

# The Differential Association Theory -

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The criminological theory of differential association is based on the concept that individual criminal actions are the results of positive evaluations of deviance acts after knowledge is procured through social instruction. A person who is subjected to more definitions in favour of crime violation than against crime infringement becomes a delinquent.

Gabriel Tarde who lived between 1843 and 1904 was one of the initial proposers who said "patterns of delinquency and crime are learned in much the same manner as any occupation, primarily through imitation of and association with others". Edwin Sutherland (1883-1950) research between 1924 and 1947 developed further this concept. Don Cressey published later editions of Sutherland's book "Principles of criminology". Cressey was one of the last of Sutherland's students and a leading proponent of Sutherland's research.

The theory was a modern attempt to construct a single explanation for individual criminal causation. The perspectives of differential association were among the first elements that brought the concepts of Sociology to Criminological studies. It was one of the principal direct attempts to explain crime causation. It has been evaluated, criticized, prided and spread throughout the world.

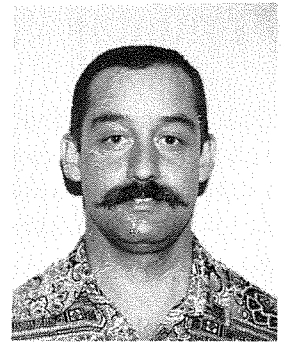
Sutherland argued that persons become delinquent when they define Law violation more favourable to them than conventional behaviour. He also stressed that individuals learn the definitions of crime violations through the usual means that are often used for learning traditional and conventional elements of life.

Sutherland's research was based primarily on studies of "white collar crime". He argued that normal conventional persons who encounter intensive rationalization in favour of committing norms' infringements are vulnerable to committ deviances themselves. If the sources of negative instruction is a person who is usually trustworthy to the person aquiring the definitions there is a better chance that the person aquiring the definitions become a deviant.

## The Nine Basic Element of the Theory

The theory has nine basic prepositions.

1. Behaviour conventional or not is learned.
2. One learns criminal behaviour by socialization.
3. An individual's behaviour is particularly effected by close contact with relatives, friends and when among groups of such friends and relatives.
4. Instructions include the particular motive, reason and bearing, and the technical way to achieve a deviant goal.
5. Legal Statutes contribute to the formation of opinion as to the favourable or unfavourable evaluations of criminal acts.
6. People become criminals when the weight of instruction in favour of illegal acts outweighs that against infringement of Law.
7. The affinity and period being regular or otherwise, of an individual's association with the source of negative instruction effect the intensity and extent of criminal behaviour.
8. Learning illegal conduct by association with negative sources is similar to the process of learning orthodox behaviour from positive sources.
9. Although delinquent behaviour is an expression of one's requirements, it is not a compulsory effect of specific requirements, as same needs may be attained through legal practices.



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Social economic environments may effect individual associations. An opportunity for a person to be close to readily available sources of negative or illegal inspirations will increase his chances to associate and learn delinquency. Therefore communities with a high rate of criminality increase the chances of any person to have social contacts with negative sources. In addition Criminal environment help an individual to regard criminal behaviour as an acceptable norm in the particular community.

## “White Collar Crime” and the Differential Association Theory

This Cultural deviance theory had left a special impact on the empirical research on “White Collar Crime”. In “White Collar Crime”, yields are usually high. It is the element of profitability that makes this type of crime attractive to many individuals.

Individuals become familiar to methods of achieving criminal accords while in the company of persons already well accustomed to methods and who already have the drives that influence their relationship towards crime. The more intimate and close the relation is with delinquent tutors, the better is the chance for an individual to get impelled towards crime. In Corporate and business environment, stakes are high and crime may leave crucial gains that may exceed the sanctions that are ventured.

In several cases of white collar crime, the society considers such crimes as not effecting anyone individually. Though white collar crime is very much dispersed compared in ratio to other crime, very few cases are prosecuted annually. Radzinovicz (1966) pointed out that:

“For various reasons these offences are regarded by most people as venial, or at least as far less criminal than what Garafolo (1885) called the “natural crimes”, the traditional offences against the person and property”

“White Collar Crime” not only creates a perfect setting for a criminal opportunity that leaves high criminal benefits but in most cases of “White Collar Crime” environments, there are readily available and willing instructors.

## Evaluation and studies of the Differential Association Theory

Gottredson and Hirschi (1990), agreed that persons commit crime whenever they decide that the pleasures produced by such violation exceed the pain risked on their commission. However they explained that there is a natural desire within individuals for deviant behaviour. Consequently they concluded that individuals, must learn to restrain from committing deviant behaviour. This argument conflicts with Sutherland’s notion that crime is the result of learning the non-conventional behaviour, and not the result of deficiency in the learning process of conventional behaviour.

Simons, Miller and Aigner (1980) while analyzing this theory, presented a study that shows that females and males are sensitive to criminal learning in the same manner. However since young age females tend to have less access to criminal and illegal inspirations. This results in lesser delinquent attitudes in females.

Ray Jeffrey (1990) pointed out that the theory has five principal set-backs:

- a) That the differential association theory ignores personal biology and psychology.
- b) The theory fails to overlook the role of opportunities for crime to transpire.
- c) The theory does not explain crimes of passion.
- d) The theory is impossible to explore empirically.
- e) The theory gives very vague recommendations as how to curb crime.

Jeffrey also contends that if the concept that Criminal acts are learned, is presument to be correct, consequently who inspire the first law-breakers? Can criminologists ignore genetics? Why persons who recieve very similar opportunities in National Institutions behave in different manner?

Warr (1993) while explaining a “National Youth Survey”, on the effects of age groups on crime distribution and the exposure of youths to delinquent peers, concluded that “age effects an individual ability to learn and consider any inclinations learned through peer groups”. According to him infants and addolcents are more vulnerable to learn negative definitions of deviant acts.

Research on the “differential association theory” helped Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960) in their development of the “Differential Opportunity Theory”. Ronald Akers and Robert Burgess (1968), also used Sutherland’s work in the development of the “Differential Reinforcement theory.

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