

Social Process Theories

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Teenager Genarlow Wilson was an honor student, a gifted athlete, attractive, popular, and outgoing. He had a 3.2 grade point average, he was All Conference in football, he was voted 11th-grade prom prince, and his senior year was capped off with a distinguished honor: He was elected Douglas County High's first-ever homecoming king. He was supposed to be a star athlete in college, but instead Wilson was sentenced to 10 years in a Georgia prison. His crime: engaging in consensual sex when he was 17 years old with a girl two years younger. Wilson was convicted of aggravated child molestation, even though he and the girl were both minors at the time and the sex was clearly consensual.

Wilson engaged in oral sex with the girl during a wild party involving a bunch of kids, marijuana, and alcohol—all captured on videotape. The tapes made it clear that the sex was voluntary and not coerced. Although the prosecutor favored leniency, Wilson refused to plea bargain because that would mean admitting he was a sexual predator—a charge he vehemently denied and that no one, including the prosecutor, believed was true. Ironically, if the couple had had sexual intercourse, it would have been considered a misdemeanor, but because oral sex was involved, the crime was considered a felony. An additional irony in the case is that soon after Wilson was convicted, the public outcry forced Georgia to change the law and make consensual oral sex a misdemeanor. But the new law does not apply retroactively, and Wilson was sent to prison hoping for some type of legal reprieve.¹ The case sparked a national outcry, and on October 26, 2007, the Georgia State Supreme Court, though not overturning the conviction itself, ruled that Wilson's sentence was cruel and unusual ("grossly disproportionate"). The crusade to free Genarlow worked, and he was released after serving over 2 years of his 10-year prison sentence in the Al Burress Correctional Training Center in Forsyth, Georgia.

Fact or Fiction?

- ▶ No matter where kids live, even in a high-poverty area, having effective parents can reduce the lure of gangs and street crime.
- ▶ Parents today are too lenient. If they toughened up discipline, they could straighten out rebellious teens.
- ▶ High school dropouts are crime-prone troublemakers.
- ▶ Disturbed loners become delinquents; popular kids are too busy to commit crime.
- ▶ Being exposed to criminal parents and parental deviance is closely linked to crime.
- ▶ Criminals have a unique antisocial lifestyle that takes up all of their time.
- ▶ "Idle hands are the devil's workshop" is merely an old saying. Kids who work outside the home are the ones most likely to get into trouble.

Chapter Objectives

1. Be familiar with the concepts of social process and socialization.
2. Be able to discuss the differences among social learning theory, social control theory, and social reaction (labeling) theory.
3. Discuss the effect of family relationships on crime.
4. Understand how the educational setting influences crime.
5. Be aware of the link between peers and delinquency.
6. Be familiar with the association between beliefs and criminality.
7. Discuss the main types of social learning theory.
8. Be familiar with the principles of social control theory.
9. Know the basic elements of social reaction (labeling) theory.
10. Link social process theory to crime prevention efforts.

Genarlow Wilson's case shows how social interactions and processes shape crime and can label some people as criminals. He did not consider himself a criminal and, even in court, denied his culpability. Here is an exchange he had with the prosecutor during his trial:

Genarlow: . . . Aggravated child molestation is when like a 60-year—some old man like messing with 10-year-old girls. I'm 17, the girl was 15, sir. You call that child molestation, two years apart?

Barker: I didn't write the law.

Genarlow: I didn't write the law, either.

Barker: That's what the law states is aggravated child molestation, Mr. Wilson, not me.

Genarlow: Well, sir, I understand you're just doing your job. I don't blame you. . . . But do you think it's fair? . . . Would you want your son on trial for something like this?

Should Genarlow Wilson ever have been labeled a "sexual predator"? If he had engaged in a different type of sex act, the case would never have been made public. The law itself was designed to protect young girls from being abused by much older men, not by members of their own peer group with whom they were socializing freely. And if the act itself was so bad, why was it legalized a short time later? The bottom line: If the party had occurred a few months later, Genarlow Wilson might have been playing football at Georgia State University instead of serving time in Georgia State Prison!

Genarlow Wilson was in fact labeled a sexual predator and sent to prison because those in power, who define the law and control its process, decided that his behavior constituted a serious crime, a felony. He was released when those in power decided that he was not really a felon and that the law was not intended to apply to his behavior.

social process theory

The view that criminality is a function of people's interactions with various organizations, institutions, and processes in society.

social learning theory

The view that people learn to be aggressive by observing others acting aggressively to achieve some goal or being rewarded for violent acts.

social control theory

The view that people commit crime when the forces binding them to society are weakened or broken.

social reaction (labeling) theory

The view that people become criminals when they are labeled as such and accept the label as a personal identity.

Some criminologists focus their attention on the social processes and interactions that occur in all segments of society. They believe that, rather than strictly being a product of their environment and their place in the social structure, most people are shaped by their interactions with social institutions such as schools and with social groups, such as family, peers, and neighbors. As we develop and are socialized over the life course, our relationships can be either positive and supportive, or dysfunctional and destructive. If the latter is the norm, then conventional success may be impossible for that individual to achieve. Criminal solutions may become the only feasible alternative. This view of crime is referred to as **social process theory**.

The social process approach has several independent branches. These are described briefly below and discussed in detail later in this chapter.

- ▶ **Social learning theory** suggests that people learn the techniques and attitudes of crime from close relationships with criminal peers: Crime is a learned behavior.
- ▶ **Social control theory** maintains that everyone has the potential to become a criminal, but most people are controlled by their bonds to society. Crime occurs when the forces that bind people to society are weakened or broken.
- ▶ **Social reaction (labeling) theory** holds that people become criminals when significant members of society label them as such and they accept those labels as a personal identity.

To put it another way, social learning theories assume that people are born good and learn to be bad; social control theory assumes that people are born bad and must be controlled in order to be good; and social reaction theory assumes that whether good or bad, people are shaped, directed, and influenced by the evaluations of others.

Despite their apparent differences, social process theories share one basic concept: All people, regardless of their race, class, or gender, have the potential to become

delinquents or criminals. Although members of the lower socioeconomic class bear the added burdens of poverty, racism, poor schools, and disrupted family lives, these social forces can be counteracted by positive peer relations, a supportive family, and educational success. And conversely, even the most affluent members of society may turn to antisocial behavior if their life experiences are damaging and/or destructive.

Institutions of Socialization

Social process theorists have long studied the critical elements of **socialization** to determine how they contribute to a burgeoning criminal career. Their view relies on the fact that interaction with key social institutions helps control human behavior. Prominent among these elements are the individual's family, peer group, school, and church.

FAMILY RELATIONS

Family relationships are considered a major determinant of behavior.³ In fact, parenting factors, such as the ability to communicate and to provide proper discipline, may play a critical role in determining whether people misbehave as children and even later as adults. The family-crime relationship is significant across racial, ethnic, and gender lines, and this is one of the most replicated findings in the criminological literature.⁴

Parents who are supportive and who effectively control their children in a noncoercive way are more likely to raise children who refrain from delinquency; this phenomenon is referred to as **parental efficacy**.⁵ Delinquency is reduced when parents provide the type of structure that integrates children into families, while giving them the ability to assert their individuality and regulate their own behaviors.⁶ Kids who report having troubled home lives also exhibit lower levels of self-esteem and are more prone to antisocial behaviors.⁷

In contrast, children who have warm and affectionate ties to their parents report greater levels of self-esteem beginning in adolescence and extending into their adulthood; high self-esteem is inversely related to criminal behavior.⁸ As important as it is, parental efficacy is sometimes compromised by family disruption and separation. Divorce forces many kids to live in single-parent households that are more likely to suffer economic and other social problems that are less likely to plague intact families.⁹ Figure 7.1 illustrates the percentage of children living in single-parent households by state.

The concept of family functioning and crime and the factors that disturb this interaction are discussed in the accompanying Current Issues in Crime feature on page 171.

Other family factors that have predictive value include the following:

- ▶ Marital distress and conflict are significantly related to harsh and hostile negative parenting styles. Adolescents who live in this type of environment develop poor emotional well-being, externalizing problems, and antisocial behavior.¹⁰
- ▶ Adolescents who do not receive affection from their parents during childhood are more likely to use illicit drugs and to be more aggressive as they mature.¹¹



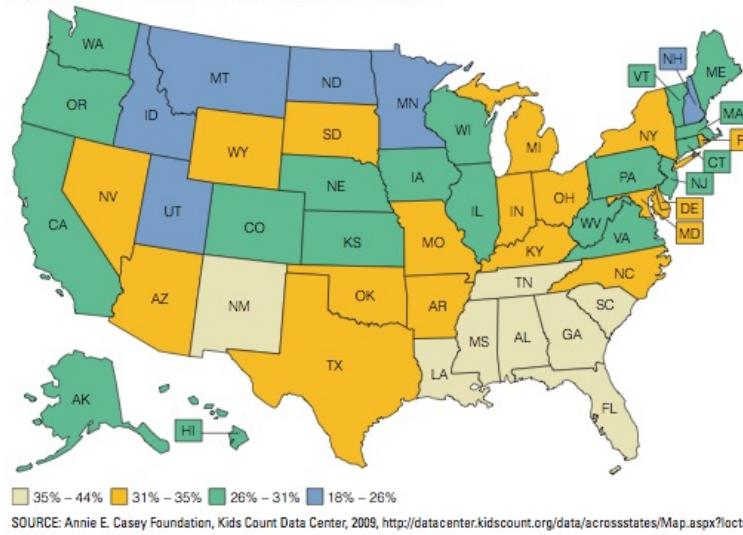
In July 2008, Nebraska adopted a "safe haven" law that allowed parents of children ages 18 and under to abandon them with impunity at local hospitals. The law was changed in November 2008, allowing only infants up to 30 days old to be abandoned. Before the law was amended, 36 children were dropped off in Nebraska hospitals over a four-month period, and none was an infant. Here, the mother of an 18-year-old daughter looks at a photograph in her daughter's room in Lincoln, Nebraska. She was one of the 36 parents who left children at a hospital; she acted in the hope that her daughter could get help. Would a safe haven law such as Nebraska's help or hinder the socialization process?

socialization

Process of human development and enculturation. Socialization is influenced by key social processes and institutions.

parental efficacy

The ability of parents to be supportive of their children and effectively control them in noncoercive ways.

Figure 7.1 Children Living in Single-Parent Households by State

Fact or Fiction?

No matter where kids live, even in a high-poverty area, having effective parents can reduce the lure of gangs and street crime.

Fact. Criminologists link parental efficacy and effectiveness to higher self-esteem and lower crime rates.

CONNECTIONS

Chapter 2's analysis of the relationship between socioeconomic class and crime showed why this relationship is still a hotly debated topic. Although serious criminals may be found disproportionately in lower-class areas, self-report studies show that criminality cuts across class lines. Middle-class use and abuse of recreational drugs, discussed in Chapter 13, suggests that law violators are not necessarily economically motivated.

- ▶ Children growing up in homes where a parent suffers mental impairment are also at risk for delinquency.¹²
- ▶ Children whose parents abuse drugs are more likely to become persistent substance abusers than the children of nonabusers.¹³
- ▶ Children (both males and females, both black and white) who experience abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse are believed to be more crime-prone and to suffer more from other social problems, such as depression, suicide attempts, and self-injurious behaviors.¹⁴ Mental health and delinquency experts have found that abused kids experience mental and social problems across their life span, problems ranging from substance abuse to damaged personality.¹⁵
- ▶ Children who grow up in homes where parents use strict discipline, and where children lack parental warmth and involvement in their lives, are prone to antisocial behavior.¹⁶ Links have been found among corporal punishment, delinquency, anger, spousal abuse, depression, and adult crime.¹⁷

The effects of family dysfunction are felt well beyond childhood. Kids who experience high levels of family conflict grow up to lead stressful adult lives, punctuated by periods of depression.¹⁸ Children whose parents are harsh, angry, and irritable are likely to behave in the same way toward their own children, putting their own offspring at risk.¹⁹ Thus, the seeds of adult dysfunction are planted early in childhood.

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The educational process and adolescent school achievement have been linked to criminality. Children who do poorly in school, lack educational motivation, and feel alienated are the most likely to engage in criminal acts.²⁰ Children who fail in school offend more frequently than those who succeed. These children commit more serious and more violent offenses, and their criminal behavior regularly persists into adulthood.²¹

Rand Conger is one of the nation's leading experts on family life. For the past two decades he has been involved with four major community studies that have examined the influence of economic stress on families, children, and adolescents; in sum these studies involve almost 1,500 families and over 4,000 individual family members who represent a diverse cross section of society. The extensive information that has been collected on all of these families over time includes reports by family members, videotaped discussions in the home, and data from schools and other community agencies.

One thing that Conger and his associates have learned is that in all of these different types of families, economic stress appears to have a harmful effect on parents and

turn, increase children's risk of suffering developmental problems, such as depressed mood, substance abuse, and engaging in delinquent behaviors. These economic stress processes also decrease children's ability to function in a competent manner in school and with peers.

The findings also show, however, that parents who remain supportive of one another, and who demonstrate effective problem-solving skills in spite of hardship, can disrupt this negative process and shield their children and themselves from these adverse consequences of economic stress. These parenting skills can be taught and used by human service professionals to assist families experiencing economic pressure or similar stresses in their lives.

Current Issues in Crime Family Functioning and Crime

children. According to his "Family Stress Model" of economic hardship, such factors as low income and income loss increase parents' sadness, pessimism about the future, anger, despair, and withdrawal from other family members. Economic stress has this impact on parents' social-emotional functioning through the daily pressures it creates for them, such as being unable to pay bills or acquire basic necessities such as adequate food, housing, clothing, and medical care. As parents become more emotionally distressed, they tend to interact with one another and their children in a more irritable and less supportive fashion. These patterns of behavior increase instability in the marriage and also disrupt effective parenting practices, such as monitoring children's activities and using consistent and appropriate disciplinary strategies. Marital instability and disrupted parenting, in



CRITICAL THINKING

To help deal with these problems, Conger advocates support for social policies that adequately aid families during stressful times as they recover from downturns in the economy. He also advocates educating parents about effective strategies for managing the economic, emotional, and family relationship challenges they will face when hardship occurs. What would you add to the mix to improve family functioning in America?

SOURCES: Rand Conger and Katherine Conger, "Understanding the Processes through Which Economic Hardship Influences Families and Children," in D. Russell Crane and Tim B. Heaton, *Handbook of Families and Poverty* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), pp. 64–81; Iowa State University, Institute for Social and Behavioral Research, The Research of Rand Conger, www.isbr.iastate.edu/staff/Personals/rconger/

Dropping Out Even though national dropout rates are in decline, more than 10 percent of Americans aged 16 to 24 have left school permanently without a diploma; of these, more than 1 million withdrew before completing 10th grade. There are still ethnic racial gaps in graduation rates. Students from historically disadvantaged minority groups (American Indian, Hispanic, African American) have little more than a 50–50 chance of finishing high school with a diploma.²² The research on the effect of dropping out is a mixed bag: Some research findings indicate that school dropouts face a significant chance of entering a criminal career, but other efforts using sophisticated methodological tools have failed to find a dropout effect.²³ If there is a "dropout effect," it is because those who do leave school early already have a long history of poor school performance and antisocial behaviors.²⁴ In other words, poor school performance predicts both dropping out and antisocial activity. Even if dropping out is not directly related to crime, it reduces earnings and dampens future life achievements.

Fact or Fiction?

Parents today are too lenient. If they toughened up discipline, they could straighten out rebellious teens.

Fiction. Most of the existing literature links strict discipline and corporal punishment to antisocial behavior. Effective parenting is the key to controlling youthful misbehavior.



Getting Bullied Students are also subject to violence and intimidation on school grounds. Bullying is a sad but common occurrence in the U.S. educational system.²⁵ More than 15 percent of U.S. schoolchildren say they have been bullied by other students during the current school term.²⁶ School crime surveys yield estimates that about 1.5 million violent incidents occur in public elementary and secondary schools each year.²⁷ The presence of weapons and violence is not lost on the average student. Data from a recent survey of high school students found that almost half report having seen other students carry knives at school, roughly 1 in 10 reports having seen other students carry guns at school, and more than 1 in 5 report being fearful of weapon-associated victimization at school.²⁸

Social process theories hold that socialization is a key element in the shaping of human behavior and that impaired socialization can have devastating effects. Peer group conflict, for example, can lead to disaster. Here Norman Keene, 35, stepfather of Jaheim Herrera, 11, embraces his daughter Ny'itsa Keene, 5, while discussing Jaheim's suicide at the family's apartment on April 20, 2009. Jaheim hanged himself with a belt after coming home from Dunaire Elementary School in DeKalb County, Georgia, where he was being bullied by fellow students. A photograph of Jaheim hangs on the family's front door above a poster that family, friends, and neighborhood residents have turned into a shrine in the boy's memory.

© AP Images/Atlanta Journal-Constitution/Cuts On Tap

PEER RELATIONS

Psychologists have long recognized that peer group relations have a powerful effect on human conduct and can dramatically influence decision making and behavior choices. Peer relations is a double-edged sword. Popular kids who hang out with their friends without parental supervision are at risk for delinquent behaviors mainly because they have more opportunity to

get into trouble.²⁹ Less popular kids, who are routinely rejected by their peers, are more likely to display aggressive behavior and to disrupt group activities through bickering, bullying, or other antisocial behavior.³⁰ Those who report inadequate or strained peer relations, and who say they are not popular with the opposite sex, are prone to delinquent behaviors.³¹

Troubled kids find it tough to make friends; they choose delinquent peers out of necessity rather than desire.³² Being a social outcast causes them to hook up with friends who are dangerous and get them into trouble.³³ Those who acquire delinquent friends may find that peer influence is a powerful determinant of behavior. Deviant peers may sustain or amplify antisocial behavior trends and reinforce delinquent careers.³⁴ The fear of punishment is diminished among kids who hang with delinquent friends, and loyalty to delinquent peers may outweigh the fear of punishment.³⁵

Because delinquent friends tend to be, as criminologist Mark Warr puts it, "sticky" (once acquired, they are not easily lost), peer influence may continue through the life span.³⁶ People who maintain close relations with antisocial peers will sustain their own criminal behavior into adulthood.³⁷ In contrast, nondelinquent friends help to moderate delinquency.³⁸ Having prosocial friends who are committed to conventional success may help shield kids from crime-producing inducements in their environment.³⁹

RELIGION AND BELIEF

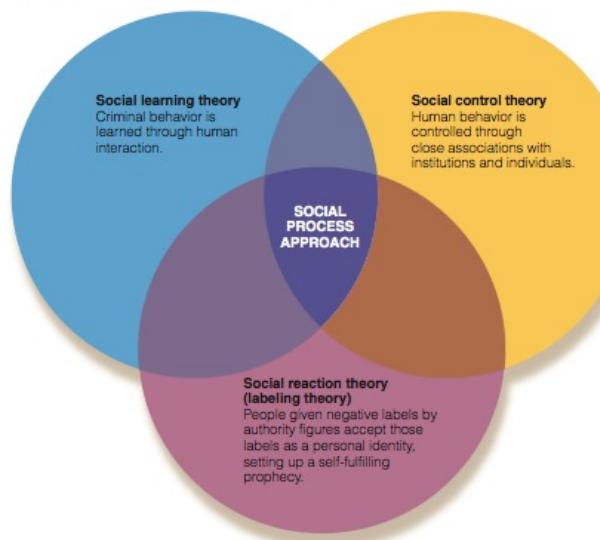
Logic would dictate that people who hold high moral values and beliefs, who have learned to distinguish right from wrong, and who regularly attend religious services should also eschew crime and other antisocial behaviors. Religion binds people

Fact or Fiction?

High school dropouts are crime-prone troublemakers.

Fiction. It depends on why the individual drops out. Those who are having problems in school and are already involved in antisocial behaviors will commit more crime when they drop out. Kids who drop out to get a job or for other reasons are less crime-prone.

Figure 7.2 The Complex Web of Social Processes That Controls Human Behavior

**Fact or Fiction?**

Disturbed loners become delinquents; popular kids are too busy to commit crime.

Fiction. Popular kids who hang out with their friends without parental supervision are at risk for delinquent behaviors; they have more opportunity to get into trouble, especially if they have their own car!

CONNECTIONS

As you may recall from Chapter 2, most juveniles age out of crime and do not become adult offenders. Having delinquent friends may retard this process. According to the social process view, a chronic offender may have learned a delinquent way of life from his or her peer group members.

together and forces them to confront the consequences of their behavior. Committing crimes would violate the principles of all organized religions.

Recent research findings suggest that attending religious services does in fact have a significant negative impact on crime.⁴⁰ Kids living in disorganized, high-crime areas who attend religious services are better able to resist illegal drug use than nonreligious youths.⁴¹ Interestingly, participation seems to be a more significant inhibitor of crime than merely having religious beliefs and values. That is, actually attending religious services has a more dramatic effect on behavior than merely holding religious beliefs.⁴²

Figure 7.2 summarizes the relationship among the various elements of socialization.

► **Checkpoints**

Social Learning Theories

Social learning theorists believe that crime is a product of learning the norms, values, and behaviors associated with criminal activity. Social learning can involve the actual techniques of crime (how to hot-wire a car or roll a joint), as well as the psychological aspects of criminality (how to deal with the guilt or shame associated with illegal activities). This section briefly reviews two of the most prominent forms of social learning theory: differential association theory and neutralization theory.

DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION THEORY

One of the most prominent social learning theories is Edwin H. Sutherland's **differential association theory**. Often considered the preeminent U.S. criminologist, Sutherland first put forth his theory in 1939 in *Principles of Criminology*.⁴³ The final version of the theory appeared in 1947. When Sutherland died in 1950, his longtime associate Donald Cressey continued his work until his own death in 1987.

Checkpoints

- Social process theories hold that the way people are socialized controls their behavior choices.
- Some criminologists maintain that crime is a learned behavior.
- Other criminologists view criminals as people whose behavior has not been controlled.
- Some view criminality as a function of labeling and stigma.
- There is strong evidence that social relations influence behavior.
- Children growing up with conflict, abuse, and neglect are at risk for crime and delinquency.
- Educational failure has been linked to criminality.
- Adolescents who associate with deviant peers are more likely to engage in crime than those who maintain conventional peer group relations.

Sutherland's research on white-collar crime, professional theft, and intelligence led him to dispute the notion that crime was a function of the inherent inadequacy of people in the lower classes.⁴⁴ He believed crime was a function of a learning process that could affect any individual in any culture. Acquiring a behavior is a socialization process, not a political or legal process. Skills and motives conducive to crime are learned as a result of contact with pro-crime values, attitudes, and definitions and other patterns of criminal behavior.

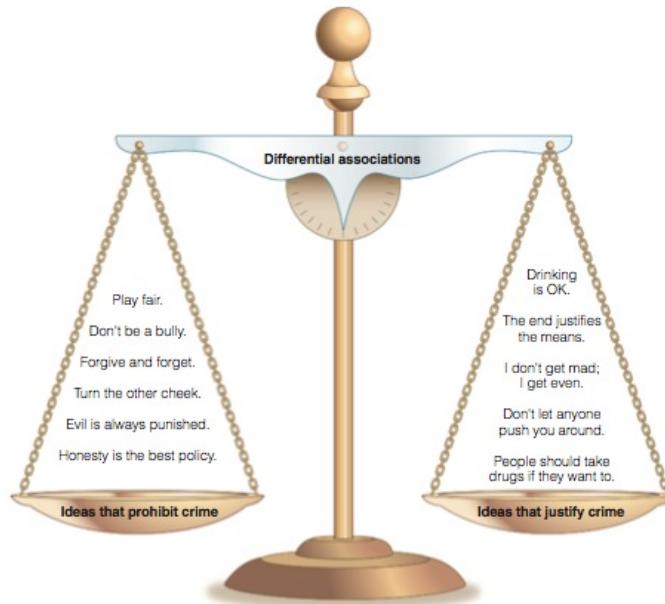
Principles of Differential Association Sutherland and Cressey explain the basic principles of differential association as follows:⁴⁵

- ▶ *Criminal behavior is learned.* This statement differentiates Sutherland's theory from prior attempts to classify criminal behavior as an inherent characteristic of criminals. Sutherland implies that criminality is learned in the same manner as any other learned behavior, such as writing, painting, or reading.
- ▶ *Criminal behavior is learned as a by-product of interacting with others.* An individual does not start violating the law simply by living in a criminogenic environment or by manifesting personal characteristics associated with criminality, such as low IQ or family problems. People actively learn as they are socialized and interact with other individuals who serve as teachers and guides to crime. Some kids may meet and associate with criminal "mentors" who teach them how to be successful criminals and to reap the greatest benefits from their criminal activities.⁴⁶ Thus criminality cannot occur without the aid of others.
- ▶ *Learning criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups.* People's contacts with their most intimate social companions—family, friends, and peers—have the greatest influence on their development of deviant behavior and an antisocial attitude. Relationships with these influential individuals color and control the way individuals interpret everyday events. For example, children who grow up in homes where parents abuse alcohol are more likely to view drinking as socially and physically beneficial.⁴⁷
- ▶ *Learning criminal behavior involves assimilating the techniques of committing crime, including motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.* Young delinquents learn from their associates the proper way to pick a lock, shoplift, and obtain and use narcotics. In addition, novice criminals learn the proper terminology for their acts and acquire approved reactions to law violations. Criminals must learn how to react properly to their illegal acts, such as when to defend them, when to rationalize them, and when to show remorse for them.
- ▶ *The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from perceptions of various aspects of the legal code as favorable or unfavorable.* Because the reaction to social rules and laws is not uniform across society, people constantly meet others who hold different views on the utility of obeying the legal code. Some people admire others who may openly disdain or flout the law or ignore its substance. People experience what Sutherland calls *culture conflict* when they are exposed to opposing attitudes toward right and wrong or moral and immoral. The conflict of social attitudes and cultural norms is the basis for the concept of differential association.
- ▶ *A person becomes a criminal when he or she perceives more favorable than unfavorable consequences to violating the law.* According to Sutherland's theory, individuals become law violators when they are in contact with persons, groups, or events that produce an excess of definitions favorable toward criminality and are isolated from counteracting forces (see Figure 7.3). A definition favorable toward criminality occurs, for example, when a person hears friends talking about the virtues of getting high on drugs. A definition unfavorable toward crime occurs when friends or parents demonstrate their disapproval of crime.
- ▶ *Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.* Whether a person learns to obey the law or to disregard it is influenced by the quality of that person's social interactions. Those of lasting duration have greater

differential association theory
The view that people commit crime when their social learning leads them to perceive more definitions favoring crime than favoring conventional behavior.
culture conflict
Result of exposure to opposing norms, attitudes, and definitions of right and wrong, moral and immoral.

Figure 7.3 Differential Associations

Differential association theory suggests that criminal behavior will occur when the definitions favorable to crime outweigh the unfavorable definitions.



influence than those that are brief. Similarly, frequent contacts have greater effect than rare, haphazard contacts. "Priority" means the age of children when they first encounter definitions of criminality. Contacts made early in life probably have more influence than those developed later. Finally, "intensity" is generally interpreted to mean the importance and prestige attached to the individuals or groups from whom the definitions are learned. For example, the influence of a father, mother, or trusted friend far outweighs that of more socially distant figures.

- *The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anticriminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning process.* Learning criminal behavior patterns is similar to learning nearly all other patterns and is not a matter of mere imitation.
- *Although criminal behavior expresses general needs and values, it is not excused by those general needs and values, because noncriminal behavior expresses the same needs and values.* This principle suggests that the motives for criminal behavior cannot logically be the same as those for conventional behavior. Sutherland rules out such motives as desire to accumulate money or social status, personal frustration, and low self-concept as causes of crime because they are just as likely to produce noncriminal behavior, such as getting a better education or working harder on a job. Only the learning of deviant norms through contact with an excess of definitions favorable toward criminality produces illegal behavior.

Fact or Fiction?

Being exposed to criminal parents and to parental deviance is closely linked to crime.

Fact. The more you hang out with your antisocial parents, the more likely it is that you will become an antisocial person yourself!

In sum, differential association theory holds that people learn criminal attitudes and behavior during their adolescence from close, trusted friends or relatives. A criminal career develops if learned antisocial values and behaviors are not matched or exceeded by the conventional attitudes and behaviors the individual learns. Criminal behavior, then, is learned in a process that is similar to learning any other human behavior.

Testing Differential Association Theory Several research efforts have supported the core principles of this theory.

- ▶ Crime appears to be intergenerational: Kids whose parents are deviant and criminal are more likely to become criminals themselves and eventually to produce criminal children. The more that kids are involved with criminal parents, the more likely they are to commit crime, a finding that supports the hypothesis that children learn criminal attitudes from exposure to deviant parents, rather than crime being inherited (because time of exposure predicts criminal behavior, not merely having criminal parents).⁴⁸
- ▶ People who report having attitudes that support deviant behavior are also likely to engage in deviant behavior.⁴⁹ Again, this suggests that delinquents have learned deviant definitions and have incorporated them into their attitude structure.
- ▶ As people mature, having delinquent friends who support criminal attitudes and behavior is strongly related to developing criminal careers. Association with deviant peers has been found to sustain the deviant attitudes.⁵⁰ The influence of deviant friends is highly supportive of delinquency, regardless of race and/or class.⁵¹ One reason is that within peer groups, high-status leaders will influence and legitimize deviant behavior. In other words, if one of your friends whom you look up to drinks and smokes, it makes it a lot easier for you to engage in those behaviors yourself and to believe they are appropriate.⁵²
- ▶ Romantic partners who engage in antisocial activities may influence their partner's behavior, which suggests that partners "learn" from one another.⁵³ Adolescents with deviant romantic partners are more delinquent than those youths with more prosocial partners, regardless of friends' and parents' behavior.⁵⁴
- ▶ Kids who associate and presumably learn from aggressive peers are more likely to behave aggressively themselves.⁵⁵ Deviant peers interfere with the natural process of aging out of crime by helping provide the support that keeps kids in criminal careers.⁵⁶
- ▶ Scales measuring differential association have been significantly correlated with criminal behaviors among samples taken in other nations and cultures.⁵⁷
- ▶ The more deviant an adolescent's social network and network of affiliations, including parents, peers, and romantic partners, the more likely that adolescent is to engage in antisocial behavior. It is likely that deviant affiliations provide definitions that incline adolescents toward delinquency.⁵⁸

neutralization theory

The view that law violators learn to neutralize conventional values and attitudes, enabling them to drift back and forth between criminal and conventional behavior.

drift

Movement in and out of delinquency, shifting between conventional and deviant values.

neutralization techniques

Methods of rationalizing deviant behavior, such as denying responsibility or blaming the victim.

Analysis of Differential Association Theory Differential association theory is important because it does not specify that criminals come from a disorganized area or are members of the lower class. Outwardly law-abiding, middle-class parents can encourage delinquent behavior by their own drinking, drug use, or family violence. The influence of differential associations is not dependent on social class; deviant learning experiences can affect youths in all classes.⁵⁹

There are, however, a number of valid criticisms of Sutherland's work. It fails to account for the origin of criminal definitions. How did the first "teacher" learn criminal attitudes and definitions in order to pass them on? Another criticism of differential association theory is that it assumes criminal and delinquent acts to be rational and systematic. This ignores spontaneous, wanton acts of violence and damage that appear to have little utility or purpose, such as the isolated psychopathic killing that is virtually unsolvable because of the killer's anonymity and lack of delinquent associations.