

The major criticisms of sutherlands differential theory criminology essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Edwin H. Sutherland who started the differential association theory believed that criminal behavior is learned by interaction with other people by communicating. Sutherland theorized that people will either obey or violate the law depending on how they define their life situation (Sutherland, 1947). However, Sutherland's theory had some major criticisms; one of which was the assumption that if you were to interact with criminals that you would eventually become a criminal yourself. Sheldon Glueck criticized and questioned the theory claiming that it was not testable. Glueck asked, "Has anyone actually counted the number of violation of law, and demonstrated that in the predelinquency experience of the vast majority of delinquents and criminals, the former exceed the latter?"

Additionally, there seemed to be a shortage of reason in Sutherland's theory to explain acts of deviance that are not learned or spontaneous. For example, how does a child who is raised in a nice neighborhood with a good family and peers go and steal from their local grocery store or commit violent crimes? Simply put, Sutherland's ideas were just too hard to put into action and measure quantitatively so Akers and Burgess revised Sutherland's theory of differential association in their theory called the social learning theory. Akers and Burgess added the idea of reinforcement. Reinforcement would either increase or decrease the strength of behavior (Akers, 1984). They also applied the principles of Operant Psychology. Operant psychology believes that behavior is a result of its consequences (Akers). By adding the idea of "nonsocial situations" Akers and Burgess added that the environment on its own can aid criminality rather than only "social interactions" influencing an individual to commit crime through direct

interactions with the environment without having interaction with people (Bernard, 2010).

3. Contrast two theoretical explanations of the age-crime curve. Which is the most convincing and why?

The age-crime curve is a pattern that shows that public crimes peak when one is around their twenties and declines as one gets older. It shows that people who become criminals start when they are young with non-violent crimes that can then progress and peak at about 18-20 years of age and can be non-violent or violent crimes and then the tendency for crime declines with the progression of age. There are different theories that present different ideas as to what causes the learning of crime and how different variables can affect the tendency of someone to participate in crimes. Sutherland and Aker both present valid learning theories for criminal learning but they have different ideas as to how one comes about learning crime and participating in crimes.

The theory of social learning is learning that "...is defined as habits and knowledge that develop as a result of experiences with the environment, as opposed to instincts, drives, reflexes, and genetic predispositions (Hale, 2006)", and can be applied to the age-crime curve because it has variables which can account for the age of a perpetrator and their crime. Sutherland's theory is based on criminal behavior being learned in social interactions, that it is learned in groups, and that the differential associations vary widely.

Children usually commit non-violent minor crimes that can be attributed to "not knowing any better". Things like putting a candy bar in their pocket and

stealing it or taking a toy off of the shelf and putting it in with the rest of the already paid groceries. As children get older they should have learned that stealing is wrong and learned the difference between right and wrong. If their environment is one of lax parenting and their friends are children who misbehave and steal, they have more of a risk to learn the same behaviors and to follow along; even despite the fact that they have been taught that it is wrong. If their experiences teach them that they can get away with stealing and they know others who steal, then they have no reason to resist when the temptation comes. Sutherland's theory is different from Aker's theory of differential reinforcement because Aker's theory is based in the belief that criminal behavior is learned through imitation, the severity of the criminal behavior relies on the strength of reinforcement, and " the type and frequency of learning depends on the norms by which these reinforcers are applied (Hale, 2006)." These young people who are committing crimes learn which crimes carry a heavier punishment than others and learn how to commit the crimes without being punished by learning from their anticipated behaviors and punishment. In Sutherland's theory the kids do not necessarily learn from punishment or anticipated behavior, but from other people in a group, from peers, from home or any other place where they are seeing criminal activity.

The more convincing of the two theories leans more toward Sutherland's theory. Most people who are around the age of struggling with what is right from wrong are in school where they are exposed to other people from other backgrounds that hold different morals and have had other experiences. If they begin to hang around people who commit crimes there are any number

of underlying reasons why they might join in, but they will learn from these peers in their group.

5. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Why or why not? (You may agree with some and not others.)

“ As criminologists increasingly identify variables that are causally related to crime, crime policies increasingly will address these variables. We will gain increasing control over our world, and we will use that control to reduce crime. Some criminologists may warn against moving in this direction, fearing that the costs associated with this increased control will outweigh the benefits that will come from the reduced crime. But regardless of these warnings, it seems clear that criminology and crime policy in the larger society are moving in this direction” (Bernard, Snipes, & Gerould 2010: 364-5).

In this statement I agree that criminology and crime policies are gaining increased control over the world. I disagree that the costs of the increased control would outweigh the benefits. A safer society is better for everyone as long as they are still given their freedoms and privacy. Addressing more variables that are related to crime does not necessarily mean intruding on the rights of citizens to keep them safe but can be used to determine what factors (the variables that criminologists are identifying) are going to lead to the potential for crime. It is already known that places with higher poverty also have higher crime rates. This is a variable that criminologists would use to determine what type of neighborhoods or societies are more at-risk for

crime in their area. Using more variables they can determine what type of crime is more likely to happen, and who is most likely to perform them.

The more variables that criminologists can discover that will lead to a better understanding of the causes of a crime and the surrounding factors, can make it easier to figure out who it was that was most likely to have committed the crime and also who is more likely to commit those types of crime. By knowing ahead of time who might be more likely to cause crimes (for example children in low-income areas with high poverty in the inner-city are more likely to join gangs and commit crimes at an earlier age) can help prevent these people from causing crimes through the use of programs (programs that help kids stay off of the streets, stay in school, and have after school activities would be a way to prevent these same kids from joining gangs and committing crimes). Understanding as many variables as possible allows criminologists to narrow down who possible suspects for a crime might be.

I agree that these variables will help take an increasing control over crime, but I do not think that the costs will outweigh the benefits. People like to know that everything is being done to ensure that their society is a safer place to live and that criminals will be brought to justice. If you have to weigh the costs of safety versus the cost of spending time researching variables which could increase safety then safety should always be worth it.