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CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY IN CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND ITS POSSIBLE USE IN TURKISH CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract

Crime theories are mostly used in criminological studies which are developed in the 20th century such as social disorganization theory in 1920s, social learning theory in 1960s and life course theory in 1980s. Therefore, researchers using crime theories on juvenile delinquency may contend that nothing new in the explanation of crime and delinquency over the past thirty years. In addressing this comment, social learning theory was selected and different works were identified. Examination of these works shows that there are new developments in the social learning theory in the area of crime and delinquency which are congruent with the findings of qualitative interviews of 30 incarcerated youth in Turkey in Tasgin's (2012) study.

Keywords: Social Learning Theory; Juvenile Delinquency; Turkey; Peer Influence; Collective Behavior.

1. Introduction

Explanation of the crime is changing throughout time by using new statistical methods, by new findings, concepts which make contribution to the theory. Moreover, contradictory findings also develop the theory because of providing new explanations to the theory. I do not expect to see theories in criminology as continuously emerging like other theories which existed before. Instead, I consider developments in explanations of crime and delinquency within the existing theories.

Sometimes an article which was published 10 years ago had made great contributions to the theory while most recent articles did not. When examining an article, researchers should be aware of that theory may not be used explicitly. For example, some articles about social learning theory did not use the learning theory explicitly but we can consider them under learning theory. Sometimes, researchers may use social learning variables in their studies but do not mention or explicitly state that they used social learning variables. Akers (1998) pointed out this issue and claimed that although most of the studies used variables or hypotheses from learning or differential association theory, they did not make reference to both theories even though they measured and showed the strong effects of deviant attitudes, informal social sanctions, peer associations, reaction to deviance, parental models or other relationships which were obviously supportive of social learning theory. For example, Akers (1998) stated that expanded version of deterrence models showed the strong effects of moral evaluations (definitions favorable or unfavorable to crime), actual or anticipated informal social sanctions, and measures of anticipated rewards as well as risk of punishment (differential social reinforcement) on the individual's commission of crime which also provided support for social learning theory. Or, Osgood et al (1996) stated that unstructured and supervised socializing with peers was among the most important contexts in which youth experienced situational factors to deviant behavior. However, this study used social learning variables but did not make any reference to social learning theory. Another example is Osgood and Anderson's

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(2004) study in which they applied an individual level routine activities perspective to explain delinquency. They concluded that time spent in unstructured socializing with peers had both individual and contextual effects that explain a large variation in the rates of delinquency. Then, they proposed integration of social disorganization and routine activities theory with making no reference to social learning theory. However, this article could be considered as good contribution to learning theory because of considering situational factors. Therefore, we should examine articles carefully and examine whether or not they used the theory explicitly, whether they used propositions of the theory correctly, whether they used appropriate measures or not. If one type of data collection method is not appropriate, other methods may be used. For example, Watkins and Melde (2007) stated that the Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) believed that individuals with low self control were more likely to give inaccurate responses compared to their higher self control counterparts which would affect survey validity. Therefore, due to lacking test of this proposition, the authors examined the relationship between self control and differential response in longitudinal data in which self control and self reported offenses in four waves. The authors found that sample retention was not because of self control but sociodemographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity and family structure. However, they found that self control was significantly related to item nonresponse in the survey which means that individuals with low self control were more likely not to respond self report survey items compared to their high self control counterparts. They recommended further studies to account for all six elements of self control while they used two of them which were risk seeking and impulsivity. These kinds of studies may help to enhance our understanding which method to use and how propositions of the theory may be used appropriately.

Social learning theory was developed in Akers and his colleagues' article in 1979 and they developed the theory with its basic propositions. After extending differential association theory of Sutherland, Burgess and Akers (1966) proposed that associating with criminals was not enough for individuals to engage in crime, but crime should also provided reinforcing rewards in the absence of punishment. They called this theory as 'differential association-reinforcement' theory. They combined Sutherland's theory with principles of operant psychology. We can say that Akers' social learning theory was first proposed as 'differential association-reinforcement theory'.

Akers extended Sutherland's differential association theory which argued that deviant/criminal behavior was learned in interaction of others but Sutherland did not specify the mechanisms by which such behavior was learned. Akers (1985) stated that individuals may have many deviant peers but if they do not spend more time with them, they will not transmit norms and cultivate delinquency. Therefore, he proposed that spending more time with deviant peers (i.e., involvement) will expose individual to deviant definitions, models of behavior, and reinforcement.

The theory was based on four major concepts: Differential association, definitions, differential reinforcements, and imitation. In this respect, Akers (1998) summarized social learning theory in one proposition: "The probability that persons will engage in criminal and deviant behavior is increased and the probability of their conforming to the norm is decreased when they differentially associate with others who commit criminal behavior and espouse definitions favorable to it, are relatively more exposed in person or symbolically to salient criminal/deviant models, define it as desirable or justified in a situation discriminative for the behavior, and have received in the past and anticipate in the current or future situation relatively greater than punishment for the behavior" (p. 50).

2. Developments in the Social Learning Theory

Developments in the social learning theory in the past thirty years were displayed below considering with the findings of Tasgin's (2012) study which was conducted in a juvenile prison in Turkey with thirty convicted juveniles.

2.1. Methodological and Measurement Issues

Krohn (1999) pointed out measurement problem in social learning studies. He examined one of Akers study (Akers et al 1979) in which the authors used differential

association, definitions, imitation, differential reinforcement, and construct of both social and nonsocial reinforcement measures. He stated that differential association had explained 63% of the variance while all other remaining variables explained 68% of the variance. Therefore, Krohn (1999) stated that Akers was right for assuming differential association concept as having other concepts in it and asked if this concept was considered to have other concepts in it, why other concepts were also used; or alternatively it would be instructive to exclude differential association concept and use other component parts because it served as summarizing those parts. He stated that it would not be wise to incorporate differential peer association when other learning processes were included in the model. Therefore, Krohn's first critique about social learning theory was incorporating measures of both differential association and other learning processes which created ambiguity. Therefore, researchers who will test this theory should consider this new finding when testing the theory.

Another argument of Krohn (1999) was that if differential association was a global concept which summarized other concepts of the theory, how one can identify just differential association in causal order/argument. Krohn (1999) used Akers' (1998) social learning model with differential association as an endogenous variable in which the model had 43% of the variance in onset of stable smoking. In that model, definitions and reinforcements were in time 1 and time 2 whereas differential peer association was in time 3. Krohn asked how it could be possible to justify the learning of definitions and anticipation of reinforcements in the absence of differential peer association while Akers assumed that differential association was the context in which all learning processes occurred. Therefore, Krohn criticized the model as misspecified and contended that differential peer association should be antecedent to those processes at time 1 and to have those processes be endogenous to differential association subsequent to time 3.

Brauer (2009) contended that researchers who used direct measures of reinforcement such as actual or experienced consequences could produce convincing results when testing reinforcement hypotheses; because there was a distinction between anticipation of behavioral consequences which was proposed by Akers and consequences of behaviors themselves. Direct examination of reinforcement was more important than indirect examination of reinforcement. For instance, observing friends being picked up by the police, experiencing psychological deficits of drug use were examples of vicarious rewards/punishments and actual nonsocial rewards/punishments. Brauer (2009) claimed that researchers who employed indirect measures of reinforcement such as anticipations or expectations would produce less convincing results in terms of testing reinforcement theory; because former only tap into theorized products of the reinforcement learning process. However, the author stated that use of indirect measure of reinforcement learning process was better than only relying on differential association variables as proxy to those learning mechanisms. Second, indirect measures were mostly available in secondary data sets which were mostly used by the researchers. Therefore, the author suggested use of indirect measures of reinforcement such as anticipated parental or peer approval or disapproval of deviance, anticipated informal or formal workplace consequences for deviance, and other anticipated potential rewards or costs of deviance.

Lotz and Lee (1999) stated that relationship between peers and one's delinquency may be erroneous. They stated that when adolescents were asked about their friends' feeling and did regarding violent and delinquent acts, because most adolescents were unsure of the correct answer, they were more willing to tend to project their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors onto them which in turn cause high correlation and similarity between their friend's and their own delinquency.

2.2. Considering Macro Level influences

Another contribution to the social learning theory was incorporating social structural variables into the social learning theory. Akers (1998) extended social learning theory to the macro level by explaining group differences in crime rates, differences among class and gender groups, communities, and societies which was defined as Social Structure and Social Learning (SSSL) model. He stated that social structure variables had indirect effect on individual's

conduct. They were hypothesized to have effects on differential association, imitation, differential reinforcement, and definitions which in turn had direct impact on individuals' conduct. When those factors are combined with social learning processes, we can state that characteristics of the environment as well as the individual's position in this environment affect crime through their effect on the individual's exposure to criminal associations, models, definitions, and reinforcements.

Matsueda and Heimer's (1987) study is a good example for how learning of definitions of delinquency may differ between races. The authors examined how broken homes may influence delinquency among both blacks and non blacks. They found that broken homes has greater influence on delinquency for blacks than non blacks by mediating effect of excess of definitions favorable to delinquency which was fostered by broken homes. Tasgin (2012) found that family's low socioeconomic status, residential mobility, and excessive parental drinking were the three important structural background factors in juveniles' lives. They served as starting points for juveniles' negative trajectories. Low socioeconomic status of the family was the most influential background factor in juveniles' life course. It led families to live in bad neighborhood and disrupted youth's lives. In Tasgin's study, of the bad neighborhoods, consistent with the literature on squatter areas in Turkey, squatter neighborhoods were the most common type where juveniles lived (Baslevant and Dayioglu, 2005). Eighteen juveniles (60%) lived in squatter neighborhoods. Of those juveniles who lived in squatter areas, sixteen (88.8%) stated that they committed crime, used drugs or had delinquent friends in those neighborhoods. For example, Cem described how he became involved in criminal activities through his delinquent friends in a squatter neighborhood,

It was the first neighborhood when I got into trouble. Everything happened when I was living there. It was a squatter area and I had many bad friends. When you ask other people about my neighborhood, they would say it is a bad place to live in... Because of my friends, I had to follow in their tracks. They were bullying, beating people and I was hanging out with them and doing what they were doing in that neighborhood (Cem).

When families moved to better neighborhoods, families did not change their supervision of or attachment to youth, and youth just returned to their delinquent peers in their previous bad neighborhoods, due to lack of friends in new neighborhoods or because they wanted to continue their drug trajectory. Sixteen juveniles moved from such areas and six of them (37.5%) described why they turned back to their bad neighborhoods. The most common reason for returning to crime-ridden neighborhoods and squatter areas was desire to spend time with delinquent friends. For example, Mehmet's family moved into a better area, but he preferred to return to his previous high-crime neighborhood due to his delinquent friends,

The second neighborhood was better than the first neighborhood, but I did not spend much time there, and mostly I used to go to my first neighborhood to hang out with my friends.

2.3. Peer Influence

Peer influence is mostly studied in social learning studies. Warr (2002) stated that general emphasis of peer influence was "bad" kids influence "good" kids by changing their moral standards, beliefs, or attitudes. However, the authors contended that kids may conform to their behavior to "bad" kids without actually agreeing them. Therefore, he used two concepts which were drawn from the literature. Compliance was the first concept which refers to behaving as the group wants kids to without agreeing with the group. Second concept was private acceptance which refers to changing in attitude or beliefs in the direction of the group. Kids not only act as the group wishes, but also believe as the group believes. Sutherland's differential association theory was based on the idea of private acceptance. He warned that peer influence did not necessarily entail private acceptance of the behavior. We can see that people's beliefs and definitions favorable or unfavorable to crime may not change even individuals engage in delinquency without agreeing their definitions and beliefs.

Tasgin (2012) stated that due to lack of attachment to parents, witnessing domestic violence, and parental beating, peers became more important to youth than their parents. Juveniles lived in bachelor's houses with their delinquent peers, which supported their drug use, continued illegal behavior, and running away. Children begin life with very close attachment to their parents. However, as they grow up, they form closer attachments to their

friends. Friends have a great influence on juveniles' behaviors, including their delinquency (Warr, 1993). Therefore, for many adolescents, friends become more important than parents. One of the respondents described his strong bond with his peers and how his parents were ineffective in stopping his crime trajectory,

My family did not want me to commit crime and be with my friends because they believed that if I did not have those friends, I would not commit any crime. I was with them all the time, and when I was working and earning money, I was spending it with my friends. Then, I was not going to school and I was hanging out with my friends. After a while, my family said they would no longer stay with me if I continued committing crime, and I said [to my parents] go away. I thought that they did not want me to be good at that time. I always used to say to them, those were my friends, close friends, the most valuable things in my life.

Another new contribution about peer influence was considering social mechanisms of peer influence such as fear of ridicule, loyalty, and status. Those mechanisms were helpful to understand influence of peers in different way than the traditional belief which proposed that learning and incorporating an excess of definitions favoring violations of crime. Because of the *fear of ridicule*, adolescents can engage in delinquent and dangerous behaviors in order to avoid ridicule. If adolescents do not engage in those activities, they can be expelled from the group, abandoned/rejected by the group. Sometimes losing group means losing identity and consequently prestige as well as sense of belonging (Warr, 2002). Therefore, adolescents may involve in delinquent acts due fearing of ridicule in which they may be labeled as "wimps" by the others (Trojanowicz et al, 2001). Tasgin (2012) found that some incarcerated juveniles' motive for committing crime was fear of ridicule.

Yes, in the theft and wounding the taxi driver, they provoked me, saying that I could not do such things, and I did it because I wanted to show that I was one of them (Murat).

The second school was a secondary school, and I went there after we moved to a new neighborhood. It was the place where everything started. My friends...I started to get into fights and use marijuana in this school. If your friends do something, then you imitate them and start to do the same. I was doing what they had done because otherwise, they could call me a coward. (Nuri)

Loyalty may first be defined with being trustworthy or loyal to the friends. In terms of delinquency, loyalty refers to demonstrating friendship and sharing risky behavior. In those circumstances, adolescents find opportunity to prove their loyalty to their friends (Warr, 2002). In Tasgin's (2012) study, one of the incarcerated juvenile explained his loyalty to his delinquent peers:

We were close friends. If one of us did not go home, none of us went home either. We used to help each other in every way. For instance, if one of us got into a fight, all of us were going to fight with him.

When asked about the living conditions after running away from home one of the juveniles said:

Yes, it was safe because I was with my friends and nobody could do anything to us. I believed that I would stand on my feet by living away from home. I was not scared of getting into fights. If one of us got into fights, others were immediately coming to help.

Status enhancement through delinquency was considered as important mechanism which was responsible for proliferation of delinquency among peers. Status concept refers to prestige or respect within a group. Earning and maintaining status in the group in particular in gangs was very crucial (Warr, 2002). In Tasgin's (2012) study, one of the respondents explained how it is important to be a part of the group:

Whenever my friends wanted me to do something, I could not refuse them. Sometimes they were saying, "Let us go and steal something" and I could not say no to them because otherwise, I would not be a part of their group (Tuna).

As mentioned above different social mechanisms play a big role with the influence of peers. Therefore, those mechanisms should be considered with peer influence itself.

Another new and interesting contribution is from the most contemporary reading about social learning theory. McGloin (2009) stated that studies which examined influence of deviant peers consisted of measures in three ways such as the number of friends who engage in delinquency, proportion of friends who were deviant, and amount of deviant behavior in which friends engage. However, there were few studies which examined the influence of deviant peers on within-individual change. For instance, Brauer (2009) found no significant within individual change when testing reinforcement hypothesis of social learning theory. Having deviant peers does not always result in engaging in delinquency and it would not affect

individuals in the same way, because there were several possible mechanisms which underlied the deviant peer risk. In order to understand the relationship between deviant peers and within individual change, the author used social psychological concept of balance. That concept helps us to understand how deviant peers influence behaviors. They assumed that deviant peers may increase, decrease, or have no influence on the subject. For example, if deviant peer's and subject's delinquency levels are equal, subject's delinquent levels may not increase or decrease because no imbalance exists. However, the same deviant peer may be risky for another subject. If subject had lower level of delinquency than deviant peer, he may increase his level of delinquency to achieve 'balance' with his peer. If subject is a more serious deviant, peer may decrease his level of delinquency as he seeks congruence with his peer. The author found those findings by using longitudinal data. Subjects who were less delinquent than their friends in time 1 increased their delinquency in time 2. Subjects who were more delinquent than their friends in time 1 were apt to reduce their delinquency in time 2. Those examples show that having delinquent peers is not constant or objective. He found that females were more likely to demonstrate within-individual increases in their delinquency over time. The main finding of the study was that adolescents sought congruent levels of deviance with their close friends and have influence on within level change. For example, if subjects were less delinquent than their peers, they increased their level of delinquency. If subjects were more delinquent than their peers, they decreased their level of delinquency. Those results showed that having deviant peer did not always increase the risk of delinquency and having less delinquency was not always beneficial. Delinquent peers risky for one kid may be protective for another.

2.4. Definitions and Attitudes

Warr and Stafford (1991) stated that adolescents were more sensitive to their friends' behavior rather than to their attitudes and definitions. They found that while Sutherland's theory presumed that delinquency was a consequence of attitudes favorable to the violation of law, attitudes that were acquired through intimate social interaction with peers, the effect of peers' attitudes were small and behaviors of peers were strong even after controlling peers' attitudes adolescents' own attitudes. Thus, the authors' finding was contrary to theory's assumption that favorable attitudes toward delinquency were a necessary condition for delinquent behavior.

2.5. Causal Process

Lotz and Lee (1999) provided four competing interpretations of the peer and delinquency nexus. One of these perspectives was that bad friends lead to delinquency proposition was misleading because individuals became delinquent first and found delinquent peers later. Warr (2001) explained this situation with sociological principle of homophily which means that people make friends with people who are similar to themselves. In this respect, we can see that people do not become delinquent because of their delinquent friends, but they acquire these friends after they become delinquent.

2.6. Routine Activity and Peers

Warr (2002) examined changing peer relations in terms of change in routine activities of adolescents. Based on Felson's (1994) finding, he stated that increasing availability of auto provided young people to get away from home and to contact with their friends who lived in some distance away. Second reason was acquiring jobs outside of the home which result in decrease time spent with families and increase exposure to peers in work environments. Spending time with delinquent peers disrupted juvenile's routines and the running away from home was the most apparent issue in juveniles' trajectories in Tasgin's study (2012) as displayed below in Murat's statement who ran away from home due to lack of attachment to his parents.

The main reason was lack of love and compassion at home. Therefore, I always wanted to go away from home because I thought that if I was away from my parents, I would live in peace

2.7. (Negative) Influence of family

Warr (2002) stated that both peer and family influence were considered separately. For example, while differential association theory focused on peer influence by ignoring family effect, social control theory focused on family influence by ignoring peer effect. Then he

contended that both issues cannot be separated because adolescents cannot leave either issue behind them. Some studies considered them together but examined different time periods. For example, when examining childhood, parents had stronger effect and when examining adolescent period, peers had stronger effect. He also claimed that peers were mostly recognized as instigators of delinquency whereas parents were considered as barriers to delinquency because of providing anti-criminal definitions, conforming models, and the reinforcement of conformity through parental discipline.

Warr (2002) contended that there were several studies which showed that parenting behaviors influenced selection into delinquent peer groups. Parental supervision, direct parental controls, and parental surveillance methods were related to access to delinquent peers. If juveniles feel deprivation, exposed to parental hostility or rejection, those factors will lead to emotional problems or deviant behavior; or if juveniles receive inappropriate punishments and rewards, use of inconsistent punishments, it may also lead to learning of deviant behavior or aggression (Trojanowicz et al, 2001).

Lotz and Lee (1999) stated that when adolescents spent more time with their peers in the absence of adult or other forms of supervision, they will more likely to engage in crime. They defined interaction among peers in the absence of parental supervision as unstructured socializing. In Turkish example, Tasgin (2012) found that juveniles were pushed out of the family into a context that promoted crime by negative family processes. Father's behavior, cold personality, feeling distant to them, beating, and fathers' excessive drinking created lack of attachment. Lack of parental attachment did not directly affect delinquency. Instead, it led juveniles to run away from home and stay with their friends, which in turn, led to delinquency and drug use. Parental beating was also present in the study. Juveniles who were not attached to their parents and physically abused were also not supervised by their parents.

Witnessing domestic violence also had a negative effect on juveniles' lives. In Tasgin's (2012) study, Mert explained why he continued running away from home.

When I first ran away from home, I was 14 or 15 years old. That night my father came home intoxicated. I told my brother we should run away from home together. Then, we went to Park K and he said he was hungry and thirsty. Then, I sent him home again. I tried to sleep on the chairs of the park but it was not safe enough. Therefore, I slept in a park just across from the police station because it was safe. In the morning, the police found me and took me home. My parents were going crazy. My mother was crying and the police were trying to calm down my father. He got very angry. When we left the police station, my father cursed me. My father told me that if a real man runs away from home, he does not come back again. Then, I continued running away from home and did not come back home. I could not stay at home because my father was always intoxicated.

2.8. Mechanisms of Collective Behavior

Sometimes people may act in a group more easily due to not being easily recognized by others whom they know. Or, they may not even think about committing such acts alone but may act those acts within the group. Therefore, we need to know how individuals commit crime as collective behavior. Warr (2002) three major mechanisms for collective behavior: Anonymity, diffusion of responsibility, and group excitement. *Anonymity* provides individuals being away from observation and detection which tempers everyday behavior of individuals. However, Warr (2002) claims that although anonymity may be important factor for crime as collective behavior, because of the small size of groups, there might be little anonymity for individuals in the group. He also stated that some researchers found that anonymity reduced the aggression rather than increased. Most of the people have either internal or external or both moral objections for criminal behavior; and when they act delinquent behavior within a group, crowd remove restraints on behavior by *diffusing the moral responsibility* for those acts. Those mechanisms of collective behavior may serve as leading cause for delinquency in the group rather than the influence of peer influence itself.

3. Conclusion

We can see that there are several developments in the social learning theory for 30 years. Explanations about delinquency and crime were developed throughout the time by new even contradictory findings which are also necessary to critically examining future studies. It is obvious that there have been new explanations of crime and delinquency throughout the time.

Findings of Tasgin's (2012) study with 30 incarcerated juveniles, was also congruent with the new developments of the social learning theory. Influential family background factors, strong affect of delinquent peers in the lives of juveniles, different peer mechanisms, negative influence of family such as lack of attachment, parental beating and lack of supervision, and macro level influences such as the influential effect of squatter areas were important elements in the trajectories of delinquent juveniles. I recommend more studies on juveniles in Turkey using with social learning theory which is consistent with the experiences of juvenile delinquents.

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