

Differential Association Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of differential association theory, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Edwin Sutherland and Differential Association Theory

1. EDWIN SUTHERLAND AND DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION THEORY

Edwin Sutherland was a criminologist working in the early 20th century. He developed a new way to look at deviance that is slightly different from Merton's and Hirschi's, called the differential association theory of deviance. Sutherland focused on the group influence and how your peer group can influence deviant behavior.



THINK ABOUT IT

When you were growing up, did anyone ever say to you, “I don't like the crowd you're hanging with, you're hanging with the wrong crowd?” If so, this embodies the core of the **differential association theory**. It means that your peer group has a very strong influence on whether you're going to conform to society's rules or engage in deviant behavior.

Each peer group and subgroup has its own set of mores, norms, and folkways, which may or may not align with the mores, norms, and folkways of society as a whole. As discussed, people crave group acceptance, so when you fall in with a peer group, you're going to subscribe to their ways of living and their culture. This subculture may potentially be a deviant subculture that runs counter to the culture of society, so by virtue of participating in this subculture, you might act out deviantly, Sutherland maintained.

IN CONTEXT

This theory helps to explain how people might fall in with gangs and gang activity when they're youthful, because of the group's strong influence on their behavior. People don't behave in isolation—they behave with respect to people and groups, which is one of the central tenets of sociology.



BIG IDEA

The differential association theory of deviance is different from the more micro focus of Hirschi and more macro focus of Merton. Differential association theory is situated in the middle of the other two, and all three can cause deviant behavior at the same time. Groups of people might form around the commonality of strain, because there aren't enough opportunities in society. Other people who relate under similar circumstances counter to the mainstream can breed an antagonistic culture to the overriding culture of society. All the deviance theories work together.



TERM TO KNOW

Differential Association Theory

The theory that a person's likeliness to conform depends on how much contact they have with others who reject conventional behavior or who encourage conventional behavior.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Edwin Sutherland

An important criminologist credited with developing differential association theory to explain crime and deviance in society.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Edwin Sutherland and his differential association theory** of deviance.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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