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Akers, Ronald L.: Social Learning Theory

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In 1973, Ronald L. Akers published the first of three editions of his seminal work, *Deviant Behavior: A Social Learning Approach*. In that book, Akers laid out the basic elements of what has become one of the most popular and widely researched theories in criminology: social learning theory. Social learning theory, in its current form, spells out the specific mechanisms by which criminal behavior is learned. In particular, social learning theory maintains that criminal behavior is more likely to result when an individual associates **[p. 22 ↓]** more with those who engage in and approve of crime than with others who do not. Such a pattern of association provides more criminal than non-criminal role models, greater reinforcement of criminal than conforming behavior, and the shaping of more pro-crime than anti-crime attitudes that constitute the optimal environment in which criminal behavior is learned. The origins of social learning theory extend to an effort by Robert Burgess and Akers to integrate Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory with principles drawn from behavioral learning in psychology. From these beginnings, Akers crafted a highly testable general theory of deviance and conformity, which has enjoyed immense empirical support, has been applied successfully to a variety of behaviors, and has fostered prevention programs that have been effective in reducing criminal and deviant behavior in the populations these programs serve.

The Theorist

Born in 1939, Akers was raised in a working-class family of modest means in a small factory town on the banks of the Ohio River in southeastern Indiana. Typical of the Midwestern upbringing of that time, Akers was taught to work hard, value education, and love God. Perhaps inspired by his teachers throughout public school, he sought a college degree, the first in his family to do so, and a career as a high school social studies teacher. In 1960, he graduated from Indiana State University with a bachelor's degree in secondary education. Akers, however, turned down a high school teaching job to pursue a graduate education in sociology.

As an undergraduate, Akers developed an intellectual interest in the link between social class and crime, an interest that he further cultivated in his master's thesis research at Kent State University. Even as a doctoral student at the University of Kentucky,

Akers's work was not devoted specifically to criminological theory. With a broader emphasis on criminology and the sociology of law and with the guidance of his mentor, Richard Quinney, Akers's dissertation analyzed the role played by political power in the enactment of professional practice and licensure laws.

Despite the absence of etiological theory in his thesis and dissertation research, Akers's graduate education provided substantial exposure to the criminological theories of that time. Robert Merton's anomie theory and the theories of the Chicago School, including Sutherland's differential association theory, were standard in any academic discussions of criminological theory. During the early 1960s, however, new developments in criminological theory were proliferating, including the delinquent subculture theories of Albert Cohen and of Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, control theories advanced by F. Ivan Nye and Walter Reckless, labeling theories proposed by Edwin Lemert and Howard Becker, and conflict theories advocated by George Vold and Richard Quinney. By the time Akers left graduate school at the University of Kentucky in 1965, he had been fully immersed in the extant criminological theory literature of that time. That year, he accepted his first position as an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Washington. It was in this setting that Akers encountered colleagues that would ultimately shape his academic career and set in motion one of the most influential theories in criminology.

The Origins of the Theory

Akers's arrival in the Department of Sociology at the University of Washington coincided with that of Robert Burgess, a behavioral sociologist with extensive training in operant conditioning theory. Intellectual discussions between the two assistant professors often centered on the seemingly improbable compatibility of psychological behaviorism with sociology. Psychological behaviorism based on operant conditioning principles advanced by B. F. Skinner conceptualized humans as essentially robotic and without volition, responding almost mindlessly to cues in their environment. Sociology, especially the branch that focused on individual rather than structural levels of analysis, was based on symbolic interactionism, which placed great emphasis on the capacity of humans to both influence and be influenced by their environment through their interactions with others. Nevertheless, Burgess and Akers saw congruity in the two

approaches, notably that both behaviorism and symbolic interactionism, especially as Sutherland had made use of it in differential association theory, illustrated similar **[p. 23 ↓]** processes by which social behavior is learned through interaction with one's environment. From these conversations emerged a growing realization that an important contribution to the explanation of crime could be accomplished through the integration of psychological learning principles with Sutherland's differential association theory.

Reasoning that differential association theory lacked explicit discussion of the mechanisms by which criminal behavior is learned, it seemed possible to Burgess and Akers that behaviorism could supply the missing pieces. In 1966, Burgess and Akers published an article titled “A Differential Association-Reinforcement Theory of Criminal Behavior,” which reformulated Sutherland's nine propositions of differential association theory into seven propositions that laid out in behavioral terms a more precise description of the process by which criminal behavior—like any other form of behavior—is learned. The article drew a modest and mostly positive response from those working with differential association theory, including Donald Cressey, but was not without its critics. Some sociologists were affronted by the mere introduction of behaviorism into sociology; others charged that the theory was tautological. Burgess and Akers continued to collaborate for a short time thereafter on refining differential association-reinforcement theory, especially answering to criticisms. Eventually, Burgess moved on to other intellectual pursuits; Akers continued to work with the theory, with a specific interest in demonstrating its applicability to a wide variety of deviant behaviors.

The transition from “differential association-reinforcement theory” to “social learning theory” was subtle. Burgess and Akers referred in passing in their article to “social learning,” but Akers did not formally apply the term to the theory until he published *Deviant Behavior: A Social Learning Approach*, a textbook on the sociology of deviance in which he analyzed several forms of deviant behavior using the theory he developed with Burgess. In that book, Akers presented the seven propositions comprising differential association-reinforcement theory but devoted much of the subsequent theoretical discussion to a detailed explication of the key concepts drawn from the behavioral learning and differential association theories that together formed a social learning explanation of deviance.

The Statement of the Theory

Social learning theory is an integration of differential association and behavioral learning theories. It wholly subsumes differential association theory by recasting it in the context of behavioral learning principles.

In differential association theory, Sutherland drew upon symbolic interactionism to emphasize that both criminal and law-abiding behavior are learned in interaction with others. Sutherland acknowledged that in American society, one is likely to associate, to varying degrees, with individuals who define law violation as favorable as well as with individuals who define law violation as unfavorable. When exposure to people with behavioral patterns and attitudes favorable to crime exceeds exposure to people with behavioral patterns and attitudes unfavorable to crime, criminal behavior is likely to be learned. When the balance is struck in the opposite direction, law-abiding behavior is likely to be learned instead.

Chief among the criticisms of differential association theory was the charge that it neglected to specify the precise underlying learning mechanism involved in the process of becoming a criminal. At the time Sutherland developed differential association theory, behaviorism in psychology, with its focus on learning, was in full swing. However, the behaviorism of the 1930s and 1940s largely excluded human cognition and the assignment of meaning to human action, principles at the core of the symbolic interactionist foundation of differential association theory. The radical behaviorism of B. F. Skinner in the 1950s and 1960s further divorced behavior from mind; however, by the late 1960s, behaviorism had come increasingly under fire as cognitive psychology began to supplant it. Although Burgess and Akers claimed to draw on Skinnerian principles of operant conditioning, by 1973 Akers had tempered social learning theory with principles more consistent with the cognitive learning approach advocated by Albert Bandura.

The behavioral principles involved in the social learning of deviant behavior—and conforming behavior as well—include but are not limited to notions of operant conditioning, differential **[p. 24 ↓]** reinforcement, and discriminative stimuli. Among cognitive learning principles, Akers incorporated concepts such as imitation, anticipated

reinforcement, and self-reinforcement into social learning theory. As Akers presented the theory, he discussed how these principles illuminate the specific mechanisms by which deviant behavior is learned through association with others. In his earlier presentations of the theory, Akers devoted most of his attention to the cognitive and behavioral principles underlying the social learning process. It was not until he published an empirical test of the theory using original data that the concepts of social learning theory as it is known today emerged (Akers et al., 1979).

In its present form, social learning theory contains four key concepts: differential reinforcement, imitation, definitions, and differential association. The concept most solidly grounded in psychological behaviorism is differential reinforcement, which incorporates among other ideas operant conditioning, reinforcement, and punishment. Operant conditioning is distinguished from respondent conditioning as opposite processes. In respondent conditioning, a prior stimulus elicits an involuntary behavioral response, such as when food (stimulus) presented to a hungry dog elicits salivation (involuntary behavior). In operant conditioning, a voluntary behavior leads to a subsequent consequence; the nature of the consequence then determines whether or not that voluntary behavior will be repeated. Operant behaviors that are reinforced—that is, followed by a rewarding consequence (positive reinforcement) or by the cessation of an unpleasant state (negative reinforcement)—will increase in frequency. Operant behaviors that are punished—that is, followed by an adverse consequence (positive punishment) or by the cessation of a pleasurable state (negative punishment)—will decrease in frequency. Akers argues that the consequences that follow an individual's behavior may be nonsocial, in the sense that they derive from the experience itself; for example, the ingestion of alcohol may be followed by a feeling of euphoria or nausea. However, because humans are also social beings who interact with other people, the consequences of their behavior may be social in origin as well. Thus, a given behavior may be followed, for example, by encouragement or derision from others with whom one interacts. Consistent with the tenets of differential association theory, it is not simply a matter of whether a single consequence is reinforcing or punishing for a given behavior that determines its likelihood of repetition. Instead, it is important to assess the *balance* of reinforcements and punishments for a given behavior, since that behavior is likely to be followed by multiple consequences depending on the constellation of others with whom the individual interacts. In social learning theory, then, deviant behavior is

more likely to increase when the social and nonsocial reinforcement exceeds the social and nonsocial punishment of the behavior.

A second concept in social learning theory, drawn from cognitive psychology, is imitation. Although Sutherland maintained that the learning of criminal behavior involved far more than simple mimicry of others' behavior, Akers included imitation as an indispensible component of the learning mechanism. Imitation occurs through observation of the behavior of others. Whether or not the behavior is reproduced by the observer depends on the degree of identification with the model, whether the model is observed to receive reinforcement for the behavior, and whether the imitation itself is anticipated to be reinforced. Likely models of deviant and conforming behavior are found within the primary group, especially parents and friends, but may also be found in secondary groups and those observed in the popular media. In social learning theory, when exposure to admired criminal role models exceeds exposure to admired conventional role models, criminal behavior is more likely to be imitated.

A key concept in differential association theory that appears in modified form in social learning theory is definitions. In both differential association theory and social learning theory, definitions refer to evaluative expressions ranging from approval to disapproval of a given behavior. In differential association theory, Sutherland focuses mainly on one's exposure to the definitions of others. In social learning theory, definitions refer primarily to the attitudes formulated by the individual following exposure to the definitions of others. Definitions may be general, oriented toward broad moral principles, or they may be specific, focused on particular acts of norm violation. Akers designates definitions **[p. 25 ↓]** as positive if they approve of a given behavior, negative if they disapprove of a given behavior, and neutralizing if they acknowledge the general improbity of an act yet furnish justification or rationalization for engaging in the act nonetheless. Neutralizing definitions are more commonly found than positive definitions in promoting deviant behavior.

Because the formation of one's own definitions involves exposure to a wide array of approving, disapproving, and neutralizing beliefs of other people, it is less likely that one will develop positive definitions that make norm violation the expected course of action. Such indoctrination into positive definitions of deviant behavior may be possible in some subcultures, but would still require extreme isolation or alienation from the dominant

culture. Akers emphasizes that deviant subcultures and the positive definitions they generate are not required for deviant behavior to occur; deviance is more likely to occur when the conventional values one holds offer only weak disapproval or when the deviant behavior has been successfully neutralized.

The concept of definitions in social learning theory embodies the symbolic interactionist notions of interpretation and definition of the situation: determining the meaning of another's actions or verbalizations and communicating to others how they are expected to behave. Akers also illustrates, however, the mechanism by which definitions are learned or incorporated into one's own belief system. Through imitation and differential reinforcement, the individual takes on the attitudes expressed by admired models, provided that those expressed attitudes are observed to be followed by reinforcement. When the individual is exposed to definitions favoring or facilitating deviance more than definitions condemning deviance, and when those definitions facilitating deviance are observed to be followed by reinforcement more than punishment, then the individual is likely to accept those definitions favorable to deviance. Furthermore, once these definitions are learned, they may persist in anticipation of future rewards or they may serve as discriminative stimuli that prompt the individual into action. That is, the individual engages in deviance only in settings in which definitions favorable to deviance are expressed and reinforced.

The concept in social learning theory that ties together the mechanisms underlying the learning of deviant behavior is that of differential association. Similar to the concept presented in Sutherland's theory, Akers acknowledges that interaction with others exposes the individual to specific normative content transmitted through communication. However, Akers adds a behavioral/interactional dimension to the concept of differential association, by which individuals are exposed to not only the definitions but also the behaviors of others. Like Sutherland, Akers maintains that we associate with an array of individuals, who often express a wide range of behaviors and attitudes, some unfavorable to deviance, some favorable to specific deviant acts, and some rationalizing specific deviant acts as acceptable under certain circumstances. Also like Sutherland, Akers asserts that these associations vary in frequency, duration (how much time is spent and how longstanding the relationship), priority (occurring early in childhood), and intensity (how emotionally close the relationship). These modalities of association determine the extent to which any given association will have an impact on the learning

process. Those associations that are more frequent, of longer duration, and of greater priority and intensity will have a greater influence on the content of what is learned. Although Sutherland emphasized associations within primary groups, Akers identifies a broader assortment of associations, including not only parents and peers but also neighbors, co-workers, members of voluntary groups to which an individual belongs, and even impersonal (and often one-way) “associations” with those depicted in film, television, or other popular media.

Within the context of social learning theory, differential association plays a pivotal role. The configuration of various associations determines which individuals serve as salient role models for the individual to imitate and which do not; which definitions are likely to be formed and which are not; and which behaviors are likely to receive more reinforcement than punishment and which behaviors are likely to receive more punishment than reinforcement. Akers emphasizes that the learning of criminal behavior involves a rather complex mechanism that takes into account interactions with *both* pro-crime and anti-crime individuals, **[p. 26 ↓]** who provide *both* pro-crime and anti-crime models, definitions, and reinforcements. A simple association with a deviant other is far from sufficient to produce deviant behavior in an individual without taking into account any counterbalancing influences.

The Empirical Status of Social Learning Theory

When Akers presented social learning theory in 1973, it drew little attention from other researchers. A few studies examined one or two concepts derived from social learning theory, but no test of the full theoretical model was conducted until Akers and his colleagues published their research on the theory in 1979. In this first full test of social learning theory, which applied the theory to an explanation of adolescent alcohol and marijuana use, Akers and colleagues systematically laid out the key concepts of the theory and provided detailed measures of those concepts. They reported substantial predictive accuracy for the social learning model. Specifically, the model explained 55 percent of the variance in alcohol use and 68 percent of the variance in marijuana use. Akers conducted two additional studies designed to test social learning theory,

using measures similar to those used in the first study. The results from these studies are comparable to those of the 1979 study. The social learning model accounted for about 40 percent of the variance in adolescent tobacco use (Krohn et al., 1985) and 59 percent of the variance in alcohol use among the elderly (Akers et al., 1989).

Since the 1979 article appeared, interest in social learning theory has intensified. To date, the theory has been subjected to empirical assessment in over 130 studies. Many of these studies have performed only partial tests of selected social learning variables. Most commonly measured is differential association, particularly peers' behaviors. Definitions and differential reinforcement are measured with somewhat less frequency, and imitation is most often omitted from tests of the theory. The results of studies conducted by researchers other than Akers have not matched the success of those produced by Akers. Nevertheless, the theory has garnered overall solid support in the body of empirical literature on social learning theory.

The Scope of Social Learning Theory

Throughout the development of social learning theory, Akers intended the theory as an explanation of a wide variety of deviant behaviors. In his 1973 textbook, he illustrated how social learning theory could explain drug and alcohol use, various types of criminal behavior, mental illness, sexual deviance, and suicide. He has also emphasized repeatedly that the theory is capable of explaining not only deviant but conforming behavior as well. Despite these claims of generality, the broad scope of social learning theory has seldom been examined empirically. Most tests, including many conducted by Akers, have been limited to the analysis of minor self-reported delinquency and substance use. However, the boundaries of social learning theory have recently extended into more serious types of deviant conduct. Of these, three are noteworthy because of their distinctive group context: sexual aggression, gang delinquency, and terrorism.

In 1998, Akers reported in detail on two studies he conducted with others that tested the validity of social learning as an explanation of various types of sexual coercion and aggression. Within the context of social learning theory, Akers reasoned that if one associates disproportionately with groups that express acceptance and involvement

in sexually coercive activities, one is more likely to engage in that same behavior. These groups are likely to provide reinforcement for sexual aggression, express rape-supportive attitudes, and serve as models to imitate.

In the first study, variables drawn from social learning theory—specifically differential peer association, differential reinforcement, definitions, and modeling—performed quite well in predicting both the proclivity to use force or commit rape and actual use of nonphysical sexual coercion; however, these same variables—with the exception of differential reinforcement—did not perform as well in predicting actual use of physical sexual aggression. The effect of fraternity membership on these sexual aggression measures also appeared to be mediated by the social learning variables, indicating that membership in these all-male groups had an impact on sexual coercion only in the sense that they may have provided a rape-supportive learning environment. Describing a second study, **[p. 27 ↓]** Akers also reported that in a comparative analysis, social learning surpassed social bonding, self-control, and relative deprivation theories in the ability to predict proclivity to use sexual aggression, actual use of physical sexual coercion, use of drugs and alcohol as a coercive sexual strategy, and use of other nonphysical coercive strategies.

A second type of serious deviant behavior likely to occur in a group context is gang delinquency. Those who are members of a gang are more likely than non-gang members to be exposed to pro-delinquent definitions and behavior patterns, develop their own pro-delinquent definitions, and to be reinforced for delinquent behavior. L. Thomas Winfree, Jr., and his associates tested a social learning model of gang membership and delinquency. They found that among adolescents in the general population, differential association, pro-gang definitions, and current gang membership were significant predictors of group-context crime, defined as activities specifically engaged in at the behest of someone else or in a group setting.

A third type of serious deviant conduct that often occurs within a group context is terrorist activity. Although not yet investigated empirically, a social learning explanation has been proposed to account for a range of terrorist activities. Akers and Adam Silverman suggest that through the same learning processes that criminals acquire motivations, methods, and rationalizations, terrorists learn that the violence they use against their enemies will be met with praise from their group and possibly with a

desirable political outcome. Employing the specific case of suicide bombers in Gaza, Winfree and Akins also provide social learning-informed ideas about why some might engage in such suicidal acts. They suggest that a system of rewards and punishments is in place in Gaza such that violence is encouraged and rewarded, especially if it is directed at Israel; “collaborators,” or those who might challenge such beliefs and practices, are publicly and viciously murdered. Those who die in the service of the greater good will are promised their reward in Paradise, a clear nonsocial positive reinforcement. Children are encouraged to mimic or imitate in nonlethal ways the actions of suicide bombers, against the day when play turns to reality. The social learning framework within which terrorist activities might be explained invites future empirical research to test these contentions.

Applications of Social Learning Theory

Various practitioners in a variety of social services and service delivery fields have embraced social learning theory, using all or parts of it to prevent or treat the occurrence of crime and delinquency. One example is the Oregon Social Learning Center (OSLC), which has developed a series of successful programs based on principles of social learning. Three OSLC programs, in particular, merit special attention.

First, the Adolescent Transition Program (ATP) exposes parents and their adolescent children to family management skills (e.g., monitoring, discipline, problem solving, communications, and other effective socialization skills), the goal being to improve communication skills, self-control, prosocial attitudes, and prosocial peer associations of both pre-teens and teenagers alike. Youths engaged in chronic, high-frequency, and serious delinquencies are the object of the Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care program, the idea being to provide such children with a safer and more restrictive environment with parents who already possess the kinds of skills developed through ATP. Good behavior is reinforced in positive ways. Children are expected to participate fully in school, therapy sessions, and other prosocial aspects of intervention coordinated and supervised by a case manager—all intended to foster skills related to problem solving, social perspective taking, and nonaggression in self-expression. A third OSLC program, Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT), views the children, their parents, their teachers, and their friends as equally important elements of a successful

social learning-based prevention/intervention program, the intent being to modify the child's interactions with teachers, parents, and peers through a three-pronged approach that targets classroom-based social and problem skills training for the child, playground-based behavior modification, and group-delivered parent training. What is important to note about these three programs is that the child is not treated in isolation from his or her social environment. Moreover, the other important sources of discriminative stimuli in a child's life—the parents, peers, **[p. 28 ↓]** and significant others—participate in the programming in meaningful ways, all linked to social learning theory.

Social Structure and Social Learning

Social learning theory has, for most of its history, been conceptualized as a micro-level or processual theory, capable of accounting for within-group variation in deviant behavior. However, even as early as 1968, Akers linked social structure with the learning process, emphasizing that location in the social structure largely determines the specific learning environment in which the individual operates. Akers elaborated more fully on these ideas in his 1998 monograph, *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance*. In that work, Akers presented his initial attempt at a multilevel theoretical model describing the relationships between structural variables, many drawn from other theories in criminology, and the processual variables of the original social learning model.

Akers founded his social structure-social learning (SSSL) model on arguments first advanced by Sutherland, who asserted that differential association occurs within a context of differential social organization. Communities are organized differently to either promote or condemn—on balance—deviant activities; one's associates are determined by the way one's community is organized with respect to deviance. Akers (1998) is careful to note that his SSSL model does not attempt to account directly for crime rates, which he conceptualized as merely aggregations of individual behaviors. Instead, he views structural and cultural conditions as determinants of patterns or configurations of associations and reinforcement, which in turn exert an influence on individual behavior. As such, social learning processes (differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and modeling) mediate the likely impact of social

structural variables on the individual behaviors that constitute crime rates in various groups.

The SSSL model links a variety of exogenous social structure variables to social learning variables, which remain as “proximate causes” of individual deviant behavior. Akers classifies these social structure variables into four categories. *Differential social organization* refers to variables such as age composition or population density of a community. *Differential location in the social structure*, the second category, refers to socio-demographic characteristics that comprise known correlates of crime rates, including age, class, gender, and race/ethnicity. A third category is labeled as *theoretically defined structural variables* and includes variables drawn from established macro-sociological theories that propose social disorganization, anomie, group conflict, patriarchy, class oppression and the like as possible determinants of crime rates. Finally, *differential social location in groups* refers to membership in primary, secondary, and reference groups such as families, peer groups, and voluntary associations.

In its present form, the SSSL model is not a fully formulated theory. The lists of variables included under each social structure category are not meant to be exhaustive, and the categories themselves are not entirely mutually exclusive. For instance, some theoretically defined social disorganization variables are also presented as examples of differential social organization variables. Moreover, Akers focuses on presumed empirical correlations between structural variables and crime that are expected to be substantially mediated by social learning variables rather than on logical linkages between the social structure and social learning concepts.

Despite Akers's de-emphasis of the precise logical connection between structure and process, any future effort to delineate these linkages theoretically is likely to enhance the theory's plausibility as well as provide guidance for empirical tests of the model. Empirical research on the social structure-social learning model is still scarce, and few studies have utilized variables designed specifically to operationalize both social structure and social learning in ways intended by Akers. Results of these studies show promise, but as yet it is too soon to arrive at any meaningful conclusions about the validity of the SSSL model.

Conclusion

From its modest beginnings in 1966 as differential association-reinforcement theory, social learning theory is now in its fifth decade as a viable explanation of crime and deviance. One of its **[p. 29 ↓]** more powerful explanatory variables, differential peer associations, is so commonly predictive of delinquent behavior that theoretical models purporting to explain delinquency are considered incomplete if they fail to include peer delinquency as a control. The theory consistently receives empirical support, is logically capable of and empirically successful at explaining a broad array of deviant activities, and continues to demonstrate effectiveness when its theoretical principles are put into practice in delinquency prevention and intervention programs.

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See also

- Bandura, Albert: Social Learning Theory
- Burgess, Robert L., and Ronald L. Akers: Differential Association-Reinforcement Theory
- Patterson, Gerald R.: Social Learning, the Family, and Crime
- Sutherland, Edwin H.: Differential Association Theory and Differential Social Organization

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