Social Learning Theory

⇒ Introduction

Learning theory in criminology explains that criminal behaviour is not innate, but acquired through social interaction, observation, imitation, and reinforcement. This approach shifts the focus from biological or psychological abnormalities to the social environment in which individuals are raised and operate. It was first conceptualized by Edwin H. Sutherland (1939) through his Differential Association Theory, and later developed by Albert Bandura (1973) and Ronald Akers (1998).

" People are not born criminals; they learn to become one".

— Edwin H. Sutherland

In the Pakistani context, the theory provides insight into how individuals may learn deviant through peer influence, community norms, and media exposure. For example, cases of cybercrime, organized theft, or group violence can be better understood when analyzed through the lens of learned behavior, rather than personal pathology.
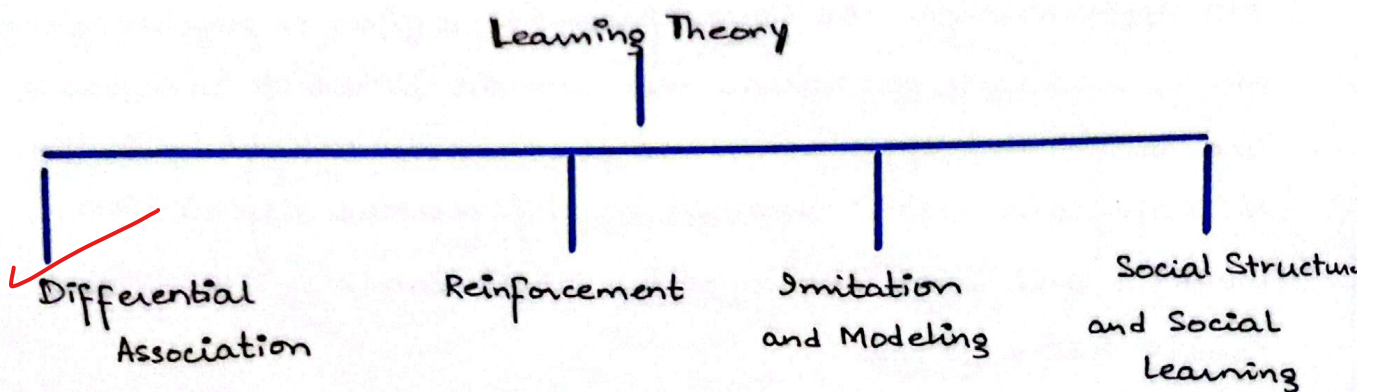
⇒ Origin and Overview of Learning Theory

Learning Theory find its roots in behavioral psychology (Pavlov, Skinner) and was later adpted in criminology by Sutherland and Akers. It emphasizes that:

- Crime is learned just like any other behaviour.

- Influences include peer groups, media, and family.

- The learning involves techniques, motivations, and

justifications.

Definition :

Learning Theory in criminology asserts that criminal behavior is learned through interaction with others in intimate personal groups that promote criminal norms over Lawful behavior.

Learning Theory
- Differential Association
- Reinforcement
- Imitation and Modeling
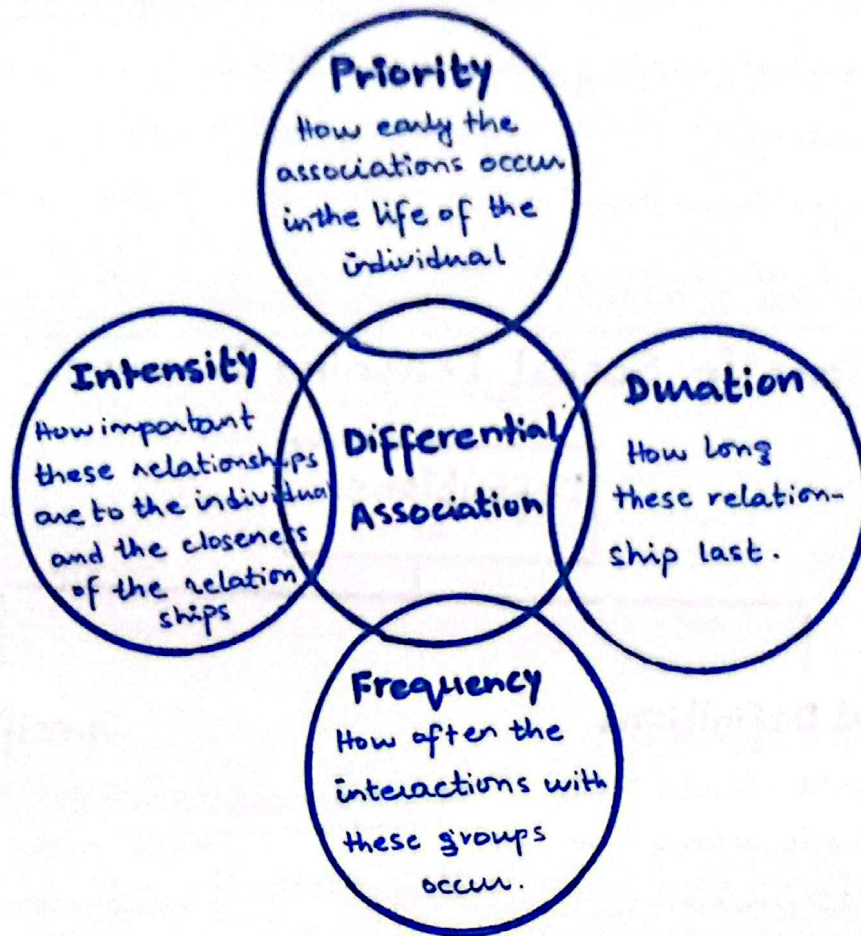- Social Structure and Social Learning

⇒ Differential Association (Sutherland)

Differential Association Theory proposes that individuals become criminals through exposure to attitudes, values, and techniques that favor law violation over law abidance. According to Sutherland, criminal behavior is learned in intimate personal groups, not from media or impersonal sources. When individuals are frequently and intensely exposed to pro-criminal definitions, they adopt these behaviors.

key learning occurs in two ways:

(i) Techniques of committing crime (e.g., fabricate documents)

(ii) Rationalizations (e.g., Everyone does it, "It's survival)

Associations vary in four dimensions:

Priority
How early the associations occur in the life of the individual

Intensity
How important these relationships are to the individual and the closeness of the relationships

Differential Association

Duration
How long these relationship last.

Frequency
How often the interactions with these groups occur.

Example: In Karachi, young boys in Lyari have been known to learn gang culture and drug peddling from older relatives and peers due to long-term exposure.

HRCP Report (2023):
Over 30% of juvenile delinquents in Pakistan come from households where at least one immediate family member has been involved in repeated offenses.
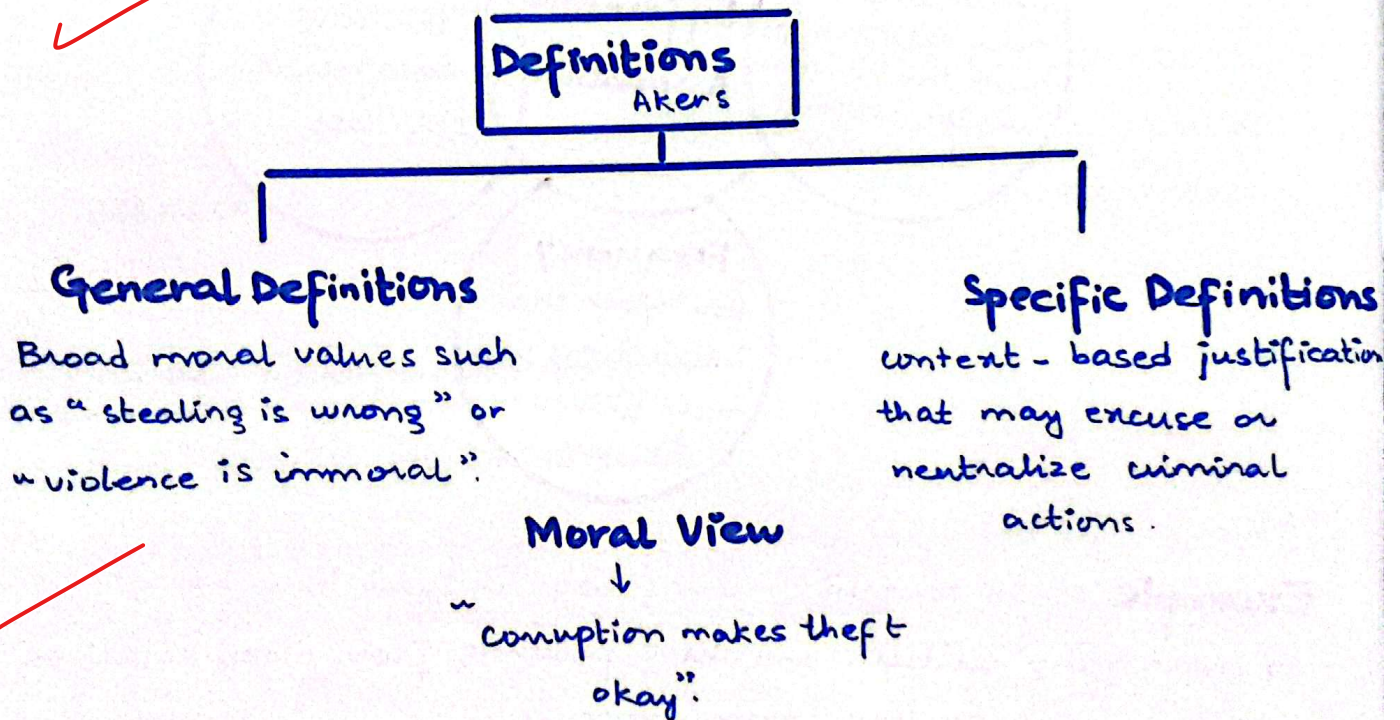
UNODC Pakistan (2022):
Peer influence is cited as the no. 1 predictor of youth involvement in urban street crimes.

→ Aker's Expansion of Sutherland's Theory, 1973:

Ronald Akers built upon Sutherland's Differential Association by integrating insights from behavioral psychology, particularly operant conditioning, into a sociological framework. One of the cornerstones of this expansion is the concept of "definitions," which shapes how individuals interpret, justify, and rationalize behavior.

Definitions in Social Learning Theory

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┌─────────────┐
│ Definitions │
│    Akers    │
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General Definitions
Broad moral values such as "stealing is wrong" or "violence is immoral".

Specific Definitions
context - based justification that may excuse or neutralize criminal actions.

Moral View
↓
"Corruption makes theft okay".

Example (Pakistan)

Street Child Justification: A homeless child in Lahore justifies pickpocketing as a means of survival, believing that "society has already abondened me."

Cultural Specific Definition:
In tribal areas, honor killings maybe justified as a form of preserving family reputation due to prevailing customary definitions.

According to a UNODC Pakistan (2023) study, 42% of urban juvenile delinquents held justifying beliefs like "corruption in society makes small thefts excusable."

HRCP Data from Jan to November 2024 shows that 346 people were killed for honor.

⇒ Differential Reinforcement : Aker's Integration of Behaviorism

Ronald Akers, influenced by B.F. Skinner's behaviorism, integrated with operant conditioning that individuals continue or abandon criminal acts depending on the consequences they face.

Types of Reinforcement

(i) Positive Reinforcement :

criminals acts are encouraged when followed by rewards such as money, status, or peer approval.

Example:
A cybercriminal earns easy money and admiration for friends, reinforcing further hacking.

(ii) Negative Reinforcement:

crime helps avoid an adverse outcome like poverty, domestic abuse, or unemployment.

Example:
A child joins a gang to escape physical abuse at home.

Legal Implications in Pakistan

Due to poor presecution and delayed justice, criminals often feel emboldened.

Punjab Police (2022) reported only 7% conviction rate in theft cases, reducing deterrence and increasing reward expectancy.

⇒ Imitation and Role Modeling:

This concept is rooted in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, particularly demonstrated by his Bobo Doll Experiment, where children imitated aggressive behavior modeled by adults.

In criminology, individuals observe and imitate behavior, especially when:

- The model is prestigious (e.g., celebrity, elders)
- The model is close (e.g., family, peers)
- The behavior to be rewarded or normalized

Criminal behavior is often learned not just by instruction, but by watching others.

Example (Pakistan):

On platforms like TikTok and Instagram, influencers flaunting money from dubious sources (fake online businesses, crypto scams) have led many Pakistani Youth to engage in cybercrimes, fake visa consultancies, and job frauds.

UNODC (2023) notes that cybercrime and digital fraud among Pakistani youth has increased by over **40%** in the last three years largely due to online imitation behavior.

⇒ Social Structure and Social Learning (SSSL) Theory:

Ronald Akers extended his Social Learning Theory by incorporating macro-level sociological factors into it. His refined approach, known as Social Structure and Social Learning Theory. explains how broader social environments shape individual criminal behavior through social learning mechanisms.

Four Domains of Social Structure

Akers identified four macro-level domains that condition the learning of deviant behavior.

→ Differential Social Organization:

Differential Social Organization refers to how community-level features shape local crime rates. In areas with youth-heavy populations, poor infrastructure, and weak institution criminal behaviour is more likely to flourish due to low social cohesion and limited informal control.

Pakistan Context:

In areas like Orangi Town (Karachi), poor infrastructure, lack of education, and minimal police presence create fertile ground for gang activity.

UNODC, 2023:

over 40% of Pakistan's juvenile arrests occur in urban slums with poor social organization and limited state control.

→ Differential Location in the Social Structure

This refers to an individuals' position within a stratified society, which shapes their opportunities, social interactions and the kinds of values they are like to internalize. Factors such as socioeconomic status, gender roles and inequalities, ethnic or religious, and age-based access to mobility significantly influence one's exposure to deviant or law-abiding behavior.

HRCP 2024:

children from low-income rural households in Sindh and Punjab are **3.6 times more** likely to engage in criminal behavior due to lack of access to formal institution.

→ Theoretically Defined Structural Variables:

This refers to macro-level criminogenic forces described by major criminological theories, such as Anomie, social disorganization, patriarchy and class conflict.

Example

In feudal-dominated areas of Southern Punjab and interior Sindh, class-based oppression can normalize violence and theft against landlords.

Fact (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023)

over 55% of reported rural thefts occur in feudal or semi-feudal districts, where class tension is a driving factor in crimes of resistance.

→ **Differential Social Location In Groups:**

Differential social Location refers to individuals' membership in and relationship to primary, secondary, and reference groups such as the family, friendship/peer groups, leisure groups, colleagues, and work groups.

(ILO- Pakistan, 2023):

Children involved in bonded labor are 5 times more likely to justify or commit survival-related crimes by age 15.

⇒ # Criticism of Learning Theory

→ (i) Overemphasis on Peer Influence

→ Theory assumes people commit crimes mainly due to peer groups

→ Ignores personal values, trauma, mental health.

→ e.g: Many lone-wolf cybercriminals operate without deviant peers.

→ (ii) Inadequate Explanation of Spontaneous or Impulsive Crimes

→ crime of passion, sudden rage, or mental breakdowns are not "learned."

→ e.g: Honor killings in rural Pakistan often arise from instant emotional reaction, not prior learning.

→ (iii) Ignores Structural and Institutional Causes

→ Over-focus on macro-social factors; neglects poverty, injustice, or systematic corruption.

→ Youth turning to drug trade in karachi due to unemployment and state neglect.

⇒ Conclusion :

Social Learning Theory effectively explains how criminal behavior is learned through interaction, imitation, and reinforcement. It highlights the role of peers, media, and family in shaping deviance. However, it overlooks biological, emotional, and spontaneous factors. Thus, it is useful but best understood alongside other criminological theories for a complete picture of crime.

it seems that you have spent a lot of time in writing such question
it is likely that you didnot complete this in 45 mins
attempt a proper question

over all good presentation and good content
rest is fine
but manage the time also
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