7.6A: Differential Association Theory

Differential association is when individuals base their behaviors by association and interaction with others.

Learning Objectives

• List Sutherland’s nine key points

Key Points

• In criminology, differential association is a theory developed by Edwin Sutherland.
• Differential association theory proposes that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior.
• Differential association predicts that an individual will choose the criminal path when the balance of definitions for law-breaking exceeds those for law-abiding.
• One critique leveled against differential association stems from the idea that people can be independent, rational actors and individually motivated.

Key Terms

• Edwin Sutherland: Considered as one of the most influential criminologists of the 20th century. He was a sociologist of the symbolic interactionist school of thought and is best known for defining white-collar crime and differential association—a general theory of crime and delinquency.
• Differential Association Theory: This theory predicts that an individual will choose the criminal path when the balance of definitions for law-breaking exceeds those for law-abiding.
differential association: a theory in criminology developed by Edwin Sutherland, proposing that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior

In criminology, differential association is a theory developed by Edwin Sutherland (1883–1950) proposing that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior. Differential association theory is the most talked-about of the learning theories of deviance. This theory focuses on how individuals learn to become criminals, but it does not concern itself with why they become criminals.

Differential association predicts that an individual will choose the criminal path when the balance of definitions for law-breaking exceeds those for law-abiding. This tendency will be reinforced if social association provides active people in the person’s life. The earlier in life an individual comes under the influence of high status people within a group, the more likely the individual is to follow in their footsteps. This does not deny that there may be practical motives for crime. If a person is hungry but has no money, there is a temptation to steal. But the use of “needs” and “values” is equivocal. To some extent, both non-criminal and criminal individuals are motivated by the need for money and social gain.

Sutherland’s Nine Points

The principles of Sutherland’s theory of differential association can be summarized into nine key points.

1. Criminal behavior is learned.
2. Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other 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 needs and values, since non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values.

An important quality of differential association theory is the frequency and intensity of interaction. The amount of time that a person is exposed to a particular definition and at what point the interaction began are both crucial for explaining criminal activity. The process of learning criminal behavior is really not any different from the process involved in learning any other type of behavior. Sutherland maintains that there is no unique learning process associated with acquiring non-normative ways of behaving.

One very unique aspect of this theory is that it works to explain more than just juvenile delinquency and crime committed by lower class individuals. Since crime is understood to be learned behavior, the theory is also applicable to white-collar, corporate, and organized crime.
One critique leveled against differential association stems from the idea that people can be independent, rational actors and individually motivated. This notion of one being a criminal based on his or her environment is problematic—the theory does not take into account personality traits that might affect a person’s susceptibility to these environmental influences.

**Criminal Silhouette:** Differential association theory predicts that an individual will choose the criminal path when the balance of definitions for law-breaking exceeds those for law-abiding.