

CMY3701 Differential association essay/summary for 30 marks

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Sutherland's theory of differential association (30 Marks)

This is a summary of Sutherland's theory of differential association, including my own examples; I used these as my own exam preparation and managed to obtain a distinction. Please do not submit this essay as an assignment, there are direct quotes from the study guide. Use these for exam revision ONLY .

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1. Introduction

Sutherland's theory of differential association was responsible for the diminishing popularity of biological and psychological explanations of crime in that it argued that crime was the result of environmental influences on people who are biologically and psychologically normal. Sutherland created a general theory of criminal behaviour by insisting that behaviour was learnt in a social environment. In fact, all behaviour is learnt in more or less the same way. The main difference between law-abiding and criminal behaviour is in what is learned, rather than how it is learned.

2. Definition of a key concept

2.1 Differential association

Differential association is a theory that attempts to explain both the process by which a person learns to engage in crime and the content of what is learned. According to Sutherland, differential association refers to the principle that criminal acts are related to an individual's frequent or constant exposure to antisocial attitudes and values.

3. The fundamental principles of differential association

The following nine propositions explain the process whereby a person becomes involved in a crime:

Proposition 1: Criminal behaviour is learnt

The basic argument of differential association is that, like all forms of behaviour, criminal behaviour is learnt from other people. *For example, just as one learns to tie his or her shoelaces, so does one learn to pick a lock.* This eliminates the roles of heredity, human nature and innovation as causes of deviant behaviour.

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Proposition 2: Criminal behaviour is learnt through interaction with other people by means of a process of communication

This process states that criminal behaviour is learnt through active involvement with others in a process of communication. Parent's influence in the process of education during which language, habits and customs are acquired is accepted as a given. *For example, one may learn to respect and obey the law or to believe in a certain religion from one's parents*

Proposition 3: The learning process takes place mainly within intimate personal groups

As the child gets older, their behaviour initially shaped by the parents comes increasingly under the influence of peers, which is why parents are often concerned about their children's choice in friends. *For example, youth would likely learn how to shoplift from their close friends, rather than from general acquaintances.*

Proposition 4: When criminal behaviour is learnt, this learning process includes the following:

- Learning the techniques needed to commit specific crimes, which may be simple or complex.
- The presence of the necessary motives, drives, rationalisation and attitude

Merely learning how to commit a crime is not cause alone for one to actually engage in the activity, but learning such skills is a prerequisite for the eventual success of the offence. Specific rationalisations and attitudes that are learnt also explain the common excuse for criminal behaviour as deserved. *For example, a rapist may reason that his or her actions were justified as the victim was "asking for it" by wearing revealing clothing.* The learning of criminal behaviour involves, not only mastering how to commit the crime, but also the adoption of deviant attitudes that justified committing it.

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Proposition 5: The specific direction of motives and drives is learnt from definitions of the legal codes as favourable or unfavourable

Anybody may come into contact with definitions that are favourable or unfavourable towards criminal activities. The dominance of either the criminal or the conventional influences in a person's life will determine whether the particular person will regard crime as an acceptable way of life. The definition that is favourable or unfavourable towards the law provides the key to differential association, because it is this definition that determines an individual's values or mind set.

Proposition 6: A person engages in delinquency or crime when the predominance of definitions is in favour of breaking the law

This proposition illustrates the fundamental principle of the theory of differential association. When the influence of definitions favouring crime carries more weight than the influence of definitions that discourages breaking the law, this predominance will encourage the learning of criminal behaviour. The predominance is determined by the quality and intimacy of the interaction with others. *For example a teenager that associates with peers that use drugs may also eventually learn to use drugs*

Proposition 7: Differential association varies in respect of frequency, duration, priority and intensity

Not all associations carry the same weight. Sutherland's theory makes provision for variation in frequency, duration, priority and intensity. How often, for how long, how early in life and from whom one is exposed to criminal associations will affect the relative impact of individuals behaviour. *For example, a young child raised by a drug addict parent will be exposed to stronger definitions of deviant behaviour than a teenager who witnesses a cousin snorting cocaine at a party. In this case, the child would be frequently exposed (**frequency**) for many years (**duration**) in early life (**priority**) to pro-criminal definitions by his or her parent (**intensity**)*

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Proposition 8: The process of learning criminal behaviour by means of the association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all the mechanisms that apply in any learning process

Cognition, conation and affectation are three mechanisms of learning. **Cognition** forms the information control centre where all incoming stimuli are processed. Cognition stores our thoughts and experiences. The function of **conation** within the learning process is the “*performance guidance factor*”. Conation establishes the pace at which we perform a learning task and the autonomy we exercise when learning. Some people will be slow to respond and first think a matter over and consider the options. Others respond more quickly. Conation includes the tactics or skills used by the individual to solve real-life problems and his or her unique perspectives or view of the world. **Affectation** is made up of feelings, emotional response and values.

Proposition 9: Although criminal behaviour is an expression of general needs and values, the offence is not explained by such needs and values, because noncriminal behaviour is an expression of the same needs and values

The last two propositions illustrate the link with general learning principles. Both propositions emphasise the fact that criminal behaviour is learnt in the same way as any other behaviour and that both types of behaviour are the product of similar needs and values. *For example, jealousy may lead some people to commit murder, but most people who get jealous do not commit murder.*

4. Evaluation of differential association

4.1 Pro's

Sutherland's legacy to criminology is his argument that criminal behaviour is normal learnt behaviour. The main strength of the theory is that it showed that crime was not just a product of poverty, but that it could occur in all settings, ranging from slum areas to large business operations. Some research findings partially support Sutherland's theory, because there is no doubt that peers play a crucial role in delinquency.

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4.2 Con's

Sutherland's argument can only be assessed in the context of general theories and research about human learning, the theory cannot be empirically tested. Differential association alone is not sufficient to explain crime and does not really make provision for freedom of choice and individual circumstances. The theory is too wide and does not succeed in explaining any specific offence

5. Conclusion

Please provide own conclusion. Remember to indicate that this is your opinion, for example "this student is of the opinion that..." This is what you think about the theory. This is not a summary of your essay.