

Social learning theory: an attempt to explain crime

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Social Learning Theory: An Attempt To Explain Crime Katie Brown

Criminology Dr. Tamborra 12/04/12 Many theories exist that try to explain why people commit crimes. One theory in particular pertains to the associations people have and how they influence the individual's behavior. After looking at the data from the Uniform Crime Report of robbery, one of the four violent crimes, this theory will be expanded upon. In addition, a study of the theory will be summarized along with its findings and conclusions. Considering all the data, the components of the theory, and the test of the theory, new policies will be suggested. Robbery, as defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2011), is " the taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force or violence and/or by putting the victim in fear. " According to the Uniform Crime Report, published by the FBI, there were about 354, 396 robbery offenses in the United States in 2011. This translates to 113. 7 robberies per 100, 000 inhabitants, a decrease of four percent from the previous year (FBI, 2011). 3, 677 of these robberies occurred in the state of Connecticut; for every 100, 000 inhabitants of Connecticut, there were about 102. 7 robberies. The majority of these offenses (3, 581) happened in the metropolitan areas of the state (FBI, 2011). In 43. 8% of the national total of robberies in 2011, the offense took place on a street or highway. The next most common place was a residence; people were robbed at their house 17% of the time. On average, the total value seized during a robbery added up to \$1, 153. The FBI also stated that, if a weapon or force is used, it is usually a gun or physical violence. In 130, 839 robberies in the United States, physical violence was used against the victim. A firearm was utilized

in 128, 793 instances (FBI, 2011). The National Crime Victimization Survey shows that there are many trends involving the victims of violent crimes. These help us to begin to understand relationships between crimes and offenders, and offenders and their victims. As for violent crimes across the United States, males are victimized more than females. The rate of victimization, per 1, 000 people over the age of twelve, of males is 25. 7, 5. 2 more than that of females (Criminal, 2011). The two races that have the highest rates of victimization are American Indians/Alaskan Natives and African Americans. For every 1, 000 people over twelve that identify with these racial groups, 45. 4 American Indians and 26. 4 African Americans were victims of violent crimes in 2011. The age group that was the most victimized in 2011 was 24 and under: particularly 18-24. This age group had a rate of 49 victimizations and 12-17 had a rate of 37. 8 per 1. 000 inhabitants over the age of twelve, while the victimization rates of all other age groups were significantly less (Criminal, 2011). The two regions of the United States with the highest victimization rates were the West and Midwest (27. 1 and 26. 3, respectively), with the south and northeast not far behind. Urban areas also had higher victimization rates than suburban or rural areas, with a rate of 27. 4 (Criminal, 2011). Upon looking at data from the Uniform Crime Report and the National Crime Victimization Survey, the question of why people are criminal arises. Deviance and criminality is still largely a mystery in the social science fields, but many theories attempting to explain them exist. One theory in particular, Social Learning Theory, developed by Ronald Akers, makes the most sense when explaining why people become deviant. Social Learning Theory states that regardless of

whether an individual is conforming or deviant, they become this way by learning from and imitating others. The balance of certain influences play a large part in what an individual chooses to do. The influences in particular that Akers refers to are: differential association, differential reinforcement, modeling, and cognitive definitions (Akers). Differential association, the direct or indirect association with certain people or groups of people, creates the basis for the other factors. This is because; based on the group you associate with, behaviors are given either formal or informal punishments or rewards (differential reinforcement). These groups also create imitation in an individual because the individual will most likely model behaviors that these people do. Cognitive definitions are also a product of differential association because an individual tends to share ideas with those that they associate with; therefore if a certain behavior (whether it be a crime or a conforming act) is given a positive definition, that definition carries into the individual's state of mind and is therefore "okay" for them to do. If an individual is presented with the opportunity to either commit a crime or to abstain, their decision to do so or not is based upon differential reinforcement: the actual or anticipated present or future rewards or punishments. The reinforcement could be social or nonsocial (Akers). For instance, if a teenager is given the opportunity to smoke a cigarette and declines, it could either be because of the physical health risks associated with smoking, because their family would be disappointed, or a combination of the two. In addition, the reinforcements a person receives either increases or decreases the likelihood of the person performing a certain act again or often. Positive and negative definitions also play a large role here; if a person's social group positively

regard a deviant act, or even simply excuse or justify it, the person is much more likely to commit the act. It also works the same way with imitation. An individual is very likely to model behaviors of those that they think of as important, such as family and close friends (Akers). If robbery is looked at from the Social Learning perspective, it is easy to see how people could get involved in such crimes. Depending on the people an individual associates with, robbery can be seen in a positive light; the definition associated with it can be that it is a quick and easy way to obtain money. It is justified because the individual is lacking something, and committing the crime can change that. If the associations of a person view robbery in a positive way, they are probably going to commit the crime themselves, setting up an opportunity for imitation. It is common to model after those that you respect, especially if they seem to be getting rewarded for the behavior. Reinforcements also apply in this situation in the way that for certain groups of people; the actual reward of extra cash possibly outweighs the possibility of legal punishment. So, the more that an individual associates with those that perform certain acts, the more likely the individual will perform the same acts. Ronald Akers tested his theory of Social Learning with Gang Lee in a longitudinal study of adolescent smoking, hypothesizing that the factors of Social Learning Theory had a positive correlation with adolescent smoking habits. A self-report questionnaire was administered three times over the course of five years to secondary school students in the town of Muscatine, Iowa. Students included in the study were in grades 7-12, attending either one of the junior high schools or the senior high school in the town. There were results from students who had previously participated in the study, students who had just

entered the seventh grade, or any new students. Each year, the study's sample consisted of about 2,000 students and it was either administered in homerooms or in mandatory physical education classes. There are 454 students who participated in the study all five years (Akers). It was assumed that the responses would not always be valid, considering adolescents have many reasons to lie about their smoking habits, whether it be lying to avoid incrimination or to make themselves seem cool. In order to be sure of the validity of the responses, the students' answers were matched with the level of thiocyanate, a chemical left behind by nicotine, in the saliva of the respondents (Akers). The researchers also used a method called "randomized response." Between the two techniques, the validity of the subjects' responses was shown. The levels of thiocyanate closely matched the self-reports of the students about whether or not they smoked and how frequently (Akers). The main variable in this study was the frequency of smoking cigarettes. The subjects stated how often they smoked cigarettes using a six-point scale ranging from never smoked to smoke every day. The social learning variables were measured using similar scales and summing the responses (Akers). Differential reinforcement was measured by asking questions about positive and negative reinforcements, social and not. The balance of reinforcement was determined by subtracting the positive reinforcements (reactions from friends and family) from the negative reinforcements (health risks) (Akers). Imitation was not a factor that was measured because of its extreme overlap with differential association. This is because imitation is mostly involved in the initiation of certain acts, such as smoking, rather than the continuation of the acts (Akers). Differential

association was measured by asking questions about how many friends smoke based on different things such as duration (how long they have been friends), frequency (how often they hang out), and intensity (how close they are). Questions regarded the attitudes of close relationships, like family and friends, were asked. The attitudes were measured on a scale ranging from strongly approve to strongly disapprove. The answers of questions regarding the subjects' personal definitions of smoking were averaged together to determine the students' general attitude toward smoking (Akers). The findings of the study supported the hypothesis (Akers). Particularly in the fifth year (the third administration of the questionnaire), smoking and the social learning variables have a very strong correlation. It is also found that the factors in the first year affect those in the third, and the factors in the third year affect those in the fifth. However, it is found that the first year factors affect those in the fifth year less, meaning that the variables have less of a correlation when there is more time in between (Akers). Because it shows stability in the behavioral process of smoking, this study shows that social learning variables have an ongoing effect on the smoking habits of adolescents. However, the stability of smoking isn't as strong as the stability of the social learning variables. This means that the variables of the Social Learning Theory are not the only factors involved in smoking. Certain trends exemplify this; for instance, teenage boys are shown to be far less effected by their girlfriends smoking than teenage girls are by their boyfriends smoking. In addition to this, the magnitude of the effect of peers and parents' attitudes towards smoking vary from age group to age group (Akers). Based upon the previously stated facts and research, there are a

few policies that, while perhaps not completely probable, if put in place, could reduce the likelihood of certain crimes. The first is to, from an early age, make it mandatory to gather information regarding individuals' personal cognitive definitions through the use of questionnaires much like those used in the Akers study. Then, use this information to (whether with the knowledge of the individual or without) to put the individual in classes, clubs, or sports teams with people who have favorable cognitive definitions. If the explanation of differential association having a large impact on criminal activity is accepted, then perhaps values can be pushed upon a person by being surrounded by people with these values. Another way to approach the cognitive definitions of people, especially adolescents, is through the media. It could be made mandatory for all television shows to show anti-crime commercials at least once per episode. It may not directly effect people as much as close friends and family, but the media is very influential. Another, while not very ideal, way of controlling crime could be to completely control who a person hangs out with. Deviants would be totally separated from everyone else. In a way, this is already used; kids in school who act out are put in a time-out away from their peers, just like adults are put into jails when they commit a crime, separating them from society. The exact purpose of these punishments may not be to prevent others from being deviant by association with these people, but it works for this as well. However, these policies would be very strict and determine who is allowed to hang out with whom from a very young age. References Akers, Ronald , and Gang Lee. " A Longitudinal Study of Social Learning Theory: Adolescent Smoking." *Journal of Drug Issues* 26. 2 (1996): 317-343. Print. " Criminal Victimization, 2011."

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