

Discuss the fundamental postulates of Edwin Sutherland's 'Differential Association Theory' with examples.

INTRODUCTION

Differential Association Theory was presented by Edwin Sutherland in his book *Principles of Criminology*. This theory is one of the most influential sociological explanation of crime. Edwin in his fundamental postulates argues that criminal behavior is learned through interaction with others (criminal behavior carriers) rather than inherited biologically.

OR

Fundamental Postulates of Sutherland's 'Differential Association Theory'

Sutherland laid down nine propositions that form the basis of this theory.

1) Criminal behavior is learned.

- a) crime is not an inborn trait but acquired.

Example: A teenager learns to steal by observing peers rather than being naturally inclined to theft.

2) Criminal behavior is learned through interaction with other persons in a process of communication.

Communication may be verbal (words)

instructions) or non-verbal (gestures demonstration).

Example: Gangs teaching new members how to commit burglary through stories demonstrations.

- 3) The principal part of the learning occurs within intimate personal groups. Family, peers, and close associates are more influential than media or casual contacts.

Example: If a child grows up in a household where drug dealing is normalized, he is more likely to learn and adopt it.

- 4) When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes:

- a) Techniques of committing crime, and
- b) The specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.

Criminal learning involves both the how and the why.

Example: Learning how to hack (techniques) and justify it as a way to fight "unfair corporations" (motives).

- 5) The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal code as favorable or unfavorable.

Individuals develop attitudes toward laws — seeing them either as rules to follow or obstacles to overcome.

Example: A smuggler may see customs

laws as unfair and consider breaking them acceptable.

- 6) A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law.

The balance between pro-crime and anti-crime attitudes determines behavior.

Example: A youth exposed mostly to friends who glorify theft will likely engage in theft, as favorable definitions outweigh unfavorable ones.

- 7) Differential association may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.

The impact of associations depend on how often, how long, how early in life, and how strong one is exposed to.

Example: A person influenced by criminal friends since childhood (priority) and spending long hours with them (duration) is more likely to adopt crime.

- 8) The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.

Learning crime is the same as learning any other social behavior.

Example: Just as one learns language by imitation, one may learn shoplifting by watching others.

- 9) While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by these needs and values. Since non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values.

Poverty, hunger, or desire for success alone do not explain crime; both criminals and law-abiding individuals share these needs. The difference is learned criminal behavior.

Example: Two poor men may both want money; one works hard legally, the other learns to steal.

Examples of Edwin Sutherland's Differential Association Theory.

- 1) **Street Gangs in urban Areas:** Young boys join gangs, where they learn techniques of robbery, gang rules, and justifications of violence.
- 2) **White-Collar Crimes:** Corporate employees may learn fraudulent practices like tax evasion from senior colleagues.
- 3) **Drug Abuse:** A teenager exposed to friends who normalize drug use is more likely to adopt the habits.

Critical Analysis

Strengths:

- 1) Explains how crime spreads in groups.

2) Highlights importance of socialization and peer influence.

3) Applicable to both street crimes and white-collar crimes.

Weaknesses:

1) Overemphasizes social learning, ignores individual choice and biological factors.

2) It cannot explain spontaneous or first-time crimes committed without prior exposure.

3) It fails to explain why some exposed individuals still reject crime.

Conclusion

Sutherland's Differential Association Theory remains a cornerstone of criminology, emphasizing that crime is a socially learned behavior shaped by associations, communications, and cultural definitions of law. Despite its limitations, it provides valuable insight into crime prevention by highlighting the role of family, peers, and environment.