

PRECIS: Week 5 — Differential Association

A brief summary of Sutherland (1973) and Sutherland & Cressey (1978).

The theory of differential association says that criminal behavior is learned like all other behavior: in interaction and mainly in intimate personal groups. Motives and drives are learned through definitions of laws as favorable or unfavorable, with a person becoming delinquent because of an excess of unfavorable definitions. Differential associations vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. Criminal behavior cannot be explained by general needs and values. Personal traits have a causal relation to criminal behavior only as they affect the person's associations. Sutherland says that his theory is flawed in its inability to explain crime as a function of opportunity or intensity of need.

A brief summary of Kornhauser's (1977) critique of differential association

Humans are empty vessels with no predispositions to act a certain way. Only through interaction can they gain favorable definitions to crime, which resultantly causes delinquency. Then, when one commits a crime, we automatically know he or she favors that behavior. There are no basic needs or drives that influence behavior, and thus no reward mechanism, or a mechanism of positive reinforcement. An individual simply performs what action they have a preponderance of favorable definitions for based on frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. Therefore, there are no other variables to consider. Everything is merely a constant, including culture, social organization and differentiation, and situational factors. There is no distinction between culture and social structure. The cause of crime in these theories is culture conflict, or variation in subcultural values defining crime. In this conception, there is no agreement even on minimal values and only a contest among subcultures to define what is law, and thus society is permanently disorganized. Everyone is perfectly socialized into their subculture, and therefore, by definition, cannot violate norms. There is no rationale for why people join a subculture. The significance of aleatory (basically background) factors reveals a flaw in the theory and that companionship is compatible with control models. Finally and most significantly, there is no evidence supporting the most fundamental tenets of differential association.

Warr, Mark. 2002. *Companions in Crime: The Social Aspects of Criminal Conduct*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 4-6.

Chapter 4 is a broad overview of the nature of peer influence and starts by just throwing us in the middle of it, as I will do here. First, whether influencing legal or illegal behavior, ridicule, loyalty, and status act as mechanisms for producing conformity among adolescents in a peer group. Avoiding ridicule, expressing loyalty, and acquiring and maintaining status are overwhelmingly important to adolescents, often causing them to do things they normally wouldn't do. This result possibly means that crime can be construed as collective behavior. In applying theories of collective behavior, Warr

dismisses the element of anonymity because delinquent groups are so small, but believes in the diffusion of responsibility that comes with group delinquency. Instead of relying on theories of collective behavior, Warr tells us that even a group of two people create a moral code between them. In their peer groups, adolescents have a desire to be liked, often bringing about consensus toward behavior that most group members had originally opposed. Also, when adolescents act delinquent, they are unlikely to be condemned by their age peers outside their group.

Warr now gets into some of the real (by real I mean named) theories. Starting with Sutherland's differential association, Warr says that there is incredible support for the association between self-reported delinquency and number of delinquent peers. In addition to some vague notions, the major problem is that attitude transference is not the mechanism causing delinquency, but rather friends have a direct influence on delinquency. In other words, it is not FRIENDS → ATTITUDES → DELINQUENCY as Sutherland suggested, but rather FRIENDS → DELINQUENCY. Next, Warr briefly discusses Akers' learning theory, saying it is powerful but has proven limited in scope. Warr finishes the chapter by noting that males commit delinquent acts in male groups and females commit delinquent acts in mixed groups (does this mean that males don't commit delinquent acts in the company of females who are committing delinquent acts?), the link between drug use and group delinquency is largely unexplored, youths often join groups (which may be delinquent) as a means of protection, and some crimes require co-offenders. One last interesting section discusses the "virtual peer group," meaning that media and communication allow for the diffusion of age norms across disparate geographic locations.

Chapter 5 considers how peer variables, in relation to other variables, affect delinquency and also the influence of family. One of the most indisputable facts in crime and delinquency research is crime's relation to age, with a rapid increase in early adolescence and an equally rapid decrease in early adulthood, with some exceptions of later desistance among drug offenses. This simple fact actually poses an incredible research problem: how can we account for such a rapid ascent and rapid decline in delinquent behavior in such a short time period? Warr attributes this ascent and decline to an equally rapid increase and decrease in the exposure to delinquent peers, the importance of peer relations, and expressed loyalty to peers. From this, Warr makes a blunt conclusion: "...the age distribution of crime stems primarily from age-related changes in peer relations, changes that are part of the ordinary developmental process that takes place during adolescence" (99, emphasis in original). It appears that changes in the life course (e.g. marriage) mark turning points from criminal to conventional behavior, discouraging crime by severing or weakening former criminal associations.

The discussion then shifts to the role of family in countering delinquent activity. Three supported reasons are given to how family can reduce delinquency. First, quantity of time spent with family reduces delinquency. Second, strong bonds to parents may make children less prone to ever make delinquent friends and hence less motivated to engage in delinquency. Third, loss of parental affection may cause adolescents to use their parents as a reference group for behavior even when they are absent. Summarily, there is a strong inverse relationship between attachment to parents and having delinquent friends. Despite this, evidence suggests that parental attachment does not reduce the impact of delinquent peers among adolescents who are already exposed to such peers.

Warr finishes by discussing gender. For females, stronger moral inhibitions discourage delinquency even when exposed to delinquent friends. Though Warr doesn't say it, I see this as support for differential association as outlined with the arrows above. Rather than just experiencing FRIENDS→DELINQUENCY, females follow the path FRIENDS→ATTITUDES→DELINQUENCY but are more likely not to let friends influence attitudes, and in turn they do not commit delinquent acts. Why this is the case is up for discussion.

In the conclusion, Warr attempts to champion a new approach to research. Despite the indisputable evidence for the influence of peers on delinquency, the mechanism by which peers transmit or encourage delinquent behavior remains unknown. Proven correlations or overly inclusive scales measuring several delinquent acts tell us little about this mechanism. Warr proposes a "micro-life-course perspective." Researchers would keep track of adolescent behavior and peer contacts over much shorter periods of time (hours or days) than used in previous studies in order to better assess causal direction and not rely so heavily on distant memory. Some possibilities lie in methods using diaries or beepers.

In the end, Warr speaks of policy implications, pointing to the ability of the family to offset the impact of delinquent peers. Quantity is more important than quality, but within reasonable limits that allow for normal adolescent social development. Despite starting this section with policy, Warr does nothing to offer a policy per se, but rather an individual level solution. He does not actually suggest any policies that could be implemented to encourage such increased family time.

Ludwig, Jens, Greg J. Duncan, and Paul Hirschfield. "Urban Poverty and Juvenile Crime: Evidence from a Randomized Housing-Mobility Experiment." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 116: 655-79.

The major conclusion of Ludwig et al. is that providing families with the opportunity to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods reduces violent crime by teens. To show this, they use data from Baltimore in which families who volunteered for a relocation program were randomly assigned to one of three groups: an experimental group receiving subsidies, counseling, and search assistance; a Section 8 comparison group receiving only subsidies, and a control group receiving no assistance. They hypothesize that the two assisted groups will have reduced violent crime since the program moves them to lower-poverty areas. They make no clear hypothesis regarding property crime. Their outcome variable is juvenile arrests, classified into violent, property, and other. Unfortunately, this is the last mention in the text of the other category, despite making up a third of arrests, half of which are drug offenses, and despite showing some significant results in the tables.

Graphical results show a decrease in violent crimes among experimental teens shortly after moving. Compared to controls, there is an initial increase in property crimes, though it subsides later. Comparing means, prevalence and incidence of arrest for violent crimes for the experimental teens were one-half of the control group averages. Experimental teens also see an increase in property arrests, but this effect becomes statistically insignificant when controlling for preprogram characteristics. Also, preprogram arrests of teens have a positive effect on the family's probability of making

an assisted move, which runs counter to beliefs that there is a self-selection into more affluent areas by non-criminal families. The authors demonstrate the robustness of their results by testing those with no preprogram arrests separately, splitting the sample by gender, using a negative binomial regression, and expanding the age group being examined.

The paper is generally devoid of theory. They make little attempt to interpret the mechanisms involved in their results. They ask the following question to start the discussion section: “Do these findings represent actual behavioral changes among [experimental] teens caused by changes in neighborhood conditions?” Rather than answering the question at all, they talk about alternative competing explanations and are satisfied by simply stating that teens that move to low poverty areas will exhibit less violent crime without any discussion of mechanisms.

Discussion Questions

1. If we take frequency and priority as independent in Sutherland & Cressey’s theory, then how does an individual establish a ranking of priority? In other words, if priority is not a function of frequency, then how could you explain why someone gives a higher priority to their peers than to their family? What might rational choice theorists say about this? What does Kornhauser think of this? What would Warr say?
2. In Sutherland’s formulation of learning theory, does learning have to occur in the context of a defined subculture (e.g. a gang, an ethnic group) or can it be just a group of friends without such a strict boundary? What does Kornhauser say about this?
3. Is Warr proposing a theory (whether new or an altered existing one) or simply reviewing research? He offers no concise outline or summary in the book as Sutherland & Cressey do. Could we make such an outline of points for Warr?
4. If Warr is right about family time offsetting delinquent peer influence, what are some race, class, and gender consequences? What are some actual policies that could be implemented to encourage more family time and how can we make these policies be sensitive to issues of race, class, and gender?
5. What do you think of Warr’s micro-life-course perspective? Is this approach reasonable and feasible? How would you develop a study using such an approach? Can this approach have external validity?
6. Does Ludwig et al. convince you that this policy is one that should be implemented more widely? What are the implications for those who don’t take advantage of the program and for inner cities generally?
7. What do you think is the answer to the question posed above that Ludwig et al. fail to answer: Do their findings represent actual behavioral changes among experimental teens caused by changes in neighborhood conditions?
8. In general, do you think that following a your theory with a set of criticisms of your own theory as Sutherland does is a good idea? Does recognizing its drawbacks so straightforwardly weaken or strengthen the case for your theory?