

A Case Study Analysis of Criminal Behaviour using Burgess-Akers' Differential Association Reinforcement Theory

Case summary

Tobi was a happy and cheerful boy throughout his childhood years. He had a loving father and mother (Roby and Janet) who were legally married and lived together as a happy couple. Both parents were teachers who worked in the same secondary school located about eight miles away from their home. Tobi was the only son of his parents. His parents loved him so much and provided all his basic needs, both materially and emotionally. Sadly, his parents died in a car crash after colliding with truck on a motorway not too far from their home while returning from work. Tobi was almost 4 years old when he lost both parents. One of his uncles, Morgan, loved him dearly and as questions about Tobi's care arose, Morgan willingly took Tobi with him to live with alongside his only son, Mathias, aged 12 at the time.

Morgan was a delivery driver whose main duty was picking up goods from warehouses in industrial estates to be delivered to high street shops. He drove alone in his van everyday but on Saturdays and during school holidays, he would take Toby and Mathias with him while working. Both would seat in his vehicle having conversations and watching Morgan as he loaded goods onto his van in industrial estates and unloaded them on reaching high street shops. Morgan was a good man who took care of both Tobi and Mathias very well. Both loved him so much. However, Morgan was in the habit of stealing loose items on top of goods pallets left outside the warehouses by some of the companies in the industrial estates as Toby and Mathias watched. By the time Tobi reached 8 years, Morgan had assigned him and Mathias the duty of helping him to steal from pallets. Tobi was later caught stealing from an open truck in another industrial estate and was charged and convicted of theft when he was 13. Upon investigation,

it was found that Tobi had developed a criminal career specialising in theft and had made a lot of money from stolen goods, which he used to buy designer wears and expensive jewelleries.

Assignment Task:

Draw on ‘differential association reinforcement theory’ to analyse the above case study, explaining why Tobi became a thief.

Case Study Analysis

Differential association reinforcement theory was developed by Burgess and Akers in an attempt to expand Sutherland’s social learning theory (Pratt et al., 2010). The main proposition of both Sutherland’s social learning theory and Burgess-Akers’ differential association reinforcement theory is that criminal behaviour follows a learning process which involves an interaction with a criminal (Pratt et al., 2010). In other words, one learns crime and starts committing crimes after learning it from someone who has been doing so following an interaction with that person. Differential association reinforcement theory combines the social elements of both sociology and psychology to explain why crime occurs as a result of learning processes (Akers, 2009).

Burgess and Akers used three important concepts to illustrate the link between social learning or interaction and criminal behaviour and these are differential association, differential reinforcement, definitions and imitation. The first concept, ‘differential association’ refers to an interaction with someone or a group known to hold attitudes and norms that are supportive of criminality. The individual may be close to the person or group or distant to them. The closer the individual is to the person or group holding the attitudes and norms, the more the individual will be influenced with them and vice versa. It is hypothesised that ‘the more one’s patterns of differential association are balanced in the direction of greater exposure to deviant behavior

and attitudes, the greater the probability of that person engaging in deviant or criminal behavior' (Akers and Jensen, 2008, p.39). Definitions are people's attitudes that allow them to determine whether an act is good or bad and such attitudes can come from religious beliefs, socialisation processes and more. These definitions can be so strong in guiding a behaviour once learned (Akers and Jensen, 2008). The stronger one holds attitudes connected to deviant or criminal behaviour, the higher the chances of committing a criminal act. Differential reinforcement refers to the rewards and punishments associated with criminal behaviour. The individual continues with the act in anticipation of a reward but may refrain when punishment is perceived. Imitation refers to engaging in a criminal behaviour after observing it from someone or a group. It can be directly learned from a person in real life or indirectly learned from the media. This is in line with Bandura's (1965) social learning theory that any kind of behaviour can be learned by observing role models.

The differential association reinforcement theory adequately explains Tobi's criminal career. If Tobi had grown up under his law-abiding parents, it was unlikely that he would have become a criminal because he could not have learnt theft from his parents as his parents were not criminals. The problem started when his parents died and his uncle, Morgan became his carer. Morgan took Tobi and Mathias with him when stealing from pallets and this was how the criminal career started setting in gradually. This was so because crime is a learning process according to differential association theory (Akers, 2009).

Within this theory, associating or interacting with criminally-minded people prepares an individual towards becoming a criminal (Burgess and Akers, 1966). Tobi was associating with Morgan as he stole from pallets and as a result, learned what Morgan was doing. This theory also holds that the closer the individual is to a criminally-minded person, the greater the chances that the individual will do what that person does (Akers and Jensen, 2008). This was the case with Tobi who lived with Morgan as his carer and would follow him to industrial estates at

least once a week observing what he did and how he did it. By continuous observation, imitation set in leading to Tobi starting to steal. Most importantly, Tobi was obtaining rewards for his theft, which was his ability to buy designer wears with the money. This reinforced him to continue with the criminal career, otherwise, he might not have succeeded if he experienced punishments earlier.

References

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