

Social Structure Social Learning Theory: Preventing Crime and Violence

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Social learning theory is an important theoretical premise. The importance of the theory occurs in psychology, sociology, and criminology. Further, this theoretical premise, also, has importance in developing prevention programs. This chapter will move from the theoretical roots, review of the social learning theory literature, social structure social learning theory, review of the social structure social learning theory, and a review of historical and contemporary prevention programs.

Theoretical Roots

Akers' social learning theory was first formulated as differential association reinforcement by Burgess and Akers (1966). They were attempting to combine Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory with the principles of behavioral psychology. Sutherland (1947) endeavored to develop a theory of white-collar crime, which required a theory that differed from most of the era since most had assumptions based on individual-level deficiencies of lower-class citizens and criminals. Consequentially, a theory

was formed based on crime, like any behavior being learned through differential association.

Sutherland proposed nine points to highlight his theory of differential association and are as follows: (1) Criminal behavior is learned, (2) criminal behavior is learned and in interaction with other persons in a process of communication, (3) the principle part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups, (4) when criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated and sometimes very simple, and (b) the learning also includes the specific direction of motives and 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 association 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, and (9) although criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values, because noncriminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values (Sutherland 1947, p. 6–7).

Sutherland's (1947) theory, however, did not specify the process in which behavior is learned. The sixth principle of differential association was

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essential to the creation of Burgess and Akers' (1966) differential association–reinforcement theory. Sutherland (1947) believed in the ability of people to learn two kinds of definitions that are assigned to behaviors—favorable and unfavorable. The probability of an individual committing a certain delinquent act will increase when their definitions of the act are more favorable. Correspondingly, an unfavorable definition toward an act will decrease the probability of its commission. In most circumstances, people are exposed to both criminal and anti-criminal influences with an overly representative presence of favorable or unfavorable definitions being rare.

Burgess and Akers (1966) believed that Sutherland's (1947) concept of learning through association or interaction with others within a social context goes hand in hand with the premises of operant theory, which refers to how behavior is formed by interactive environmental factors, either social or nonsocial (Akers 2009, p. 11). Akers and Burgess included work from B. F. Skinner, an expert in the psychology of operant conditioning who formulated the original operant reinforcement model. Skinner (1953) formed his theory through experimental work with laboratory rats. He studied the rat's behavior when they were placed in a box containing a lever that when pushed rewarded the rats with a food pellet. The rats were able to learn that they could consistently receive food by using the lever and thus were subjected to operant conditioning to do so. Akers eventually applied concepts from this study to his own work including the four core elements of social learning theory: definitions, differential association, differential reinforcement, and imitation.

Eventually, Burgess and Akers (1966) altered Sutherland's (1947) original 9 propositions to contain a detailed illustration of the learning process. With contributions from Skinner's (1953) writings on operant condition, Bandura's (1969) work on the modeling of behavior, and Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory, Burgess and Akers (1966) gave the following new principles that describe the learning process of criminal behavior: (1) Criminal behavior is learned according to the process of

operant conditioning, (2) criminal behavior is learned both in nonsocial situations that are reinforcing or discriminative and through that social interaction in which the behavior of other persons is reinforcing or discriminative for criminal behavior, (3) the principle part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs in those groups which comprise the individuals' major source of reinforcements, (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, (5) the specific class of behaviors which are learned and their frequencies of occurrence are a function of the reinforcers which are effective and available and the rules or norms by which these reinforcers are applied, (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 noncriminal behavior, and (7) the strength of criminal behavior is a direct function of the amount, frequency, and probability, of its reinforcement.

As before mentioned, Burgess and Akers (1966) saw this new theoretical perspective as originating from applying an integrated set of learning principles to differential association theory. However, criticisms of this refinement caused Akers to move away from these seven principles and concentrate on Bandura's (1969) social behaviorism and the four core elements that would comprise social learning theory.

The social learning theory is thought to be a general theory of crime due to its underlying assumptions that attempt to explain why individuals commit deviant acts and also why they do not. Akers briefly describes his theory as: "The probability that persons will engage in criminal and deviant behaviors is increased and the probability of conforming to the norm is decreased when they differentially associate with others who commit criminal behavior and espouse definitions favorable to it, are relatively more exposed in-person or symbolically to salient criminal/deviant models, define it as desirable or justified in a situation discriminative for the

behavior, and have received in the past and anticipate in the current or future situation relatively greater reward than punishment for the behavior (Akers 2009, p. 50)."

Main Concepts of Social Learning Theory

Akers (1998) outlines four main concepts in his social learning theory. Specifically, these are (1) differential association, (2) definitions, (3) differential reinforcement, and (4) imitation. The concept of *differential association* emphasizes the social interactions between people in peer groups such as those between families, neighbors, or teachers and also those found in media content through television, Internet, etc. These interactions structure the setting in which the social learning of behavior occurs. Similar to Sutherland (1947), Akers considered the intimate personal group vital due to their role in the individual's life being most significant. These are most importantly the primary groups of friends and family. Social learning theory contends that these primary groups are vital beyond just exposing an individual to passing of definitions and also include providing behavior models. However, differing from Sutherland (1947), Akers recognizes the importance of secondary groups including church members, teachers, and authority figures. Influences from these sources gain importance as an individual moves from childhood through their life span. Essentially, criminal behavior is thought to be more likely when an individual differentially associates with others who possess and share pro-delinquent attitudes and values.

Related to this, Akers mentions that beyond this interaction is the time spent within these associations that will contribute to the ratio of deviant to nondeviant associations. The four modalities from Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory remain in social learning theory. These involve the variation in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. Frequency involves those associations that occur most often.

Priority refers to those which occur earlier. Furthermore, Akers believes that duration can be broken into two parts including the length of time and relative amount of time spent with differential associates. Basically, the greater the amount of time and percentage of all time that is spent with certain people, the greater influence they will have on an individual's behavior. The intensity of the relationship refers to the importance those to whom an individual relates. Essentially, the more frequent, intense, and long-lasting an individual's differential associations that expose and reinforce deviant behavior, the greater the chances of such behavior.

The next component, *definitions*, involves an individual's own beliefs and attitudes they assign to certain behaviors. According to Akers, definitions include the orientations, rationalizations, definitions of the situation, and other attitudes that label the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, and justified or unjustified. Further specified are general and specific definitions. General definitions are conventional societal norms, often seen in the form of religion or morality, that are favorable or unfavorable to delinquency. Specific definitions refer to how individuals may feel about specific criminal acts in terms of level of immorality. For example, drug use may be considered approvable, but robbery is not. When an individual strongly disapproves of certain acts, they are less likely to participate in such behavior. Also, definitions can be categorized as positive or neutralizing. Examples of positive definitions in favor of crime may be "it is a thrilling experience to steal a car" or "it is fun to do drugs." Examples of neutralizing definitions include "it is ok to steal from your boss if you are underpaid."

According to Akers (1998), general and specific definitions operate as if on a spectrum. Akers (1998) describes it as "definitions favorable to deviance include weakly held general beliefs and more strongly held deviant justifications and definitions of the situation; those unfavorable to deviance include more strongly held conventional beliefs and deviant definitions

that are weakly subscribed to” or “two parallel continua running in opposite directions.” However, importantly, according to social learning theory, definitions are learned through social reinforcement mechanisms. Definitions do not work so much as direct motivators but rather “discriminative stimuli” communicating that certain behaviors are likely to be rewarded or punished. This predictable reinforcement or punishment is what motivates behavior, regardless of whether motivation to participate in such an act is in line with someone’s beliefs.

The following concept, *differential reinforcement*, refers to the cost–benefit calculation of the anticipated or actual rewards or punishments that result from behavior. People are more likely to engage in a behavior based on certain desirable results involving rewards or punishment. Differential reinforcement’s effect on behavior stems from Skinner’s (1953) operant (instrumental) conditioning model which includes positive and negative reinforcement and positive and negative punishment. Greater and more frequently occurring rewards, such as status, monetary gain, or excitement associated with a behavior, are thought to be positively correlated with commission of such behavior (positive reinforcement). Furthermore, this correlation continues when behavior is reinforced with a low frequency and severity of punishment (negative reinforcement). In terms of punishment, behavior can be deterred through direct or positive punishment and indirect or negative punishment. Positive punishment refers to undesirable consequences associated with a behavior, while negative punishment is the removal of a valued reward as a consequence of a behavior.

Finally, *imitation* is modeling similar behavior that was observed in others. This element is related to Bandura’s (1979) perspective of vicarious reinforcement in which individuals observe the behaviors modeled by others and also the consequences that follow others’ behavior. For example, someone may witness a criminal act and recognize the rewards the offender gained or the lack of punishment and feel encouraged to participate in the same behavior through imitation. Imitation can result

from direct observation of those in peer groups or indirect observation such as what is seen in the media.

The level of effect that imitation brings to the social learning process is dependent on a few different factors. Characteristics of the model and observed behavior in question along with the reinforcement of the behavior all factor into the likelihood that the behavior will be imitated. Akers believes the most imitated models are those in direct contact with the observer. But also distant media figures can serve as models to imitation as well.

The concepts from Akers’s (1998) version of social learning theory are part of a larger process that occurs in three areas: (1) individual’s learning history (both learning from and influencing others), (2) immediate situations where opportunity for a crime occurs, and (3) in the larger social context (i.e., meso- and macrolevels). The social learning process is the recognition that it is dynamic rather than static. For social learning to take place, reciprocal and feedback effects are central. Following Skinner’s (1953) logic and Akers’s (1998) use of operant conditioning, reinforcement relies on a response–stimulus–response reciprocation. This means that a behavior occurs producing consequences that produce a certain probability that the behavior may be repeated, suggesting, thus, the complexity of the theory.

The complexity of the theory has far greater than the mere usage of the four components. Akers and Jensen (2006) wrote that individuals acquire criminal and deviant behavior in the following manner:

The typical temporal sequence in the process by which persons come to the point of violating the law, or engaging in other deviant acts, is hypothesized to be one in which the balance of learned definitions, imitation of criminal or deviant models, and anticipated balance of reinforcement produces the initial delinquent or deviant act. The facilitative effects of these variables continue in the repetition of acts, although imitation becomes less important than it was in the first commission of the act. After onset or initiation, the actual social and non-social reinforcers and punishers affect whether or not the acts will be repeated and at what level of frequency. Both the behavior and definitions,

favorable and unfavorable, are affected by the consequences of the initial acts. Whether a deviant act will be repeated in a situation that presents, or is perceived to present, the opportunity depends on the learning history of the individual and the set of definitions, discriminative stimuli and reinforcement contingencies in that situation (p. 41).

This does not mean that all of the social learning concepts can only happen as they are presented above. The reality is that certain concepts may come at any point in the social learning process. For instance, definitions are often thought to occur before the commission of an act. As hypothesized by Akers (1998), definitions may occur at any point in the social learning process. For instance, it is possible for definitions to occur before an act, but it is also possible for definitions to occur retrospectively to justify or excuse a behavior. Even at this point of the social learning process, the retrospective nature of the justification or excuse may still serve as a prospective definition of future behavior slipping into the response–stimulus–response reciprocation that is often found in reinforcement.

Review of the Social Learning Theory Literature

Up to this point, this chapter has focused on the development of social learning theory. This chapter then shifts to focus on the empirical literature of social learning theory. Specifically, the focus is on the major concepts of social learning theory and the process of social learning theory. Following Akers (1998), we take empirical evidence to be research results that are supportive of at least one or more concepts of the theory.

Researchers have spent a substantial amount of time and resources empirically testing social learning theory. Research results have been produced for a number of decades that show support for Akers different versions of social learning theory (Agnew 1991, 1993, 1994; Andrews 1980; Esbensen and Deschenes 1998; Haynie 2002; Jensen 1972; Krohn 1974; Kandel and Adler 1982; Matsueda 1982; Patterson 1995;

Skinner and Fream 1997; Warr 2002; Winfree and Griffiths 1983). In addition, social learning theory remained relative when researchers empirically compared it with other theories in the same studies. Hepburn (1976) argued, in this situation, social learning theory provided a better explanation of the variation than other theories. Pratt and Cullen's (2000) meta-analysis of self-control theory showed that differential association and definitions remained relevant, although not as strong as Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) version of self-control. In addition, a number of researchers have shown that social learning theory has value when it is used from integrated theories (Catalano et al. 1996; Elliott et al. 1985; Higgins and Marcum 2011; Thornberry et al. 1994).

In addition to this empirical support, Pratt et al. (2010) performed a meta-analysis of the social learning theory using more than 100 studies as evidence. Their research showed that the most tested and validated portion of social learning theory was differential association. Further, they showed that imitation had the least empirical support. Overall, the results across decades and the meta-analysis indicate support for social learning theory.

Social Structure Social Learning Theory

While the empirical research indicates that social learning theory has importance in providing an understanding of crime and deviance, Akers (1998) pushes the theory in an additional direction. Akers (1998) redeveloped the theory in a manner to include the social structure. In this reformulation, the social structure is pivotal to a richer understanding of social learning theory.

Akers (1998) argued that an understanding the individuals environment was key to understanding their criminal and deviant behavior. The social structure has an organizing feature that indirectly effects the performance of criminal and deviant behavior. In other words, the social structure would effect the social learning

concepts (i.e., differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation). Overall, the social learning concepts still govern the learning process, but the social structure has some influence over them. Akers (1998) argued:

The social structural variables are indicators of the primary distal macro-level and meso-level causes of crime, while the social learning variables reflect the primary proximate causes of criminal behavior that mediate the relationships between social structure and crime rates. Some structural variables are not related to crime and do not explain the crime rate because they do not have a crime relevant effect on the social learning variables (p. 322).

With this in mind, Akers (1998) suggests that four dimensions of social structure provide the contexts that the social learning concepts exist and the learning process takes place. They are as follows: differential social organization, differential location in the social structure, theoretically defined structural variables, and differential social location.

Differential social organization focuses on the larger community. Akers (1998) argued that this is based on the structural correlates of crime in the larger community or society. For instance, these can be the age composition, population density, or other community demographics that seem to move communities toward higher crime rates.

Differential location in the social structure focuses on the stratification of individuals within their communities. In other words, Akers (1998) emphasized that the sociodemographic characteristics that placed individuals and social groups in their specific categories. These characteristics included, but not exclusive, the following: class, gender, race and ethnicity, marital status, standing of individuals, and their roles in organizations.

Theoretically defined structural variables have importance for the future development of social learning theory. Akers (1998) has taken the perspective that other theoretically relevant variables are important social structural forces. Examples of these forces included anomie, class oppression, social disorganization, and patriarchy.

Differential social location refers to the membership to social groups. These groups

include membership to groups such as gangs, family, or other peer groups. In addition, prevention programs may be used as a means of differential social location. Further, time and relative importance of these groups increase the likelihood of organizing social learning that will influence behavior.

Review of the Social Structure Social Learning Theory Literature

To date, a small body of research has examined the links explicated by Akers (1998). Researchers have, generally, used college student samples to examine the effects hypothesized by Akers (1998). These studies have yielded positive results for social structure social learning theory in the context of rape, violence, binge drinking, and digital piracy (Lee 1998; Lanza-Kaduce and Capece 2003; Morris and Higgins 2010). These results need to be consumed within their limitations. None of these studies examined the full complement of structural factors that may be present in social learning theory. This complement includes using prevention programs as a means of social structure. This suggests that social learning theory has importance for prevention programs.

The principles of social learning theory have guided many prevention and treatment programs for criminal offenders. This chapter provides an overview of some of the historical prevention programs that are in the context of social learning theory. Move to some contemporary views of prevention programs in the context of social learning theory.

Historical Social Learning Prevention Programs

Social learning theory has provided the basis for some prevention programs. If the assumption is made that delinquent behavior is transferred through the social learning process, then controlling and altering the process or the

environment that allows social learning to occur can reduce crime and victimization. The following paragraphs will show examples of how the principles of social learning theory have been applied to practical crime prevention efforts.

The Highfields alternative treatment program allowed delinquent boys to participate in regular school, work, and outside activities, but required a residential stay at the Highfields facility after hours. At the Highfields facility, boys were primarily subjected to Guided Group Interaction sessions where adult leaders guided peer groups in discussion about common problems and building a group atmosphere encouraging pro-social attitudes and behaviors. Upon completion of the program, the boys had developed more law-abiding attitudes. But, these improvements were modest and most recognizable in the black population. Comparatively, the Highfields participants fared somewhat better than a group placed in the state reform school in avoiding reinstitutionalization upon release, again most noticeable in the black population. The Highfields' peer group session approach was continued by Essexfield in a nonresidential setting with similar results. But, participants were not more successful than those in regular probation or residential placement in Highfields.

Similar to the Highfields' GGI was Empeys' delinquency treatment experiment. This semiresidential alternative placement program placed delinquents in a group home facility and gave them responsibilities such as forming groups, orienting new residents, making rules, determining appropriate punishment for rule breaking, and forming opinions of when a resident is ready to be released. Participants were recognized more for pro-social rather than delinquent behavior with the intent of forming definitions favorable to conforming behavior. Those who participated in Pinehills were less likely to be repeat offenders than those randomly assigned to state institutions at 6-month and 4-year follow-up point.

Community-based residential programs moved beyond this peer group support seen in the Highlands and Provo projects in favor of

creating family environments. The Teaching Family Model involved a married couple and 6–8 delinquent youths living together in a family setting. The delinquent youth are able to earn or lose reward points for respective behavior. The idea is that exposure to pro-social parents and peers will encourage conforming behavior. Studies were favorable to behavior modification while living with the teaching family, but subsequent delinquency between control and comparison groups was not favorable of the program.

The coercive family model and Patterson Adolescent Transition Program of the Oregon Social Learning Center was designed to target family management skills in parent-focused parent-teen interaction. Parental sessions with therapists are held to build effective socialization and disciplinary practices, while teen-focused sessions improve communication, self-control, attitudes, and peer association. Program evaluations were favorable (Dishion et al. 1992); however, older delinquent participation in intervention groups increased rather than decreased delinquency (Dishion et al. 1999).

Andrews (1980) attempted to change the attitudes of convicted adult offenders. The major principles of his program included contingency, quality of interpersonal relationships in those groups, and self-management. Program participants developed greater respect for the law and had lower recidivism rates. Altering associations and reinforces reduced criminal definitions and improved pro-social definitions.

These are just a few examples, but in the past decades, there have been numerous treatment and prevention programs using this peer group approach. Many of these have suffered poor design and implementation and have not been widely found to be effective at reducing delinquency (Gorman and White 1995). In a review of scientific studies of prevention, Sherman et al. (1998) categorize family- and school-based programs under the "what works" philosophy. They conclude the cognitive behavioral approaches such as communicating norms, positive behavior reinforcement, social competency training, life and thinking skills, and self-control. Also,

community- and school-based programs drawing on the principles of learning and bonding theories attempt to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors.

Contemporary Prevention Programs

To date, the majority of the programs have been based on the entire theoretical premise. Contemporary prevention programs have moved from using the entire program to using the concepts as risk factors. This means that the causal logic of the theory is not the entire focus, but the programs focus on the main concepts of the theory.

One prevention program comes from Catalano et al. (1996). They developed a prevention program that utilizes the key features from a number of theoretical premises. These premises rely heavily on social learning concepts. Specifically, Catalano et al. (1996) developed the social development model, for example, is a long-term project that has shown some success in preventing adolescent misbehavior. The main risk factor that this model focuses on is peer association known as differential association.

Another contemporary prevention program is The Teens, Crime, and the Community and Community Works which was developed by a partnership between the National Crime Prevention Council and Street Law, Inc. This program, also, takes a risk factor approach. The program attempts to reduce juvenile delinquency and victimization by focusing on specific risk and protective factors related to its occurrence. The TCC/CW program contained three main components: (1) a 31-lesson classroom-based curriculum on topics such as guns, violence, hate, drugs, conflict resolution, and preventing victimization; (2) actively engaging role models such as teachers, police officers, doctors, and lawyers in delivering the curriculum; teach young people to be resources for each other and to interact positively with community members, and (3) following through with Action Projects that apply the school-based curriculum to the community. The program relies heavily on Akers

(1998) describes how criminal behavior is learned through social interactions with others. While this relies on the key principles, the program largely uses the concepts as risk factors. To date, Esbensen (2009) conducted an outcome evaluation of the Community Works program that showed some beneficial program effects. Specifically, in the categories of general delinquency, violent offending, neutralization for hitting, and pro-social involvement, the program treatment appeared beneficial.

These programs are examples of contemporary uses of social learning theory to reduce instances of violence and substance use. The prevention programs are showing promise for this type of reduction. These programs show that social learning theory is a viable theoretical premise for prevention programs.

Conclusion

Social learning theory is an important crime theory that can be used for prevention purposes. With roots in sociology and psychology, the theoretical premise has several different ways that it may be used for prevention. The sociological roots came from Sutherland's developments of differential association theory. Burgess and Akers (1966) further developed the theory to include reinforcement. The premise was further developed by Akers (1973, 1985) who added imitation to the theory. Akers (1998) further respecified the theory to include the roles of social structure leaving the theory as social structure social learning theory. With the final pieces of social learning theory developed, the theory has a feeling of soft behavioralism. Each one of these developments has implications for prevention.

The prevention research based on social learning theory has particular importance. Early prevention research in this area focused on peer group discussions and encouragement of pro-social attitudes and behaviors. Other prevention research has focused on family management issues that may assist in better parenting practices. More contemporary prevention programs focused on using pieces of social learning theory as risk

factors and that focusing on those risk factors will assist in preventing crime and deviance.

Social learning theory has some issues that have to be addressed. First, the role of imitation within the empirical literature has not been supported very well. This means that part of the theory may have difficulty in the context of prevention. Second, little research has empirically examined the role of social structure in the context of social learning theory. Research in these areas may provide additional evidence that could be helpful in the context of prevention.

While social learning theory and the empirical literature pertaining to social learning theory has some limits, the theoretical premise may be used for prevention. Studies using imitation and more studies examining the different parts of social structure in the context of social learning theory will be helpful. For now, social learning theory has some validity, and the prevention efforts built from social learning theory also have shown promise.

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