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Social Learning Theory

Ronald L. Akers and Wesley G. Jennings

Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical overview of Akers' social learning theory and his more recent social structure social learning extension. Specifically, it begins with a brief overview of the theoretical origins of social learning theory and a description of the four core theoretical elements. The following section reviews the relevant empirical evidence that has tested social learning theory as an explanation for crime and deviance, with particular attention to the results from a recent meta-analysis. A separate section detailing the findings from recent cross-cultural empirical tests of social learning theory is also provided. Next, Akers' social structure social learning extension is discussed with attention to the research that has assessed this theoretical extension. The chapter concludes by offering a series of suggestions for future social learning research.

Theoretical Origin

The origin of social learning theory is rooted in an effort to link elements of Sutherland's differential association theory with more general principles of behavioral psychology. Accordingly, Sutherland originally proposed the following nine propositions that he considered to illustrate his theory of differential association (Sutherland, 1947:6–7):

1. Criminal behavior is learned.
2. Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication.

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3. The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups.
4. When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes very simple; and (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.
5. The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable.
6. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of the law.
7. Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.
8. The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.
9. Although criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values, because noncriminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values.

Drawing from this original serial list, Burgess & Akers (1966) later latched on to the sixth principle: the principle of differential association. In essence, for Sutherland, this principle is not complex. Specifically, individuals learn two types of definitions for a particular behavior, either a favorable definition of the behavior or an unfavorable definition of the behavior. According to this principle, and applied to explain crime and deviance, the probability that a person will perform a criminal or deviant act increases when they learn definitions favorable to violating the law in excess of definitions that are learned that are unfavorable toward violating the law. This key principle influenced Burgess and Akers to modify Sutherland's original serial list in an effort to further elucidate the process wherein the learning occurs. Burgess & Akers' (1966:132–145) revised serial list is as follows:

1. Criminal behavior is learned according to the principles of operant conditioning (reformulation of Sutherland's principles 1 and 8).
2. Criminal behavior is learned both in nonsocial situations that are reinforcing or discriminative and through that social interaction in which the behavior of other persons is reinforcing or discriminative for criminal behavior (reformulation of Sutherland's principle 2).
3. The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs in those groups which comprise the individual's major source of reinforcements (reformulation of Sutherland's principle 3).
4. The learning of criminal behavior, including specific techniques, attitudes, and avoidance procedures, is a function of the effective and available reinforcers, and the existing reinforcement contingencies (reformulation of Sutherland's principle 4).

5. The specific class of behaviors which are learned and their frequency of occurrence are a function of the reinforcers which are effective and available, and the rules or norms by which these reinforcers are applied (reformulation of Sutherland's principle 5).
6. Criminal behavior is a function of norms which are discriminative for criminal behavior, the learning of which takes place when such behavior is more highly reinforced than noncriminal behavior (reformulation of Sutherland's principle 6).
7. The strength of criminal behavior is a direct function of the amount, frequency, and probability of its reinforcement (reformulation of Sutherland's principle 7).

The efforts of Burgess & Akers to infuse principles of behavioral psychology, most notably operant conditioning, into Sutherland's differential association theory was met was some theoretical criticisms at the time of its first iteration. In light of these criticisms, Akers later made theoretical modifications, refinements, and moved away from the serial list of revised Sutherland principles. In this regard, he opted to state social learning theory as it is known and understood today according to its four core theoretical elements: differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation (Akers & Sellers, 2013). In its most basic sense, social learning theory as originally postulated by Burgess and Akers and later polished and refined by Akers refers to:

> The probability that persons will engage in criminal and deviant behavior is increased and the probability of their conforming to the norm is decreased when they differentially associate with others who commit criminal behavior and espouse definitions favorable to it, are relatively more exposed in-person or symbolically to salient criminal/deviant models, define it as desirable or justified in a situation discriminative for the behavior, and have received in the past and anticipate in the current or future situation relatively greater reward than punishment for the behavior (Akers, 1998, p. 50).

Core Theoretical Elements

The concept of differential association as it is expressed in Akers' social learning theory primarily focuses on the importance of the interactions that persons have with others in their peer group such as neighbors, churches, school teachers, the law, and authority figures, as well as "virtual groups" such as those established through the mass media, the internet, cell phones, etc. (Warr, 2002). These interactions are believed to provide the context wherein the process of social learning occurs. Specifically, should an individual differentially associate with peers or other groups that hold attitudes favorable toward violations of the law and evince pro-criminal or pro-deviant attitudes and values, then it is expected that the probability that the individual would engage in crime or deviance would be increased. Following this logic, Akers not only discusses the importance of the interaction with criminal or deviant peer groups, he also argues that the amount of time spent

in this interaction/association will hold prominence in affecting the ratio of criminal to noncriminal associations.

The definitions component of social learning theory refers to the attitudes, values, and orientations that individuals hold toward crime and deviance as well as conforming behavior. In essence, the attitudes, values, and orientations that a person considers more right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified, appropriate or inappropriate, excusable or inexcusable, affect their own likelihood for participating in non-conforming or conforming behavior. These personal definitions favorable or unfavorable to crime and deviance can be expressed as general definitions (e.g., covering a wide range of behaviors) or specific to a particular behavior or to a particular situation. Furthermore, definitions may be positive definitions ("It is fun to steal beer from the store I work at") or neutralizing definitions ("I am not stealing beer from the store; I work there and am underpaid; thus, I am just taking what is owed to me"). Akers also considers these personal definitions as operating on a continuum as described and illustrated as follows:

> Definitions favorable to deviance include weakly held general beliefs and more strongly held deviant justifications and definitions of the situation; those unfavorable to deviance include more strongly held conventional beliefs and deviant definitions that are weakly subscribed to. … Think of two parallel continua running in opposite directions:
>
> 1. General and Specific Conforming Beliefs/Definitions:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Strongly held | Absent or weakly held |
> | Unfavorable to Deviance | Favorable to Deviance |
>
> 2. General and Specific Non-Conforming Beliefs/Definitions
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Strongly held | Absent or weakly held |
> | Favorable to Deviance | Unfavorable to Deviance |
>
> (Akers, 1998, p. 83).

Differential reinforcement concerns the balance of perceived, experienced, or anticipated reward/s and punishment/s that may accompany or follow the performance of a particular behavior. For instance, Akers argues that value is attributed to a behavior that is rewarded, and the more frequently the behavior is rewarded (rather than punished) the higher the value becomes for the behavior. Thus, behaviors that are performed frequently and are rewarded frequently (and are thus highly reinforced) are those behaviors that an individual is likely to continue to choose to perform. Differential reinforcement can occur in a variety of ways including via positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and/or negative punishment.

The fourth and final element of Akers' social learning theory is imitation. This element is likened to the concept of vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, 1979)

wherein individuals directly observe the behaviors performed/modeled by others including the consequences of others' behaviors. Or in other words, should an individual observe another person commit a criminal or deviant act and also observe its related rewards (and absence of punishment), then an individual may in turn engage in the same behavior as a result of imitation. The effect that imitation exerts in the social learning process is considered to be contingent on a variety of factors and circumstances such as the characteristics of the model themselves, the actual behavior itself being modeled, and any directly observed consequences for the model.

Empirical Support from a Meta-Analytic Perspective

Social learning theory has been subjected to a considerable amount of empirical testing in the literature across a variety of samples, places, time periods, and types of crime and deviance. Generally, the bulk of the evidence has identified and supported social learning theory as an explanation for crime and deviance (for reviews, see Akers & Jensen, 2006; Akers & Jennings, 2009; Akers & Sellers, 2013; Jennings & Akers, 2011; Jennings *et al.*, 2010). In lieu of the vast amount of published studies and recent reviews on social learning theory, we focus on a recent meta-analysis published by Pratt and colleagues (2010) as a source for illustrating the robustness of the support that has been empirically revealed for social learning theory as an explanation for crime and deviance.

Pratt *et al.*'s (2010) meta-analysis involved systematically searching the literature for all of the studies measuring social learning variables in the leading criminal justice/criminology journals between 1974 and 2003. After having performed an exhaustive search of the available literature, their search identified 133 studies that had measured social learning variables. Furthermore, these 133 studies generated 246 statistical models which reported 704 effect-size estimates and represented 118,403 cases. Following a detailed coding protocol, Pratt *et al.* reported the percentage of effect sizes that were statistically significant, the mean effect sizes (and corresponding confidence intervals), as well as a series of moderator analyses to assess the 'stability' of the effect sizes across a host of dimensions such as sampling frame, race of sample, gender of sample, and age of sample.

Regarding the effect sizes, Pratt *et al.* (2010) estimated independent mean effect sizes for each of the four core elements of Akers' social learning theory. Their results indicated that each of the four core elements had a significant and independent mean effect size as a predictor of crime and deviance, with the largest mean effect size being found for differential association, followed by definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation. Pratt *et al.* also provided independent mean effect sizes for different measurement sources for each of the four core elements with the following measurement sources yielding independent mean effect sizes: differential association (peers' behaviors, parents' behaviors, others' behaviors, peers' attitudes, and a differential association index); definitions (antisocial attitudes/definitions and

a definitions index); differential reinforcement (peer reactions, parental reactions, rewards minus costs, and a differential reinforcement index); and imitation (witnessing and a differential imitation index). Concerning the moderator analyses, Pratt *et al.* reported that only 10 of the 55 moderator analyses that were estimated were statistically significant, which provided relatively robust evidence that social learning theory and its four central components, by and large, showed evidence of stability or 'general effects' across samples with different characteristics (e.g., sampling frame, race of sample, gender of sample, and age of sample).

Cross-Cultural Tests

Although the recent reviews of Akers' social learning theory (Akers & Jensen, 2006; Akers & Jennings, 2009; Jennings & Akers, 2011; Jennings *et al.*, 2010) and Pratt *et al.*'s (2010) more recent meta-analysis have revealed considerable evidence in support of the robustness of social learning theory as an explanation for crime and deviance, it is also important to recognize and review the empirical evidence concerning the cross-cultural applicability of social learning theory (as any general theory of crime and deviance should be able to explain crime and deviance across geographical/cultural contexts). In this vein, there have been several recent cross-cultural studies that we review in detail (for examples of older cross-cultural studies see, Bruinsma, 1992, Wang & Jensen, 2003, Zhang & Messner, 1995).

Miller, Jennings, Alvarez-Rivera, & Miller (2008) recently examined the cross-cultural efficacy of social learning theory for predicting substance use among Puerto Rican adolescents attending public and private schools in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Using a series of regression models where they estimated the effects of definitions and differential association on cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use, Miller *et al.* demonstrated that both aspects of social learning theory were generally predictive of substance use and these findings largely held across schools (e.g., public or private) and biological sex. Relying on the same data (although only using the public school Puerto Rican youth), Miller, Jennings, Alvarez-Rivera, & Lanza-Kaduce (2009) explored the mediating role of low self-control on the relationship between maternal attachment and deviance. Their results indicated that maternal attachment and low self-control both predicted deviance, although social learning (specifically the element of differential association) was still an independent predictor of deviance as well.

More recently, Jennings, Park, Tomsich, Gover, & Akers (2011) investigated the relationship between self-control and social learning and the overlap in dating violence perpetration and victimization among a large sample of South Korean college students. Utilizing a series of bivariate probit models that model the joint relationship/overlap between two dependent variables, Jennings *et al.* reported that both self-control and social learning emerged as significant predictors of dating violence perpetration and victimization. Furthermore, the effect of childhood physical abuse on both outcomes was generally more robust compared

with witnessing father-perpetrated violence against the mother or mother-perpetrated violence against the father.

Finally, Meneses & Akers (2011) provided one of the first empirical studies to directly compare the applicability of several general theories of crime and deviance (general strain theory, social bonding, self-control, and social learning) for explaining Bolivian college students' marijuana use. After estimating a series of step-by-step models, Meneses & Akers (2011) demonstrated that although there were considerable differences between Bolivian and American college students regarding their use of marijuana (with American students being more likely to and to frequently use marijuana), all of the general theories had varying levels of magnitude as predictors of marijuana use. Having said this, the results also suggested that the effects of social learning theory were generally larger in magnitude compared to the other general theories of crime.

Social Structure Social Learning: A Cross-Level Theoretical Model

From the beginning of the development of social learning theory, Akers made specific and frequent reference throughout the years to the compatible relationship between social learning as a social psychological theory at the micro-level and social structural theories of crime at the macro-level, building on even earlier assertions by Sutherland (1947) and Cressey (1960) with regard to differential association theory. He made and reiterated the general point that social learning is the main process, or set of cognitive/behavioral mechanisms, by which the structural conditions and variables defined and conceptualized in structural theories (e.g., social disorganization, anomie, conflict, control) produce deviant or conforming behavior, and often stated that there are good prospects for cross-level integration of social learning and structural theories (see Akers, 1968, 1973, 1985, 1998; Burgess & Akers, 1966). However, it was not until later that he went beyond these general statements to propose explicitly a cross-level (micro, meso, macro) theoretical model. A preliminary model was outlined for drug and alcohol abstinence, use, and abuse (Akers, 1992). Akers (1998), then went on to present a fuller discussion and presentation of the social structure social learning (SSSL) model as a general theory of crime and deviance and has continued to present discussions, further specification, and empirical research on this theoretical extension (see Akers, 2009; Akers & Jensen, 2003; Akers & Sellers, 2009; 2013).

Social structure social learning (SSSL) retains the central proposition earlier articulated by Akers that the social learning variables of differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation are hypothesized to be the principal variables in the process by which social structural causes have an impact on individual behavior, that is, the social learning variables will substantially (although not necessarily fully) mediate the effect of structural variables on

criminal and deviant behavior. Consider the following quotations as explicit statements on how this process may operate:

> SSSL links the main distal (macro- and meso-level) structural causes of crime found in the social structure and context to the behavior of individuals through the main proximate cognitive/behavioral causes of behavior (i.e. as found in social learning processes and mechanisms) at the micro-level. Crime rates across groups, sociodemographic categories, neighborhoods, communities, and societies are said to reflect their respective crime-inducing and crime-inhibiting characteristics, and they do so because the operation of the social learning variables are said to reflect those same structural characteristics. Not all structural variables are correlated (positively or negatively) with crime rates, but SSSL proposes that the main effects of whatever social structural factors are found empirically to be related to crime rates will be substantially mediated by the social learning variables (Akers, 2009:xxviii).

> The general culture and structure of society and the particular communities, groups, and other contexts of social interaction provide learning environments in which the norms define what is approved and disapproved, behavioral models are present, and the reactions of others (for example, in applying social sanctions) and other stimuli attach different reinforcing or punishing consequences to individuals' behavior. … Differences in the societal or group rates of criminal behavior are a function of the extent to which cultural traditions, norms, social organization, and social control systems provide socialization, learning environments, reinforcement schedules, opportunities, and immediate situations conducive to conformity or deviance (Akers, 1998:322–323).

Although the concept of "social structure" (and references to groups, societies, and social systems when discussing social structure as in the quotations above) is commonly found in sociology and criminology, its meaning and the way it is used varies considerably. To specify more clearly the meaning of social structure in SSSL Akers identified and defined four main dimensions or vectors of social structure. These dimensions of social structure affect the probabilities that individuals will be exposed to deviant and conforming associations, models, definitions, and reinforcement.

Differential social organization Akers takes this term from, and uses it in a similar manner to, Sutherland (1947), but Akers disagrees with Sutherland that it is a preferred alternative label for the concept of social disorganization. That is, it refers to the overall macro-level, integral characteristics such as culture, history, population density, age composition, racial make-up and others that distinguishes one community, region, society, or social system from another and which may be correlated with, or form the basis for, differences across these social entities in rates of crime and delinquency.

Differential location in the social structure This dimension refers to the well-known sociodemographic variables of class, gender, age, race, ethnicity, and others that are commonly found in research as control variables or sometimes as indirect indicators of causal variables. These are, of course, social characteristics of individuals, but in SSSL they are conceptualized as social structural variables in the sense that persons' race,

gender, class, and so on indicate their relative location in society by placing them in social categories, groups, statuses, and roles within the larger, overall social structure of society (hence the term location in the social structure). That location entails variations in power, lifestyles, and life chances vis-a-vis others' locations which could have effects on variations in learning experiences and in criminal and deviant behavior.

Theoretically defined structural variables Structural theories of crime and delinquency include social disorganization, anomie, institutional anomie, conflict, feminist, and Marxist/critical, and each specifies one or more abstract categories of causes or criminogenic conditions of groups, communities, or societies such as structural malintegration, lack of social cohesion, class and other inequalities, social disorganization, group conflict, patriarchy, and other concepts. These have been measured in various ways, including using some of the structural correlates mentioned above. Some are very difficult to measure for empirical research and not all are supported by empirical research as major causes of crime. But to the extent that the structural conditions or variables proposed by the theories produce variations in rates of crime and deviance they should also have an impact on variations in (and have their effects on crime mediated by) the social learning variables.

Differential social location in groups This dimension is a meso-level or more immediate social context of individuals' membership in and relation to primary, secondary, and tertiary reference groups such as the family, friendship and peer groups, leisure groups, colleagues, and work groups. It includes the same set of groups as the concept of differential association. But, it does not refer directly to the deviant/nondeviant behavior and attitudes of those groups; rather it refers to the size, organization, and structure of those groups (for example, two-parent or one-parent family) that may be related to deviant behavior.

To summarize, SSSL hypothesizes that the social learning variables are the principal cognitive/behavioral variables linking the structural factors in rates of crime and delinquency to individual behavior. To the extent that similarities and differences in the macro or meso-level social structure (virtually every aspect of which can be categorized under one or more of the dimension identified in SSSL) empirically affect the differences and similarities in rates of crime and deviance, they do so by empirically affecting the content, value, and direction of the social learning variables which increases or decreases the probability of individuals' deviant behavior.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

Considering the current state of the voluminous literature that reports tests of Akers' social learning theory, it is readily apparent and often argued to be one of the most consistent and relevant explanations of crime and deviance (Akers & Jennings, 2009). Furthermore, the cross-cultural and international efficacy of social learning theory has also become evident, particularly through more recent

and large scale empirical tests. Social learning theory and its application to prevention and prevention programs is also well known in criminology and the sociology of deviance, as well as it being a standard entry in criminology and criminal justice textbooks.

In comparison, the SSSL model is much less known and has thus far been tested in a limited, but growing, number of research projects, many of which test only partial models (for reviews, see Jennings & Akers, 2011). That research generally has found supportive evidence for the major proposition of the theory, i.e. the mediating role of social learning on the effects of structural conditions on various deviant behaviors. However, nonsupportive evidence has also been reported, and suggestions have been made to further develop SSSL by incorporating both the mediating effects of the social learning variables on structural correlates and moderating effects of social structure on the operation of the social learning variables (for reviews of this research see Akers, 2009; Akers & Sellers, 2013).

Going forward, future research examining social learning theory generally and the more recent SSSL extension should continue to focus on the cross-cultural and international generalizability of social learning as an explanation for crime and deviance. Second, social learning research should make an effort to further unpack the mediating and moderating effects of SSSL. Third, future studies should not concentrate so much on competing social learning theory with other general theories of crime as it is well established that social learning theory is a robust and independent predictor of crime and deviance relative to and alongside other 'competing' general theories of crime. Rather, there may be theoretical room for integration of social learning principles into other general theories of crime in an effort to build a theoretical model with an even greater ability to explain the variation in crime and deviance above and beyond the variance explained by any one specific "general theory of crime." In the end, social learning theory has rightfully earned its place as one of the core general theories of crime, and continued commitment to replicate its effects globally, further test the more recent SSSL extension, and to engage in theoretical integration discussions are likely areas where social learning research should be directed toward in the 21st century.

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