Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Sutherland, Edwin H.: Differential Association Theory and Differential Social Organization

Edwin Sutherland's development of differential association theory in 1947 marked a watershed in criminology. The theory, which dominated the discipline for decades, brought Chicago-style sociology to the forefront of criminology. It is well known that differential association explains individual criminality with a social psychological process of learning crime within interaction with social groups. Less well known is Sutherland's attempt to explain aggregate crime rates across groups and societies. Here, he specified the theory of differential social organization to explain rates of crime with an organizational process that implies group dynamics. This entry reviews Sutherland's theory of differential association, discusses attempts at revision, and assesses the empirical status of the theory. It also examines recent attempts to revisit and elaborate the concept of differential social organization as well as current areas of research in which it is being used.

Differential Association Theory

Sutherland stated differential association theory as a set of nine propositions, which introduced three concepts—normative conflict, differential association, and differential group organization—that explain crime at the levels of the society, the individual, and the group. This section discusses relationships among these concepts, drawing from Ross L. Matsueda's "The Current State of Differential Association Theory."

Normative Conflict: The Root Cause of Crime in Society

At the societal level, crime is rooted in normative conflict. For Sutherland, primitive, undifferentiated societies are characterized by harmony, solidarity, and consensus over basic values and beliefs. Such societies have little conflict over appropriate behaviors and, consequently, little crime. With the industrial revolution, however, societies developed advanced divisions of labor, market economies, and a breakdown in consensus. Such societies become segmented into groups that conflict over interests, values, and behavior patterns. These societies are characterized by specialization

rather than similarity, coercion rather than harmony, conflict rather than consensus. They tend to have high rates of crime. Sutherland hypothesized that high crime rates are associated with normative conflict, which he defined as a society segmented into groups that conflict over the appropriateness of the law: some groups define the law as a set of rules to be followed under all circumstances, while others define the law as a set of rules to be violated under certain circumstances. Therefore, when normative conflict is absent in a society, crime rates will be low; when normative conflict is high, societal crime rates will be high. In this way, crime is ultimately rooted in normative conflict, according to Sutherland and Donald Cressey.

Differential Association Process: Explanation of Individual Criminal Acts

At the level of the individual, the process of differential association provides a social psychological **[p. 899 ↓]** explanation of how normative conflict in society translates into individual criminal acts. Accordingly, criminal behavior is learned in a process of communication in intimate groups. The content of learning includes two important elements. First are the requisite skills and techniques for committing crime, which can range from complicated, specialized skills of computer fraud, insider trading, and confidence games, to the simple, readily available skills of assault, purse snatching, and drunk driving. Such techniques are necessary but insufficient to produce crime. Second are definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime, which consist of motives, verbalizations, or rationalizations that make crime justified or unjustified, and include Gresham Sykes and David Matza's *techniques of neutralization*. For example, definitions favorable to income tax fraud include "Everyone cheats on their taxes" and "The government has no right to tax its citizens." Definitions favorable to drunk driving include "I can drive fine after a few beers" and "I only have a couple of miles to drive home." Definitions favorable to violence include "If your manhood is threatened, you have to fight back" and "To maintain respect, you can never back down from a fight."

These definitions favorable to crime help organize and justify a criminal line of action in a particular situation. They are offset by definitions unfavorable to crime, such as "Tax fraud deprives Americans of important programs that benefit the commonwealth," "All

fraud and theft is immoral," "If insulted, turn the other cheek," "Friends don't let friends drink and drive," and "Any violation of the law is wrong." These examples illustrate several points about definitions of crime. First, some definitions pertain to specific offenses only, such as "Friends don't let friends drink and drive," whereas others refer to a class of offenses, such as "All fraud and theft is immoral," and others refer to virtually all law violation, such as "Any violation of the law is wrong." Second, each definition serves to justify or motivate either committing criminal acts or refraining from criminal acts. Third, these definitions are not merely ex-post facto rationalizations of crime but rather operate to cause criminal behavior.

Sutherland recognized that definitions favorable to crime can be offset by definitions unfavorable to crime and, therefore, hypothesized that criminal behavior is determined by the ratio of definitions favorable to crime versus unfavorable to crime. Furthermore, he recognized that definitions are not all equal. Definitions that are presented more frequently, for a longer duration, earlier in one's life, and in more intense relationships receive more weight in the process producing crime.

The individual-level hypothesis of differential association theory can now be stated. According to Matsueda, a person will engage in criminal behavior if the following three conditions are met:

- 1. The person has learned the requisite skills and techniques for committing crime.
- 2. The person has learned an excess of definitions favorable to crime over unfavorable to crime.
- 3. The person has the objective opportunity to carry out the crime.

According to Sutherland, if all three conditions are present and crime does not occur, or a crime occurs in the absence of all three conditions, the theory would be wrong and in need of revision. Thus, in principle, the theory is falsifiable.

The process of differential association with definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime is structured by the broader social organization in which individuals are embedded. This includes the structures and organization of families, neighborhoods,

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schools, and labor markets. This organization is captured by the concept of differential social organization.

Differential Social Organization Explanation of Group Rates of Crime

At the level of the group, differential social organization provides an organizational explanation of how normative conflict in society translates into specific group rates of crime. According to differential social organization, the crime rate of a group is determined by the extent to which that group is organized against crime versus organized in favor of crime. In industrialized societies, the two forms of organization exist side by side—and indeed are sometimes interwoven in complex ways, such as when police take bribes and participate in organized extortion, or baseball players take steroids in full view of teammates. Sutherland hypothesized that the relative strength of organization in favor of crime versus organization **[p. 900 ↓]** against crime explains the crime rate of any group or society. Thus, compared to suburban neighborhoods, inner-city neighborhoods are weakly organized against street crimes and strongly organized in favor of such crimes. Compared to other groups, the Mafia is strongly organized in favor of crime and weakly organized against crime. Compared to the United States, Japan is strongly organized against crime and weakly organized in favor of crime.

Moreover, the group-level process of differential social organization is linked to the individual-level process of differential association. Groups that are strongly organized in favor of crime display numerous and intense definitions favorable to crime. Conversely, groups that are strongly organized against crime display numerous and intense definitions unfavorable to crime. Matsueda suggests that it follows that differential social organization explains group crimes rate by influencing the availability of definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime within the group. When groups are strongly organized in favor of crime and weakly organized against crime, they will present an abundance of definitions favorable to crime and few definitions unfavorable to crime. Individuals in such groups have a high probability of learning an excess of definitions of crime. Whether they do, depends on their actual learning. Even in high crime communities, some residents are isolated from the abundant criminal definitions

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and exposed to the few anti-criminal definitions in the community. Those residents will refrain from crime because of an excess of definitions unfavorable to crime. The opposite also holds. In low-crime communities, some residents are exposed to the few criminal definitions in the community, and isolated from the abundant anti-criminal definitions. Given the opportunity and skills, they will engage in crime because of an excess of definitions favorable to crime.

Extensions and Empirical Tests of Differential Association

Extensions

Although the core features of differential association theory have persisted to the present, the theory has undergone several modifications and extensions. Early attempts to modify the theory specified hypotheses of differential identification, in which individuals identify with either criminals or non-criminals, and differential anticipation, in which individuals anticipate the consequences of delinquent or nondelinquent behavior.

Perhaps the most elaborate revision is associated with Ronald Akers, who incorporated social learning principles into the theory, which posits that crime is initially learned through direct imitation or modeling. Then, the probability of continuing criminal behavior is determined by differential reinforcement, the relative rewards and punishments following the act. Reinforcement can be direct or vicarious, whereby simply observing another's criminal behavior being reinforced will reinforce one's own criminal behavior. Definitions of crime are learned through this process and affect behavior directly, as well as indirectly by serving as cues (discriminative stimuli) for law violation.

A more recent extension of differential association theory, proposed by Karen Heimer and Matsueda in 1994, incorporates the symbolic interactionist concept of taking the role of the other as a link between group control, cognition, and behavior. Here, taking the role of significant others and considering delinquency from the standpoint of others

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is a cognitive process by which anticipated reactions of others, reflected appraisals of self from the standpoint of others (the looking-glass self), and delinquent peer associations (along with habits) lead to future delinquency. Such processes produce group social control of both delinquent and nondelinquent acts; delinquency is a result of *differential social control*, the relative strength of conventional versus delinquent group controls. Differential social control specifies specific mechanisms by which groups control the behavior of members, while retaining Sutherland's emphasis on the learning of delinquency and the importance of definitions of law violation.

Empirical Tests

Empirical studies of differential association generally use self-report surveys of adolescents and young adults. A key issue is how to measure an excess of definitions favorable to crime, a prerequisite for testing the theory. Long ago, Matsueda argued that if definitions of law violation can be viewed as a single continuum, they can be treated as a latent variable with operational implications for fallible survey measures of definitions. This strategy **[p. 901 ↓]** found that definitions of delinquency mediated effects of parent and peer attachment on delinquent behavior, and therefore that differential association is supported over social control theories for non-black (Matsueda, 1982) and black youths (Matsueda & Heimer, 1987). Panel studies have also supported the hypothesis that definitions are causally linked to delinquency and violence for males and females (Heimer & DeCoster, 1999) and that techniques for monetary crimes are important (McCarthy, 1996).

Empirical research has also found some support for the hypothesis that differential reinforcement adds explanatory power in models of delinquency. The concepts of imitation and anticipated social rewards from crime appear to add to the explanation of delinquency. Finally, recent research suggests that delinquent peer association has a smaller effect on delinquency when estimated longitudinally, when disentangling peer selection from peer effects, and when measuring delinquent peers from the peers themselves. Dana Haynie has linked differential association to social network theory and found that network density and centrality of delinquent peer groups are key predictors of delinquency. In sum, most empirical research finds general support for differential association and social learning theories.

Specifying Theoretical Mechanisms for Differential Social Organization

Sutherland spent considerable time refining his individual-level theory of differential association, but devoted less time to his more sociological theory of differential social organization, which consequently never progressed beyond its original rudimentary form. In 2006, Matsueda tried to resurrect the concept of differential social organization, pointing to a little-known chapter Sutherland wrote on wartime crime—in which he identifies a number of mechanisms by which social organization may affect crime rates during war—and developing the dynamic collective action implications of the theory. This discussion draws from that work.

The concept of differential social organization, like social organization more generally, can be separated into two analytically distinct forms. From the standpoint of a snapshot or cross-section, social organization consists of structures, including social network ties, norms and sanctions, consensus versus conflict, and access to resources. Here, the extent to which those structures are used for crime versus used to combat crime determines the instantaneous distribution of crime. From the standpoint of a dynamic process over time, social organization consists of collective action, social change, and the process by which consensus and conflict are built up. The latter process has been largely ignored in the criminology literature on social organization and crime. Nevertheless, the role of collective action can be inferred from Sutherland's own words, when he wrote that organization against crime and in favor of crime consist of two principal elements: "consensus in regard to objectives and in implementation for the realization of objectives" ([1943]1973, p. 126). In other words, such organization is the result of collective action, and it entails building consensus over a problematic situation and then translating that consensus into action.

The Structure of Social Network Ties

If we first consider differential social organization cross-sectionally, a key element is the structure of network ties. James Coleman argued that closed network structures

enable greater social capital and social control. Imagine a diagram of a triangle, with points A, B, and C at each corner. In this diagram of an open structure, points A and B are linked by a line (or side) to C, but not connected to each other. This would be like a triangle in which two sides are connected but not the third. In this situation, A and B can independently and additively influence C by using individual sanctions, developing trust, establishing norms, using moral persuasion, and the like. But they cannot engage in joint behavior because they lack social ties. Now imagine another figure in which all sides of a triangle are connected. In this diagram of a closed structure, points A and B are linked not only to C but also to each other. As a result, they not only can influence C independently, but—because they interact with each other—can jointly (multiplicatively) influence C by developing coordinated strategies, simultaneous sanctions, similar rhetorical arguments, and the like.

Coleman gives a second example of parents and children. In an open structure, the two children are friends but their parents do not know one another. In a closed structure, not only do the children know one another but the parents are **[p. 902 ↓]** also friends. In the open structure, the parent can only influence their own child's behavior. But in the closed structure, because the parents know one another, they can now work collectively to control or influence all the children. Thus, they can monitor each others' children, call each other, and coordinate their punitive strategies, rhetorical arguments, and so on. Robert Sampson, Stephen Raudenbush, and Felton Earls find support for the hypothesis that intergenerational closure, as an element of neighborhood collective efficacy, is negatively associated with neighborhood rates of violence.

The Strength of Weak Ties

Closed structures tend to form dense networks of like-minded actors because assortative matching is typically based on homophily, which creates close relationships among similar individuals. Strong ties within a homogenous group not only encourage conformity but also lead to the circulation and recirculation of similar ideas. Such groups will tend to be stable and have strong internal social control—through shared information, consensus over goals, and strong norms and sanctions. On the down side, the group's homogeneity and closed structure will cause it to be rigid, lack cognitive flexibility, and have difficulty adjusting to changes in the environment.

In contrast, groups that are not entirely closed, but have weak ties to other groups, will benefit from information flows between groups through bridging ties. The information flowing across the bridge will expose members of each group to novel ideas, since it is coming from a set of comparatively dissimilar individuals. Mark Granovetter argues that weak ties provide group members with information on the latest ideas, fashions, and job openings, as well as increasing the likelihood of members being organized into social movements. Conversely, the absence of weak ties not only isolates members but also presents obstacles to building a critical mass necessary to produce a political movement or goal-oriented social organization.

Such structures provide a basis for theorizing about organization for and against crime. For residents of affluent neighborhoods, who enjoy regular employment, good incomes, and sufficient time and resources to address local problems (e.g., delinquency), a mix of strong and weak ties is empowering. Strong ties enable such residents to reach consensus about shared problems, agree on promising solutions, and work collectively to try out such solutions. Weak ties to outsiders enable them to introduce innovative solutions by providing fresh ideas and information, and to draw directly on ties to outside social agencies. For residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods, high rates of residential mobility, poverty, and lack of time and resources undermine their ability to reach consensus about crime control beyond the kinship network, identify novel ways of controlling crime, link to other agencies, and act collectively. Moreover, in such neighborhoods, disadvantaged youths, who have high rates of school failure and bleak labor market trajectories, have a strong incentive to develop alternate ways of gaining status, perhaps in illicit ways. Such innovation may be more likely when the group of disadvantaged youths have weak ties to other disadvantaged groups who share the same objective situation. To link these structures to instrumental action, we turn to theories of collective action.

Collective Action Frames

Structures of network ties, political opportunities, and institutional support help explain opportunity structures for collective action but have little to say about the moment-to-moment dynamics of emerging collective action and, in particular, about how the framing of grievances may foster social movements. David Snow and Robert Benford

argue that individuals actively produce, maintain, and fight for meanings about issues they hold dear by using *collective action frames*, which are emergent beliefs and meanings that foster social movements by framing a problematic situation as calling for an action-oriented collective solution. The process of frame alignment—linking the interpretive frameworks of individuals and social movement organizations—is the key task for social movement organizers. Moreover, collective action frames are more effective when they define the problem and its solution collectively rather than individually, define the opposition as them versus us, and define an injustice that can be corrected through collective action.

Collective action frames can help us understand the dynamics of differential social organization. **[p. 903 ↓]** Effective collective action frames can be instrumental for concerned residents to mobilize their neighbors to create neighborhood watches, assist in supervising children, and contact law enforcement to create a safer neighborhood. This form of organization against crime, of course, requires the existence of social network ties—including strong and weak ties. In the case of neighborhood collective efficacy, residents use a neighborhood frame, in which they draw upon values of a safe and clean neighborhood, appeal to neighborhood pride, and create collective identities as neighbors, and an anti-crime frame, which emphasizes the evils of delinquency, drugs, and misbehavior.

Collective action frames may also contribute to organization in favor of crime. One can speak of a street frame that is used to make sense of situations on the streets of inner-city impoverished neighborhoods. Like other frames, street frames contain vocabularies of motive, rules, and tacit sanctions for violating rules. Elijah Anderson has identified the dimensions of rules or norms within the street frame. The most fundamental norm is "never back down from a fight." Violations of this rule will result in a loss of street credibility, social standing, and self-esteem, and an increase in the likelihood of being preyed upon in the future. Status on the street is achieved by demonstrating "nerve"— a willingness to express disrespect for other males by getting in their face, throwing the first punch, pulling the trigger, messing with their women—which builds a reputation for "being a man." Moreover, the phrase, "I got your back," implies that street youths will protect friends and loved ones from insult, disrespect, or attack from others. Indeed, an insult or assault on one's "crew" calls for revenge or payback. Finally, decent youths, not just street youths, have an incentive to learn the tenets of the code of the street.

Ignorance of the code may provoke a violent confrontation by staring too long at a street youth, stepping on someone's toe, or failing to project a look of someone not to be messed with.

The street frame is available on the streets to use instrumentally to incite collective action, maintain a sense of honor, and gain respect and status. For example, knowing the tenets of the frame, youths in search of a reputation seek to increase their status by "campaigning for respect"—by challenging, humiliating, or assaulting others, and disrespecting them by stealing their material possessions or girlfriends. When a member of a group is disrespected or assaulted, other members need only invoke the street frame, with its attendant rules, motives, and sanctions, to mobilize the group to exact payback.

Social Efficacy: The Intersection of Structural Networks and Collective Action

Individuals will vary not only in the value they place on safety or criminality but, more importantly, in their own ability to persuade others to pursue an objective. In this context, *social efficacy* is defined as an individual's ability to create consensus over group objectives and procedures and to translate the procedures into action. Such individuals use higher stages of moral reasoning to consider not merely the parochial issues that affect their own self-interest but also the community as a whole, including the way in which various roles operate within the neighborhood and between the neighborhood and relevant institutions. They would likely be capable of code-switching. Social efficacy is a more specific application of Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, which refers to "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (p. 71). Social efficacy refers to an objective ability to organize social groups to realize a common goal, rather than a perceived belief about one's capability to produce general effects important to one's life (Matsueda, 2006).

The way in which an efficacious individual is embedded in a neighborhood's social relationships may be critical for collective efficacy. For example, in a network highly

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centralized around a well-connected hub (a node with high degree centrality and between-ness centrality), if the hub is occupied by a socially efficacious individual (who values the neighborhood), the neighborhood's structure is conducive to collective efficacy. With social ties to nearly all residents, the socially efficacious hub is in a position to mobilize residents to improve the neighborhood. In contrast, in an identical neighborhood network structure, but with an inefficacious hub, the presence of efficacious residents on the network's periphery is unable to compensate for the inefficacious hub. This is because their structural location limits their ability to mobilize their neighbors. Social **[p. 904 ↓]** efficacy can also be crucial to organization in favor of crime: gang leaders may be particularly effective, structurally and personally, in mobilizing street youths into gang membership and violence. It may also be crucial for genocide, to which we now turn.

Differential Social Organization and Genocide in Darfur

John Hagan and Wenona Rymond-Richmond's provocative theory of genocide draws on differential social organization viewed dynamically, in which access to resources, collective action frames, and social efficacy play key roles (Matsueda, 2006). The authors focus on organization in favor of crime and specify a multilevel model, in which a macro-level relationship is explained by a micro-level causal process. They argue that, at the macro-level, the Sudanese genocidal state is a function of two intersecting events: competition for land and resources between Arabs and black Africans and a state-led pro-Arab ideology emphasizing the supremacy of Arab Muslims over African Muslims. The macro-level constructs, competition and ideology, produce two conflicting, meso-level, locally organized interest groups—Arabs and black Africans. According to Hagan and Rymond-Richmond, individual members of the Arab groups, having internalized the racist ideology, engage in violent acts accompanied by dehumanizing racial epithets—micro-level purposive action consistent with their interests in the competition for land and resources. The authors show that the racial epithets derived from the collective action frames dehumanize Africans in stark and disturbing terms. Moreover, such individual actions coalesce into collective action,

including collective violence, rape, and other atrocities, justified by a collectivized racial intent, culminating into a "fanatical fury." This collective action, which occurs not only with the tacit knowledge, but also active participation of the Sudanese state, creates widespread genocidal victimization.

Hagan and Rymond-Richmond creatively use the concept of social efficacy to explain the crucial role of Janjaweed militia leaders in fostering collective acts of genocide. These military leaders, particularly Musa Hilal, are already in positions of authority, well-networked, and skilled leaders. The term *social efficacy* refers to a person whose social skills and location in the social structure—a network node—make the individual particularly adroit at mobilizing others into action (Matsueda, 2006). The military leaders prove instrumental in mobilizing Arab militia and, in particular, in promoting a racist collective action frame to justify mass killings, rapes, and other atrocities. Hagan and Rymond-Richmond analyze survey data on Darfur, finding strong support for their multilevel theory of genocide.

Differential Neighborhood Organization

Recent research has applied differential social organization to neighborhood social control. Robert Sampson and Corina Graif analyze survey data for Chicago and cluster analyze community-level indicators of collective efficacy, local networks, organizational involvement, and conduct norms, and leadership-based social capital—the latter, which identifies positional leaders, taps into the concept of social efficacy (although they do not use the term). They then apply multidimensional scaling to cluster communities based on indices of differential social organization into distinct clusters of communities (urban village, cosmopolitan efficacy, conduct norms, and institutional alienation), and then regress the clusters on neighborhood structure. They find that neighborhood disadvantage is negatively associated with collective efficacy and organizational involvement and positively associated with leadership capital, and that residential stability is positively associated with local networks conduct norms, organizational involvement, and leadership-based capital.

Elsewhere, Matsueda has specified a multilevel model of differential social organization, in which individual investments in social capital (e.g., reciprocated exchange) follow a

rational choice process (Matsueda, in press). Social capital, in turn, results in positive externalities for the community, such as providing social capital that translates into collective efficacy, a form of organization against crime, and negative externalities, such as providing social capital that translates into a social system governed by the code of the street, a form of organization in favor of crime. This framework raises additional questions, such as coordination problems (e.g., the free-rider problem), the origin of norms and sanctions, and solutions based on game theory.

[p. 905 ↓]

Conclusion

Differential association theory remains an important theoretical perspective in criminology, continuing to stimulate empirical research and attempts at revision. Although historically most research has focused on the individual differential association process, the last few years has seen a resurgence of interest in the sociological counterpart, differential social organization. The latter has opened new puzzles and provided a framework for incorporating sociological mechanisms governing social structure and social organization.

Ross L.Matsueda

See also

- Akers, Ronald L.: Social Learning Theory
- Burgess, Robert L., and Ronald L. Akers: Differential Association-Reinforcement Theory
- De Fleur, Melvin L., and Richard Quinney: A Reformulation of Sutherland's Differential Association Theory
- Heimer, Karen, and Ross L. Matsueda: A Theory of Differential Social Control
- Peers and Delinquency
- Sampson, Robert J.: Collective Efficacy Theory
- Sellin, Thorsten: Culture Conflict and Crime

- Shaw, Clifford R., and Henry D. McKay: Social Disorganization Theory
- Sutherland, Edwin H.: The Professional Thief
- Sutherland, Edwin H.: White-Collar Crime

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