

ON THE EVOLVING SYNTHESIS OF
DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION AND
ANOMIE THEORY¹: A PERSPECTIVE
FROM THE SOCIOLOGY OF SCIENCE

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It was with great pleasure and, I confess, with no little pride that I learned from your president, Charles F. Wellford, and your president-elect, James F. Short, Jr., that the American Society of Criminology had granted me the Edwin H. Sutherland Award. In all innocence, I had intended to limit myself this evening to just a few words of deep-felt appreciation, but then Professor Wellford let me know that 20 minutes or so are usually set aside for recipients of the award and that I, too, was expected to fill that cognitive space. And so I continue with a scattering of reminiscent observations linking Edwin Sutherland's and my own theoretical work.

The Sutherland award holds much special meaning for me. After all, it is notorious that I am not a full-fledged criminologist. However, it happens that some two-thirds of a century ago I became persuaded that theoretical sociology was too sharply focussed on social patterns of conforming behavior and so I turned to the task of trying to develop a sociological theory of deviant behavior. And, of course, deviant behavior notably includes crime and delinquency. You will understand, then, that it means much to a disciplinary outsider like myself to have your society of specialists in the science, art, and craft of criminology grant this fine recognition to the stubborn efforts of a generalist.

It also means much to me that yours is the *Sutherland* Award. For I have long admired the exercises in metatheorizing that were often implicit in Edwin Sutherland's explicit contributions to criminology. Thus, back in 1945, a few years after his paper on "white-collar criminality" had appeared, I took occasion to observe that a major

function of conceptual clarification [is] to make explicit the character of data subsumed under a concept. It serves to reduce the likelihood that spurious empirical findings will be couched in terms of given concepts. Thus, Sutherland's re-examination of the received concept of "crime" provides an instructive instance of how such clarification induces a revision of hypotheses concerning the data organized in

1. Since the term *theory* has been historically adopted for these ideas for better than half a century, I adopt it here as well, not pausing for metatheorizing designed to distinguish *theory* from *pre-Kuhnian paradigm* and *model*.

terms of the concept [Sutherland, 1940]. He demonstrates an equivocation implicit in criminological theories which seek to account for the fact that there is a much higher rate of crime, as "officially measured," in the lower than in the upper social classes. These crime "data" (organized in terms of a particular operational concept and measure of crime) have led to a series of hypotheses which view poverty, slum conditions, feeble-mindedness, and other characteristics held to be highly associated with low[er]-class status as the [so-called] "causes" of criminal behavior. [However,] once the concept of crime is clarified to refer to the violation of criminal law and is thus extended to include "white-collar criminality" in business and the professions—violations which are less often reflected in official crime statistics than are lower-class violations—the presumptive [strong] association between low social status and crime may no longer [be as strong as it seemed]. We need not pursue Sutherland's analysis further to detect the function of conceptual clarification in this instance. It provides for a *reconstruction of data* by indicating more precisely just what they include and what they exclude. In doing so, it leads to a liquidation of hypotheses set up to account for spurious data by questioning the assumptions on which the statistical data were based. By hanging a question mark on an implicit assumption underlying the research definition of crime—the assumption that violations of the criminal code by members of the several social classes are representatively registered in the official statistics—this conceptual clarification had direct implications for a nucleus of theories (Merton, 1945:465–466).

I have quoted at length from that paper of half a century ago only to indicate that my appreciation of Sutherland's foundational work in criminology is of long standing rather than being newly evoked by this special occasion. And now, at my improbably advanced age, I am also prepared to say, as I obviously could not say when still in my 20s, that when it comes to the study of deviant behavior, I regard Sutherland's evolving idea of differential association and my evolving idea of anomie-and-opportunity-structures as definite complementarities. They are complementary in several respects.

To begin with, as implied by that long quotation, it can be argued that, rightly understood, Sutherland's specialized theorizing in criminology has contributed to general theorizing in sociology, just as the Sutherland Award now confirms the hope that my general theorizing in sociology may have contributed to specialized theorizing in criminology.

Further, as I have also observed in print—this, a mere 20 years ago,² our sociological ideas are complementary in their problematics and key questions: Put in overly compressed terms, the theory of differential association holds that individuals learn to engage in criminal behavior by associating with others, principally in face-to-face groups, who prefer and practice such behavior. Thus, the key question in this theory centers on the sociocultural transmission of criminal patterns: It inquires into the processes of socialization and social learning through which such patterns are learned from significant others. With its focus on this key question, the theory has little to say about how those patterns of criminal preferences and behavior emerged in the first place.

Correlatively, the theory of anomie-and-opportunity-structures also has a delimited problematics. It holds that rates of various types of deviant behavior (not only crime) are high in a society where, as with the American Dream, the culture places a high premium on economic success and upward mobility for *all* its members, although in brute social fact large numbers of people located in the lower reaches of the social structure have severely limited access to legitimate resources for achieving those culturally induced or reinforced goals. Since the key question in this theory focusses on the socially structured sources and consequences of deviant behavior, it says next to nothing about the social mechanisms for transmitting such patterns of behavior or about the ways in which individuals' initial departures from the norms crystallize into deviant careers. In short, the two theories focus on complementary problematics and seek to provide complementary solutions of those problems.

As I now learn, thanks to the recent scholarship of Elin Waring, David Weisburd, and Ellen Chayet, Sutherland himself indicated that, to his mind, anomie theory and his theory of differential association "are consistent with each other and one is the counterpart of the other. Both apply to ordinary crime as well as to white-collar crime" (Waring et al., 1995:208, quoting Sutherland, 1949b:255).

Early compelling evidence of the complementarity of the two theories was provided by their syntheses and extensions that started with the pioneering work of Albert K. Cohen, Lloyd E. Ohlin, and Richard A. Cloward in the 1950s and continue on an enlarged scale to the present day. It would make no more sense to bring a detailed account of those enduring contributions to *this* company than to bring coals to Newcastle or timber into the woods. But I can point out that those still consequential syntheses plainly presuppose an underlying complementarity; they are not

2. Continuing with this retrospective, I barely paraphrase page 32 from the opening chapter, "The Sociology of Social Problems," of *Contemporary Social Problems* (Merton and Nisbet, 1976).

would-be Hegelian syntheses of thesis and antithesis—as those three pioneering criminologists were of course abundantly aware. Thus, Cohen has repeatedly observed that his 1955 monograph *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*, which introduced the concept of “delinquent subcultures,” represented “a fusion of the Chicago and anomie tradition” (Cohen, 1968:IV–152). (And of course, the Chicago tradition eminently includes Sutherland as well as Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay.) A few years later, the complementarity of those two traditions was further demonstrated by their major fusion and extension in the Cloward and Ohlin (1960) monograph *Delinquency and Opportunity* as was crisply symbolized by its joint dedication “To Robert K. Merton and Edwin H. Sutherland.”

Shifting gears for a moment to the perspective of the sociology of science, one notes that these early extenders of the two traditions were Sutherland’s and my students or associates. That is to say, they came from one or both of our cognitive micro-environments. As an undergraduate at Harvard in the late 1930s, Albert Cohen had been subjected to an oral as well as a printed publication of “Social Structure and Anomie” (Merton, 1938) in a course he happened to take with me. He then went on to Indiana University for graduate study with Sutherland in 1939, where, after a three-year stint in the armed forces, he returned in due course as Sutherland’s associate on the faculty. As once before, I hazard the conjecture that Cohen’s experience in those two micro-environments may have facilitated, though it did not of course determine, his blending and notable development of the two theoretical traditions.

In like fashion, Lloyd Ohlin had found his way in the mid-1950s to the Columbia micro-environment as a faculty member of its School of Social Work after having studied with Sutherland at Indiana and taken his doctorate at the University of Chicago. Thus, he had had firsthand exposure to the cultural transmission and differential association traditions in both micro-environments where they had originated and had been substantially developed. At Columbia, Ohlin encountered Dick Cloward, who was then at work on his dissertation “Social Control and Anomie: A Study of the Prison Community,” which as it happens, he was writing largely under my direction. And again, we notice that their early blending and considerable extension of the two traditions followed upon direct or vicarious involvement in the two cognitive micro-environments.

The cognitive process involved in the syntheses and extensions of those traditions holds further interest for the sociology of science. In both cases, it involved a process recurrent in the selective accumulation of scientific knowledge: the successive *explicit* identification of theoretical problems and the emergence of consequential concepts that had remained *implicit* in prior formulations. Thus, Albert Cohen had identified a sociological gap

in the problematics of Sutherland's basically sociopsychological paradigm of differential association as well as a gap in the problematics of "social structure and anomie" that ignored the social interactions influencing individuals' choices of solutions to structurally induced strains. It was that double specification of theoretical ignorance which helped lead him to the important sociological concept of "delinquent subcultures." So, too, we find Cloward and Ohlin specifying a conceptual gap in the anomie-and-opportunity-structure paradigm and developing a subsequent idea in Sutherland's paradigm by adding the important parallel concept of "illegitimate opportunity structure" to the received concept of "legitimate opportunity structure."

Although those early extensions of the two theoretical traditions derived from colleagues in local cognitive environments, here as with scientific knowledge generally, further developments derived largely from those colleagues-at-a-distance who constitute what the historian of science, Derek de Solla Price, described as "invisible colleges": informal collectives of scientists interacting at the same research fronts and generally limited to a size "that can be handled by interpersonal relationships" (Price, 1963:ch. 3; see also Crane, 1972; Chubin, 1983). So far as I know, no sociologist of science has yet begun to study the invisible colleges at work on the various research fronts in criminology, past and present. It should be enlightening to examine the diffusion and differentiation of criminological knowledge as it moved from local micro-environments to cosmopolitan macro-environments.

Having noted the substantive complementarity of Sutherland's and my ideas, I now note formal similarities and differences in our styles of work. By way of similarity, we both made a practice of tenaciously following up our ideas, Sutherland continuously and I intermittently. As you know, the first formulations of the two theories appeared at almost the same time, differential association in 1939 and anomie-and-structurally-differentiated-access-to-opportunity in 1938. We then worked, each in our own way, to *evolve* those ideas by reflecting critically on them over the years. Sutherland extended the first formulation of his theory in the 1947 (fourth) edition of his still enduring textbook *Principles of Criminology*, and he dealt with it further in the monograph *White Collar Crime* (1949a) published shortly before his death. His other severely critical reflections on the theory appear in the *Sutherland Papers*, which were put together after his death by the benign editorial hands of Albert Cohen, Alfred Lindesmith, and Karl Schuessler (1956). That critique, the editors tell us, "was intended only for circulation among Sutherland's associates" and was titled, with almost masochistic detachment, "The Swan Song of Differential Association." Most in point for present purposes, this reflective self-

critique, written in 1944 and unpublished in Sutherland's lifetime, introduced a fundamental new ingredient, the concept of "opportunity":

One factor in criminal behavior that is at least partially extraneous to differential association is opportunity. Criminal behavior is partially a function of opportunities to commit specific classes of crime, such as embezzlement, bank burglary or illicit heterosexual intercourse. Opportunities to commit crimes of these classes are partially a function of physical factors and of cultures which are neutral as to crime. Consequently, criminal behavior is not caused entirely by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns, and differential association is not a sufficient cause of criminal behavior (Cohen et al., 1956:31).

Thus, Sutherland had himself moved toward a convergence between the two theories and, as I've intimated, partly anticipated in undeveloped sociological form the clear-cut Cloward and Ohlin theoretical advance of supplementing the concept of differential access to the *legitimate* opportunity structure with the concept of differential access to the *illegitimate* opportunity structure.

As Sutherland tried in his way to extend the first formulation of differential association theory of 1939, so I have tried in my way to extend the first formulation of anomie-and-opportunity-structure theory of 1938. This I undertook in a half dozen papers appearing between 1949 and 1976 and in another appearing most recently in 1995.³ However, when witnessed from the perspective of the sociology of scientific knowledge, it is clear that both theoretical traditions have evolved principally through the work still being carried forward by the various invisible colleges. So far as I know, the most recent works are the volume edited by Freda Adler and William S. Laufer, which appeared in 1995 under the telling title *The Legacy of Anomie Theory*, and the volume edited by Nikos Passas and Robert Agnew, which is to appear in 1997 under the telling correlative title *The*

3. That evolution of anomie theory was emphatically and critically noted in fine-grained detail by Stephen Cole (1975:175-220). Drawing upon my "Social Structure and Anomie" (1938:672-682), Cole also draws upon most of my further efforts at extensions and continuities: "Social Structure and Anomie: Revisions and Extensions" (1949:226-257); "The Socio-Cultural Environment and Anomie" (1955:24-50); "Continuities in the Theory of Social Structure and Anomie" (1957a:161-194); "Priorities in Scientific Discovery: A Chapter in the Sociology of Science" (1957b:635-649), an application of anomie theory to deviant behavior in science; "Social Conformity, Deviation, and Opportunity Structures" (1959:177-189); and "Anomie, Anomia, and Social Interaction: Contexts of Deviant Behavior" (1964:213-242). Writing in 1975, Cole could not draw upon two further cases in point of what I have taken to be complementarity: "The Sociology of Social Problems" (1976, esp. at pp. 31-37); and "Opportunity Structure: The Emergence, Diffusion, and Differentiation of a Sociological Concept, 1930s-1950s" (1995:3-78).

Future of Anomie Theory. Various papers in both volumes contribute to the evolving synthesis of the two theoretical orientations.

So much for the similarity in Sutherland's and my styles of work: Both of us have engaged in a pattern of iterative critical examination of our ideas over extended periods of time in an effort to develop better approximations to a workable theory.

Now, a few concluding words about a distinct difference in our work styles: Sutherland worked *continuously* toward that objective by focussing on the evolving idea of differential association, while I worked *discontinuously* on the evolving idea of anomie-and-opportunity structures when turning temporarily from diverse other problems in the sociology of science, structural sociology, mass communications, reference group theory, the focussed group interview (whence, the widely used and often-abused "focus group"), the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage involving the Matthew effect, and the dynamics of unintended consequences and the self-fulfilling prophecy. What one can see exemplified in our respective work styles is, I believe, the metaphorical contrast between *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, a contrast brought to contemporary attention by the social philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1953), who quotes the ancient Greek poet Archilochus as saying, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Otherwise put, this is the contrast between the pluralist and the monist. As a consummate monist, Sutherland was definitely a hedgehog, just as, in effect, he once declared my pluralist self to be a fox—this, in the only note I still have from him, written better than half a century ago, which closes by remarking that "I marvel at your ability to write so much on such varied topics."

As you see, the Sutherland Award has evoked a scattering of reminiscent reflections on the evolving synthesis of the two theoretical traditions. I suspect that one unintended consequence of that award will be my further pondering on that still consequential development in criminological inquiry.

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