

Differential  
association social  
learning theory  
philosophy essay



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The premises of the Differential Association theory are that factors such as social class, race, and broken homes influence crime because they increase the chances that the individuals will associate themselves with other delinquents or people who commit crimes [Sutherland, 1960]. Sutherland formulated his theory in the form of 9 different propositions which formulate a process through which an individual goes through. First off, Sutherland's propositions 1, 2 and 3 state that criminal behavior is learned and that it is learned through interactions and intimate personal relations (Sutherland, 1960). This is the basis for the whole theory and assumes that criminal behavior is not inherited. Speck could have easily learned this behavior from his stepfather who had a 25-year criminal record and he was a very heavy drinker. Speck himself began drinking alcohol at the age of 12 and by 15 was drunk almost every day.

Sutherland's 4th proposition states that "When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime ... (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations and attitudes." Speck was first arrested at age 13 for trespassing and this began a downward spiral of multiple arrests over the next 8 years. Of his 5th proposition, Sutherland states that "in some societies, an individual is surrounded by people who define the legal codes as rules to be observed, while in other who disregard them and feel they can easily be violated. Speck was constantly around his step-father who saw no problem breaking the rules with his drinking and forgery and Speck never received particularly severe punishments from law enforcement during his many arrests.

Propositions 6 and 7 state that “ A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law” and “ Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority and intensity.” (Sutherland, 1960). This in essence is the theory of differential association. It in effect states that a person will “ assimilate” into his surroundings unless he is prevented to do so by other patterns which are in conflict. Speck was surrounded by a criminal throughout his childhood, his mother encouraged this relationship by marrying Lindberg, no one forced him to go to school as a child and turned their backs to the fact that at 16 he had dropped out. He attempted to normalize his life by meeting a young woman, Shirley Malone, but she became pregnant with his daughter after only 3 weeks of dating. They then tried to form a normal life by moving in with his mother, but Speck returned to jail within a short period of time.

Sutherland’s final proposition states that “ While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values since non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values.” It can be assumed that all of Speck’s robberies and forgeries were to acquire money for his needs but he committed these acts while still working at several jobs.

## (2) Control Theory

Gottfredson and Hirschi’s General Theory of Crime focuses on the family and how childhood and rearing affects a child’s future delinquent behavior in terms of low self-control. People who lack self control will tend to be

impulsive, insensitive, physical, risk-taking, short sighted, and nonverbal [Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990]. People with low self control want immediate gratification. Criminal acts tend to provide that immediate gratification, although with consequences, but these tend to not matter to those who commit them. Speck, probably under the influence of alcohol for the duration of most of his crimes wanted immediate gratification in his drunken fog and he did whatever he wanted.

Furthermore, individuals and criminals with low self control tend to be self-centered and insensitive to the pain of others [Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990]. Low self control also exhibits the pursuit of immediate pleasure which usually comes in the form of drinking, smoking, drug use, etc which does not need to be necessarily criminal [Gottfried & Hirschi, 1990]. Specks criminal behavior all started when he began to drink and he continued to rely on drinking throughout his life. Gottfredson and Hirschi state that the causes of low self control are the absences of nurturance, discipline and/or training. Specks mother contributed greatly to this idea. She got remarried shortly after Specks biological father died to a man with a criminal past. They moved around 10 times in 12 years and always lived in poor neighborhoods. Speck refused to wear his glasses and his mother did not force him to, showing lack of concern and care for her child's well being.

### (3) Strain Theory

Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory states that people commit crimes because they experience certain strains and stressors in their lives.

According to Agnew, there are 3 major types of stressors and they must all

be large or severe in magnitude in order to have impact: losing something, the individual is treated badly or in a negative way, and the individual is unable to achieve their goals. Speck seems like he has quite a few strains in stressors in his life. He was abused constantly by his stepfather, he lost his father to whom he was very close to at a very early age, his mother and the rest of his family did not provide him with adequate attention, and he became a drinker at an early age.

Agnew lists a few strains that are more than likely to cause criminal behavior, and they related very well to Speck. Parental rejection was prevalent in Specks life, some by his father's death, and some by his mother's remarriage. He did not go to school and had very low grades and a negative attitude towards it. He worked in the "secondary labor market" which provided him with low pay and few benefits and opportunities, and he also had significant marital problems. All of these strains led Speck to his life of crime for one reason or another. These issues reduced his levels of social control, caused emotional negativity and shaped his character. He was not able to cope with these strains surrounded by a loving home and a cushy job from which he brought home significant amounts of money and had no means to come up in the world.

I would infer that the best theory that describes Specks actions and his lifestyle is the General Strain Theory. Specks life was filled with stressors and strains that caused him to commit crimes due to lack of education, unstable home environment, dead-end jobs and failing personal relationships. His final crimes may be attributed to the compression of all previous stressors into one final act of rebellion and anger. A specific policy implication that may be <https://assignbuster.com/differential-association-social-learning-theory-philosophy-essay/>

enacted in order to attempt to prevent such crimes would be a better law enforcement system and better counselors. If one of the first few times that Speck was in jail, someone would have asked him why he is doing all this and what leads him to commit these crimes, he may have been able to tell them, which in turn would have allowed them to refer him to organizations and clinics that would force him to work on himself and provide him with skills and avenues to avoid acting out against the stressors in life that caused him to be arrested in the first place.

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#### (1) Classical/Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice argues that “ crimes are broadly the result of rational choice based on analyses of anticipated costs and benefits” [Cornish & Clarke, 1986]. It also state that offenders seek to benefit themselves by their criminal behavior which requires decisions to be made, and that decision making is a sign of rationality. There also must be a cost versus benefit analysis that is figured out in order to make the crime more or less appealing. In the case of Keating, and since he committed white collar crime, the cost was not even foreseeable to him, and the benefit was right on the horizon. Keating was completely rational in all his prospects. He knew that buying up properties and funneling money through them is illegal but he continued to do it because he wanted to amass as much money and prestige as possible without doing any actual hard labor. Once Keating’s financial hardships began to show he decided to do it at the expense of the people

and society. He was completely ready to destroy everyone around him in order to give himself a better life.

Keating was focused more on bettering his own life and in order to do that he weighed the pros and cons and chose to go with the less harmful avenue for him but the most harmful avenue for everyone else. He was completely rational, along with his cohorts in figuring out how to do this without the SEC finding out and other governmental agencies and tried to evade them for as long as he could.

## (2) Social Learning Theory

Ronald Akers' definition of the Social Learning Theory relies on four aspects: differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement and imitation. The first one, differential association is the process of how the individual is exposed to the definitions of "favorable or unfavorable law-abiding behavior" [Akers, 1994]. He states that an individual is exposed to these definitions by several groups, including family members, friends, media and law enforcement. In order for it to be influential, the associations must occur early, last longer, occupy more time, take place more often, and involve those with whom the individual is close to [Akers, 1994]. It could be argued that Keating built these associations with people like his brother and law school friend when they opened up their own law firm. Eventually, Keating switched his association from his law firm, to his sole client with whom he now became to have a close relationship and even integrated himself into his business.

Definitions, simply put, are the meanings and identities we give to certain behaviors, be they good or bad, and include rationalizations and moral attitudes. Keating relied heavily on Lindner (his sole client and new boss) to provide him with what he needed in the form of money and status. Keating came up with his own definitions of the work he was doing and he understood it to be non-harmful and even pleasant. Differential reinforcement is the anticipated rewards and punishments and their balance [Akers, 1994]. Akers stated that in order to decide whether or not an individual will commit future crimes depends on their past experiences with similar actions or their anticipation of rewards and punishments. Keating saw only rewards in his future. He became the face of Lindners company and was even on Richard Nixon's U. S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography.

Lastly, imitation is the engagement in behavior after the observation of similar behavior in others (Akers, 1994). Seeing as how Keating was very close to Lindner, he definitely imitated him and tried to do whatever he could to be like him. Even after he was kicked out of the company and a federal investigation was launched, he moved to another state and decided to redo everything on his own and to once again make millions just like he did previously.

### (3) Willem Bongers' Criminology and Economic Conditions

Bonger explains crime as a form of egoism (Bonger, 1969). Egoism is the rejection of altruism, or the focus on others, and solely focusing on yourself. Keating, after growing up in a family where he had to worry about himself, then joining an autonomous navy, and then working in a business-oriented, “



you have to get the most money for yourself" economy, has definitely become egoistic. He took pride in firing employees from newly purchased companies and was known as aggressive and arrogant. He worried only what happens to him and how he can make more money for his company instead of the people whose money he was stealing. As Bonger stated, egoism leads to crime.

This theory shows that when there is a lower class and an upper class there is going to be discontent when working in a capitalist economy. Although our current economy is not one of capitalism, the interpersonal relationships between Keating and his properties and real estates and corporations have become almost capitalistic. Keating uses and abuses his workers and the people of the society that contribute to his companies and conglomerates, all the while only considering himself.

I believe that Willem Bongers theory is the one that fits best with Keating's actions because it connects the race for money and power with egoism and lack of altruism. Keating had no concern for the victims of his crimes and focused solely on his own gain and fortune. His self-centered nature led him to disregard morals and values in favor of status and capitalistic gain. In order to protect our society from criminals like Keating from doing what they constantly do, there must be more watching done from the SEC and other Federal and Government agencies. There needs to be a system in place which, on a minimum of a bi-annual basis investigates and looks into the corporate world to prevent crimes of greed and self-interest.