

Social Learning

"You, too, can learn to be a serial killer." (Robert Hale)

- Learning Theories
- Social process paradigm
- "Associationism" (Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, and Hume): oldest learning theory.
- Based on the idea that the mind organizes sensory experiences in some way (known as cognitive psychology today).
- Learning Theories
- "Behaviorism" (developed by Pavlov and Skinner) is the second oldest learning theory.
- Based on the idea that the mind requires a physical response by the body in order to organize sensory associations.
- Behavioral Psychology
- Classical conditioning: stimuli produce a given response without prior training.
- Operant conditioning: rewards and punishments are used to reinforce given responses.
- Social Learning Theory
- Most impact on criminology: Bandura (1969).
- Formulated the principles of "stimulus control", outlined the stages of "modeling", and pioneered the field of "vicarious learning".
- Bandura's Social Learning Theory
- People learn to be aggressive and violent through life experiences.
- Aggressive acts are the result of modeling (family, environmental experiences, and mass media).
- Four factors that produce violent/aggressive behavior: an event that heightens arousal, aggressive skills, expected outcome, and consistency of behavior with values
- Social Learning in Criminology
- Origins in Criminology with Sutherland's Differential Association theory (1934, 1939, 1947).
- Revision of Sutherland's theory in 1960s by Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers (1966); later revised and elaborated by Akers (1973; 1985; 1998).
- Akers' Social Learning Theory

- Draws from psychology and behavioral studies (Bandura, Pavlov, etc.)
- Criminal behavior is learned through direct operant conditioning and imitation/modeling of others.

- **Akers' Social Learning Theory:
Four Major Concepts**

1. **Differential association** (Sutherland)

2. **Definitions:**

- *positive definitions* = beliefs or attitudes which make the behavior morally desirable or permissible.
- *neutralizing definitions* = justify/excuse the behavior.

- **Akers' Social Learning Theory:
Four Major Concepts**

3. **Differential reinforcement:** "Whether deviant or conforming behavior is acquired and persists depends on past and present rewards or punishments for the behavior and the rewards/punishments attached to alternative behavior."

4. **Modeling/Imitation:** behavior can be developed or extinguished.

- *Important Observations*
- Broad in scope
- Those with whom one has the greatest contact will have the greatest influence over that individual (family, friends, media, school, employers, co-workers, government, law enforcement, etc.)
- More readily testable than differential association theory.
- *The Research*
- Generally supportive of the theory.
- Praised for practical implications in the areas of counseling and corrections.
- *Criticisms*
- Most studies have examined relatively minor forms of deviance and criminal behavior.
- Will it be supported in studies of serious criminal offending?
- One study found support for the theory with rape/sexual coercion by male college students but more studies are needed on other forms of serious criminal offending.
- *Criticisms*

- Does not address the question of how or where criminal/deviant definitions and labels originate (Major criticism of most theories we have discussed thus far).
- Does not include a general explanation of laws, criminal justice, or the structural aspects of society that have an impact on crime.