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| **Psychological explanations: Differential association theory** | | | |
| **Differential association theory AO1** | | | |
| The theory proposes that individual learn the values, attitudes, techniques and motives for criminal behaviour through association and interaction with different people. | | | |
| **Scientific bias**  Edwin Sutherland set himself the task of developing a set of scientific principles that could explain all types of offending – that is, ‘the conditions which are said to cause crime should be present when crime is present, and they should be absent when crime is absent’. This theory is designed to discriminate between individuals who become criminals and those who do not, whatever their race, class or ethnic background. | | | |
| **Crime as a learned behaviour**  Offending behaviour may be acquired in the same way as any other behaviour through the processes of learning. This learning occurs most often through interactions with significant others that the child associates with, such as the family and peer group. Criminality arises from two factors: learned attitudes towards crime, and the learning of specific criminal acts. | | | |
| **Pro- criminal attitudes**  When a person is socialised into a group they will be exposed to values and attitudes towards the law. Some of these values will be pro-crime, some of these will be anti-crime. Sutherland argues that if the number of pro-criminal attitudes the person comes to acquire outweighs the number of anti-criminal attitudes, they will go on to offend. The learning process is the same whether a person is learning criminality or conformity to the law.  Differential association suggests that it should be possible to mathematically predict how likely it is that an individual will commit crime if we have knowledge of the frequency, intensity and duration of which they have been exposed to deviant and non-deviant norms and values. | | | |
| **Learning criminal acts**  In addition to being exposed to pro-criminal attitudes, they would be offender may also learn particular techniques for committing crime. These might include how to break into someone’s house through a locked window or how to disable a car stereo before stealing it.  As well as offering an account of how crime may ‘breed’ amongst specific social groups and in communities, Sutherlands theory can also account for why so many convicts released from prison go on to reoffend. It is reasonable to assume that whilst inside prison inmates will learn specific techniques of offending from other, more experienced criminals that they may be eager to put into practice upon their release. This learning may occur through observational learning and imitation or direct tuition from criminal peers. | | | |
| **Differential association AO3** | | | |
| **Explanatory power**    P: One of the great strengths of differential association theory is its ability to account for crime within all sectors of society.  E: For example, whilst Sutherland recognised that some types of crime, such as burglary, may be clustered within certain inner-city, working class communities, it is also the case that some crimes are more prevalent amongst more affluent groups in society.  E: This is a strength because he did not just focus on violent crimes as many other theories do, but instead was interested in ‘white collar crimes’ or corporate crimes and how this may be a feature of middle class social groups who share deviant norms and value.  L: As a result the credibility of the differential association as an explanation for offending is increased. | **Shift of focus**  P: Another strength of differential association is that it was successful in moving the emphasis from early biological accounts of crime (such as the atavistic theory)  E: For example, differential association theory draws attention to the fact that dysfunctional social circumstances and environments may be more to blame for criminality than dysfunctional people.  E: This is a strength as this approach is more desirable because it offers a more realistic solution to the problem of crime instead of the biological solution or punishment.  L: Consequently, the credibility of the differential association theory as an explanation for offending is increased. | **Difficulty of testing**  P: A weakness of the differential association theory is that it is difficult to test despite Sutherlands promise to provide scientific, mathematical framework.  E: For example, it is hard to see how, for instance, the number of pro criminal attitudes a person has, or had been exposed to, could be measured.  E: This is a weakness as without being able to measure, it is difficult to know at what point the urge to offend is realised and the criminal career triggered.  L: The differential association theory does not provide a satisfactory solution to these issues, which undermines its credibility to offending. | **Supportive research**  Farrington (In your notes) |