

## 5.10: Learning Theories

In the previous sections, strain theories focused on social structural conditions that contribute to people experiencing strain, stress, or pressure. Strain theories explain how people can respond to these structures. Learning theories compliment strain theories because learning theories focus on the content and process of learning.

Early philosophers, like Aristotle, believed human beings learned through association. The thought implies humans have a blank slate and our experiences build upon each other. It is through these experiences we recognize patterns and linked phenomena. For example, ancient humans did not have the technological advancements of global positioning satellites, which many people have on their phones. However, they used other celestial bodies like the stars and moon to travel. When early humans looked to the heavens, people began to recognize patterns in the stars. These patterns were consistent and enabled long-distance travel over land and sea.

A few centuries later, Ivan Pavlov was studying the digestive system of dogs, when he noticed the dogs started the digestive process *before* food was in sight. The dogs began to salivate when they heard the assistants' footsteps. The dogs were associating the oncoming footsteps with the upcoming food. This type of learning was called **classical conditioning**.



Classical Conditioning

The acquisition of this learned response occurred over time. The dogs' salivary reflex was an unconditioned response to the unconditioned stimuli (food). Pavlov wondered if he could get the dogs to salivate with a neutral stimulus (i.e., a ringing bell). He would ring a bell then feed the dog. After a series of these paired occasions, the dogs began to salivate at the sound of the bell alone. The salivation became a conditioned response to a conditioned stimulus. The acquisition of this learned behavior (i.e., conditioned response) will become extinct if the incentive is no longer associated. Human beings most certainly learn via classical conditioning, but it is a passive and straightforward approach to learning. We may shudder when we see flashing blue lights in our rearview mirror, salivate when food is cooking in the kitchen, or dance when we hear our favorite song. These paired events we passively learned through our experiences.

B.F. Skinner was also interested in learning and transformed modern psychology with operant conditioning. Operant condition is active learning where organisms learn to behave based on reinforcements and punishments. Using rats and pigeons, Skinner wanted animals to learn a simple task (i.e., pushing a bar or key) through reinforcements. A reinforcement is any event that strengthens, or maximizes, a behavior. We reinforce behaviors that we want to continue or increase. We can use positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement. Positive is the addition of something desirable, and negative is the removal of something unpleasant; they do not mean "good" or "bad." For example, if we wanted to more people to wear seatbelts, we would want to reinforce the behavior. A

positive reinforcement may be praise or a reward for buckling up. Newer model cars come equipped with seatbelt alarms. The will ring until you buckle up. Once you buckle up, the sound stops. This is an example of negative reinforcement. Both examples reinforce the behavior (wearing a seatbelt) but in different ways.

Consequently, if we want a behavior to stop or decrease, we punish that behavior. Punishments can also be positive or negative. A positive punishment involves the presentation of something unpleasant whereas negative punishment is punishment by removal. For example, a teenager breaks curfew and the parents want their child to stop breaking curfew. The parents can punish the child in one of two ways. An example of positive punishment would be scolding. A negative punishment would be removing the child's driving privileges. Both punishments seek to decrease the adolescent's breaking curfew but in two different ways.

#### Punishment Exercise 5.10.1

How does the Criminal Justice System positively punish offenders? How does the Criminal Justice System negatively punish? Give examples of both.

Edwin Sutherland (1947) was the first and created the most prominent statement of a micro-level learning theory about criminal behavior. He first presented differential association theory in 1934, and his final revision occurred in 1947.<sup>[1]</sup> His attempt tried to explain how age, sex, income, and social locations related to the acquisition of criminal behaviors. Sutherland (1947) presented his theory as nine separate, but related propositions, which were:

1. Criminal behavior is learned.
2. Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication.
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; b) the specific direction of the motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.
5. The specific directions of motives and drives are learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable. In some societies, an individual is surrounded by persons who invariably define the legal codes as rules to be observed, while in others he is surrounded by a person whose definitions are favorable to the violation of the legal codes.
6. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of the law. This is the principle of differential association.
7. Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. This means that associations with criminal behavior and also associations with anticriminal behavior vary in those respects.
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. While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values, since noncriminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values.<sup>[2]</sup>

Sutherland describes the content of what is learned, but also the process of how it is learned. Ultimately, he argued people give meaning to their situation; this meaning-making determined if they would obey the law or break the law. Hence, this meaning-making explains how siblings, who grow up in the same environment may differ in their behavior.

Ironically, Sutherland and B.F. Skinner were teaching at Indiana University during the late 1940s. For some reason or another, Sutherland never used Skinner's ideas of operant conditioning in his differential association theory. However, Ronald Akers utilized both approaches in his "social learning" or "differential reinforcement" theory. Akers' theory comprised the four main concepts of differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation/modeling. He was interested in the process of how criminal behavior is acquired, maintained, and modified through reinforcement in social situations and nonsocial situations. Differential associations refer to the people one comes into contact with frequently. These peers are the source of definitions that favor obeying the law or breaking it. It is the most important source of social learning. According to Akers, definitions are the meaning a person attaches to his or her behavior. Those meanings can be general (i.e., religious, moral, or ethical beliefs that remain consistent) or specific (i.e., apply to a specific behavior like smoking or theft). Differential reinforcements refer to the balance between anticipated rewards or punishment and the actual reward or punishment. For example, if a juvenile vandalized a storefront, his or her friends praise may reinforce that behavior. If the juvenile sought more praise, he or she might continue vandalizing more property (the peers' reactionary praise positively reinforced the behavior). The final concept was imitation/modeling. Akers argued that human beings could learn by observing how other people are rewarded and punished. Thus, some people may imitate other people's behavior, especially if that behavior was rewarded or not punished.<sup>[3]</sup>

Finally, there have been some theories that focus more on the content of what is learned. Residents who may live in disadvantaged neighborhoods, like in the transitional zone, may “learn” different things. Subcultural theories focus on the ideas of what is learned rather than the social conditions that foster these ideas. Some groups may internalize values that are conducive to violence or justify criminal behavior.<sup>[4]</sup> In other words, where we grow up may influence what we learn about crime, police, government, religion, etc.

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1. Sutherland, E.H. (1947). *Criminology* (4th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott. ↩
  2. Sutherland, E.H. (1947). *Criminology* (4th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott. ↩
  3. Akers, R.L. (1994). *Criminological theories*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury. ↩
  4. Anderson, E. (1999). *Code of the street: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton. ↩
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