



Research Article

## Crime as a Learned Behaviour: Contemporary Relevance of Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association

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### Abstract

Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association, first articulated in the mid-20th century, remains one of the most influential frameworks in criminology. It posits that criminal behaviour is learned through interaction with others, emphasising the role of socialisation, peer influence, and cultural transmission in shaping deviance. This paper explores the contemporary relevance of the theory in light of modern criminological research, digital socialisation, and globalised crime networks. Drawing upon secondary data from recent scholarly works, the study examines how the theory explains current patterns of crime, including cybercrime, gang affiliation, and white-collar offences. The research objectives focus on understanding the adaptability of the theory to modern contexts, evaluating its explanatory power compared to alternative criminological theories, and identifying its limitations in addressing structural inequalities. The findings suggest that while the theory remains highly relevant, it requires integration with contemporary perspectives on technology, intersectionality, and systemic factors. Recommendations for future research highlight the need for interdisciplinary approaches that combine sociological, psychological, and technological insights.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Edwin H. Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association, introduced in 1939 and refined in 1947, revolutionised criminology by shifting the focus from biological and psychological explanations of crime to sociological processes. The theory asserts that criminal behaviour is not inherited or biologically predetermined but learned through interaction with others. According to Sutherland, individuals adopt criminal values, techniques, and motivations through communication within intimate personal groups. This perspective challenged deterministic views of crime and emphasised the social environment as the primary driver of deviant behaviour.

In contemporary society, the theory's relevance has expanded beyond traditional street crime to encompass a wide range of deviant behaviours, including cybercrime, organised crime, terrorism, and white-collar offences. The rise of digital communication platforms has created new avenues for the transmission of criminal knowledge, making Sutherland's emphasis on interaction and learning more pertinent than ever. For instance, online forums and encrypted networks facilitate the exchange of criminal techniques, mirroring the interpersonal learning processes described by Sutherland.

The theory's enduring significance lies in its explanatory flexibility. It accounts for the role of peer groups in juvenile delinquency, the influence of workplace culture in corporate crime, and the normalisation of deviance in online communities. Moreover, it provides a framework for understanding how individuals rationalise criminal behaviour through exposure to definitions favourable to law violation. This rationalisation process is evident in contemporary phenomena such as the justification of hacking as activism or the framing of financial fraud as a victimless crime.

Despite its strengths, the theory has faced criticism for underestimating structural factors such as poverty, inequality, and systemic discrimination. Critics argue that while differential association explains how crime is learned, it does not fully address why certain groups are more exposed to criminal definitions than others. Contemporary criminology has sought to integrate Sutherland's insights with broader theories of social disorganisation, strain, and critical criminology to provide a more comprehensive understanding of crime.

This paper seeks to evaluate the contemporary relevance of Sutherland's theory by reviewing recent research, analysing its applicability to modern forms of crime, and identifying areas where it requires theoretical expansion. The study employs secondary data analysis, drawing from scholarly articles, books, and empirical studies published in the last two decades. By doing so, it aims to provide a nuanced assessment of the theory's strengths, limitations, and future directions.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association has expanded significantly in recent decades, with scholars applying it to diverse forms of deviance and testing its validity in new social contexts.

Akers and Sellers (2017) <sup>[1]</sup> revisited the theory by integrating it with social learning theory, emphasising reinforcement and imitation as mechanisms that complement differential association. Their work demonstrates how criminal behaviour is not only learned through exposure to definitions favourable to crime but also reinforced through rewards and punishments. This integration has been particularly useful in explaining persistent patterns of deviance.

Pratt *et al.* (2010) <sup>[14]</sup> conducted a meta-analysis of empirical studies and found strong support for the theory's predictive power in explaining delinquency. Their findings suggest that peer influence remains one of the most consistent predictors of criminal involvement, validating Sutherland's original propositions.

Warr (2002) <sup>[15]</sup> provided a detailed exploration of peer influence during adolescence, showing how intimate groups serve as the primary agents of criminal socialisation. His work highlights the importance of frequency, duration, and intensity of associations, which directly align with Sutherland's principles.

Matsueda (2006) <sup>[9]</sup> extended the theory by linking it with structural contexts such as neighbourhood disorganisation. He argued that while differential association explains the micro-level learning of crime, it must be situated within macro-level conditions that determine exposure to criminal definitions.

Haynie and Osgood (2005) <sup>[4]</sup> examined peer networks and found that adolescents embedded in delinquent peer groups were more likely to engage in crime. Their study underscores the role of network structures in shaping opportunities for deviant learning.

Higgins *et al.* (2008) <sup>[6]</sup> applied the theory to cybercrime, demonstrating that online peer associations strongly influence hacking behaviour. This study illustrates how digital environments replicate the interpersonal learning processes described by Sutherland, making the theory highly relevant in the age of technology.

Piquero *et al.* (2012) <sup>[12]</sup> analysed white-collar crime and found that workplace culture often fosters deviant norms. Their research shows how professional environments can normalise unethical practices, supporting the idea that crime is learned through association with deviant definitions.

McGloin and Piquero (2010) <sup>[10]</sup> studied gang membership and confirmed that differential association plays a central role in sustaining group-based crime. They emphasised that gangs provide both the techniques and rationalisations necessary for continued criminal involvement.

Payne and Salotti (2007) <sup>[11]</sup> linked the theory to intimate partner violence, showing how cultural definitions of masculinity and dominance are transmitted through social interactions. This expands the theory's application beyond traditional crime to interpersonal violence.

Krohn *et al.* (2014) <sup>[8]</sup> highlighted the role of family socialisation in transmitting criminal values. Their findings suggest that family units, much like peer groups, can serve as primary agents of deviant learning.

Higgins and Marcum (2011) <sup>[5]</sup> extended the theory to digital piracy, showing that peer influence is a strong predictor of illegal downloading. This demonstrates the adaptability of the theory to new forms of deviance emerging in digital contexts.

Pratt and Cullen (2005) <sup>[13]</sup> compared differential association with self-control theory, finding that both theories offer complementary explanations of crime. While self-control theory emphasises individual traits, differential association highlights social processes, suggesting that a combined approach may be most effective.

Hay and Forrest (2008) <sup>[3]</sup> emphasised the role of moral definitions in shaping deviant behaviour. They argued that exposure to definitions favourable to crime not only influences behaviour but also reshapes moral reasoning, aligning with Sutherland's propositions.

Holt *et al.* (2010) <sup>[7]</sup> applied the theory to online deviance, confirming its relevance in explaining behaviours such as hacking, identity theft, and digital fraud. Their work highlights how online communities function as spaces of deviant learning.

Cullen *et al.* (2018) <sup>[2]</sup> argued for integrating differential association with life-course criminology to explain persistence in crime. They suggested that exposure to deviant associations during formative years has long-term effects on criminal trajectories.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that Sutherland's theory continues to be a cornerstone of criminological research. Its adaptability to diverse contexts—from street crime to cybercrime and corporate deviance—underscores its enduring relevance. However, the literature also points to the need for theoretical expansion, particularly in addressing structural inequalities and the digital transformation of social interaction.

### 3. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of this study is limited to the analysis of secondary data from recent criminological research. It focuses on the application of Sutherland's theory to contemporary forms of crime, including cybercrime, organised crime, juvenile delinquency, and white-collar offences. The study does not involve primary data collection but synthesises existing literature to evaluate the theory's relevance. The geographical scope is global, reflecting the transnational nature of modern crime.

### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis. Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and empirical studies published between 2000 and 2023. The methodology involves thematic analysis of literature to identify patterns in the application of differential association to contemporary crime.

#### 4.1 OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate the applicability of Sutherland's theory to modern forms of crime.
2. To compare the explanatory power of differential association with alternative criminological theories.

3. To identify the limitations of the theory in addressing structural and systemic factors.

#### 4.1.1 Applicability of Sutherland's Theory to Modern Forms of Crime

Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association emphasises that criminal behaviour is learned through interaction with others, particularly within intimate groups. In the contemporary era, this principle has been applied to a wide range of crimes beyond traditional street-level offences. The theory's adaptability to modern contexts such as cybercrime, organised crime, white-collar crime, and terrorism demonstrates its enduring relevance.

#### 4.1.2 Cybercrime and Digital Deviance

The digital age has created new spaces for deviant learning. Online forums, encrypted chat rooms, and social media platforms function as virtual peer groups where individuals exchange criminal knowledge. Higgins *et al.* (2008) <sup>[6]</sup> found that online associations strongly predict hacking behaviour, suggesting that digital environments replicate the interpersonal learning processes described by Sutherland. Similarly, Holt *et al.* (2010) <sup>[7]</sup> demonstrated that cybercriminals often learn techniques such as phishing and malware deployment through peer-to-peer interactions in online communities. These findings highlight how the theory explains the transmission of deviant norms in virtual spaces.

#### 4.1.3 Juvenile Delinquency and Peer Influence

Adolescents remain particularly susceptible to peer influence, making differential association a powerful explanatory tool for juvenile delinquency. Warr (2002) <sup>[15]</sup> emphasised that the frequency, duration, and intensity of peer interactions significantly shape delinquent behaviour. Haynie and Osgood (2005) <sup>[4]</sup> further demonstrated that adolescents embedded in delinquent peer networks are more likely to engage in crime, underscoring the role of social networks in transmitting deviant values. These studies confirm that Sutherland's propositions remain central to understanding youth crime.

#### 4.1.4 Gang Membership and Group-Based Crime

Gang affiliation provides a clear example of differential association in action. McGloin and Piquero (2010) <sup>[10]</sup> found that gangs serve as environments where members learn both the techniques of crime and the rationalisations that justify deviant behaviour. The collective identity of gangs reinforces definitions favourable to law violation, sustaining long-term criminal involvement. This aligns with Sutherland's assertion that crime is learned through communication within intimate groups.

#### 4.1.5 White-Collar and Corporate Crime

Sutherland himself introduced the concept of white-collar crime, and his theory remains highly relevant in explaining corporate deviance. Piquero *et al.* (2012) <sup>[12]</sup> demonstrated that workplace cultures often normalise unethical practices, creating environments where employees learn to rationalise fraud and

embezzlement. Exposure to deviant definitions within professional settings fosters a culture of compliance with illegal norms, illustrating the applicability of differential association to non-traditional forms of crime.

#### 4.1.6 Terrorism and Radicalisation

The theory has also been applied to terrorism and radicalisation. Exposure to extremist ideologies within close-knit groups fosters the adoption of definitions favourable to violence. Akers and Sellers (2017) <sup>[1]</sup> argued that radicalisation processes mirror the mechanisms of differential association, as individuals learn justifications for violence through interaction with extremist peers. This application underscores the theory's relevance in addressing global security concerns.

#### 4.1.7 Cross-Cultural Applications

Differential association has been tested in diverse cultural contexts, demonstrating its global applicability. Matsueda (2006) <sup>[9]</sup> argued that while the theory explains micro-level learning, it must be situated within macro-level conditions such as neighbourhood disorganisation. Studies in Latin America and Asia have shown that exposure to deviant peer groups predicts delinquency across cultural boundaries, suggesting that the theory's principles are universally relevant (Cullen *et al.*, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>.

The applicability of Sutherland's theory to modern forms of crime underscores its enduring relevance. From cybercrime to terrorism, the theory provides a robust framework for understanding how deviance is learned through social interaction. However, its explanatory power is enhanced when integrated with structural perspectives that account for broader social conditions.

#### 4.2.1 Comparative Explanatory Power with Alternative Theories

While Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association remains influential, criminology has developed alternative frameworks such as strain theory, social control theory, and labelling theory. Comparing these perspectives highlights the strengths and limitations of differential association in explaining crime.

#### 4.2.2 Differential Association vs. Strain Theory

Strain theory, developed by Merton, emphasises the role of societal pressures in driving individuals toward crime. It argues that when legitimate means to achieve cultural goals are blocked, individuals may resort to deviance. Pratt and Cullen (2005) <sup>[13]</sup> noted that while strain theory explains why individuals may be motivated to commit a crime, differential association explains how they learn the techniques and rationalisations necessary to act on those motivations. Thus, the two theories complement each other, with strain theory addressing macro-level pressures and differential association focusing on micro-level learning.

#### 4.2.3 Differential Association vs. Social Control Theory

Social control theory, articulated by Hirschi, posits that strong social bonds prevent individuals from engaging in crime. Hay

and Forrest (2008) <sup>[3]</sup> argued that weak attachments to family, school, and community increase the likelihood of deviance. While social control theory emphasises the absence of bonds, differential association emphasises the presence of deviant associations. Together, they provide a more comprehensive understanding of crime, with one focusing on what restrains individuals and the other on what propels them toward deviance.

#### 4.2.4 Differential Association vs. Labelling Theory

Labelling theory suggests that deviance is a product of societal reactions and stigmatisation. Once labelled as deviant, individuals may internalise this identity and continue engaging in crime. Warr (2002) <sup>[15]</sup> argued that while labelling theory explains the persistence of deviance, differential association explains its initiation. The two theories intersect in showing how social interactions shape criminal trajectories, but differential association provides a more detailed account of the learning process.

#### 4.2.5 Integration with Social Learning Theory

Akers and Sellers (2017) <sup>[1]</sup> expanded differential association into social learning theory by incorporating reinforcement and imitation. This integration strengthens the explanatory power of the theory by accounting for how behaviours are maintained over time. Pratt *et al.* (2010) <sup>[14]</sup> confirmed through meta-analysis that social learning theory, rooted in differential association, remains one of the most empirically supported frameworks in criminology.

#### 4.2.6 Comparative Strengths and Weaknesses

The strength of differential association lies in its ability to explain the micro-level processes of learning crime. However, it is less effective in addressing structural inequalities and systemic factors. Strain theory and critical criminology fill this gap by focusing on macro-level conditions. Social control theory, meanwhile, highlights the importance of social bonds, offering insights into prevention strategies.

Differential association does not replace alternative theories but complements them. Its explanatory power is strongest when integrated with other perspectives, creating a multidimensional understanding of crime that accounts for both individual learning and structural conditions.

#### 4.3.1 Limitations in Addressing Structural and Systemic Factors

While Sutherland's theory provides valuable insights into the learning of crime, it has been criticised for underemphasizing structural and systemic factors such as poverty, inequality, race, and gender.

#### 4.3.2 Poverty and Economic Inequality

Differential association explains how crime is learned, but not why certain groups are more exposed to deviant definitions. Matsueda (2006) <sup>[9]</sup> argued that structural conditions such as poverty and neighbourhood disorganisation increase exposure

to delinquent peers. Strain theory complements this by explaining how economic inequality creates pressures that push individuals toward deviance. Without integrating these perspectives, differential association risks overlooking the root causes of exposure to crime.

#### 4.3.3 Race and Systemic Discrimination

Research has shown that racial minorities are disproportionately exposed to criminal definitions due to systemic discrimination. Cullen *et al.* (2018) <sup>[2]</sup> emphasised that structural racism shapes opportunities and peer networks, influencing who is more likely to encounter deviant associations. Differential association alone cannot account for these systemic disparities, highlighting the need for integration with critical criminology.

#### 4.3.4 Gender and Socialisation

Gendered patterns of crime also reveal the limitations of differential association. Payne and Salotti (2007) <sup>[11]</sup> demonstrated that cultural definitions of masculinity contribute to intimate partner violence. While differential association explains how these definitions are transmitted, it does not fully address the gendered power structures that sustain them. Feminist criminology provides a necessary complement by focusing on patriarchy and gender inequality.

#### 4.3.5 Globalisation and Transnational Crime

The rise of transnational crime networks further challenges the theory. While differential association explains how individuals learn criminal techniques within groups, it does not fully account for the global economic and political structures that facilitate organised crime. McGloin and Piquero (2010) <sup>[10]</sup> noted that globalised networks create opportunities for deviant learning across borders, requiring a broader theoretical framework.

#### 4.3.6 Digital Divide and Online Exposure

The digital age has expanded opportunities for deviant learning, but access to online communities is shaped by socioeconomic factors. Holt *et al.* (2010) <sup>[7]</sup> argued that while online forums replicate differential association processes, structural inequalities determine who has access to these spaces. This highlights the need to integrate digital criminology with structural perspectives.

The limitations of differential association lie in its underemphasis on structural and systemic factors. While it effectively explains how crime is learned, it must be integrated with theories that address poverty, inequality, race, gender, and globalisation. Only through such integration can criminology develop a comprehensive understanding of crime in contemporary society.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The objectives collectively demonstrate that Sutherland's theory remains highly relevant but requires theoretical expansion. Its strength lies in explaining the micro-level processes of learning crime, while its weakness lies in

underemphasizing macro-level structural factors. Comparative analysis shows that it complements rather than replaces other criminological theories.

## 6. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate differential association with digital criminology to address online deviance.
- Expand the theory to incorporate structural inequalities and systemic discrimination.
- Employ interdisciplinary approaches combining sociology, psychology, and technology.
- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the persistence of learned criminal behaviour.
- Explore cross-cultural applications of the theory in globalised crime contexts.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association continues to provide a powerful framework for understanding crime as a learned behaviour. Its application to contemporary issues such as cybercrime, white-collar crime, and gang affiliation underscores its enduring relevance. However, the theory must evolve to address structural inequalities and the digital transformation of social interaction. Future research should focus on integrating differential association with broader criminological perspectives to create a more comprehensive understanding of crime in the 21st century.

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