

Learning and Situational/ Environmental Influences on Criminal Behavior

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- Analyze the early theories of behavior and their influence on the study of learning and criminal behavior.
- Discuss why social learning theory is fundamental to the understanding of criminal behavior.
- Explain the theory of differential association.
- Discuss why social cognitive theory is fundamental to understanding criminal behavior.
- Summarize situational/environmental influences and their impact on behavior.

Introductory Case Study: The Hillside Strangler

The Hillside Strangler terrorized Los Angeles during 1977 and 1978, when at least 10 women were kidnapped, raped, tortured, and murdered over a 4-month period. The defendants in the case were cousins Angelo Buono and Kenneth Bianchi. Although both were psychopathic and sexually sadistic, there was also an interesting family dynamic to their relationship. Buono was nearly 20 years older than his cousin, more socially adept, and the dominant figure in their relationship. Buono had an extensive criminal history and kept women involved in prostitution and sexual slavery. He exposed his younger cousin to these behaviors, and soon their pimping and sexual appetites escalated to murder. The two quarreled after the initial police investigation, and Bianchi fled California shortly after the Los Angeles murders and committed an additional two murders in the state of Washington before finally getting arrested in 1979. Both men were sentenced to life in prison.

As you read this chapter, consider the following questions regarding this case:

- 1. Do you think Bianchi would have committed these murders had it not been for Buono's influence?*
- 2. Consider social learning theory with regard to Bianchi committing two more crimes without Buono. Which of the four factors of social learning theory can be applied?*
- 3. What situational factors do you believe may have influenced Buono and Bianchi to commit those horrible crimes?*

4.1 Introduction

The criminal psychology field has invested heavily in attempting to understand the causes of criminal behavior, such as the crimes committed in the Hillside Strangler example. Throughout the history of the field, theorists have asserted that human behavior reflects forces of nature or forces of nurture, depending on one's perspective. Today it is almost universally recognized that *both* individual and environmental factors are important for understanding behavior, including criminal behavior. Moreover, it is largely recognized that individual and environmental factors often interact with and mutually reinforce each other.

Different theoretical models describe the relationship between variables and outcomes, and researchers have concluded that there is no single path to criminal behavior. This chapter explores various theories that help us understand the influences on behavior, as well as situational/environmental influences and their relationship to criminal behavior. We will begin by discussing some of the theories of learned behavior and later will explore how situational factors may influence criminal behavior.

4.2 Theories of Behaviorism

Though research on the stimuli for and consequences of behavior hasn't focused on criminal behavior specifically, the research helps in understanding the causes of criminal behavior and why individuals learn these types of behaviors. **Behaviorism** is a social learning-based theory that suggests behaviors are the product of conditioning that occurs as an individual interacts with the environment. Behaviorism rejects the notion that internal, person-specific factors (e.g., emotional expression, self-regulation, intelligence) are the drivers of behavior. As a result, individual-level constructs are minimized or excluded in favor of learning from one's environment.

However, before the behaviorist school of thought was officially coined, several psychologists and criminologists developed theories of learned behavior to describe the "study of circumstances under which a response and a cue stimulus become connected" (Miller & Dollard, 1941, p. 1). These theories are crucial to understanding the basis of behavior.

Pavlov's Classical Conditioning Theory

Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936) is perhaps best known for his theory of **classical conditioning**, which is said to occur when two stimuli are linked together to produce a new learned response in a person or an animal. Pavlov conducted studies in which he measured and conditioned salivation (and other physiological responses) in dogs to respond to neutral stimuli. His work provided a basis for later behaviorists, who focused on the consequences of behavior (rather than the eliciting stimuli).

Thorndike's Law of Effect

Other early studies of learning were conducted by Edward Thorndike (1874–1949), who argued that the consequences that follow behavior help learning. Thorndike developed the **law of effect**, which states that the consequences of behavior serve to strengthen or weaken its continuation. A baby who is fed a bottle of milk every time he or she cries (the behavior) will continue to cry when he or she feels hungry so that the parent will produce the bottle (the consequence). In other words, the consequence, because it is satisfying or pleasurable, serves to strengthen the crying behavior. To put it another way, when the response to a stimulus is positive, the connection between behavior and response is strengthened; when the response to the stimulus results in pain, the connection is weakened.

Watson's Theory of Behavior

Though Pavlov and Thorndike began exploring learning theories before him, John Watson (1878–1958) was the founder of the behaviorism school in psychology, initiating the movement in 1913. He showed that the idea of classical conditioning could be applied to humans, via the famous and controversial Little Albert experiment. Visit the following link to learn more about this experiment: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/classical-conditioning.html#little>.

One of the most famous and frequently cited quotations in psychology comes from Watson (1930):

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. (p. 82)

An important legacy of behaviorism for understanding crime is a blank slate conceptualization of human behavior; Watson asserted this concept. The idea of a **blank slate**, or *tabula rasa*, which is attributed to the philosophers John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Dryden, is that people are born basically the same in terms of their innate abilities and that experience molds their behaviors. The blank slate is an optimistic worldview contrasting the idea of widespread individual variation. The implication for understanding crime is that learning-based theoretical approaches generally view the criminal offender as an innately blank slate that is then corrupted by negative or crime-inducing environmental features and personal connections.



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Learning-based theories assert that we start as a blank slate when we're born and learn negative behaviors from our environments as we develop.

Skinner's Operant Conditioning

B. F. Skinner (1904–1990) was a psychologist widely known for his research on **operant conditioning**, a learning theory that suggests behavior is produced and modified based on the reinforcements and punishments it elicits. Over time, a particular behavior is paired with specific consequences that either strengthen or weaken the behavior. There are four types of reinforcement related to operant conditioning: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment.

Positive reinforcement is a type of reinforcement that involves a behavioral response followed by a rewarding or reinforcing stimulus (also known as a “reinforcer”). The rewarding stimulus serves to strengthen the behavioral response. For instance, children who display good behavior (response) are likely to receive praise, warmth, and affection (reinforcers) from their parents, which serves to further encourage the good behavior. **Negative reinforcement** is a type of reinforcement that involves the strengthening of a behavioral response through the removal of an aversive stimulus. For instance, a child who receives a stern lecture from his or her parents for neglecting chores can end the lecturing (aversive stimulus) by performing the chores (response) in the first place.

In **positive punishment**, a particular behavior or response is decreased or weakened when it is followed by an aversive stimulus. A stern stare from parents (aversive stimulus) will often

immediately stop the problem behavior (response) that a child is exhibiting. In **negative punishment**, a behavior or response is weakened through the removal of a valued stimulus. For example, if a parent prohibits the use of a valued item (such as a smartphone) because his or her child broke curfew, the child may learn not to break curfew again. The removal of the smartphone (valued stimulus) will decrease the likelihood that the child will continue to stay out late (behavior). See Table 4.1 for further examples of reinforcement and punishment.

Table 4.1: Examples of reinforcement and punishment

Stimulus	Operant response	Consequence (reinforcement or punishment)	Implications
Teacher promises a sticker for good behavior in class.	Student behaves well in class.	Positive reinforcement. Student receives a sticker.	Student is more likely to behave well in future classes.
Teacher ridicules wrong answers spoken aloud.	Student answers only when sure of being right.	Negative reinforcement. Student is not ridiculed.	Student is more likely to answer only when sure of being right.
Teacher presents a lecture.	Student talks to neighbor.	Positive punishment. Teacher has student clean cupboards.	Student is less likely to talk during a lecture.
Teacher promises field trip for good behavior.	Student misbehaves.	Negative punishment. Privilege of going on field trip is withdrawn.	Student is less likely to misbehave before a field trip.

Operant conditioning played an important role in updating criminological explanations of crime that used social learning theory, particularly those relating to the role of reinforcement in perpetuating behavior.

Given these basic definitions, we can see the parallels between behavioral theory and the criminal justice process. For many people who live their entire lives without an arrest, the mere potential threat of punishment is sufficient to deter criminal behavior. This is known as **deterrence**. For serious criminal offenders, unfortunately, the threat of punishment does little to discourage subsequent criminal acts.

4.3 Social Learning Theory

Among conventional wisdom and scholarly researchers, social learning theory is a fundamental part of understanding crime. It is so significantly related to crime that psychologists and sociologists alike made social learning theory a central part of their theoretical platforms. Few other conceptual areas can claim such universality.

Foundations of Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory suggests that behavior is motivated by the effects it produces and is largely based on mimicry of behaviors to which one is frequently exposed. It gives credibility to the common saying that “birds of a feather flock together,” which means that individuals generally behave like those with whom they associate.

The main reason the theory is popular is that so much of childhood is based on learning. In the home, children are continuously exposed to behaviors and verbal instruction from their parents and siblings about the appropriateness of various behaviors. Although parents often do their best to intentionally inculcate prosocial behaviors and values in their children, much of this inculcation occurs in an indirect, almost subconscious way. (Remember that the terms *prosocial* and *antisocial* do not mean extroverted or introverted. *Prosocial* means that a person’s behavior is oriented toward making a positive contribution to society; for example, picking up litter in a local park. *Antisocial* means that a person’s behavior does not conform to the norms, rules, and laws of an orderly society. An example is dumping litter in the park instead of in the trash receptacle, an offense that may result in a fine or criminal prosecution, depending on what was dumped.) What this means is that much of learning occurs by observation and exposure to situational contexts.

For instance, parents who work each day, prepare their clothing and lunch the night before going to work, leave early in the morning to arrive on time for work, invest their time and energy in productive labor in exchange for income and benefits, and generally invest in work as a social institution are displaying—each and every day—what it means to be a functioning member of society. Although this message may or may not be internalized by their children, because the parents are actively displaying good behavior, the children are more likely to learn. Learning occurs directly and indirectly, from observation of and interaction with role models who perform the behavior to be learned.

The identical process occurs for negative behaviors. Consider parents who cannot hold down a job for more than a few weeks at a time. Being unable or unwilling to meet the responsibilities of their jobs, they either get fired or quit. Once at home, these parents vehemently critique their former boss, lament their unemployment, and engage in unhealthy, unproductive



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According to social learning theory, much of learning occurs by observation and exposure to situational contexts, including influence from peers.

behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, drug selling, gambling) to quell their boredom and meet the financial needs of their family. Although these parents might simultaneously praise the value and importance of work, their behavior tells another story, and their children are exposed to negative behaviors that are internalized and unfortunately mimicked. This scenario can be made much worse. The parents can abuse or neglect their children, introduce them to drugs or alcohol, engage in violence within the home, or commit any combination of these crimes. These behaviors are observed, internalized, and unfortunately learned.

Parents act as **socialization agents**, or people who contribute to socialization—but so do teachers, coworkers, and **peers**, or persons of a similar status

in an individual's social environment. Whenever there is exposure to other individuals, there are opportunities to learn and imitate. Indeed, the very function of school is to instill the knowledge and skills that are needed for survival in a particular society. The preponderance of learning that occurs in our lives is positive; however, when exposure to antisocial individuals and criminogenic settings occurs, there are also opportunities to adopt certain negative behaviors.

In the psychological study of crime, social learning theory is unique in that it was developed and influenced by both psychologists and sociologists. And within American criminology, the social learning approach has served as a core method of understanding and explaining crime. Even though the term *social learning theory* was originally coined and developed by Albert Bandura while he was researching and studying aggression (we will wait to discuss Bandura's findings until Chapter 6), the theory has become mostly associated with Ronald Akers. Criminologists Akers and Gary Jensen (2006), two of the leading proponents of social learning theory, explain that it is

a general theory that offers an explanation of the acquisition, maintenance, and change in criminal and deviant behavior that embraces social, non-social, and cultural factors operating both to motivate and control criminal behavior and both to promote and undermine conformity. (p. 38)

Akers's Differential Association-Reinforcement Theory

Akers developed his **differential association-reinforcement theory** based on sociologist Edwin Sutherland's differential theory of crime, Skinner's operant conditioning theory, and Bandura's social learning theory. Essentially, Akers argues that "criminal behavior is learned through both social and nonsocial reinforcements and that most learning of criminal behavior occurs in social interactions with other people" (as cited in Bernard, n.d., para. 3). Akers outlined the four core elements in his theory: differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation.

Differential Association

Differential association refers to the varying associations or friendships and acquaintanceships that individuals directly and indirectly have with others. (*Differential* is a term that suggests there are differences between individuals.)

Although differential association is a classic in sociological criminology, it is clearly a social learning theory. Sutherland's work is important because it is an example of the ways that scientific disciplines borrow concepts from one another and reinvent them with different language. Subsequent social learning approaches are more rooted in psychology.

Sutherland's theory contains nine principles:

1. Delinquent behavior is learned, not inherited.
2. Delinquent behavior is learned through interaction with others by way of verbal or nonverbal communication.
3. Learning occurs in intimate groups; it is in small, face-to-face gatherings that children learn to commit crime.

4. In intimate groups, children learn techniques for committing crime, as well as the appropriate motives, attitudes, and rationalizations. The learning process involves exposure not only to the techniques of committing offenses but also to the attitudes or rationalizations that justify those acts.
5. The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal code as being favorable or unfavorable. (The term *definitions* here refers to attitudes.)
6. A juvenile becomes delinquent due to an excess of definitions favorable to the violation of law over definitions unfavorable to the violation of law. This sixth principle is the core of the theory. Definitions favorable to the violation of law can be learned from both criminal and noncriminal people.
7. The tendency toward delinquency will be affected by the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of learning experiences. The longer, earlier, more intensely, and more frequently youths are exposed to both positive and negative attitudes about delinquency, the more likely it is that they will be influenced.
8. Learning delinquent behavior involves the same mechanisms involved in any other learning. While the content of what is learned is different, the process for learning any behavior is the same.
9. Criminal behavior and noncriminal behavior are expressions of the same needs and values. In other words, the goals of delinquents and nondelinquents are similar. What differs are the means they use to pursue their goals.



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Sutherland posited that an individual will learn criminal behaviors and rationalizations for such behaviors from his or her intimate groups, such as close friends.

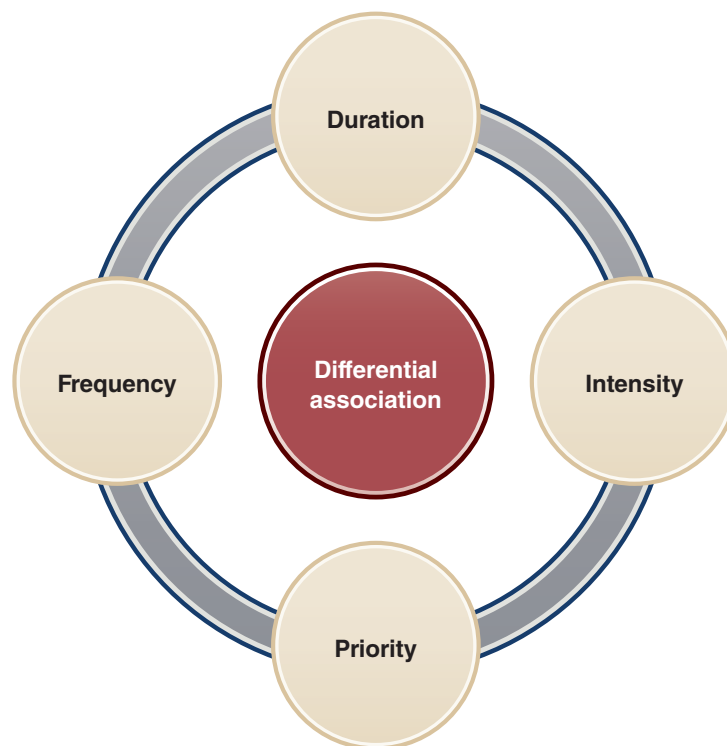
In the case of differential association, some individuals associate with many criminals, some associate with criminals occasionally, and some never associate with criminals. These friendships and acquaintanceships involve behaviors and the expression of values and beliefs that support the behaviors. Importantly, differential association also includes indirect identification with reference groups outside of one's immediate contact, such as an individual's involvement in an organization or online chat group. Although the person does not physically have access to these associates, there is nevertheless the transmission and learning of values, beliefs, and behaviors.

Researchers theorize that differential association has greater effects on behavior depending on the duration, frequency, intensity, and priority of the associations (see Figure 4.1). How the duration, frequency, intensity, and priority of these associations predicts conventional or criminal behavior depends on the characteristics of the persons with whom one associates. For example, Schreck, Fisher, and Miller (2004) examined the relationship between friendship networks and violent victimization among respondents from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. They found that adolescents and young adults who were popular and well connected in conventional friendship networks were very unlikely to be victims of a violent crime. A similar effect, albeit in the opposite direction, was found among those who were popular, well-connected members of antisocial friendship networks: They were more likely to be violently victimized.

See *Spotlight: Research on Differential Association in the Workplace* to explore how coworkers and peers can have an effect on an individual's work ethic.

Figure 4.1: The parameters of differential association

Relationship parameters such as duration, intensity, priority, and frequency can help determine the effect differential association will have on an individual's behavior.



Spotlight: Research on Differential Association in the Workplace

Research focusing on the work setting and delinquency demonstrates the value of differential association. For instance, Gibson and Wright (2001) analyzed data from the Tri-Cities Adolescent Employment Survey, which is a survey of students from eight high schools in northeastern Tennessee. They found that workplace delinquency—which included behaviors such as lying on one’s time card about the number of hours worked, shortchanging customers, giving away goods or services for free, theft, using drugs or alcohol while on duty, and helping coworkers steal employers’ property—was predicted by coworker delinquency.

On the other hand, coworkers can exert a positive influence on their colleagues. Utilizing data from the National Youth Survey, Wright and Cullen (2004) found that association with prosocial coworkers helps dismantle delinquent peer networks and results in reductions in delinquency and drug use.

Taken together, these findings indicate that differential association with bad or good influences at work has important effects on whether an individual is commensurately well behaved or deviant.

Definitions

Definitions refer to an individual’s attitudes, orientation, and rationalizations that characterize the person’s behavior and cast him or her in moral or value-based terms. Put simply, definitions are a person’s beliefs about or moral evaluation of his or her behavior. Consider this brief example: People who are part of a “partying” friendship network like to drink alcohol and use illegal drugs. When an individual is with these substance-abusing friends, he or she gives little thought or consideration to the moral violations inherent in illegal drug use. However, the same individual would likely not engage in these behaviors or approve of them if they were taking place around that person’s parents. The difference in these situations relates to the definitions that the individual produces about his or her behavior.



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A person’s general mind-set is also known as his or her definitions. Someone who spends time around other drug users, for instance, may not give a second thought to using or worrying about the consequences of illegal drugs.

There are three bases of definitions: conventional beliefs, positive beliefs, and neutralizing beliefs. **Conventional beliefs** are those that are unfavorable toward committing crime and favorable toward conformity. **Positive beliefs** are definitions by which an individual believes that committing crime is permissible. **Neutralizing beliefs** are definitions by which an individual justifies or provides excuses for why antisocial behavior is permissible (Akers & Jennings, 2009).

It is important to note that criminals do not commit crime every second of their lives; therefore, they are not cognitively dominated by definitions that are favorable to the commission of crime. Instead, serious criminal offenders merely hold weak definitions about conventional behavior. This makes sense when one considers that serious criminal offenders also experience failures in terms of adult functioning, such as unemployment, financial insecurity, relationship discord, and imprudent behaviors like gambling, smoking, sexual promiscuity, and drug use. Their definitions about the righteousness of conventional life are so distorted that negative behaviors are enhanced.

There is ample evidence that definitions are related to antisocial behavior. Drawing on data from the National Youth Survey, Mears, Ploeger, and Warr (1998) found that definitions and moral evaluations of antisocial conduct are significantly responsible for the large sex differences in crime. Mears and his colleagues found that delinquent peers were predictive of delinquency for both males and females; however, greater moral evaluations by girls buffered them from the pernicious effects of delinquent peers. In another study that used the National Youth Survey, Hochstetler, Copes, and DeLisi (2002) explored the link between respondents' attitudes and their friends' attitudes and involvement in three forms of crime: vandalism, theft, and assault. They found that friends' attitudes were significantly associated with all forms of crime. In addition, these effects were found in both solo and group forms of theft, vandalism, and assault.

Differential Reinforcement

Differential reinforcement is the balance of reward and punishment that is produced from behavioral acts. Consistent with Akers's theory, antisocial behavior is very costly to those who have little to no association with antisocial peers and is beneficial or rewarding to those who are enmeshed in antisocial peer networks. To prosocial people, crime brings incredible stigma, financial costs, fear, and the potential loss of liberty, employment, and other attachments. To antisocial people, crime can bring credibility and enhance one's reputation. Gang activity is a clear example. To ascend the ranks of a gang, members will often commit major acts of violence to impress their peers or leaders in the gang hierarchy. Such criminal behaviors are highly reinforcing because they bolster one's position within the gang.

Focused research on habitual criminals demonstrates the interesting ways that involvement in criminal acts can be highly reinforcing. For example, Wood, Gove, Wilson, and Cochran (1997) surveyed more than 300 incarcerated prisoners and also conducted focus groups with 40 offenders who were career criminals. They found that serious offenders found crime to be intrinsically rewarding, reported feelings of physiological euphoria when committing crime, and felt that crime solidified their self-concept. Wood and colleagues referred to these processes as "nonsocial" reinforcement.

Imitation

Imitation is the repeating or mimicry of behaviors that have been directly or indirectly observed. Imitation is particularly salient during the initial exposure to behaviors that will be modeled. Over time, one's behavior becomes habituated and is second nature; thus, there is no longer necessarily a need to imitate a behavioral role model.

Bandura is an important figure in studying the factor of imitation in social learning. He demonstrated that aggression is produced from exposure to role models who display aggression and the imitation of it (Bandura, 1978). However, because his approach is directed toward aggression, we will wait to discuss it until Chapter 6.

One of the most powerful pieces of evidence of the importance of imitation relates to intimate partner violence. Violence that occurs in the home produces a staggering array of immediate and enduring costs for children. In addition to exposing children to verbal, physical, and at times sexual abuse, such homes model violence for children at vital developmental stages that can set into motion learning processes that favor the use of violence during interpersonal disputes. If this occurs, these behaviors can be repeated years later. For instance, Sellers, Cochran, and Winfree (2007) surveyed nearly 1,300 university students and found that imitation significantly predicted dating or courtship violence. Moreover, separate analyses found that imitation predicted violence among both male and female students; however, the effects were more pronounced among women.

4.4 Social Cognitive Theory

The **social cognitive theory** focuses on cognitive processes, rational thought, and cognitive expectancies as important determinants of behavior. Importantly, cognitive psychology deals not only with cognitive processes but also with the emotional processes that are related to the ways that people think. In other words, this perspective shows the connection between thinking and feeling and how both actions influence behavior. In addition, the cognitive psychology perspective is aligned with social learning theory in the sense that learning processes are involved. For clarification, social cognitive theory focuses on the situational factors that may influence our cognitions. That is, cognitive theory focuses on internal processes that influence our perceptions and thus lead to our cognitions, whereas social cognitive theory focuses on external influences.

Assumptions

Social cognitive theory is not a singular theory but is rather a theoretical perspective that is guided by several assumptions.

- Cognitions include a range of constructs, such as beliefs, expectancies, *attributions* (what people believe about the causes of events), and memories about the self. These constructs are essential for understanding the feelings and behavior of people.
- Various types of psychopathology, such as crime, arise from distorted, incorrect, or maladaptive cognitions concerning the self, others, and events. For example, anti-social individuals are likely to perceive negative motives from others during normal social interaction—this is known as *hostile attribution bias*. This bias produces a higher likelihood of conflict and thus opportunities for crime.
- Maladaptive cognitions set into motion a self-fulfilling cycle of feelings and behaviors whereby persons confirm and maintain their maladaptive ways (Pervin,

Cervone, & Oliver, 2005). Because antisocial individuals are partially driven by antisocial or hostile cognitions and are more likely to be aggressive, they are prone to using aggression as a means to resolve disputes. In addition, this negative cycle of feelings and behaviors commonly results in the individual associating with people with similar deficits. This provides the basis for deviant peer associations.

Self-Efficacy

One of the major figures in social cognitive theory is Bandura, and one of his major contributions is his work on self-efficacy. **Self-efficacy** is the belief that one harbors about one's competence in a particular situation or the general sense of confidence that one holds about oneself; it is part of a larger set of self-evaluative cognitive processes that Bandura called the



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Self-efficacy, or a person's overall sense of confidence, is often high among people who have "reformed" and quit bad behavior such as doing drugs or committing crime.

"self-system." The importance of self-efficacy to crime is perhaps most clearly understood when considering persons who have desisted from lives of crime, such as former prisoners who decided to "go straight." Reformed offenders develop a general sense of confidence, self-acceptance, and pride in themselves once they maintain employment, attach and fully commit to their family relationships, and cease their association with bad influences, such as persons who use drugs or who are actively involved in crime. Indeed, one of the most effective forms of correctional treatment is cognitive behavioral therapy, and it is clearly informed by the social cognitive theoretical perspective.

Moral Disengagement

Bandura also proposed the concept of moral disengagement to explain how "good" people can sometimes engage in "bad" behaviors, which can be categorized as behaviors that go against the moral principles typically endorsed by society (see *Spotlight: Why Good People Do Bad Things*). More specifically, **moral disengagement** is a set of social cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to justify their unethical and potentially harmful behavior in order to preserve their self-image. It is viewed as a process that enables people to engage in negative behaviors, ranging from small misdeeds to great atrocities, without believing that they are doing wrong or causing harm (Bandura, 1990, 1999). For example, when children violate their moral standards by behaving immorally, moral disengagement can be used as a strategy to justify the behavior and avoid the self-condemnation.

Bandura identified eight different ways (i.e., mechanisms) by which people can disengage from their bad behaviors. To further illustrate the concept of moral disengagement and the moral disengagement mechanisms, let's take a look at the following examples in the context of how and why someone might attempt to justify his or her unethical behavior.

1. *Moral justification*: I broke the rules, but it helped our team win.
2. *Euphemistic labeling*: I needed to get in a fight to “let off steam.”
3. *Advantageous comparison*: There are people in other gangs who are far more violent than I am.
4. *Displacement of responsibility*: I only cheated because my coach told me to.
5. *Diffusion of responsibility*: I heard she was being assaulted, but I assumed someone else would help her.
6. *Distortion of consequences*: I know I stole the money, but my parents won’t ever know.
7. *Attribution of blame*: I only reacted violently because he yelled at me first.
8. *Dehumanization*: That guy is an “animal.” He deserves whatever punishment he gets.

As you can see, people can have the capacity to socially and cognitively restructure their unacceptable behaviors so that the behaviors become morally acceptable. In a sense, people can distort consequences by muddying their personal responsibility with respect to creating negative outcomes.

Spotlight: Why Good People Do Bad Things

Psychologist and Stanford University professor emeritus Philip Zimbardo is perhaps most renowned for his 1971 Stanford prison experiment, in which he set up a prison-like environment at the university and recruited college students to act as prison guards and prisoners. The goal of the experiment was to explore the situational effects of power, cognitive dissonance (or stress due to contradictory beliefs), and good versus evil.

Though the methodology of the experiment has since been questioned, Zimbardo remains a key figure in modern psychology. In a 2008 TED Talk, he discussed moral disengagement and the psychology of evil. Watch the video at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsFEV35tWsg>.

4.5 Situational/Environmental Influences on Behavior

By building on learning theories, we are able to better understand how individuals learn behaviors depending on their situation or environment. Situational factors and their influence on human behavior are the domain of social psychology. That is, social psychology focuses on how our behavior may be shaped by the situations in which we find ourselves. For example, we are more likely to modify our behavior at work with our supervisors than at home alone or with our family members. An interesting observation that arises time and again in the social psychological perspective is that we tend to discount, or ignore altogether, the power of situational factors in influencing our behavior.

Human behavior is molded and influenced by environmental context and social situations. This is the essence of the discipline of sociology, which attempts to conceptualize human behavior using constructs outside of the individual. Just as there are risk and protective factors at the individual level, there are also environmental contexts that can either increase or decrease the likelihood that a person will commit a crime. Let’s examine major content areas in sociology that constitute key environmental influences on behavior: family effects, peer influences, neighborhood effects, and socioeconomic status.

Family Effects

One of the most widely studied and, to the general public, most obvious correlates and potential causes of antisocial and criminal behavior centers on early life family characteristics. Family effects figure prominently in many of the leading theoretical explanations of crime. In the social learning tradition, parents and older siblings who engage in antisocial conduct serve as models of deviant behavior for younger children. For example, serial murderer Lorenzo Gilyard, who was convicted of six counts of murder in 2007 (he is believed to have murdered and raped up to 13 women from the 1970s to the 1990s), was raised in a family of violent offenders. His father had an extensive criminal career that included convictions for rape, and Gilyard's sister and brother were both convicted of homicide (Krajicek, 2012).



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Parents and siblings serve as the primary behavioral model for young children. Negative family situations are considered a leading cause of criminal behavior, according to social learning theory.

In families in which crime is openly committed, there are numerous opportunities to learn antisocial behavior, such as drug use and interpersonal violence, and numerous reinforcements of that behavior. In an important summary work, Farrington and Welsh (2007) reviewed the literature on family factors and crime and generated six global explanations for why offending tends to run in families.

1. There is intergenerational continuity in exposure to multiple risk factors wherein offending is part of a larger cycle of deprivation and antisocial behavior.
2. There is assortment, whereby antisocial people choose partners who are similar to themselves in terms of antisocial attitudes, traits, and behaviors (just as conventional, prosocial people often choose partners who are similar to them in terms of attitudes, traits, and behaviors).
3. There is a considerable amount of social learning whereby children observe the antisocial habits and behaviors of their parents, siblings, or both and subsequently “learn” how to commit crime.
4. There is the idea that criminal parents place their children in environmental situations that are conducive to offending.
5. There is labeling that occurs, where criminal justice systems disproportionately target youths with criminal parents.
6. There is evidence that “the effect of a criminal parent on a child’s offending is mediated by genetic mechanisms” (Farrington & Welsh, 2007, p. 59).

Peer Influences

A broad finding in psychology and criminology centers on the processes whereby peers affect the behavior of individuals and facilitate their conventional or antisocial behavior. While parents are the dominant socialization agent in the first decade of life, a youth’s peers are his or

her dominant socialization agent during the second decade of life. Moreover, it is during this decade, especially in the middle school and high school years, that individuals are most susceptible to the pressures to engage in delinquency (Moffitt, 1993).

The developmental effects of peers on antisocial behavior are complex, and the roles of pro-social peers and antisocial peers are equally important. Also, while peer influences are most impactful in teenage years, those influences begin far earlier. Beginning in the preschool years and extending into elementary school, a signal moment in the development of antisocial behavior is peer rejection. **Peer rejection** characterizes children who are more disliked than liked by their peers. The primary reason that a child is rejected by peers is due to the rejected child's high level of aggressive behavior (Coie, 1990; Coie & Dodge, 1998; Dodge, Coie, Pettit, & Price, 1990). For instance, Dodge and his colleagues (1990) found that rejected boys demonstrate the highest levels of anger, reactive aggression, and proactive or instrumental aggression.

Learning is centrally related to understanding crime. Much of the social learning that relates to criminal behavior occurs in friendship networks in which delinquent peers facilitate disengagement from conventional activities—such as studying, following school rules, and complying with parental demands—in favor of antisocial activities.

See *Case Study: Charles Manson* for a brief look at how Manson used peer influence to start a deadly cult.

Case Study: Charles Manson

One of the most notorious cult leaders in American history, Charles Manson formed the Manson Family cult in the late 1960s. Manson had a troubled, unstable childhood and was a juvenile delinquent; based on accounts from family members, he seemed to display psychopathic traits. He was later diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder.

As a young man, Manson became obsessed with the Beatles and wanted to become more famous than them. In and out of prison for most of his young adult life, Manson was released from a California prison in 1967 and soon began attracting a group of mostly female followers due to his charm and persuasion. The group called itself the Manson Family. One of the foundations of the cult was Manson's belief that a race war was impending and his "family" would be the saviors; he named the prophecy Helter Skelter, a song by the Beatles. According to his prophecy, the cult needed to initiate the war themselves. Manson sent his followers to commit homicides against Hollywood elites.

Manson's diagnosis and his criminal behavior can best be categorized under the abnormal psychology domain. However, Manson's charm and authoritative "leadership" were situational factors in eliciting the behavior of his "followers" in carrying out some of the most heinous murders of all time. The behavior of his followers is best conceptualized in terms of the power of situational influences (e.g., obedience to authority, peer pressure/influence, group dynamics) on human behavior, including eliciting criminal behavior.

(continued)

Case Study: Charles Manson (*continued*)

After the cult committed seven murders, the police finally traced the homicides back to the Manson Family. Manson, along with five of his followers, were sentenced to life in prison; during trial, they apparently showed no remorse for their crimes.

The peer influence in this case is astounding. Individuals were drawn in by Manson's charm and persuasion, and his antisocial characteristics were imitated.

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Neighborhood Effects

Instead of focusing on individual traits such as a child's personality, race or ethnicity, or psychological conflicts, criminologists Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1929, 1942) studied the impact of the "kinds of places" (neighborhoods) that created conditions favorable to delinquency. They believed delinquency was caused by the neighborhood in which a child lived.

Shaw and McKay focused on the city of Chicago, which served as a natural experiment of sorts that demonstrated the enduring importance of neighborhood characteristics on the delinquent and criminal behavior of its residents. For much of the 20th century, sociologists at the University of Chicago noticed that crime and disorder seemed to be concentrated within the same geographic areas of the city, particularly in the poorest neighborhoods close to the city center. Crime and disorder declined sharply as one moved from the city center to the suburbs. Shaw and McKay examined this transformation as it emerged and developed the theory of social disorganization.

Social Disorganization Theory

According to **social disorganization theory**, neighborhoods characterized by high residential mobility, tremendous ethnic heterogeneity, and high poverty levels will exhibit higher crime and delinquency rates. Shaw and McKay (1929, 1942) discovered that socially disorganized areas contain higher proportions of families on public assistance, less expensive rents, fewer residents owning homes, high infant mortality, and large immigrant populations. They also noted that delinquency rates in disorganized neighborhoods were static even though their racial and ethnic composition was quite dynamic. Crime-ridden neighborhoods were "bad" whether they were populated by western Europeans, southern and eastern Europeans, Latin Americans, or African Americans. Shaw and McKay interpreted these findings in ecological terms and decided that the communities themselves were the key factor.



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Social disorganization theory suggests that structural conditions of neighborhoods have a significant effect on human development and contribute to criminal behaviors.

Social disorganization theory has received favorable empirical support, and experts understand that the structural conditions of a disorganized neighborhood contribute to the negative behaviors of persons living there. Consistent with social disorganization theory, neighborhoods characterized by high levels of residential turnover are prone to greater levels of delinquency and victimization (Xie & McDowall, 2008). A recent study found that at the city level, places characterized by high levels of ethnic heterogeneity and economic disadvantage also have a higher number of gang members (Pyrooz, Fox, & Decker, 2010).

Simple exposure to violence in the most socially disorganized of neighborhoods creates multiple negative consequences. Over time, exposure to violence sets youths on a trajectory of steadily declining parental monitoring. Because of the toxic influences of gang activity and community violence, it becomes increasingly difficult for parents to manage and monitor the activities of their children and adolescents effectively and protect them from the effects of violence.

Collective Efficacy

Criminologists have increasingly used the social disorganization foundation when studying the behavioral and cultural responses that occur from living in blighted, disorganized neighborhoods. A major behavioral response is that of “collective efficacy,” an idea developed by Robert Sampson and his colleagues (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). **Collective efficacy** is a sense of mutual trust among neighbors in which there is collective investment in the common good and a willingness to intervene to help one another. Collective efficacy speaks to the traditional good deeds that make individuals “neighborly,” including monitoring and supervising children in the neighborhood even if the children are not one’s own, watching a neighbor’s house or vehicle when that person is out of town, maintaining a clean and orderly house and yard, providing emotional and perhaps financial assistance to those in need, and generally helping others. Neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy have more social cohesion and informal social control, and these conditions reduce the incidence of crime and disorder.

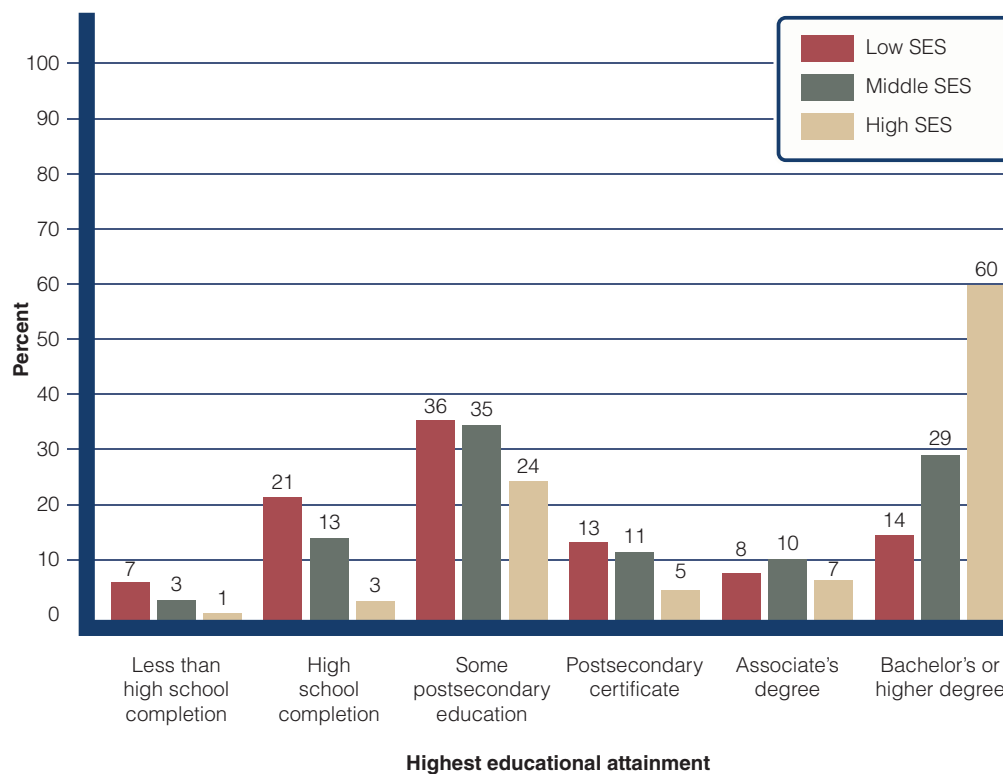
Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a combination of one’s educational attainment, income, and wealth that locates one on a stratification system. Sociologists use the term **stratification system** to divide society into relatively distinct segments, strata, or more generally, social classes. For example, low SES is characterized by low school achievement, including non-completion of high school, low-wage manual-labor jobs, and usually renting as opposed to home ownership. Middle SES is characterized by greater educational attainment, including

high school and college degrees, higher earnings, home ownership, and the accumulation of wealth. High SES typifies individuals who have very high educational attainment (e.g., MDs, PhDs, or JDs), salaried jobs paying more than \$100,000 per year, and even greater wealth accumulation. See Figure 4.2 for an example of educational attainment related to SES level. Although crime is not an automatic outcome of low SES, it is more prevalent among low-SES individuals than among those with higher SES.

Figure 4.2: Highest educational attainment of spring 2002 high school sophomores in 2012, by SES level

This graph provides an example of the relationship between educational attainment level and SES in a select group of high school students. The higher a student's SES, the more likely he or she is to complete high school and earn a higher degree.



From "Educational Attainment Differences by Students' Socioeconomic Status," by the National Center for Education Statistics, 2015 (<https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/educational-attainment-differences-by-students-socioeconomic-status>); Digest of Education Statistics 2014 (p. 51), by US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016, Washington, DC: Author.

For many decades, criminologists struggled with the idea that SES was related to crime and often rejected the idea that lower SES persons were more likely than higher SES persons to offend. Yet even the most critical reviews of the research demonstrated that there is an inverse relationship between SES and crime (i.e., higher SES is associated with lower crime rates), and when criminal violence is the dependent variable of interest, this relationship is even stronger (Walsh, 2011). Although crime does occur across the stratification system,

property crimes such as burglary and violent crimes such as murder, rape, armed robbery, and aggravated assault are more prevalent among individuals with lower SES. Indeed, the typical socioeconomic profile of a prisoner in the United States is very bleak and often involves low educational attainment or even educational failure, such as dropping out of middle or high school; indigent status; little to no work, medical, or retirement benefits; and essentially zero wealth.

Summary and Conclusion

The process of learning is central to criminological thought. Understanding the earliest learning theories by Pavlov, Thorndike, Watson, and Skinner paves the way to understanding criminal behavior. These behaviorist learning theories provided the foundation for sociologists such as Akers to develop social learning theories, which essentially state that learning occurs by observation and exposure to situational contexts.

Cognitive and social cognitive theories are a large part of criminological thought. Such theories focus on the cognitive and emotional processes related to the ways that people think in relation to influences on behavior. These perspectives align with learning theories because learning processes are involved.

The discussion on learning theories provided a natural segue to situational and environmental effects on crime. Antisocial behaviors are often learned from a young age at home through the teenage years in school. In addition, socioeconomic factors may play a role in the likelihood that an individual will commit crime.

There is impressive empirical support for the ideas that exposure to antisocial individuals, imitation of deviance, and viewing crime as a positive, reinforcing option are related to crime. Almost without exception, these content areas suggest that crime is most accurately understood as the interplay between the individual and situational/environmental forces.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Before you began reading this book, what was your personal theory of crime causation? Which of the theories introduced in this chapter came closest to your personal view?
2. If any given theory was able to explain 25% of all crimes committed, would you consider that theory to be successful? Why or why not?
3. Would criminal psychology look different today if all the early theories to explain criminal behavior had been developed by women? Why or why not?
4. How do the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement operate in our daily lives?

Key Terms

behaviorism A social learning-based theory developed by John Watson that suggests behaviors are the product of conditioning that occurs as an individual interacts with the environment. Behaviorism rejects the notion that internal, person-specific factors are the drivers of behavior.

blank slate The philosophical idea that people are born basically the same in terms of their innate abilities and that experience molds their behaviors.

classical conditioning A theory developed by Ivan Pavlov that is said to occur when two stimuli are linked together to produce a new learned response in a person or an animal.

collective efficacy A sense of mutual trust among neighbors in which there is collective investment in the common good and willingness to help one another.

conventional beliefs Beliefs that are unfavorable toward committing crime and favorable toward conformity.

definitions An individual's attitudes, orientation, and rationalizations that characterize his or her behavior and define it in moral or value-based terms. Definitions refer to the general mind-set a person has when committing a behavioral act and how the person responds to his or her behavior.

deterrence A punishment philosophy that uses the threat of punishment to control behavior and prevent crime.

differential association The varying or "differential" associations or friendships and acquaintanceships that individuals directly and indirectly have with others. These friendships and acquaintanceships include behaviors and the expression of values and beliefs that support the behaviors.

differential association-reinforcement theory A theory developed by Ronald Akers that builds on Sutherland's differential theory of crime, Skinner's operant conditioning theory, and Bandura's social learning theory. It argues that criminal behavior is learned via both social and nonsocial reinforcements.

differential reinforcement The balance of reward and punishment that is produced from behavioral acts.

imitation The repeating or mimicry of behaviors that have been directly or indirectly observed. Imitation is particularly salient during the initial exposure to behaviors that will be modeled.

law of effect Thorndike's theory stating that the consequences of behavior serve to strengthen or weaken its continuation.

moral disengagement A set of social cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to justify their unethical and potentially harmful behavior in order to preserve their self-image. Developed by Albert Bandura.

negative punishment A deterrent that results in the removal of a valued stimulus and in a decrease in the behavior.

negative reinforcement The strengthening of a behavioral response through the removal of an aversive stimulus.

neutralizing beliefs Definitions by which an individual justifies or provides excuses for why his or her antisocial behavior is permissible.

operant conditioning A learning theory developed by B. F. Skinner that suggests behavior is produced and modified based on the reinforcements and punishments it receives.

peer rejection The rejection of a child who is more disliked than liked by his or her peers, most likely due to the child's high level of aggressive behavior.

peers Persons of a similar status in an individual's social environment.

positive beliefs Definitions by which an individual believes committing crime is permissible.

positive punishment A deterrent that results in a behavior response that is decreased or weakened when it is followed by an aversive stimulus.

positive reinforcement A deterrent that results in a desired behavioral response followed by a rewarding or reinforcing stimulus that strengthens the behavioral response.

self-efficacy For the purposes of scientific study, the belief that one harbors about one's competence in a particular situation.

social cognitive theory A set of theories of social behavior studied by a number of social psychologists; assumes people are rational and that cognitive processes are mainly responsible for behavior, self-regulation, and the modulation of emotions.

social disorganization theory A theory that asserts that neighborhoods characterized by high residential mobility, tremendous ethnic heterogeneity, and high levels of poverty will exhibit higher crime and delinquency rates.

socialization agents Persons such as parents, peers, teachers, and others who contribute to socialization.

social learning theory A theory originally developed by Albert Bandura and further researched and developed by Ronald Akers and Gary Jensen. It suggests that behavior is motivated by the effects it produces and is largely based on mimicry of behaviors to which one is frequently exposed.

socioeconomic status (SES) A combination of a person's educational attainment, income, and wealth that places him or her on a stratification system.

stratification system A term used by sociologists to divide society into relatively distinct groupings based on social class.