



Research Article

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Theory of Differential Association

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Abstract

In the broad spectrum of criminological theories on the causes of deviant behavior, sociological theories of criminality involve particular importance. These theories, the causes of such behaviors are only seen in the conditions and social interactions of the individual in their environment. However, with scientific explanations about the causes of criminal behavior, special place has the theory who gives a special importance to the delinquent's interaction with its environment. This is known as theory of various associations or more commonly known as the theory of differential association. The creator of this theory is the famous American sociologist and criminologist Edwin Sutherland, who has left indelible imprints on the relatively short but very important tradition of American criminological theories of criminality. The famous creator's lessons have been taken and modified by many prominent criminologists in their reviews of criminal etiology. As a result this lesson has also been the basis for numerous subsequent empirical research on criminal behavior. In this paper, using the comparative, theoretical, and meta-analysis methods, will be presented the views of some criminology authors and their interpretation of Sutherland's lessons on differential association. Due to this, a brief section of some empirical studies of delinquent behaviors based on E. Sutherland's lessons will be presented, and also the final discussion on these issues will be discussed.

Keywords: *Differential Association, Delinquent, Juvenile Delinquency, Criminal Offense, Deviant behavior, Criminal behavior*

1. Introduction

The theory of differential association emerged within the lessons of the eminent criminologist Edwin H. Sutherland (1883-1950). It is one of those criminological theories explaining criminal behavior through the process of socialization and the contacts between members of social groups to which one belongs a certain delinquent. Sutherland presented his theory of differential association in 1939 in his work named *Principles of Criminology*. The theory was supplemented twice till 1947, in order to make many changes later, and finally was shaped by Sutherland's student Donald R. Cressey.

He considers that the scientific explanation for criminal behavior can be expressed in terms of the process by which it is operated at the moment of the crime happens or in terms functioning with facts "life history". Some authors (Petrović and Meško, 2004: 103) consider that the theory of differential association belongs to a set of criminological theories that are called theories of symbolic interaction.

So, the same authors emphasize that the most significant Symbolic Interactionist Theories include: the theory of differential associations, respectively differential associations and the theory of labeling. Therefore, symbolic interactors research the processes of turning an individual into a

perpetrator of criminal offense. Symbolic interactors defend the thesis by saying that the symbols we learn serve to understand the reality. The essence of symbolic interaction is that, people enter into different relations in which they affect each other. For each of us is not characteristic only the image that we have for ourselves or for a thing, but it is also characteristic of what others think about us and for that.

2. Development of Differential Association Theory

The theory of differential association is one of the most important criminological theories in the last sixty years. According to this theory, an individual learns delinquent behavior, accepts it from others, and learning flows through the communication process. An individual becomes delinquent, if he accepts values that support the violation of law, and not the values of conventional culture. The process of learning delinquent behavior involves all the mechanisms that are important for learning in general.

On the other hand, some authors (Mladenović, 1997: 152) treat the theory of differential association as one of the so-called American sociological theories of criminality. Likewise he claims that those theories are based on sociological research conducted by American sociologists. According to this author, the causes of criminality, in accordance with the postulates of the aforementioned theories, should be searched in groups as specific social systems, so that relevant individuals to be formed as delinquents. This meaning is based on a sociological conception that is predominant in American sociology and criminology. According to that, society is a cluster of different groups, arranged in different ways according to the horizontal and the vertical way. Individuals are at different points of their intersection and for this reason they are exposed to different influences.

According to their character and size, the groups can be very different: it can be mentioned, from the lower family groups to which belongs the delinquent, to the global groups that involve a society or a whole state. These groups have different worldviews, norms and cultural values. Regarding to that, on the other hand they may also be in conflict with the general norms of conduct that are in implementation. Within each respective group there is a strong tendency to respect internal worldviews, rules and norms of behavior, for this reason the group is able to exert a strong influence on its members. Therefore, personality is formed under the influence of the group where it lives, accepting the norms that govern it. If delinquent norms predominate in the group, then it means that delinquents are formed from such groups. Based on this concept it means that the delinquent is the product of the group and consequently the delinquent's personality must be explained in a sociological way, ie. with the influences in the group. Thus, to the prevailing view, through in investigating the causes of criminality, delinquent individuals were not interesting about criminology, but only delinquent groups as social systems. The main aim of American sociological theory is to guide criminological researches into the study of the structure of delinquent groups, in the processes of their formation, in the rules of conduct and the relations within them.

According to the same author, American sociological theories of criminality include:

- Theory of differential association
- Theory of social disorganization
- Theory of cultural conflict
- Theory of subcultural and counterculture
- Theory of anomie

As we have already seen, there are different points of views of some authors, when the topic is about classifying theories, including differential association theory. Therefore, it should not be surprising, since there are also opinions that this theory has its place in the presentation of so-called exogenous etiology (Horvatić, 112). As can be seen, it belongs to the set of criminological theories that look for the causes of criminal and deviant behavior in factors beyond the individual's personality, ie. that are present in its own social structure.

Even the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1912) had found that people learn delinquent

behaviors through imitation and association, just as they learn to pursue a profession. His attitude is also expressed through the attitude "all important actions of social life are performed under the influence of an example. One kills or one does not kill because they imitate the others".

Some other authors (Mladenović, 153) clearly notice the extent to which Tarde's influence is present and his law of imitation. So it is quite obvious that Sutherland's theory of differential association is mostly psychological colored.

Edwin H. Sutherland (1939) got Tarde's idea as the basis and developed the theory of the causes of delinquent behavior, which one he called the theory of different association (differential association). Sutherland hypothesized that people learn delinquent behavior through association with people who violate social norms. Criminal behavior is a learning consequence, in that case when an individual associates with members of delinquent groups, as a result they approach and adopt their habits. By associating with such persons, the individual the individual behaves in opposition with applicable social norms. Takes criminal values and rejects those that are consistent (Milutinović, 127, cited by Meško, Petrović, p.104). Thus, individuals think that the law must be violated, not to be respected, so in that case there is a cultural conflict between society and the individual.

According to the theory of differential association, it should be mentioned that criminal behavior is not necessarily learnt in direct contact with criminals. In other words, it is based on some authors note (Janković and Peshić, 1981: 66), so its limitation on the phrase "whom you spend time with, you are the same", means its distortion and simplification. Therefore, the potential delinquent does not have any reason to associate with the other delinquents, but it is sufficient that he is often in that situation to hear attitudes that support crime or portray it in a positive light. Consequently, criminal behavior it isn't necessarily only to be learned through contact with other people but also through reading books, the press, or watching movies. In order for an individual to become deviant, it is necessary that most of the definitions and patterns of behavior with which they are into contact, to approve or even to find norm violations (Ristanović-Nikolić, 2018: 300- 301).

The theory of differential association is the most influential socio psychological theory of the causes of crime in the last sixty years. After Sutherland's death in 1950, Donald Cressey continued his work and supplemented the theory. The theory is known for Cressey's ability to present it to the public. Gibbons mentions that Sutherland is also one of the scholars who has made an important contribution to the formation of criminology as a scientific discipline.

Sutherland represented the approach, which emphasized contradictions in society. He claimed that there are multiple values in society that influence people's behavior. According to Sutherland, people learn about antisocial behaviors and commit crimes because of associating with delinquents. Sutherland does not characterize social factors as good or bad, but merely characterize the factors that influence the individual. According to Sutherland, an individual has limited options regarding his behavior. Choosing a certain behavior depends on the association and the situation. In this case, the restriction of the individual's free will commemorates a positive attitude towards the causes of criminality.

Research of the situation concludes that the immediate determinants of criminal behavior stay in the personality-situation complex, while criminals try to explain the situation in this way. The objective situation is important to secure the possibility of a criminal act. If the situation is "applicable in criminal aspect", the sociological attitude does not exclude the situation because the situation is determined by the person involved in the criminal act. Other people do not define the situation in this way, which means that people with different life experiences tend to articulate alternative choices, including resistance to a criminal act. A person's past experiences will largely determine how he or she defines the situation. Explaining criminal behavior based on past experiences is essential to explain. (Šabani, 2013: 60)

The theory of differential association could be translated as the theory of different contacts. Sutherland's theory provides an explanation of criminality at two levels: at the individual and at the social (group) level. In that case it uses three interrelated concepts: normative (cultural) conflict, differential associations and social differential organization. At the individual level, Sutherland

distinguishes between two types of scientific explanation of criminal behavior. First, regarding the effect of factors that influence criminal behavior, by acting on the creation of the individual's certain life experience - historical or genetic explanation of criminal behavior, and secondly, about the factors of criminal behavior acting at the time of its occurrence and which constitute the complex in the personality-situation relation (Sutherland, 1939: 5, cited by Ristanović-Nikolić, 2018: 300).

The learning process begins in the criminal society. In addition to the basic characteristics of learning, involves the development of incentives, motives, attitudes, with a tendency to violate the norms of conventional culture. The individual becomes the perpetrator of the offenses if the contacts with the delinquents are stronger than the contacts with people who respect socially recognized norms and laws.

According to Sutherland, there is a difference between criminals and non-criminals, not so much from the goals that guide their lives, but from the different means they choose to achieve. (Hysi, 2010: 125)

Sutherland presented 9 postulates (Sutherland, 1939: 6-7), that express the main topic of the theory of differential association

1. Criminal behavior can be learned
2. Criminal behavior can be learned in collaboration with others, through communication process
3. The main part of learning about criminal behavior is realized within primary groups
4. Learning process about criminal behavior includes: The technique of committing penal crimes that sometimes are very complicated or very simple and in a specific way aiming motivations, encouragements, rationalizations and attitudes.
5. The way that motivation is managed depends on fact if the individual is in contact with those people who have positive definitions. Respectively those people that approve criminal behavior or those that have negative definitions of criminal behavior, it means about the case that they punish them.
6. Someone becomes a criminal because of the reason that he gets more definitions that allow criminal behavior and less definition that punish him.
7. Contact with those that approve the violation of norms or denounce it, make changes in participation, duration, importance and intensity.
8. The learning process of criminal behavior includes all the mechanisms that are part of the whole lesson.
9. Criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values. Although it isn't possible to explain with those needs and values, even it is also a non-criminal expression of the same needs and values. (Ristanović-Nikolić, 1998: 300: 257-258)

Because of these efforts that explains acceptable behavior as the criminal behavior, attempting to explain criminal behavior based on the general moving mechanisms and values (for example motivation with money), was worthless according to Sutherland. For example, thieves generally steal for the purpose of monetary gain. However, such action isn't different from the work of an honest worker. Sutherland manages to highlight weaknesses in explaining the criminal behavior of his predecessors.

Sutherland explains in further that in areas where delinquency is high, the juvenile who is social and active, seems so much likely to be in contact with the neighborhood and choose delinquent behavior. On the other side he is different from a juvenile that is isolated, introvert and inert at home and less likely to contact with other minors in the neighborhood and also not to become delinquent. But a minor who is communicative and not involved in delinquent behavior means that he is influenced by a family that enforcement the law. Personal associations are defined in the general context of a social organization. The child usually grows up in the family, so the family residence in America largely determined by their incomes. The delinquency rate is higher, where houses are rented. (Šabani, 2013: 61).

E. Sutherland and D. Cressey says that the individual becomes delinquent because of contact

with the perpetrators of criminal offenses, as well as for not belonging to a non-delinquent environment. Neutral contacts in this process have less impact on the behavior of the individual.

According to this theory, Sutherland also explains the "White Collar Criminality". In that case, he explains about the criminality of the upper classes of American society, especially American businessmen, who are in the race to gain the highest profits, also systematically commit specific offenses and circumvent legal provisions.

In the view of critics who were otherwise friendly to him (Manheim, 1966: 567), the weakness of his theory is that on the one hand it stays in the fact that is confined to the delusions of commercial corporations. On one hand, (the business of the 70 largest US companies is analyzed), while on the other hand, includes delicts of persons who neither by any criteria don't have a high social status or position. Today, some theorists limit the "white collar crime" only to groups of high social status. While others by this notion also imply the so-called middle-class people, who delinquently engage in their profession.

Having experienced reasonable criticism, the original conception, introduced by Sutherland, was later modified somewhat. Therefore, the original variant, clearly neglects the effects of those causes that even lead an individual to the possibility of "learning" delinquent behavior. As well as implying not only the acquisition of delinquency skills but also the acceptance of motives, habits, and rationalizing such behavior. Not only that: Sutherland did not answer quite clearly because of some members of the group who favored unsocial behavior and also they became delinquent, while others did not. For this reason, in later modifications to this theory, there are little more subjective elements that even change the name of the theory to its variant of differential identification. Only those members of the differential associations, who are in interaction with other members, identify just those who act delinquently, and as a result only they become delinquent. Thus, in this variant, endogenous factors in criminogenesis are expressed more than in the previous, but this does not change its largely exogenous character, and therefore remains in the context of exogenous etiology.

3. Empirical Researches of Criminal Behavior Based on Differential Association Theory

Many authors have tested the validity of Sutherland's conclusions theory through empirical research, looking for links between different forms of criminal and deviant behavior and associating with other delinquents. Therefore, according to some authors (Singer, 99, 100), theoretical premises of differential association theory have been the starting point of empirical research. Eve (1975) found that in most cases, neither the family nor the school are environments where "deviant" or "delinquent" behavior is "learned". Moreover, with the exception of a few exceptions, these are fairly conventional social environments, taking into consideration the normative orientations, exactly the behaviors that model and encourage. Delinquent behavior of most of adolescents "learns" in the peer group. From all the groups and social environments to which the juveniles belong, there are, the greatest avoidances from normative orientations, patterns of delinquent behavior, and social incentives for such forms of behavior.

There is very little research that has shown that young offenders see their behavior, as morally more superior than the conventional one, or that the values they personally accept and adopt are completely opposite to those prevailing in conventional society (Kornhauser, 1978; Jensen and Rojek, 1980).

In their research, Schwendinger (1967) asked young delinquents to state some arguments against committing crimes of rape and robbery. The responses they received in this way were much more of a practical than moral, respectively with facts (e.g. "they can catch you"). In contrast, the non-delinquent control group had a significantly higher number of moral responses.

Buffalo and Rogers (1971) presented to the orphaned juveniles of a preschool in the US a series of hypothetical situations and then asked in their opinion, what they should do, and what they would do in such situations. The answers to the first question in most cases reflected one type of moral and conventional evaluation. But the answers to the second question almost certainly included some kind

of criminal act, which shows better that these young people were aware of the values and social norms generally accepted. As well as they are not only not the main determinant of their behavior, but they are in fact irrelevant to them.

Mind (1981) found that young people who accept excuses for delinquent behavior are very willing to do really later so. This relation was more expressed among those youths, who previously expressed disapproval and dissatisfaction with crime. As a matter of fact the meaning that seeking justifications for delinquency in the public, causes gradual changes in orientations and attitudes of values. Respectively a decrease in disapproval of criminal activities. The fact that the mentioned relation was also observed among young people, who had never previously expressed their disapproval, even to those committed a crime, encouraged them to conclude that "neutralizing reasons not only allows deviation, but also encourage it."

With a range of empirical studies, starting from the Glueck (1950) couple, to the most recent (Figueira-McDonough et al., 1981; Hindelang et al., 1981; Meade and Marsden, 1981; Gottfredson 1982; Matsueda, 1982 ; Thompson et al., 1982; La Grange and White, 1983) confirmed a clear association between different forms of communication, respectively associating with delinquent friends and with delinquent behavior, or drug use among youth. A national longitudinal research of delinquency and drug addiction among American youth (1976-1979), found that criminal tendencies are more expressed. Likewise, as much they are related to their delinquent peers, the severity of offenses among youth is greater. In other words, the level of "delinquency" depends on the intensity of the young person's relations to conventional society, namely delinquent peers. Poor subordination to the influence of conventional society, combined with strong affiliation with the delinquent peer group, generates significantly more frequency of criminal behavior.

Numerous studies (Kandel et al., 1978; Johnson, 1979; Andrews and Kandel, 1979; Akers et al., 1979; Jensen and Rojek, 1980; Johnstone, 1981), have shown that youngsters are not only authors of criminal offenses under the much stronger influence of their delinquent peers, than the non-delinquent peers. As well as, the decision on a particular criminal offense of a young person depends on whether other members of his or her group have already committed the same offense. As members of the same delinquent group are much more willing to commit the same offense, than different offenses. Moreover, the decision on a particular criminal offense of a young person depends on whether other members of his or her group have already committed the same offense. As well as members of the same delinquent group are much more willing to commit the same offense, than different offenses. Analyzing data on a national sample of teenage, Jessor (1981) found a very strong relationship between adolescents, who created and approved a form of behavior and their peers, who stated their participation in that particular type of behavior. The two variables mentioned have explained almost the entire total amount of explanation for the subsample variance of marijuana and alcohol consumed by adolescents on a regular basis. Furthermore, to a good extent also the adolescent subsample of deviant behaviors, explained almost the entire total amount of explanation including also criminality. Based on the results of his research, Akers (1979) concluded that each delinquent juvenile, directly encourages at least one other of his peers for the same behavior. However, research also warns that, in conditions of social disorganization, the peer group is often the only socially stable group. So, there is generally criminal orientation involving the origin in areas where social disorganization prevails. (Kornhauser, 1978; Johnstone 1983).

Instead of testing differential association theory separately against social control or other theories, Hayes (1997) tested a model of delinquency formation and continuation that draws from social control, differential association and labeling theory. He concluded that weakened social bonds to conventional others increased the chance of meeting delinquent peers, developing friendships, observing and learning delinquent behaviors and engaging in delinquency. Thus social learning and differential association independently explain only part of the delinquency process. In summary, differential association theory has been the subject of substantial empirical scrutiny since it was first fully explicated in 1947. Since that time the theory has been criticized (eg., Vold, 1958; Costello and Vowell, 1999), as well as praised (eg., Cressey 1960, 1973; Matsueda, 1982). Nevertheless, differential

association theory continues to inform theoretical development in criminology, as well as the formation of criminal justice policy. (Wright and Miller, 2005:399)

In their research, "The Impact of Delinquent Friends on Delinquency: Searching for Intervention Variables" (Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, August, 2000), Frank Vitaro, Mara Brendgen, and Richard E. Tremblay, attempted to discover and demonstrate a relation between the delinquency of adolescents and with their association with the best delinquent friends. In this study, three categories of potential variables were explored in relation between the deviation of individuals' best friends and their delinquency during early adolescence. These categories are:

- personal (e.g., disordered childhood behavior profile, delinquency attitudes)
- familiar (parental supervision, the relation with parents), and
- social (characteristics of other friends)

The results showed that a disordered profile of boys' behavior during their childhood, relation with parents, and attitudes about delinquency, interactively influence the relationship between deviation of an individual's best friends and subsequent deviant behavior.

Deviation of other individual friends and parental supervision has an impact, but not intrusive effect.

These results help to clarify the conditions, which one the exposure of an individual to delinquent behavior of his best friends, impacts on delinquent behavior of boys.

They also contribute to the approximation of the various theoretical explanations, for the role of deviant friends in the development of an individual's delinquency.

This study undoubtedly proved that, some of these variables can impact through the interference way to the relation between the delinquency of an individual's best friends and his delinquent behavior.

Finally, the presented results of the research substantially support the social interaction model, which predicts that:

- (a) The individual's antisocial behavior or antisocial orientation, deviant friends and poor parental supervision (viewed separately), all of them contribute to the delinquent predisposition.
- (b) The individual's non antisocial orientation (unjustified attitude toward delinquency) and the improved or unrestrained profile of childhood behavior, restricts or even prevents the influence of the individual's best friends from deviation in eventual delinquency.
- (c) Family experiences also act in intrusive way on the influence of deviated friends on the individual. In this study, this is attributed more to parents than to parental supervision that achieved this result.

4. Some Concerns About This Theory

It is mostly objected to the theory of differential association, for the reason that cannot be verified empirically. Many criminologists made its revision in order to enable that to be empirically verified. One of the psychological revisions of the theory of differential association is "The Theory of Differential Identification," by Daniel Glaser. According to this theory, "an individual engages in criminal behavior to the extent that he identifies himself with real or fictitious persons, from whose perspective his criminal behavior seems acceptable." (Matsueda, (1988: 284)).

Unlike differential association theory, according to this theory, a potential delinquent is not related associated with abstract definitions and patterns, but with a specific personality, even though he could be imagined (eg the hero of a film). It is common, that in both theories is discussed the topic about "learning" criminal behavior. (Ristanović-Nikolić, 2018: 300).

Based on Sutherland's critique of his theory, Cloward and Olin (1960) started later to define their subcultures theory about the concept of illegitimate possibilities. In the form of impersonal contacts with criminal and non-criminal models, his sociological explanation of criminality was directed to variations in the social environment. However, he allowed the possibility to redefine his

meanings, in order to take into consideration even personal traits, such as pollution, for example which one may cause a slight propensity for such patterns. (Bosković, 2006:114).

Finally, differential association theory has been criticized because it fails to specify how deviance is learned. Ronald Akers (1979, 1985, 1998) developed social learning theory to redress these concerns. His theory incorporates concepts from operant psychology to show how "differential reinforcement" features in the learning process. Very briefly, Akers suggested that one's delinquent peer associations are only part of the learning process. One develops delinquent behaviors by observing delinquency, as well as its consequences (e.g., euphoria following drug use or obtained booty following a burglary). If observed consequences are interpreted positively, delinquency is more likely to occur. (Wright and Miller, 2005:396)

5. Conclusion

As a result of the individual being "taught" by such behavior, Edwin Sutherland, with his understanding of criminal behavior, has provided indeed a valuable and well-grounded explanation for the occurrence of deviation. It is immediately noticeable this theory, that essentially reflects the emergence of criminal behavior in the young population, respectively in young people since adolescence interact with their environment and show a tendency for criminal behavior, so themselves become delinquents.

Its importance becomes even greater because of the perspective of criminal policy and crime prevention in general, as far as these scientific explanations of crime causation provide the basis for preventive action in educational institutions and in work with young people, in order they be discouraged from deviant behavior. It is especially well known that the phenomenon of criminality in its reporting forms has the characteristics of a so-called "criminal career", which means that the teenager who becomes delinquent during this period of personality development is much more likely to "enrich" his personal criminal folder, by committing much more serious crimes in a later criminal career, than those who do not exhibit delinquent behavior. This is a great opportunity for the general prevention of criminality in society, for which, as already stated, there is a well based scientific explanation. Of course, socializing in a criminal environment is not the only variable that contributes exclusively to the emergence of deviant behavior among youth. But there are others, such as disordered family relationships, previous attitudes about crime, etc. In this case we can safely say that what Sutherland insisted has a significant impact on criminal behavior.

However, this theory has its weaknesses, which can be attributed to most criminological theories. It means that it does not include all criminal phenomenology in its teachings on the etiology of crime, so it doesn't offer explanation for the emergence of all forms of criminal behavior. This is becoming symptomatic for anyone who is slightly informed about criminology. Especially about its important area that deals with the search for the causes of criminal behavior. In this situation, it is clear to us the assertion of some authors that have search the causes of all deviant behavior, in the interplay of all known causes of criminality so far, of course with varying influence and intensity.

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