

# Sutherland's (1939) Differential Association Theory

As we discussed above, Sutherland attempted to explore and explain offending behaviours. Sutherland argues offending and criminal behaviours may, be learnt behaviours, and those who associate with criminals will naturally begin to pick up on their behaviours and potentially enact them themselves.

For instance, if John is sent to prison for stealing a phone and wallet from an elderly woman, they are now close to other criminals. These criminals may have committed more severe crimes, such as drug offences and sexual offences.

John may learn techniques and methods relating to these more severe offences and, upon release, may commit more serious crimes.

Sutherland's theory attempted to explain all [types of crime](#), from burglaries to middle-class *white-collar crimes*.

## Differential Association Theory: Definition

First, let's define differential association theory.

Differential association theory suggests that criminal behaviour is learned through communication and association with other criminals/delinquents, where techniques and methods are learnt, as well as new attitudes and motives to commit a crime.

Sutherland's differential association theory of crime proposes nine critical factors in how a person becomes an offender:

<b>Sutherland's (1939) Differential Association Theory: Critical Factors</b>
Criminal behaviour is learned. It assumes that we are born with a genetic predisposition, drives, and impulses, but the direction in which these go must be learned.
Criminal behaviour is learned through interactions with others through communication.
The learning of criminal behaviour takes place in intimate personal groups.
Learning includes techniques for committing the crime and the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalisations, and attitudes (to justify criminal activity and steer someone toward that activity).
The specific direction of motives and drives is learned by interpreting legal norms as favourable or unfavourable (how people with whom someone interacts view the law).
When the number of interpretations favourable to breaking the law exceeds the number of interpretations unfavourable (through more contact with people who favour the crime), a person becomes a criminal. Repeated exposure increases the likelihood of becoming a criminal.
Differential associations may vary in <b>frequency</b> (how often a person interacts with criminal influencers), <b>duration, priority</b> (age at which criminal interactions are first experienced and strength of influence), and <b>intensity</b> (prestige to people/groups with whom someone is associated).
Learning criminal behaviour through interactions with others is the same as for any other behaviour (e.g., observation, imitation).
Criminal behaviour expresses general needs and values; however, those needs and values do not explain it. Since non-criminal behaviour also expresses the same needs and values, no distinction exists between the two behaviours. Anyone can become a criminal, essentially.

Someone grows up knowing it is wrong to commit a crime (unfavourable to breaking the law) but gets into a bad society that encourages him to commit a crime, may tell him it is okay and rewards him for criminal behaviour (favourable to breaking the law).

Thieves may steal because they need money, but honest workers also need money and work for that money.

The theory can also explain:

- Why crime is more prevalent in specific communities. Perhaps people learn from each other in some way, or the community's general attitude is conducive to crime.
- Why offenders often continue their criminal behaviour after being released from prison. Often they have learned in prison how to improve their technique through observation and imitation or even by learning directly from one of the other prisoners.

## **Differential Association Theory Example**

To fully understand how differential association theory applies to real life, let's examine an example.

A child grows up in a home where the parents routinely commit criminal acts. The child would grow up believing these acts are not as wrong as society says.

To illustrate the influence of associations, imagine two boys living in a neighbourhood conducive to crime. One is outgoing and associates with other criminals in the area. The other is shy and reserved, so he does not get involved with criminals.

The first child often sees the older kids engaging in antisocial, criminal behaviours, such as breaking windows and vandalising buildings. He is encouraged to join them as he grows, and they teach him how to rob a house.



**Do you want to see this and  
many more great  
infographics?**

**SIGN UP NOW FOR FREE**

**Fig. 2 - Associations with criminals can lead to a path of crime, according to the differential association theory.**

## **Differential Association Theory of Crime: Studies**

**Farrington et al. (2006)** conducted a prospective longitudinal study with a sample of 411 male adolescents on the development of offending and antisocial behaviour. In the study, participants were followed from age eight years in 1961 up to 48 years. They all lived in a disadvantaged working-class neighbourhood in south London. Farrington et al. (2006) examined official conviction records and self-reported offences and interviewed and tested participants nine times throughout the study.

---

Interviews established living circumstances and [relationships](#) etc., while tests determined individual characteristics.

At the end of the study, 41% of participants had at least one conviction. Offences were committed most frequently between 17–20 years of age. The main risk factors at age 8–10 years for criminal activity later in life were:

1. Crime in the family.
2. Impulsivity and hyperactivity ([attention](#) deficit disorder).
3. Low IQ and low school attainment.
4. Antisocial behaviours in school.
5. Poverty.
6. Poor parenting.

This study supports the differential association theory because some of these factors can be attributed to the theory (e.g., family criminality, poverty – which may create the need to steal – poor parenting). Still, genetics also seem to play a role.

---

Familial criminality could be due to both genetics and differential association.  
Impulsivity and low IQ are genetic factors.

**Osborne and West (1979)** compared family criminal records. They found that when a father had a criminal record, 40% of sons also had a criminal record by age 18, compared with 13% of sons of fathers who did not have a criminal record. This finding suggests that children learn criminal behaviour from their fathers in families with convicted fathers through differential association.

However, one could also argue that genetics could be to blame since convicted fathers and sons share the genes predisposing them to criminality.

**Akers (1979)** surveyed 2500 male and female adolescents. They found that differential association and reinforcement accounted for 68% of the variance in marijuana use and 55% of the variance in alcohol use.

## Create and study flashcards

Create flashcards quickly and study them with science-backed learn modes in the StudySmarter app.

Sign up for free

# Differential Association Theory Evaluation

The studies above explore differential association theory, but there is more to consider, namely the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Let's evaluate the differential association theory.

## Strengths

First, the strengths of the differential association theory.

- Differential association theory can explain different crimes, and crimes people from different socioeconomic backgrounds commit.

Middle-class people learn to commit 'white-collar crimes' by association.

- Differential association theory successfully moved away from biological reasons for crime. The approach changed people's view of crime from blaming individual (genetic) factors to blaming social factors, which has real-world applications. A person's environment can be changed, but genetics cannot.
- Research corroborates the theory, for instance, Short (1955) found a positive [correlation](#) between wayward behaviour and levels of association with other

criminals.

## Study with friends

Motivate each other and share your study materials in the StudySmarter app.

Sign up for free

## Weaknesses

Now, the weaknesses of the differential association theory.

- The research is based on correlations, so we do not know if interactions and associations with others are the real cause of crime. It could be that people who already have delinquent attitudes seek out people similar to them.
- This research does not explain why crime decreases with age. Newburn (2002) found that people under the age of 21 commit 40% of crimes and that many offenders stop committing crimes when they get older. The theory cannot explain this because they should continue to be criminals if they still have the same group of peers or the same [relationships](#).
- The theory is difficult to measure and test. For example, Sutherland claims a person becomes a criminal when the number of interpretations in favour of breaking the law exceeds the number of interpretations against it. However, it is difficult to measure this empirically. How can we accurately measure the number of favourable/unfavourable interpretations a person has experienced throughout their life?
- The theory can explain less severe crimes like burglaries, but not crimes like murder.

- Biological factors are not considered. The **diathesis-stress model** might offer a better explanation. The diathesis-stress model assumes disorders develop because of a person's genetic predisposition (diathesis) and stressful conditions that play a role in promoting the predisposition.
- 

## **Differential Association Theory - Key takeaways**

- Sutherland (1939) proposed the differential association theory.
- The theory states people learn to become offenders through interactions with others (friends, peers, and family members).
- Criminal behaviours are learned through the values, attitudes, methods, and motives of others.
- Differential association theory studies support the theory, but one could also argue genetics can be to blame.
- The strengths of differential association theory are that it can explain different types of crimes and crimes committed by people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. It has also changed people's view of crime from individual (genetic) factors to social factors.
- The weaknesses of differential association theory are that research on it is correlational. It also does not explain why crime decreases with age. The theory is difficult to measure and test empirically. It can explain less serious crimes, but not crimes like murder. Finally, it does not account for biological factors.



# Frequently Asked Questions about Differential Association Theory

## What are the nine principles of differential association theory?

The nine principles of differential association theory are:

1. Criminal behaviour is learned.
2. Criminal behaviour is learned from interactions with others through communication.
3. The learning of criminal behaviour occurs within intimate personal groups.
4. When criminal behaviour is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.
5. The specific direction of motives and drives is learned through interpretation of legal codes as being favourable or unfavourable.
6. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavourable to violation of the law.
7. Differential associations can vary in frequency, duration, priority and intensity.
8. The process of learning criminal behaviour by association involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.
9. Criminal behaviour is an expression of general needs and values.

## What are the main criticisms of differential association theory?

The main criticisms of differential association theory are:

- The research on it is correlational, thus we do not know if interactions and associations with others are the real causation of crimes.
- The theory does not explain why criminality decreases with age.
- The theory is hard to empirically measure and test.
- It can account for less severe crimes such as burglary but cannot explain crimes such as murder.
- Lastly, biological factors are not taken into account.

## **What is an example of differential association theory?**

A child grows up in a home where the parents routinely commit criminal acts. The child would grow up believing that these acts are not as wrong as society says they are.

To illustrate the influence of associations, imagine two boys living in a neighbourhood conducive to crime. One is outgoing and associates with other criminals in the area. The other is shy and reserved, so he does not get involved with criminals.

The first child often sees the older kids engaging in antisocial, criminal behaviours, such as breaking windows and vandalising buildings. As he grows, he is encouraged to join them and they teach him how to burgle a house.

## **Why is differential association theory important?**

Differential association theory is critical because criminal behaviour is learned, which can greatly impact criminal justice policies. For example, offenders could participate in rehabilitation programmes after they are released from prison. They can be helped to find homes away from previous negative associations.

## **How can differential associations vary?**

Differential associations can vary in frequency (how often a person interacts with the crime influencers), duration, priority (age at which criminal interactions are first experienced and strength of influence), and intensity (prestige for individuals/groups someone has associations with).