observation. In fact, Sutherland worked for a federal agency during the Depression and observed that people who previously had not been criminal committed crimes as a direct result of their impoverishment during the depression. Others,, took advantage of the situation to manipulate banks and stocks.
- Consequently, thanks to the Great Depression, Sutherland observed that Crime and other criminal behaviors were obviously not inborn or as a result of feeblemindedness (i.e. retardation or stupidity). **Criminality was the product of situation, opportunity and values.**
- Two other events occurred that may have affected Sutherland's views on criminal behavior: Prohibition and the criminalization of drug use.

The Intellectual Heritage of the Differential Association Theory

- The major intellectual influences on Sutherland's thinking came from the members of the Chicago School, particularly W. I. Thomas.
- Other influences included: George Mead (Symbolic Interactionism), Park and Burgess (City Ecology), Shaw and McKay (Social Disorganization) and the relationship with his friend and colleague Thorsen Sellin.

Sutherland's Major Works

- *Criminology* (1924) (Note: This work have 10 different editions; the last one was written together with Donald Cressey – After the first edition the title was changed to *Principles of Criminology*)
- *The Professional Thief* (1937)
- *White-Collar Crime* (1949)

Differential Association Theory

- The central assumption of the differential association theory is that crime is learned in the process of interaction with others in the context of intimate personal groups.
- What is learned is not just the techniques for committing acts but also motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes that are favorable to criminal conduct.
- For Sutherland, crime is normal learned behavior acquired through the interaction with others in a "pattern of communication."
- To outline his theory, Sutherland utilized a series of propositions. These propositions were outlined in the 1947 edition of *Principles of Criminology* (In the 1939 edition, only seven were included)
- The Propositions are:
 - (1) *Criminal behavior is learned.* Criminal behavior is not inherited or invented by people on their own.
 - (2) *Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication.* Verbal and "gesture" communication.
 - (3) *The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups.* Movies, newspapers or more recently video games play an unimportant part in the genesis of criminal behavior.
 - (4) *When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes a) techniques of communicating the crime, which sometimes are very complicated, sometimes very simple; b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.*

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(5) *The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable and unfavorable. A person is exposed to persons that define the legal codes as rules to be observed and to other people that are favorable to the violation of legal codes (Mixed Messages).*

(6) *A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law. Crime is a product of counteracting forces. Thus, a person might be isolated from anti-crime attitudes and exposed to pro-criminal attitudes. Thus, social class, race and broken homes influence the involvement in crime activities because they affect the likelihood that individuals will associate with others who present definitions favorable to crime.*

(7) *Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority and intensity.*

(8) *Learning criminal behavior is by association with criminal patterns and is learned just like anything else.*

(9) *While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those needs and values since the non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values.*