

Techniques of research neutralization

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Heir apparent to Sutherland's differential association theory, Ron Akers long ago made his mark in criminology. Anyone claiming to be intellectually competent in the field has read Burgess and Akers (1966), and has followed the theoretical progression of Akers' social learning theory up to the present day. There is also little doubt that social learning theory is one of the titans battling it out for supremacy in the etiology of delinquency wars.

It was thus with great pleasure that I received Ron Akers' new book (*Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance*, 1998), billed as a 'landmark' contribution to criminology, the 'authoritative' account of social learning theory. We might as well go further and be honest with regard to the theoretical stakes. This is Akers' magnum opus, his attempt to set straight once and for all the general theoretical structure of social learning theory and the empirical evidence supporting it. Although not nearly as biting, it reminds me of Kornhauser's (1978) seminal work that synthesized existing literature and proposed an overarching theoretical approach. In other words, this is not an original research contribution (say, along the lines of *Causes of Delinquency* (Hirschi, 1969)) so much as a theoretical compendium on behalf of social learning—much as in the tradition of Sutherland himself. Other influential books in this realm include Matza (1964), Taylor, Walton and Young (1973), Braithwaite (1989), and Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990).

Let me state at the outset my evaluation. I think Akers has succeeded, and that *Social Learning and Social Structure* will stand as the definitive modern statement of the theory. All criminologists wishing to be theoretically informed should read it. I am less sanguine, however, about the definitive nature of social learning theory itself. Because distinguished colleagues are also writing reviews, I will not tackle the entirety of the work in developing my critique. Rather, I will concentrate on a few central arguments and then focus on the last chapter, which sets out what seems to be a new macro-level version of the theory—'Social Structure and Social Learning in Crime and Deviance.' Having conducted research on macro-level and structural processes, I am naturally inclined to reflect on the merits of Akers' new territorial push. I shall also be merciful to readers and refrain from yet another debate over the validity of 'cultural deviance' theory. I can agree with Akers that it is better to drop the term, as we lose

little by doing so. Social learning theory stands just fine on its own, whether or not you agree with it.¹

The book starts out with a gem. Chapter 1 is a delightful romp through 'A Personal History of the Development of Social Learning Theory.' Usually criminologists are vague about the sources of their theoretical predilections and insights, and even more so of their struggles to refine, defend, and test their approaches. Indeed, much modern criminology seems to be written in rather disembodied form. In Chapter 1, by contrast, we get a personal account that takes us from the early years with Burgess, the middle years at Washington and Iowa (complete with Travis Hirschi as colleague, critic, and friend), and the later years at Florida. One can see how Akers' thought progressed from theoretical formulation and refinement to a later stage of sustained empirical efforts to test the theory. This intellectual history gives the reader an excellent grasp of the big picture.

Akers then presents social learning theory in detailed form (Chapters 2–4), including subsequent reformulation of Sutherland's original version of differential association. To support a detailed explication, Akers claims that the theory has been misunderstood and misinterpreted almost from the beginning. For example, he spends a full chapter (4) attacking Kornhauser's characterization (caricature?) of cultural deviance theory. Many readers will be familiar with this critique from an earlier exchange between Akers and Hirschi in the May 1996 issue of the journal *Criminology*. In any case, Akers' goal in Chapters 2–4 is to articulate the essence of the theory in full form, without the alleged distortion of critics.²

To my mind, there were no surprises in Akers' elaboration; differential association theory turns out to be what it always has been. Paraphrasing Sutherland, 'The balance of learned criminal and anti-criminal definitions determines whether one will be conforming or deviant with respect to a given legal code. If the balance of definitions is favorable to abiding by the law, the outcome is conformity; if violative definitions are in excess criminal behavior is the result' (Akers, p. 27). The four concepts central to Akers' revised version of the theory are differential association, differential reinforcement, imitation, and definitions (p. 50). An individual is more likely to commit a violation when he or she differentially *associates* with others who commit, model, and support law violation; the violation is differentially *reinforced*; he or she is *exposed* to more deviant than conforming behavior; and his or her own learned *definitions* are favorable to committing deviance (Akers, p. 51). Essentially, as with Sutherland, the theory turns on the idea that crime is learned, and therefore that exposure to delinquent definitions (more precisely, the ratio of definitions favorable to law violation over definitions unfavorable) is the key to explanation. To the extent this central proposition is watered down, the theory loses its force and *raison d'être*.

In Chapters 5–11, Akers goes on to describe research findings that bear on social learning theory. This review is extensive and as far as I could tell,

exhaustive. He covers the research of others and his own projects, including the Boys Town, Iowa, and Florida studies. I learned a great deal here, for I must confess earlier ignorance of many nuances in social learning research, especially its focus on the *process* of delinquency (e.g. patterns of continuation, cessation, and relapse). Akers' description of empirical research on prediction (Chapter 6), substance use among adolescents (Chapter 7), and drinking among the elderly (Chapter 9) is of particular interest.

What, then, is the status of individual-level social learning theory after decades of research? Akers claims victory for the theory as he surveys the vast empirical literature. He does this, easily enough, by lining up all the sturdy predictors of delinquency found in extant research and then announcing: 'I contend that each of these can reasonably be defined as an operational indicator of social learning concepts' (p. 156). This technique is used throughout the book; in fact it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Akers claims universal support for social learning theory. As they unpack Akers' theoretical logic and description of research findings, however, stubborn readers like me are likely to chafe at the hegemony of social learning. A few examples may help to locate the source of my own troubles with Akers' articulation of social learning theory to explain the facts on crime.

One of the most revealing discussions in the book concerns the concept of 'techniques of neutralization,' and by implication the ultimate meaning of differential association. As readers probably know, numerous studies have administered self-report questionnaires to respondents and asked whether they agree or disagree with statements like 'policemen try to give all kids an even break,' 'it's all right to get around the law if you can get away with it,' and 'to get ahead, you have to do some things which are not right.' The idea of 'techniques of neutralization' can be traced to Sykes and Matza's (1957) classic paper. Not surprisingly, those respondents who report more agreement with statements like these are more likely to report having committed delinquent acts.

But why? Hirschi (1969) thought it simply meant that those individuals were less committed to the conventional order in the first place (a social control explanation). Matza (1964) later seemed to think that these techniques 'loosened' individuals up for committing delinquent acts, thus serving a causal role (a 'drift' explanation). Other possibilities come to mind as well, such as a defiant personality, reduction of cognitive dissonance, legal or moral cynicism, shared method variance, and retrospective reinterpretation (rationalization). None of these possibilities require differential behavioral exposure to a ratio of delinquent definitions (favorable over unfavorable) exceeding unity.

Now consider Akers' assertion: 'The point at which neutralizations offset conventional beliefs is simply a special case of the ratio of anti-delinquent and pro-delinquent definitions specified in differential association theory' (p. 37). Note the subtle switch—techniques become a 'case of' (manifesta-

tion) rather than the ratio of definitions itself. In other words, Akers translates the verbalization of an *attitude* to a (non-verbal) *behavioral* difference in prior exposure to delinquent attitudes. Recall that exposure, even to an attitude, was according to Sutherland a behavioral pattern involving 'both criminal and anticriminal associations' (Akers, p. 24, see also p. 29). Or as Akers puts it: '... the theory specifically refers to the ratio of criminal to noncriminal contacts by individuals' (p. 30). How could it be otherwise from a theory rooted in social behaviorism? The whole point of behaviorism was to get away from intra-psychic and unobservable mental processes.³ Having renamed techniques of neutralization as the ratio of definitions, Akers (p. 37) then turns around and chastises control theorists: 'The interpretation of techniques of neutralization as control theory, then, is an instance of renaming this ratio of definitions favorable and unfavorable and calling it a weakening of social control.'

It is perhaps emblematic of the field of delinquency research that so much turns on semantics, renaming, and an *ex post* reading of what teenagers really mean when they agree that 'suckers deserve to be taken advantage of.' Unfortunately, sophisticated measurement models (e.g. LISREL) do not resolve the problem either, for they must pull the same switch. Because 'the relevant behavior patterns cannot be observed' (Matsueda, 1982: 494), attitudinal items on a questionnaire become the means to reflect a latent construct of the ratio of definitions. Again this logic does not necessarily hold, for what goes on inside people's heads is problematically linked to behavioral patterns of exposure in the manner specified by social learning. (Just whom was Ted Kaczynski associating with in his mountain cabin, anyway?) 'Techniques' *may* spring from differential behavioral patterns of association with a pattern of criminal contacts (preferably independently assessed), but to my knowledge the research design showing this connection is non-existent.⁴

In terms of content validity, techniques of neutralization seem most directly tied to delinquent attitudes (beliefs) that may precede or follow delinquency itself, which in principle are interpretable from the lens of control theory (Hirschi, 1969). But, of course, delinquent attitudes might also result from other constructs (e.g. strain, neuropsychological deficits) unrelated to differential associations or social controls. More important, that the construct validity of measurement cannot be resolved by statistical manipulation is recognized by the best methodologists. 'If in fact these indicators [techniques] do not tap the theoretical domain specified by Sutherland, *any* use of them for examining differential association theory is unwarranted' (Matsueda, 1982: 501, emphasis in original). The correlation of 'techniques of neutralization' with delinquency is simply too ambiguous in meaning and therefore supports no particular theory in the debate.

Throughout his discussion of prior research, Akers is consistent in viewing all correlates of delinquency through the lens of social learning theory. To take another example, he claims that it is 'self evident that

variables such as parents' criminality and disciplinary practices are measures of the social learning concepts.' Yet this runs counter to hypotheses such as Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990)—parental criminality may simply reflect low self-control and thus a reduced investment on the part of parents in their children's socialization and social control. Logically, there are numerous other explanations as well, including, as some have argued, a biological mechanism whereby criminality is transmitted intergenerationally.

Not surprisingly, the ambiguity of data on correlates is brought into sharpest relief with the robust findings on peer delinquency, interpreted by Akers' social learning theory as peer influence. The Gluecks' (1950) well-known 'birds of a feather flock together' hypothesis is the traditional challenge to the social-learning interpretation. Akers convincingly dismisses simplistic versions of a selection argument. However, I think we can still allow reciprocal and situational-specific influences of peers and reject the idea that delinquency must be learned in peer groups. Adolescents are naturally attracted to peer groups because they offer something new and exciting, and that something is often at odds with the perceived monotony of parental socialization come puberty. The opportunities to commit deviant acts are also enhanced by group and situational processes (Briar and Piliavin, 1965), just as sanctioning mechanisms are offset by strength in numbers.

Proponents of differential association have recently completed some of the best research on the topic of peers. In an especially compelling account, Matsueda and Anderson (1998) subject longitudinal data to the most complex analysis possible in an attempt to ferret out simultaneous relationships between delinquent peer associations and delinquency. Although Matsueda is a staunch supporter of differential association, the results are telling: 'We conclude that the relationship between delinquent peer association and delinquent behavior is reciprocal, that the effect of delinquency on delinquent peers is larger than the effect of delinquent peers on delinquency, and that the latter effect has likely been overestimated in previous research' (1998: 301). This finding suggests that the Gluecks (1950) were not far-fetched in daring to suggest that sociologists take seriously 'birds of a feather.' With respect to the actual mechanism lurking behind peer delinquency, Mark Warr (1998) recently analyzed the National Youth Survey and found that association with peers helped explain the effect of marriage on desistance from crime. Getting married was associated with a large reduction in time spent with delinquent peers, which in turn accounted for reductions in delinquency. Again we must ask, why? Warr proposes differential association theory as an explanation but wisely concludes: 'The truth is that, despite strong and persistent evidence of peer influence in the etiology of delinquency, the precise mechanism by which peers "transmit" or encourage delinquent behavior among one another remains a mystery' (1998: 211).

So, once again, we are in a difficult position because the data are seemingly consistent with several theories at once. No amount of post hoc theorizing can whitewash this reality—the data on mechanisms are just not in, certainly with respect to peers. Once you set aside peer delinquency, along with techniques of neutralization as I already have, there is not much left for social learning theory to stand on. Even Akers admits, and the data show (see, for example, chapters 5–11), the results on imitation and reinforcement are either weak or inconsistent. Moreover, in contrast to most renditions of social learning theory, Akers' own data show that measures of delinquent definitions do not mediate the effects of delinquent peer associations (see, for example, p. 198). Characteristically, however, social learning has yet another escape clause because delinquent peers can be said to bestow conventional values (see note 4). At this point the reader is likely to be exasperated, and so I will leave it well enough alone with this conclusion. *That peers are strongly implicated in delinquency is settled; that peers cause delinquency through exposure to social learning is not.*

Criminal values (or why are subcultures so hard to find?)

As I read the book, another thought kept running through my mind. Why is it so easy to posit yet so difficult in practice to establish the existence of subcultures of delinquency? One of the major assumptions of differential association theory is value heterogeneity with respect to crime and violence. Subcultures are a major vehicle thought to foster delinquent identity and the source of differential ratios favoring delinquent definitions. Yet the data are notoriously stubborn in failing to provide clear evidence for this view—conventionality is the rule with respect to crime. (Subcultural theory, à la Claude Fischer, is altogether another matter.)

To be sure, the existential reality of living in dangerous environments may reduce one's emotional distance from the criminal 'other'—but that does not imply normative acceptance in the deeper cultural sense. Numerous ethnographic works have shown how primary values coexist alongside residual values alleged to stem from deviant subcultures such as 'toughness,' 'getting big money,' 'going for bad,' and 'having fun' (Anderson, 1978: 129–30; 152–8). According to Anderson, the use of violence is not valued as a primary goal, but it is expected as a fact of life. Much like Rainwater (1970) and Suttles (1968), Anderson's research suggests that in certain situational contexts wider cultural values recede against the daily realities of social disadvantage and disputatious encounters. Shaw and McKay (1942) offered a similar interpretation long ago, arguing that while the tradition of delinquency and crime is a powerful force in certain communities, it is only a part of the community's system of (largely conventional) values. They argued, in fact, that 'the dominant tradition in every community is conventional, even in those having the highest rate of

delinquents' (Shaw and McKay, 1942: 180). If this is true, how does the ratio of behaviorally-induced definitions tip to produce delinquency?

In short, social learning theorists tend to assume larger cultural differences in criminal values than have been shown to exist. Although emotional lassitude in the inner-city may lead to a greater tolerance of certain forms of deviance, it is precisely the acceptance of core societal standards by residents and even gang leaders themselves that underlies efforts to establish social order and safety—however unconventional these efforts may be. In a revealing ethnography of a black middle-class neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, Pattillo (1998) found that the incorporation of gang members and drug dealers into the networks of law-abiding kin and neighbors thwarted efforts to rid the neighborhood of its criminal element. Nonetheless, Pattillo found that the leader of a major gang was a long-time resident who employed monitoring and threats to keep the neighborhood free of street crime and signs of disorder (e.g. graffiti, vandalism, prostitution). Pattillo writes that both sides—the residents and the gang leaders—'spurn disorder, actively combat graffiti, and show disdain for activities that may invite negative attention, such as loitering or public fighting' (1998: 755). Ironically, then, even active participants in criminal networks seek to achieve some semblance of order in their neighborhoods of residence. The desire for order and safety appears pervasive, robbing the idea of normative conflict over crime of much of its force.

Social structure and the theory

In the last chapter, Akers presents 'Social Structure and Social Learning in Crime and Deviance' (the SSSL model). This aspect of the theory looks to how patterns in the social structure influence individual variations in exposure to delinquent definitions. The basic strategy is clear (again, following Sutherland, but allegedly with a softer determinism): 'The macro and meso-level variables determine the probability that an individual has been, is, or will be exposed to different levels of the social learning variables. The different levels of these variables determine the probability that the individual will begin, persist, or desist from behavior, and at what frequency and degree of specialization or versatility. This behavior is translated into crime rates' (p. 335). The social structural variables in the theory include structural correlates (society, community, culture, social institutions, region), socio-demographic correlates (age, gender, race, SES, religion), and differential location in primary and secondary groups (family, peers, school, work, church, media). One detects in this list an odd neutrality—all macro-level variables seem to matter (and are so listed) because all macro-level variables can be said to influence the only thing that really matters—individual exposure to learning patterns favorable to crime.

Does this in turn mean that social structure is, strangely, 'outside' the realm of the SSSL theory?

It means exactly that by my reading. Akers explicitly claims no interest in the causes or theoretical ordering of social structural arrangements. He claims that other approaches, such as social disorganization theory, are similarly indifferent to sources of variation in crime-relevant structures. This argument is incorrect, in my view. No one who has read Wirth, for example, could claim that his theory was unconcerned with urbanization, density, and heterogeneity in their own right. Social disorganization theory was nurtured by the classic Chicago-school theories of modernity and urbanization, and the accompanying declines in social control hypothesized to stem from industrialization, economic segregation, rapid immigration, and ethnic heterogeneity. Although in new ecological form (e.g. concentrated poverty; racial segregation), a vital line of ongoing criminological inquiry looks to specific sources and mediating consequences of variations in structural forces at the neighborhood level. Theorizing about social mechanisms cannot be divorced, I would thus argue, from judgmental theorizing about their structural or cultural sources.

Besides community-level research and social disorganization, Akers' foray into social structure yields a detailed discussion of research in life-course criminology. Although without direct evidence, social learning is asserted to explain the well-known age-crime curve. 'Age-specific rates differ because individuals are differentially exposed to the learning variables at different ages' (p. 338). Akers does not claim that all individuals follow the aggregate pattern, because he argues that even an individual in a low-crime group can be exposed to more criminal definitions than someone in a high-crime group. How this happens is not explained; however, Akers does cite studies showing that peer delinquency mediates the age-crime relationship, but the meaning of peer delinquency remains, as elaborated, ambiguous. Once more, then, a major correlate of crime, this time age, is explained post hoc by the theory.

With all due respect, I thus find the new macro-level aspect of the theory (SSSL) unsatisfying, even on the verge of uninteresting. For *by design*, SSSL theory is itself uninterested in . . . history, social change, social disorganization, inequality, life-course development, and on and on. The reason social learning theory can be indifferent is because ultimately it does not matter where all these things come from and why. They are only important insofar as they affect the (unobservable) ratio of definitions favorable or unfavorable to law violation. Hence, in Akers' own words, almost every variable of interest to structural criminology (and to most sociologists) such as age, sex, social class, and inequality is 'exogenous' to the model, equally viable, and works through social learning. As he writes, 'The theory does not attempt to explain why a society has the culture, age structure, class system, race system, family system, economic system, gender/sex role system, or religious system that it has. The theory does not explain (by

reference to history, social change, or other macro-level variables) why there is social disorganization, conflict, or inequality in society' (p. 336).

Say what you will about conflict, social disorganization, or strain theories, but these competing explanations of criminality were, and are, deeply concerned with just about everything social learning theory brackets. Merton cannot be understood apart from an explanation of the disjuncture between cultural values and the inequality of the stratification system in American society. Conflict theory cannot be understood apart from inequalities in resources and the power to define crime. Social disorganization theory, contra Akers, was at its roots a theory that attempted to explain the major sources of weakened social controls reflected in local communities. Moreover, these classic perspectives assign a priority to some structural conditions over others, yielding a priori hypotheses that allow the theories to be falsified. For example, in Blau and Blau's (1982) Mertonian-based macro-strain theory, racial inequality in socio-economic resources trumps region (culture), racial composition (sub-culture), and family structure (control). From Akers' shopping list of structural predictors (p. 331), by contrast, I can only conclude in frustration that everything matters.

Choice and agency

I hate to bring up Kornhauser (1978) at this juncture, but there is no denying that the assumptions of human nature inherent in social learning theory underlie much of my discomfort. Like others in the social control theory tradition, I am uneasy with the seeming passivity with which social learning theorists conceive of human beings and social interaction. I have no doubt that reinforcement matters (both social and non-social), especially in the maintenance of criminal careers. But what of choice, and the capacity of individuals to resist both criminal and conventional 'definitions?' Resistance in everyday life is so prevalent that there is an entire subfield of sociology devoted to its theoretical articulation (social movements). Only in the most contorted of ways can social learning talk about the conscious and deliberative overthrow or rejection of the status quo (i.e. extant patterns of exposure).

We need not resort to exotic revolutions, however. Consider the most prosaic delinquency set against the backdrop of adult pressures to conform. Whether in school, at home, glued to the media, or even with peers, children are for the most part exposed to the pressures of conventionality. Sykes and Matza perhaps said it best: 'The fact that the world of the delinquent is embedded in the larger world of those who conform cannot be overlooked' (1957). Yet adolescent rebellion is near ubiquitous. The age-crime curve tells us that it is normative for adolescents to reject learning messages quite vigorously—they do not want (temporarily, at least) the perceived world of their conforming parents. And how did this

change come about anyway? Employing the logic of differential association, it seems rather incongruous that teens are suddenly able to reverse course after more than a dozen years of anti-delinquent learning ratios (and thus priority, frequency, and so on).

At bottom, then, I do not find a compelling theory of human agency or behavioral change in Akers' social learning theory.⁵ Akers' caution notwithstanding (e.g. p. 341), we are asked to buy into a rather mechanical version of determinism by horde mentality. The automaton-like characterization of delinquents is reflected in the idea (purportedly soft on determinism) that what an individual does depends on the mathematical average of what he or she is exposed to. Consider again what social learning theory tells us: 'If the balance of definitions is favorable to abiding by the law, the outcome is conformity; if violative definitions are in excess criminal behavior is the result' (p. 27). No matter how hard I try, I cannot reconcile this conceptual account with the facts on crime as we know them. That persons exposed to conforming messages nonetheless deliberately choose to violate them, that the majority of persons living in high-crime areas are not criminals—these are the sort of facts that require severe wriggling on the part of a learning-exposure theory.

It is telling in this regard that Akers considers at one point (p. 57) Sutherland's inchoate notion that someone could be 'seduced' into crime. From my perspective, it is unfortunate that Akers did not pursue this idea further, perhaps by building on Katz's (1988) contribution to deviance theory in *Seductions of Crime*. No one who has read Katz's book can help but be bewildered by the effete world in which social-learning delinquents live. Indeed, where is the human side of petty jealousy, envy, rage, and impulsivity? From my view, Akers seems not to appreciate the pathos of much crime and violence—of life itself. This is overreaching, perhaps, but I think one of the reasons for the venom found in Kornhauser's attack on 'cultural deviance' theory was her outrage at Sutherland's sterile conception of humanity. She was not, and is not, alone (for an update of Dennis Wrong's classic 1960 article, see his *The Problem of Order: What Unites and Divides Society*, 1994).

Towards better research design

In the end, I think it should be clear to the reader that much of my assessment of *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance* is a critique of criminological research in general as it bears on crucial issues of theory. From the perspective of defending the major idea of a theory, Akers cannot really be blamed for his strategy. The reason, as I have noted throughout this review and as Akers himself avers in conclusion (pp. 370–1), is that previous research almost never offers a critical test of competing hypotheses. In fact, I wholly agree with Akers (p. 342) that virtually any post hoc interpretation can make plausible sense

of the same set of facts. None of us are immune from the use of techniques of research neutralization, as Akers underscores when he argues that John Laub and I interpret data on age, crime, and the life course as supporting a theory of informal social control (Sampson and Laub, 1993) when it can be read as supporting learning theory instead. Akers is right—our interpretation too was theory driven.⁶

So if criminological theory is healthy and has mushroomed in recent years, theory-sensitive research designs have not. We know precious little about why many correlates, with age and sex at the top of the list, are related to delinquency. Extant criminological research is especially strong on the statistical modeling of weak data. What is perhaps most disturbing is the cavalier indifference on the part of many criminologists to the quality, validity, and theoretical meaning of data, not to mention that few criminologists bother to invest themselves in the labors of research design. Coming from the old school that stresses design over statistical method, I should think Ron Akers agrees with this assessment as much as anybody.

I am, therefore, hopeful that Akers' book can help turn this state of affairs around, for it serves an important function in setting out the hypotheses, variables, and research designs that bear most directly on social learning theory. If I have disagreed with Akers on current facts, essentially it is because I have a different theoretical interpretation of ultimately ambiguous data. The value in an exercise like Akers' is that it makes us think harder up front about the conditions under which one would claim support for a theory. That is to say, before we set out analyzing anything, we need to come to agreement on the validity of measures and what results would, or would not, support a given theory. Computers have made us lazy theoretically, forgiving as they are of getting it wrong. A re-specified model, after all, only takes another few seconds to run.

Although beyond the scope of this review, my belief is that social learning theorists need to do a much better job, independently observing and measuring behavioral patterns of exposure to delinquent definitions. For example, it strikes me that one straightforward way to assess Akers' theory would be through time diaries that record daily activities and associations. 'Beeper' methods that systematically ask respondents to record their whereabouts and peer associations would seem especially helpful. Whatever the method, I believe criminology has largely exhausted the usefulness of trying to figure out what goes on inside teenagers' heads instead of what they actually do in everyday life. A behavioral theory in particular might well be better served with behavioral as opposed to intrapsychic or attitudinal measures. I would add that a theory of peer-group formation should be high on the list for criminologists if we ever wish to finally make sense of the connection between delinquent peer associations and delinquency (cf. Matsueda and Anderson, 1998).

Perhaps surprisingly, then, I will conclude by affirming my earlier recommendation of Akers' book. It is the definitive intellectual statement of social learning theory, probably the most dominant criminological theory

of our time. Criminologists need to read the book, and decide for themselves on the merits of the theory. I, for one, was enriched by the experience, even if I continue to view the theory as deeply flawed. Akers is the worthy successor to Sutherland, and thus he no doubt expects to be interrogated as intensely as was the master himself.

Notes

1. For a recent debate on cultural deviance theory appearing in this journal, see Costello (1997) and Matsueda (1997).
2. There is an interesting puzzle here. How does it come to be that a theory is continually misinterpreted? The reader might be forgiven for suspecting lack of clarity in the theory rather than dastardly motives on the part of critics.
3. Note as well that if behavioral exposure is severed from the acquisition of delinquent definitions, the theory is tautological and beyond research (i.e. those espousing techniques of neutralization have been exposed to a ratio of delinquent to nondelinquent definitions greater than one by definition). Sutherland also famously argued, of course, that crime could not be 'invented' (Akers, p. 23).
4. The correlation of techniques of neutralization with delinquent peers will not do, for as Akers goes out of his way to emphasize throughout the book, contact with delinquent persons (or areas) may be offset by noncriminal contacts. The effect of differential association comes from contact with behavioral patterns of definitions regardless of the person presenting them (p. 30). In fact, Akers argues: 'Thus, one may be exposed to law-abiding patterns while associating with thieves and to law-violating patterns while associating with policemen' (p. 30). If we cannot infer the ratio of exposure to delinquent definitions by the delinquent status of one's contacts, why all the fuss in social learning theory with delinquent peers? (see also below).
5. In principle, at least, social learning theory is capable of taking on human agency as a theoretical project. For a recent attempt that takes seriously an agentic conceptualization of human actors within the overall structure of social learning theory, see Bandura (1997).
6. In the face of equivocal empirical evidence, the better theory wins out. I leave it for readers of *Crime in the Making* to decide the theoretical plausibility of the theory of informal social control relative to social learning.

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A consideration of gender in relation to *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance*

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Abstract

This article considers Ronald Akers' book, *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance*, in relation to knowledge about crimes against women and the relationship of gender to type, pattern and amount of crime. Contributions of the book are summarized, and shortcomings discussed. Specific criticisms are lack of integration with feminist theory in the areas of conceptualizing and measuring crime and deviance and a failure to consider gender structure. The final discussion focuses on implications for theory development.

Introduction

There are many different aspects of *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance* that could be a focus of a book review, but because of the growing knowledge about crimes against women and the part that gender plays in generating the type, pattern and amount of crime, this review will pay particular attention to the connection (or disconnection) of what I will refer to as Akers' General Theory to feminist and other theory and research with a focus on gender. The General Theory is proposed as useful in predicting all sorts of crime, so it is pertinent to the literature on gender, crime and victimization; and the book does include a chapter on sexual assault, as well as other discussion of gender.