Differential association theory

Law, Crime

The paper discusses Edwin Sutherland’s Differential association theory. The nine principles of Differential association theory are discussed. The paper aims to connect fighting to Sutherland’s Differential association theory. Based on Sutherland’s theory, fighting is a form of deviant behavior, which young people learn via face-to-facecommunicationwith other people. Individuals choose to fight, when group beliefs that favor fighting overweigh group beliefs that do not favor violations of law.

Whether individuals choose to fight or not to fight depends on the intensity and duration of messages that favor this form of deviance. Those who fight and those who do not fight usually express the same values and beliefs; the only difference is in the means they choose to pursue theirgoals. Differential Association Theory Crime and deviance have always been the objects of the peer sociological analysis. Dozens of theories were developed in an attempt to explain what crime is, how it develops, and what can keep people from committing a crime.

The list of possible explanations of deviance is endless – from genetics and social status, to television, oedipal complexes and severe mental deficiencies; yet, Edwin Sutherland’s Differential association theory remains one of the most important theoretical foundations ofsociology. According to Differential association theory, individuals learn deviant behaviors through face-to-face communication with other people.

As a result, fighting is a form of deviant behavior individuals learn from other people and use to achieve their goals. Differential Association Theory: The Basic Principles Differential association theory reflects Edwin Sutherland’s

beliefs about the origins of crime: Sutherland was confident that crime and deviance were not biologically or economically driven, but learned through various socialization processes (Finley, 2007).

Generally, the theory of differential association comprises nine different principles:

1. (a) delinquent behavior is learned;
2. (b) delinquent behavior is learned from other people via face-to-face communication;
3. (c) learning usually occurs in intimate groups and small face-to-face gatherings;
4. (d) in these intimate groups, individuals learn techniques for committing crime, as well as appropriate attitudes and rationalizations for doing so;
5. (e) individuals learn to direct their motives, based on whether they consider the legal code as favorable or unfavorable to crime;
6. (f) individuals learn deviant behaviors and crime when definitions favorable to deviance overweigh the definitions unfavorable to violating law;
7. (g) specific tendencies toward delinquency will depend on the frequency and duration of learning experiences;
8. (h) learning delinquency is similar to any other form of learning; and
9. (i) deviant and non-deviant behaviors usually express the same needs – the only difference is in the means individuals use to pursue their goals (Regoli, Hewitt & DeListi, 2010).

These are the principles that can readily explain any form of deviant behavior, including fighting. Fighting As a Form of Deviant Behavior: Making Connections Fighting is a popular form of deviant behavior among youth. Nine principles of Sutherland’s theory help to explain fighting in terms of communication, socialization, and peer influence; however, to make the explanation more plausible, some important connections should be made.

pic. Examples of deviant behavior.

The fact is that Sutherland’s nine propositions are grouped around three important concepts – normative conflict, differential association, and differential group organization (Matsueda, 2000). As a result, the roots and origins of fighting are easy to trace through the societal, group, and individual levels (Matsueda, 2000).

At the societal level, crime is always rooted in normative conflict – a conflict of attitudes toward specific norms, beliefs, and ideas (Matsueda, 2000). Different segments of society hold different beliefs about law: some consider law as the set of rules to be followed under all circumstances, while others view law as the set of rules to be violated under certain circumstances (Matsueda, 2000).

These are favorable and unfavorable attitudes to deviance, which Sutherland mentions in his theory. Fighting is a form of deviant behavior, which develops under the influence of excessive beliefs that favor fighting. Fighting will be uncommon in societies that do not consider it as an appropriate form of behavior.

The question is in how these beliefs transform into individual fighting acts. According to Sutherland, fighting is always the act of learned behavior (Regoli, Hewitt & DeListi, 2010). Fighting is learned via face-to-face interactions with other people. For example, individuals will choose to fight if their parents welcome this form of deviance. However, peer influence alone cannot suffice to make individuals fight.

Individuals must learn (a) specific fighting techniques; and (b) definitions favorable to fighting (Matsueda, 2000). The latter are, actually, the rationalizations which individuals use to justify their fighting acts. Some individuals justify fighting by telling that everyone fights. Others view fighting as the best expression of true masculinity.

Certainly, fighting can be easily offset by definitions that do not favor violations of law, e. g. “ Fighting is bad” or “ Fighting causes pain and sufferings to other people”. Whether a person chooses to engage in or refrain from fighting depends on the duration, frequency, priority, and intensity of presenting these definitions.

Here, group influence is of critical importance: Sutherland’s theory assumes that “ when groups are strongly organized against crime, they will present an abundance of definitions favorable to crime and few definitions unfavorable to crime” (Matsueda, 2000, p. 131). Individuals growing up in groups that favor fighting will be more likely to fight, than those who live in groups strongly organized against fighting.

Through the intimate interaction with groups that favor fighting, individuals will learn techniques and rationalizations for doing so. The process of learning to fight will be similar to any other form of learning. The goals of those who fight and those who do not fight will be similar, too. What will be different is the means fighting and non-fighting individuals choose to pursue their goals (Regoli, Hewitt & DeLisi, 2010). Conclusion

From the viewpoint of Sutherland’s Differential association theory, fighting is a form of deviant behavior learned through face-to-face communication. Such learning usually occurs in intimate groups, where individuals learn specific fighting techniques and rationalizations for doing so. Fighting prevails in groups, where definitions that favor fighting overweigh the definitions that do not favor this form of deviance.

Whether individuals choose to fight depends on the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of messages and beliefs that favor fighting. Learning to fight is similar to other forms of learning. Those who fight and those who do not fight express similar ideas and values. The only difference will be in the means these individuals choose to pursue their goals.

Most Common Questions:

- What is the main criticism of differential association theory?

One of the biggest criticisms of Sutherland's differential theory is determinism. Sutherland does not clearly explain what would induce an individual to commit a crime. Furthermore, it does not explain the origin of spontaneous criminal behavior.

- Why is differential association theory important?

An important quality of the theory of differential association refers to the frequency and intensity of the interaction. The length of time a person is exposed to a particular definition and when the interaction started is crucial in explaining the criminal activity.