

## **Understanding Gang Theories: Social Process Theories, Part One.**

by  
Mario L. Hesse

### **INTRODUCTION**

Katz and Jackson-Curtis state that the study of gangs may be the most frustrating of all challenges in crime research (Katz. et. al: 2004:1). Since the first scientific study of gangs (see Thrasher 1927), criminal justice officials have continued to address such gang issues as: (1) why do gangs form, (2) why do individuals stay in gangs, and (3) what is to be done legislatively to ensure public safety from gangs? The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency (OJJDP) has addressed these questions on several occasions Prevention (OJJDP: October 1998; January 1999; December 2001; and June 2005). The gang problem in the U.S. is neither new, nor unusual, and each theoretical approach to explaining gangs is unique to the academic discipline from which it comes. In dealing with gang related issues, practitioners would benefit greatly by having a better understanding of the theoretical explanations offered by the academic disciplines within criminology.

A narrative study into the relationship of gangs to a criminological approach is warranted in a practitioners view for the understanding of the link between gang involvement and criminology. Criminological theories are separated into six broad approaches: (1) Classical School, (2) Social Structural Approaches, (3) Social Process Theories, (4) Psychological/Psychiatric Approaches, (5) Biological Theories, and (6) Social Conflict Theories (see Schmallegger 2004). The purpose of this narrative work is to address the approach/theory of Social Process (i.e., Differential Association, Differential Identification, and Differential Association-Reinforcement). Furthermore, this is the first paper in an ongoing submission of these six categories. The subsequent narrative papers will address selected theories

within the remaining five criminological approaches.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to understand where criminology is, a summation of where the discipline derives from is warranted. Historically, the early schools of thought in the criminological practice were those of the classical, positivist, and Chicago schools of thought. The Classical School, most associated with the works of Beccaria and Bentham, involved the issues of *free will* and *human rights*. Bentham, concerned with the premise of *utilitarianism*, surmised that individuals weigh the *pains against the pleasures* with regard to committing a crime. In other words, Bentham felt that individuals were human calculators and weighed the pain of committing an illegal act versus the pleasure on the rewards of such act. Furthermore, Bentham felt that the punishment should be greater than the pleasure obtained by the individual.

Positivists, associated with Lombroso, unlike the classical reformers, sought to explain the world around them. Positivist criminologists sought to explain behavior through observations. Delinquent behaviors were determined by biological, psychological, and social traits. Positivists' collected data in order to explain individual types and social phenomena.

Finally, the Chicago school (Social Structural Theory) focused upon human behavior, which is a result of the physical environment in which an individual resides. Historically, the concept of social disorganization is largely associated with the Chicago School of Sociology (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918; Shaw and McKay, 1931; 1936; 1942). Social disorganization emerged largely because of environmental and social conditions that materialized at the turn of the twentieth century in Chicago, including foreign immigration, high rates of juvenile delinquency, and various social problems within the city. Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) set out to account for the high levels of deviant and criminal behavior by Polish immigrants and their children. They concluded that rapid social change resulted in social disorganization.

## **SOCIAL LEARNING THEORIES**

The basic premise of social learning theory, a subset of social process theories, is that social behavior is determined neither by inner personality drives nor by outer sociological and environmental factors (Beirne et. al. 2006:372). As suggested by the authors (2006:372), social learning is a cognitive process in which personality and environment engage in a constant conditioning theory (i.e., B. F. Skinner 1953). Operant conditioning involves modifying behavior by the judicious use of rewards (Voorhis et. al. 2004). In

other words, human, and animal behavior, is affected by its consequences. For example, a juvenile is provided a reward (positive reinforcement) each time a task is successfully completed. A desired behavior is reinforced through a process of conditioned learning that emphasizes rewards. The reward may come in all forms: money, tokens, praise, etc.

Akers (1998) states that the probability that persons will engage in criminal and deviant behavior is increased and the probability of their conforming to the norm is decreased when they (juveniles, adults) differentially associate with others who commit criminal behavior...(1998:50).

### **Differential Association**

Sutherland did not mean that mere association with criminals would lead to criminal behavior. What he meant was that the contents of patterns in association would differ from individual to individual. He viewed crime as a consequence of conflicting values. Differential association is a theory based on the social environment and its surrounding individuals and the values those individuals gain from significant others in their social environment. The theory of Differential Association states that *crime is a learned behavior*.

First, any person can be trained to adopt and follow any pattern of behavior that he is able to execute. Second, failure to follow a prescribed pattern of behavior is due to the inconsistencies and lack of harmony in the influences, which direct the individual. Third, the conflict of cultures is therefore the fundamental principle in the explanation of crime (Sutherland 1934:51-52).

Put another way, “just as people must learn through socialization how to conform to their society’s norms, they must also learn how to depart from those norms--in other words, deviance, like conforming behavior, is a product of socialization” (Calhoun 1989:176). This theory shows how a juvenile can socially learn deviant behavior from those around him/her such as family, peers, schoolmates or anyone else that he or she may meet. The parents and peers are probably the most powerful agents in socialization.

To exemplify this theory, imagine a child growing up in a home where the parents routinely engaged in criminal acts. The child would grow up assuming that these acts may not be as wrong as society or the law has defined them. If a child is around delinquent peers, one can also learn the activities

of their peers and be much more prone to engaging in criminal activity. Further clarification, two boys can grow up in a crime-infested area; one being outgoing who is active and may associate with the criminals in the area, and the other being shy and withdrawn who does not associate with criminals in the area, therefore; criminal behavior may be determined by many associations within society by one child over another. Warr (1993:19) found that differential exposure to delinquent peers, time spent in the company of peers, the importance of friends, and one's commitment or loyalty to their own specific set of friends partially explains the relationship between age and criminal behavior.

The theory of differential association states that criminal behavior is a learned behavior and learned via social interaction with others. Sutherland relied heavily upon the work of Shaw and McKay, Chicago school theorists, in high rates of juvenile delinquency (Shaw and McKay 1931; 1936; 1942). Sutherland drew upon three major theories from the Chicago School in order to better formulate his theory. These included the ecological and cultural transmission theory, symbolic interactionism, and culture conflict. Varying crime rates were explained by the culture conflict approach and the process by which individuals became criminal was expressed by the symbolic interactionism approach. Thus, he formulated his theory with an attempt to explain not only individual criminal behavior but also those of societal groups. Differential Association is based upon these nine postulates (Sutherland, 1947):

1. Criminal behavior is learned.
2. Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with others persons in a process of communication.
3. The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups.
4. When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes simple and the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.
5. The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable.

6. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of the law.
7. Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.
8. The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.
9. 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.

According to differential association, criminal behavior is learned based on the interactions we have with others and the values that we receive during that interaction. We learn values from family, friends, coworkers, etc.; those values either support or oppose criminal behavior. Sutherland also noted that individuals with an excess of criminal definitions will be more open to new criminal definitions and that individual will be less receptive to anti-criminal definitions. The theory does not emphasize who one's associates are, but rather upon the definitions provided by those associations. Once techniques are learned, values (or definitions) supporting that criminal behavior may be learned from just about anyone.

Now, putting Sutherland's theory in one last practical example, two brothers, Darrin (Doughboy) and Ricky, in *Boyz 'n the Hood*, are a good example. Ricky is gunned down just hours away from learning that his test scores have qualified him for college, while Darrin is clearly destined for life in the "hood." At that point, we can readily specify the exposures and relationships that have pointed each brother in a different direction. Ricky's best friend, Trey, is also college-bound; coaches probably play a role, because of Ricky's football skills; and the boys' mother has always related to Ricky in terms of what she believes will be his eventual achievements. On the other hand, Doughboy's friends are the classic dead-end kids, and his mother regards him much more negatively than she regards Ricky.

One of the complications with the theory of social disorganization are the scenes earlier in the movie, for example, when Darrin, Trey, and Ricky

encounter older kids who take away Ricky's football. Darrin is the one who is ready to fight, while Ricky seems willing to accept the loss of his football. Ultimately, what perhaps make the greatest difference between the two brothers's are Darrin's encounters with the police and his incarceration in a juvenile reformatory. That is were criminology may need to supplement Sutherland's differential association theory with another social process theory (i.e., labeling).

### **Differential Association-Reinforcement**

Differential Association-Reinforcement theory is not an alternative to Sutherland's Differential Association (Akers 1985:41). Robert L. Burgess and Ronald L. Akers' (1966) article, "A Differential Association-Reinforcement Theory of Criminal Behavior," was first published in the Society for the Study of Social Problems. The articles focus is the analysis of Sutherland's first nine propositions of behavior theory. Burgess and Akers reorganized Sutherland's nine propositions into seven, below they are summarized, and the concept of reinforcement is added. This article best summarizes the Akers' model of social learning which he continues to use over the next several decades and in using this model describes a variety of deviant behaviors (Burgess and Akers, 1966). The seven-propositions of Burgess and Akers are as follow (Burgess and Akers 1966):

1. Criminal behavior is learned according to the principles of operant conditioning (Sutherland, 1947: 5-7).

Operant behavior is one of the two major types of behavior and is associated with the central nervous system and voluntary behavior. This type of conduct is affected by environmental consequences. Operant behaviors can involve different processes: conditioning, shaping, stimulus control, and extinction. Conditioning is the pairing of a primary stimulus and a neutral stimulus to produce the same response to both. Shaping involves differential reinforcement of behaviors; for example, parents will reinforce 'baby talk' and then as the child gets older regular speech. Differential reinforcements also affect stimulus discrimination by only reinforcing the behavior under certain conditions. Extinction occurs once the operant behavior is no longer reinforced. Burgess and Akers conclude that deviant behavior is a form of

operant behavior; therefore, it must be reinforced.

2. Criminal behavior is learned both in nonsocial situations that are reinforcing or discriminative, and through social interaction in which the behavior of other persons is reinforcing or discriminative for criminal behavior (Sutherland, 1947: 5-7).

Sutherland views the learning of criminal behavior as a matter of symbolic interaction. However, Burgess and Akers believe that this excludes other sources of reinforcement that do not involve human interaction. In contrast to Sutherland's proposition, they say that learning may not occur only due to social reinforcement but may also have nonsocial reinforcement. For example, stealing a loaf of bread may not receive social reinforcement, but it does receive reinforcement because the eating of the bread, thereby nourishing someone who is starving, can be seen as reinforcing.

3. The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs in those groups, which comprise the individual's major source of reinforcements (Sutherland, 1947: 5-7).

Burgess and Akers have taken Sutherland's third proposition and merely replaced the narrow 'intimate primary groups' only with 'groups.' They did this because of the realization that other influences in a person's life may reinforce their behavior. The family is the primary example of an 'intimate primary group.' However, Burgess and Akers use of the word 'groups' allows for the inclusion of reference groups and media as reinforces.

4. The learning of criminal behavior, including specific techniques, attitudes, and avoidance procedures, is a function of the effective and available reinforcers, and the existing reinforcement contingencies (Sutherland, 1947: 5-7).

Burgess and Akers agreed with much of Sutherland's fourth proposition. However, they felt that the motivations mentioned by Sutherland in his fourth

proposition needed to be more developed. Motivation is involved in the acquisition of reinforcement value by a stimulus.

5. The specific class of behaviors which are learned and their frequency of occurrence are function of the reinforcers which are effective and available, and the rules or norms by which these reinforcers are applied (Sutherland, 1947: 5-7).

Burgess and Akers feel Sutherland's proposition viewing the learning of behavior definitions from legal codes as too narrow because it dealt with the content of learning and not the actual learning. Therefore, they broadened the idea from which reinforcements may be derived. Effective reinforcements must be analyzed to understand the development of individual behavior and behavior within a group.

6. Criminal behavior is a function of norms, which are discriminative for criminal behavior, the learning of which takes place when such behavior is more highly reinforced than non-criminal behavior (Sutherland, 1947: 5-7).

Burgess and Akers take issue with Sutherland's proposition that delinquent behavior is a result of excessive definitions in favor of delinquent behavior. Rather, their view is that this is part of the process. The rest of the process is the reinforcement of behavior. Therefore, delinquent behavior is not necessarily a matter of excessive definitions, but amount of reinforcement received.

7. The strength of criminal behavior is a direct function of the amount, frequency, and probability of its reinforcement (Sutherland, 1947: 5-7).

Once again, Burgess and Akers reformulate Sutherland's proposition to include the concept of reinforcement. In reference to the amount, when there is an increase for reinforcement, there is also an increase in the response rate. In reference to frequency, when there is a decrease in the time, then

there is an increase in the response rate. In reference to the probability, when the rate of responses to reinforcement is smaller, then rate of response increases.

This theory, brought forth by Burgess and Akers, can be applied to a majority of criminals and type of crimes that produce a gain. Akers (1973) goes on to write that the gain is best applied to behavior within groups, which offer reinforcement, such as gangs, peer groups, or social groups (Akers, 1973). As an example, stealing (auto theft) or committing a crime, such as assaulting a member of a rival group. In most cases, a person will learn behavior from others and then this behavior is reinforced. The level of positive reinforcement will determine the continuation or discontinuation of the behavior. In other words, a juvenile will continue to commit auto theft if the positive reinforcement is high (see Van Voorhis, Braswell, and Lester for a more detailed discussion on positive reinforcement).

### **Differential Identification**

Glaser (1956) proposed a major modification to the social learning theories, Glaser's principle of differential identification. According to this principle, identifications with individuals we have no contact with, such as characters on television, exert a powerful influence over behavior (Glaser 1956). Glaser believed this identification was at the heart of deviant learning rather than interpersonal associations.

A person pursues criminal behavior to the extent that he identifies himself with real or imaginary persons from whose perspective his criminal behavior seems acceptable (Pontell 1999:146).

The difference between Sutherland and the older members of the Chicago school lies in his emphasis on diversity rather than on consensus upon the idea that different groups within the city are in conflict with each other. These groups have different norms, values, and means of achieving them. Sutherland's theory, at times, seems rather mechanical. For instance, if one were to add up the number of criminal associates that an individual has, and subtract the number of non-criminal associates, one will arrive at an estimate of the chances that the individual has of becoming criminal himself. This is, for the most part, why police officers, probation officers, correctional officers, social workers, and other employees of the criminal justice field do

not become criminal, even though they have extensive association with criminals. The alternate may be true for the reasoning why a juvenile commits a crime based on the company he or she keeps (i.e., duration, the priority, frequency and the intensity of the relationship).

Glaser refines this by adding to the two concepts of differential association and differential organization, the concept of *differential identification* (see diagrams 1 and 2). Differential identification, in essence, is that a person pursues criminal behavior to the extent that he identifies himself with real or imaginary persons from whose perspective his criminal behavior seems acceptable. Such a theory focuses attention on the interaction in which choice models occur, including the individual's interaction with himself in rationalizing his conduct.

In this version of the theory, actual face-to-face contact with delinquents is no longer necessary. It introduces wider sociological considerations into the argument, seeing crime and delinquency not simply as the result of a breakdown in order in one particular part of the city, but as shaped by the norms, values and group images of the wider society. Like differential association, the theory of differential identification does not account for "accidental crime" (Pontell 1999:147), rather differential association treats crime as a form of voluntary (i.e. anticipatory) behavior, rather than an accident. The consequences of accidentally committing a crime may be such as to foster identification with criminal role models. Membership groups are not necessarily reference groups and identification with non-criminal others may eventually make them [criminals] non-criminal. This is the essence of rehabilitation (Pontell 1999:147).

## CONCLUSIONS

Social learning theories focus on behavior and explain the process by which criminal behavior takes place and tells us why the behavior occurs. According to Differential Association, criminal behavior is learned based on the interactions we have with others and the values that we receive during that interaction. Individuals learn values from a wide array of associates and institutions (i.e., family, friends, coworkers, etc.) and those values either support or oppose criminal behavior.

John Doe, a juvenile has numerous contacts with other juveniles who feel that stealing a vehicle is fine. Differential Association-Reinforcement, according to Akers (1985), people are first indoctrinated into deviant behavior by differential association with deviant peers. Then, through differential reinforcement, they learn how to reap rewards and avoid punishment by reference to the actual or anticipated consequences of given behaviors.

Finally, Glaser's Differential Identification theory proposes that the stronger an identification with another person, the more likely an individual is to accept the other values (Williams and McShane 2004:84). The theory of Differential Identification may be linked theories within the *Social Control* subcategory of Social Process theories. These theories will be presented in Part 2; refer to the working model below.

The purpose of this narrative theory summation was not intended to explain all juvenile crime, rather possible reasons as to why juveniles join and commit crimes while in a gang. Each of these three discussed theories are "general theories" within the field of criminology. Furthermore, it is essential that workers in the field of criminal justice understand the theoretical aspects of crime in order to ensure a better understanding of the relationship between crime and theory.

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### **About the Author**

Dr. Mario Hesse teaches at Saint Cloud State University. Mario has worked in both juvenile and adult correctional institutions for eight years. Mario has attended three previous NGCRC conferences. Mario is one of two professors who are responsible for the corrections aspect within the Department of Criminal Justice at Saint Cloud State University. Mario's current research and teaching interests fall within the pedagogical focus of the mechanisms of social control pertaining to juvenile detention, juvenile delinquency, and correctional institutions. Mario's teaching interests are in the field of criminal justice (penology, community corrections, juvenile delinquency, gangs, crime and media, and juvenile justice).