**Theory of Differential Association**

A more developed cultural learning theory is **Edwin H. Sutherland’s** study of professional thieves, which suggested to him that many criminals learned the knowledge and motivations as well as all the skills necessary for engaging in criminal behavior.This theory is known as **theory of differential association**. Differential association is the theory of crime that suggests that criminal behavior is learned through the same processes that noncriminal behaviors are learned. Criminal behavior is learned within the context of intimate social groups that are criminal. The learning includes the techniques of committing crimes as well as the attitudes and rationalization that serve to justify such behavior. The hypothesis of differential association is that, criminal behavior is learned is association with those who define such behaviors favorably and in isolation from those who define it unfavorably. The excess of definitions favorable to law violation, furthermore, is due to most of associations with criminals over noncriminal. Sutherland theory of differential association represented a breakthrough for the study of crime at the time it was first formulated in 1930. Sutherland applied the hypothesis of differential association on white collar criminals. His study was based on a sample of seventy large corporations, and their encounters by civil and criminal agencies of social control. Theoretically, Sutherland was concerned with how white-collar criminals come to define their illegal business practices as acceptable. He concludes that a general ideology grows out of involvement in specific practices and this ideology in turn serves to justify these practices. These ideologies include, business is business, it is the law of jungle, we are not in business for our health, it isn’t matter how you get your money, but what you do with it, it counts. These developed ideologies justify the illegal practices of associations.

**Principles of Differential Association**

Sutherland and Cressy explain the basic principles of differential association as follows:

**Criminal behavior is learned:** This statement differentiates Sutherland’s theory from prior attempts to classify criminal behavior as an inherent characteristic of criminals. Sutherland implies that criminality is learned in the same manner as any other learned behavior, such as writing, painting, or reading.

**Criminal behavior is learned as a by-product of interacting with others:** An individual does not start violating the law simply by living in a criminogenic environment or by manifesting personal characteristics associated with criminality, such as low IQ or family problems. People actively learn as they are socialized and interact with other individuals who serve as teachers and guides to crime. Some kids may meet and associate with criminal “mentors” who teach them how to be successful criminals and to reap the greatest benefits from their criminal activities.46 Thus criminality cannot occur without the aid of others.

**Learning criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups:** People’s contacts with their most intimate social companions—family, friends, and peers—have the greatest influence on their development of deviant behavior and an antisocial attitude. Relationships with these influential individuals color and control the way individuals interpret everyday events. For example, children who grow up in homes where parents abuse alcohol are more likely to view drinking as socially and physically beneficial.

**Learning criminal behavior involves assimilating the techniques of committing crime, including motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes:** Young delinquents learn from their associates the proper way to pick a lock, shoplift, and obtain and use narcotics. In addition, novice criminals learn the proper terminology for their acts and acquire approved reactions to law violations. Criminals must learn how to react properly to their illegal acts, such as when to defend them, when to rationalize them, and when to show remorse for them.

**The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from perceptions of various aspects of the legal code as favorable or unfavorable:** Because the reaction to social rules and laws is not uniform across society, people constantly meet others who hold different views on the utility of obeying the legal code. Some people admire others who may openly disdain or flout the law or ignore its substance. People experience what Sutherland calls culture conflict when they are exposed to opposing attitudes toward right and wrong or moral and immoral. The conflict of social attitudes and cultural norms is the basis for the concept of differential association.

**A person becomes a criminal when he or she perceives more favorable than unfavorable consequences to violating the law:** According to Sutherland’s theory, individuals become law violators when they are in contact with persons, groups, or events that produce an excess of definitions favorable toward criminality and are isolated from counteracting forces. A definition favorable toward criminality occurs, for example, when a person hears friends talking about the virtues of getting high on drugs. A definition unfavorable toward crime occurs when friends or parents demonstrate their disapproval of crime.

**Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity:** Whether a person learns to obey the law or to disregard it is influenced by the quality of that person’s social interactions. Those of lasting duration have greater influence than those that are brief. Similarly, frequent contacts have greater effect than rare, haphazard contacts. “Priority” means the age of children when they first encounter definitions of criminality. Contacts made early in life probably have more influence than those developed later. Finally, “intensity” is generally interpreted to mean the importance and prestige attached to the individuals or groups from whom the definitions are learned. For example, the influence of a father, mother, or trusted friend far outweighs that of more socially distant figures.

**The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anticriminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning process:** Learning criminal behavior patterns is similar to learning nearly all other patterns and is not a matter of mere imitation.

**Although criminal behavior expresses general needs and values, it is not excused by those general needs and values, because noncriminal behavior expresses the same needs and values:** This principle suggests that the motives for criminal behavior cannot logically be the same as those for conventional behavior. Sutherland rules out such motives as desire to accumulate money or social status, personal frustration, and low self-concept as causes of crime because they are just as likely to produce noncriminal behavior, such as getting a better education or working harder on a job. Only the learning of deviant norms through contact with an excess of definitions favorable toward criminality produces illegal behavior.

**Criticisms:**

Sutherland theory was criticized on the following grounds;

* This theory under explains why people enter criminal associations.
* Sutherland ignores the importance of learning from media and other aspects of culture.
* This theory is based on only white-collar criminals.
* This theory does not address why some persons with extensive contacts with criminals nevertheless resist crime themselves.