Edwin H. Sutherland: Differential Association Theory

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**Introduction**

The Differential Association theory was established by Edwin H. Sutherland in the 20th century. The theory is focused on how people learn from the interaction that they have with other people. Sutherland proposed that this is how most people learn the techniques, morals, motive and attitude that are behind criminal behavior. Out of all the deviance theories, the differentiation theory is one that is talked about the most. Nonconformity is a state or fact in which a person departs from the usual or set standards. This is especially when the case is related to sexual or social behavior that a person might showcase. This theory helps in explaining 51% of the modification pertained in criminal behavior. It should be kept under consideration that the criminal population is not used for testing, only the minute offenses are evaluated. This paper will look at and discuss Edwin Sutherland’s Differential theory in-depth.

**Discussion**

The involvement of the differential theory can be seen in the interaction and intensity of things as well. The theory says that the longer an individual is part of criminal activity, the more they get devoted and involved in it. There is no doubt in the fact that trying to learn about criminal behavior from a young group consisting of teenagers is not different from learning any kind of conduct from other age sets. Sutherland has made the claim that there is no specific novel learning process that is affiliated with obtaining non-normative ways of behaving (Sutherland, Williams & McShane, 2015). One of the best things about this theory is that it is not restricted to juvenile law-breaking or crime committed by the lower class alone. It expands to other fields of criminal activities as well that are inclusive of organized, corporate or white-collar felonies. So, every class and age group is covered in the theory. This theory is focused more on how people learn to become criminals. There is no focus on why a person decides to become a criminal or what led them to such actions. The differential association theory given by Sutherland has around nine points that focuses on how criminal behavior can be learned.

Sutherland has a clear point that people learn to fight from other people’s actions and how they behave. However, whether a person chooses to fight or not entirely depends on how they perceive things (Sutherland, Williams & McShane, 2015). The consciousness of a person perceives things in various manners that further generates the result. The results can be either a crime or a criminal behavior. As mentioned above the differential association theory mainly consists of nine various principles which are as follows:

1. An individual usually learns criminal behavior from others.
2. Criminal behavior is mainly learned via face-to-face encounter or communication with other people.
3. The learning process usually occurs when a person goes to intimate group gatherings where there is face-to-face interaction.
4. In these particular gatherings, individuals learn various techniques on how to commit a crime. These groups also teach suitable rationalizations and attitude that is required when committing a crime.
5. People learn to steer their purpose based on whether they think the legal code will be favorable to the crime or not.
6. Individuals mainly learn deviant crimes and behavior when the definitions that are favorable to the delinquency overshadows the definitions that are suitable to the violation of the law.
7. Particular tendencies in the direction of crimes will be based on the duration and frequency of the learning experience.
8. Learning crime is identical to other forms of learning.
9. Non-deviant and deviant behaviors both mostly call for similar needs. The only difference that arises is in the resources that the individuals use to chase their objectives.

Having said everything, there are still certain strengths and weaknesses to the differential association theory. One of the major strengths of the theory is its contribution to changing the way people look at criminal behavior forever. The theory made great contributions in switching the criteria of holding individual factors responsible from biology to focus on the experiences and social factors. Due to this fact, the real-world implications can be represented because the learning environment can be changed and manipulated (Sutherland, Williams & McShane, 2015). Whereas in the past, accepting that genetics is the main influence in offending, left behind next to no alternatives as there is no way that genes can be manipulated. The best thing about Sutherland's work is that he not only highlights the lower class but also the middle class, proving that crime can be committed by people of all backgrounds.

The factor of genetics is also the weakness of the theory. There are many cases in which the streak of crime runs in the family. So, a lot of researchers believe that if a father is a criminal there is up to 40% chance that the son has committed a felony at one point of life. This is where the differential association theory lacks to give a satisfactory solution. Also, the differential theory ignores the biological factors completely, this factor is also a significant issue of the theory (Eassey & Krohn, 2018). Some researchers believe that the diathesis-stress model can provide a more holistic explanation over the differential theory. Lastly, this theory also ignores the factor of free will when addressing criminal behavior, which serves as another weakness of the theory.

Throughout Sutherland’s career, he made many attempts to give clarification of his ideas so he can hypothesize a brief general theory that explains felonies and criminal behavior. However, he was not able to achieve that, but that does not take away the fact that Sutherland was and still is a true innovator when it comes to the field of criminology. This can be said not in contradiction of his differential theory, but because of it (Eassey & Krohn, 2018). Sutherland’s theory still gets universal acceptance because it is not complex and it helps explain things with simplicity. Regardless of the criticism that his theory got, Sutherland was able to get significant achievement out of his theory. One of the main reason behind this factor is that to this day the theory is well-known.

**Conclusion**

As a whole, the Differential Association theory does not give the most adequate explanation of any single criminal behavior or felony. However, the theory still holds a certain ground in the field of criminology even today. One of the main reasons that Sutherland’s theory has sustained its importance so far is because it has a basic and general formula and fundamental ideas that are used to examine criminal behavior and felonies. The better question is that what type of crime or criminal behavior Sutherland’s theory cannot be applied on as opposed to what types of crimes the theory explains best. Hence, there are not many theories that can prove the fact that Sutherland’s differential association theory is not effective. The main thing is that Sutherland’s theory should be applied in accordance with how he proposed it so one can get optimum results.

**References**

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