



# Psychological explanations of offending behaviour

Sutherland's  
Differential  
Association  
Theory (DAT)



# Learning from others



The main point of differential association is that when people mix with others, they absorb a common interpretation of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for that group.



The 'associations' are the social associations a person makes; they are 'differentiated' according to that particular person.

**The following slides identify some of the key aspects of Sutherlands theory.**

1. Criminal behaviour is learned.
2. Criminal behaviour is learned in interaction with other people in a process of communication (connects with 1<sup>st</sup> point)
3. The main part of the learning of criminal behaviour happens in close personal groups (Friends/family who are close to them have largest influence)
4. When criminal behaviour is learnt, the learning includes:
  - (a) how to commit the crime
  - (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes (reasons why)
5. The specific direction of the motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favourable or unfavourable. (Groups of people may see some laws as pointless, acceptable to break e.g. underage drinking/illegal downloading)

6. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavourable to violation of law

↘ This is the principle of differential association.  
(Individuals become criminal due to repeated contacts with criminal activity and lack of contact with non-criminal activity)

7. Differential associations (number of contacts with criminals over non-criminals) may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.

8. The process of learning criminal behaviour by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.

9. General 'need' does not explain criminal behaviour as many people share the same general needs but do not engage in criminal behaviour.

# Akers et al (1979)



- Tested social learning theory and differential association theory
- **Snapshot survey** of drinking and drug taking among approx 2,500 male and females adolescents in the Midwest USA
- **Found** the most predictive variable was found to be differential association and within that, the specific factor of differential **peer** association was the single most important variable.
- **Supports theory** = differential associations and definitions of acceptable/unacceptable behaviour are key to understanding why young people develop deviant behaviours.
- **Conclusions:** Friends are important as they provide social reinforcement for our behaviour and norms by which we define particular behaviours as acceptable/unacceptable

# Questions



1. Do you agree with this theory? Why/why not?
2. Write down a real life example for at least 2 of the 9 factors.
3. .What crimes/criminal behaviour does it explain well and not so well?
4. Can you think of any factors that explain why young people use/don't use drink or drugs other than those investigated by Akers et al?