

Killing for God: Akers' Social Learning Theory Applied to the Case of Daniel Lafferty

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Akers' Social Learning Theory (SLT), esteemed among the general theories of crime, provides an overarching framework for understanding the development of criminal attitudes and behaviors. This paper utilizes a case study approach to view a double homicide committed in the name of religious ideology through the theoretical lens of SLT. Examination of the subject's upbringing sheds light on his vulnerability to influence and potential to do harm. In an era of increasingly divergent ideologies, the application of Social Learning Theory can illuminate the process of radicalization, help identify those at risk, and suggest potential points of intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Thus saith the Lord unto my servants the prophets. It is my will and commandment that ye remove the following individuals in order that my work might go forward. For they have truly become obstacles in my path and I will not allow my work to be stopped. First thy brother's wife Brenda and her baby, then Chloe Low and then Richard Stowe. And it is my will that they be removed in rapid succession. (Hyde, 2004, p. 2)

The epigraph above, known as the "Removal Revelation" was written by excommunicated Mormon extremist and self-proclaimed prophet Ronald Lafferty. Ronald's followers believed it to be the will of God. In 1984, Ron Lafferty and his brother Daniel murdered the wife and infant daughter of their youngest brother Allen, as directed by the revelation. While the actual murders were committed by Daniel, he acted under the direction of Ron, who had developed his own version of Mormon fundamentalism and recruited family members and a few others into his idiosyncratic belief system. Ron claimed he had received the revelation demanding that he and his followers "remove" their sister-in-law Brenda Wright Lafferty and her one-year-old daughter (their niece) Erica Lafferty from the world by slitting their throats. In an interview with author Jon Krakauer, author of the book *Under the Banner of Heaven* which details the Lafferty case, Daniel Lafferty described himself as "the most fanatical believer you'll ever meet" (Marshall, 2003).

This paper applies Ronald Akers' Social Learning Theory (SLT) to the case of Daniel Lafferty. Building upon Sutherland's theory of Differential Association, Akers' theory extends Sutherland's approach, incorporating elements of behavioral and social learning from the field of psychology (Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox, 2014) to create an overarching theoretical framework for explaining crime.

Briefly stated, Akers' Social Learning Theory contends that criminal behavior is the result of a learning process that occurs in four stages: differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation (Cullen et al., 2014). These will be discussed in detail below. Through the lens of SLT, Daniel's

crimes are analyzed as the possible outcome of social learning through his religious beliefs and the influence of family members, particularly his father and older brother Ronald.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background and Overview

Akers' Social Learning Theory is an outgrowth of Edwin H. Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association, which expanded traditional explanations of crime that cited factors such as social class, family dysfunction, location, individual demographic features (age, class, race, etc.) by providing a mechanism explaining how these factors led to criminal behavior (Cullen et al., 2014). Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association states that criminal behavior is learned through association with individuals and groups of people that hold more opinions favorable to lawbreaking than unfavorable (Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox, 2014). From such individuals, one learns "techniques of committing the crime—skill, or criminal trade, craft . . . and ideology, or the specific motives for the offense" (Hamm & Van de Voorde, 2005, p. 20). The theory also states that those who hold negative definitions of legal codes are more likely to commit crimes than those who hold favorable definitions (Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox, 2014). Additionally, Sutherland theorized that the degree of criminal influence is mediated by four factors: frequency, duration, priority, and intensity (Cullen et al., 2014). While this was an important step forward in criminology, Sutherland did not work out precisely *how* this learning took place (Cullen et al., 2014).

Akers' work, a "formulation and extension" of Sutherland's work, has become "one of the core criminological paradigms over the last four decades," and has been applied successfully to many categories and situations of crime (Pratt et al., 2010, p. 765). Akers' Social Learning Theory, particularly his Social Structure and Social Learning model (SSSL), moved the work forward into a nearly unified theory of criminology for which there is some empirical support (Cullen et al., 2014). Social Learning Theory recognizes that behavior can be learned through a number of mechanisms including imitation, operant and classical conditioning, symbolic interactionism, and self-reinforcement (Cullen et al., 2014). These processes work to change behavior and beliefs regarding whether actions are acceptable or unacceptable. A notable aspect of SLT is "the assumption that the same learning process produces both conforming and deviant behavior" (Krohn, 1999, p. 464).

The main process in learning social behavior is operant conditioning, in which conscious behavior is altered by stimuli (or consequences) that follow (Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, & Radosevich, 1979). According to SLT, behaviors are strengthened when they are rewarded (positive reinforcement) or not punished (negative reinforcement), and behaviors are weakened or stopped when they are punished (positive punishment) or not rewarded (negative punishment) (Akers et al., 1979). Reinforcers can be social or nonsocial, but SLT asserts that social reinforcers from significant groups and/or individuals such as "peer-friendship groups and the family . . . schools, churches, and other groups" (Akers et al., 1979, p. 638) are most important (Krohn, 1999). Akers' SLT presents four concepts that explain how social learning occurs: differential association (from Sutherland's theory), definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation.

Social Learning Theory "argues that all behavior, including crime, is learned from others via imitation and reinforcement. Thus, persons exposed to family members and friends who offend or espouse criminal values are more likely to commit crime too" (Adamczyk et al., 2017, p. 212). The concept of differential association, which Akers developed from Sutherland's theory, describes such situations, in which some people differentially associate with (whether by choice or not) non-normative rather than norm-reaffirming others, resulting in exposure to positive or neutral attitudes about crime (Pratt et al., 2010, p. 768). For those born into families with deviant attitudes toward crime and violence, the differential association is not by choice, and it has a profound impact on the individual, sometimes resulting in the perpetuation of a cycle of family violence (Maxwell, Callahan, Ruggero, & Janis, 2016).

In the context of Social Learning Theory, Cullen, Agnew, and Wilcox describe definitions as "orientations, rationalizations, definitions of the situation, and other evaluative and moral attitudes that define the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or

unjustified” (2014, p. 142). The concept of definitions is closely tied to differential association, as “differential association with others shapes the individual’s definitions” about criminal behaviors (Pratt et al., 2010, p. 768). Thus, someone who has been differentially exposed to criminal others may define criminal acts as positive, neutral, or justified (Brauer & Tittle, 2012). SLT asserts that “the more strongly a social norm or value against deviant behavior is endorsed, the less likely such behavior is to occur, and vice-versa” (Paat & Hope, 2015, p. 230).

Differential reinforcement is the aspect of SLT that incorporates operant conditioning as the mechanism whereby learned behaviors are reinforced or discouraged when an individual experiences “anticipated or actual rewards and punishments that follow or are consequences of behavior” (Cullen et al., 2014, p. 143). According to SLT, the balance of these factors will affect the individual’s behavior so that the expectation of rewards makes the behavior more likely while the expectation of punishment makes the behavior less likely (Cullen et al., 2014). Though typically social, these reinforcers may be physical such as the enjoyment of drugs or alcohol, or even ideological, political, or religious (Cullen et al., 2014). Brauer and Tittle note that “recent formulations of social learning theory suggest that learning occurs through both direct and vicarious behavioral reinforcement,” meaning that witnessing or learning of the reward or punishment of another person may also affect one’s own behavior (2012).

The fourth component of Social Learning Theory, imitation, is also referred to as modeling. SLT asserts that if an individual observes a peer or important other engaging in a deviant behavior, this increases the likelihood that the observer will also engage in that behavior (Gallupe et al., 2016). The probability that an individual will be imitated has much to do with that person’s personal characteristics, so that those who serve as role models and those who are popular and treated with respect are more likely to be imitated (Jennings, Park, Tomsich, Gover, & Akers, 2011; Gallupe et al., 2016). The effects of imitation on the observer are impacted by the frequency, intensity, duration, and priority of the deviant other (Gallupe et al., 2016). Studies on imitation have suggested that through modeling, media exposure may also impact individuals’ behavior (Gallupe et al., 2016). Within the context of the family, modeling may have a detrimental effect when “exposure to violence teaches children that controlling others through coercion and violence is normal and acceptable, and indeed using such strategies helps people reach their goals (Ireland & Smith, 2009, p. 325).

Supporting Evidence

Responding to a survey asking members of the American Society of Criminology which theory they believed to be most supported by empirical evidence, members were most likely to indicate Social Learning Theory as their answer (Cooper, Walsh, & Ellis, 2010). This speaks to the general support and high regard for Social Learning Theory within the criminological community. Since its inception, SLT has been subjected to many empirical tests with mostly encouraging results, making it “one of the leading theories of why individuals engage in crime” (Cullen et al., 2016). In this section, several such empirical tests are described. Interestingly, all these studies relate to aspects of intimate violence: stalking, dating violence, and intimate partner violence (IPV). This serves to highlight the strong effects of learning on intimate and family violence.

In a 2003 study using data from a random sample of 975 maternal interviews conducted in 1975, as well as three follow-up interviews, Ehrensaft et al. found that witnessing violence between parents was an independent predictor of becoming a perpetrator of relationship violence. In a similar study, Ireland and Smith (2009) evaluated interviews with 1,000 adolescents and found that exposure to parental violence had a significant positive impact on the perpetration of both violent crime and IPV. Citing evidence from an earlier study, the authors note that “learning violence within the family context strengthens a generalized cultural and societal orientation to violent and coercive behavior (Ireland & Smith, 2009, p. 325). Ireland and Smith also found a strong relationship between living in a home where IPV occurs and antisocial behavior in the adolescent (2009). A 2011 study (Cochran, Sellers, Wiesbrock & Palacios) testing the effect of social learning variables on IPV perpetration evaluated survey data from 1,124 university students and found support for the social learning variables differential association and differential reinforcement, but the effects of imitation/modeling were not found to be significant. The authors suggested that because SLT

is a processual theory, longitudinal studies were necessary to determine the causal effects of the SLT variables on one another (Cochran et al., 2011).

Fox, Nobles, and Akers tested the effects of social learning on stalking behavior by evaluating survey data from 2,783 randomly selected participants using logistical regression to determine the effects of differential social reinforcement (2011). They found that stalking perpetrators had a higher likelihood of having one or more friends who also displayed stalking behavior (Fox, Nobles, & Akers, 2011). The same held true for victims of stalking, who were had a significantly higher than average self-reported number of friendships with other stalking victims (Fox, Nobles, & Akers, 2011). The authors also determined that, like other forms of IPV perpetration, stalking is primarily an individual behavior (Fox, Nobles, & Akers, 2011).

Regarding Akers' discussion of the importance of group norms to social learning, there is certainly evidence that supports the salience of these norms, especially to adolescents. A study of the effects of adolescent friendship on behavior by Rees and Pogarsky finds that youths may be more swayed by the beliefs of a group than by those of their closest friends (2011). In this study, four measures of delinquency (smoking, getting drunk, fighting, and general delinquency) were evaluated using an analysis of survey data from 6,027 participants aged 12-18 (Rees & Pogarsky, 2011). Results indicated that the influence of group norms and behaviors are stronger in cases of "group-oriented forms of deviance than for inherently more solitary forms," and thus some forms of deviance only occur in the presence of groups (Rees & Pogarsky, 2011, p. 217). This finding seems counterintuitive considering that close friendships involve greater frequency, priority, duration, and intensity than many group interactions (Rees & Pogarsky, 2011). This does explain why a person might do something out of character when with a group of near strangers, even against the advice of a close friend.

Contradictory Evidence

Although there is significant evidential and professional support for Social Learning Theory, some tests did not support the theory while others found mixed results. In a study investigating the relationship between the relationship dynamics of intimate partners and criminal offending in "fragile families" (believed to be at risk for family disruption/instability and economic disadvantage), the authors found mixed support for SLT (Paat & Hope, 2015). Though Paat and Hope had designed their study to test Akers' assertion that intimate partners are likely sources of reinforcement and/or imitation, they concluded that "exposure to a more deviant partner was not independently predictive of contact with the criminal justice system" (2015, p. 237). A 2012 systematic review of experimental and criminological studies conducted by Brauer and Tittle found limited support for the differential reinforcement aspect of SLT. While the authors state that the operant learning processes of SLT are solidly supported by the evidence, their results call into question differential reinforcement as a contributing factor to behavior (Brauer & Tittle, 2012). Additionally, they note that methodological limitations make it difficult to test this variable and further, that researchers' presumption of differential reinforcement's relevance caused them to ignore "potential pre-experimental differences in reinforcement histories" among subjects (Brauer & Tittle, 2012, p. 171). Brauer and Tittle suggest additional research specifically targeting differential reinforcement, ideally distinguishing between anticipated and actual consequences of behavior (2012).

A review on SLT conducted by Martin Krohn in 1999 raises several issues with the theory. His primary concern involves the role of differential association within Social Learning Theory and the causal structure of the relationship between it and the theory's other three factors (1999). Krohn notes that differential association plays an ambiguous role in the theory, serving as a summary of the entire theory rather than one of four factors of similar importance, and suggests that the parts of the theory might be better examined separately (1999). He writes, "if Akers conceptualizes differential association as a summary or global index of the measured and unmeasured behavioral mechanisms, then it is difficult to see why or how differential association should be included in a model containing the other mechanisms" (Krohn, 1999, p. 469). Other criticism comes from Sampson, who believed SLT to be a form of mechanical determinism, and Morash who critiqued the theory's lack of attention to the impact of gender on crime (Akers, 1999).

A harsher critique came from Ruth Kornhauser in 1978, in which she took Akers to task, ultimately claiming that SLT is actually a theory of cultural deviance (Akers, 1996). Kornhauser's critique, characterized by Hirschi as using a "sometime sarcastic tone," began what Hirschi labeled a "dastardly affair" that played out in the pages of the journal *Criminology*, with Hirschi defending Kornhauser and Akers defending his own work (Hirschi, 1996). While Hirschi concedes that he is exacting a bit of "revenge" on Akers for "mislabeling control theory as 'social bonding theory,'" (1996, p. 250) he stands by Kornhauser on substantive issues, ultimately declaring "on the evidence, it seems to me, Kornhauser's perspective is decidedly superior" (1996, p. 252). Akers' response asserts that Kornhauser misinterpreted aspects of his work, that her "reasoning is circular," and that SLT is not a cultural deviance theory (Akers, 1996, p. 241).

Religion, Crime, and Social Learning

Religiosity typically has a negative relationship to criminality (Brauer, Tittle, & Antonaccio, 2013; Adamczyk, Freilich, & Kim, 2017), acting to "inhibit crime under many circumstances" (Brauer et al., 2013, p. 754). This inhibitory effect appears to hold true for the majority of adherents to all religions, including Islam, despite common belief to the contrary (Brauer et al., 2013). However, when religious teachings do not support societal norms, as in cases where an individual or group develops a non-traditional interpretation of a religion, these teachings may have criminogenic effects on believers (Farris, 2013). In such situations:

Moral systems that understand their source as being in revealed truth can categorize those who do not have the same beliefs as being radically other. . . . As such, persons and groups who do not have the same religious or moral beliefs may not be included in the system of justice, or morality, of the group. This dynamic has the potential of . . . justifying and sustaining violence. (Farris, 2013, p. 277)

In the context of terrorism, a similar situation also defined by fanaticism, it is sometimes a charismatic individual, "seen as capable of alleviating crises and restoring equilibrium to the community," who is able to teach followers alternate definitions that allow the faithful to commit acts of violence (Hamm & Van de Voorde, 2005). Researchers have linked religious fanaticism to other types of extremism including terrorism, cults, and gang membership, noting that all these groups "pose threats of crime, violence, and disorder" (Pyrooz, Lafree, Decker, & James, 2017, p. 3). The Manson Family cult, known for a series of murders in 1969, enacted horrific violence at the behest of their charismatic leader (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Atchison and Heide apply a Social Learning framework to the Manson murders, writing "Manson taught his skewed system of values to [his] followers and their attitudes became aligned with his" (2011, p. 791). The authors note that Manson's followers "were exposed to many attitudes toward crime and deviancy that were in opposition to the norms of society" (Atchison & Heide, 2011, p. 791), highlighting the effects of the extreme duration, frequency, intensity, and priority of this exposure.

A review by Adamczyk, Freilich, and Kim finds that in papers that applied a theoretical framework to issues of religiosity and crime, Social Learning Theory was used in 27% of those papers, second only to Social Control Theory (2017). The authors note that "criminology has understudied religion compared to other factors . . . Similarly, the leading criminology textbooks have tended to overlook the role of religion in understanding the etiology of crime" (Adamczyk et al., 2017, p. 212). They theorized that rather than a simple causal relationship where religiosity affects criminality, the relationship between religion and crime could be bidirectional, with deviant attitudes affecting religious beliefs as well (Adamczyk et al., 2017).

APPLYING SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY TO THE CASE OF DANIEL LAFFERTY

Daniel's Story

Daniel Lafferty was born into a large Mormon family in Payson, Utah, just south of Provo. Watson Lafferty, the "stern patriarch of the clan" (Peterson, 2014), was a strict authoritarian figure with a violent

temper, which he often directed toward his wife or family pets (Krakauer, 2003). He was harsh with his children also, and “seethed with a quiet rage,” once killing a family dog (Hyde, 2004). Dan’s brother Ron, himself a victim of his father’s “volcanic rage,” once told a reporter, “I wanted to kill my father every time I saw him hit my mother” (Peterson, 2014). Daniel responded to this volatile home environment by “seeking to match the drive and piety of his father” (Peterson, 2014). Fanatical and somewhat paranoid, Watson developed an antigovernment belief system that grew into a full-blown refusal to pay taxes, register his car, or observe traffic regulations (Krakauer, 2003). The children were taught to distrust the government and obey the will of God; punishments for disobedience were severe (Krakauer, 2003).

As the Lafferty children grew into adulthood and married, Ron and Dan became involved in a Mormon fundamentalist splinter sect that advocated polygamy (Krakauer, 2003). Dan’s daughter Rebecca recalls how her father changed rapidly during this time, growing a long beard, physically abusing her and her mother, and inviting strangers to the family home where they would preach for hours before a pulpit (Peterson, 2014; Ortiz, 2013). Eventually, Dan told his wife that he was “taking another wife,” motivating her to take the children and go into hiding (Ortiz, 2013). Ron Lafferty also wanted to practice polygamy; however, their younger brother Allen’s wife Brenda, outspoken and educated, counseled Ron’s wife not to accept this situation (Krakauer, 2003), an act that Ron described as “sowing discord” with his wife (Peterson, 2014). The brothers recruited several followers into their sect, and the men spend many hours together praying, worshipping, and planning. Daniel, previously troubled by his “weakness of the flesh,” which led him to masturbate and fear he was evil, grew to believe that his lust for “plural wives” was part of God’s will, and that for him the afterlife would be a “1,000 year party” of sexual freedom for both men and women (Peterson, 2014).

As the brothers’ belief system grew more idiosyncratic, Ron came to believe he was a prophet of God and regularly produced “revelations” that were “meant to help bring in the kingdom” (Peterson, 2014). One of these commanded that Brenda, baby Erica, and several others be murdered (Krakauer, 2003). Accepting his brother as a prophet, Daniel came to believe that he must obey the will of God would be rewarded for doing so (Krakauer, 2003). On July 24, 1984, a Utah holiday celebrating the arrival of Brigham Young into the Salt Lake Valley, Dan and Ron entered their brother’s home where Ron tied Brenda up with a vacuum cord and beat her brutally (Krakauer, 2013). Daniel slit the throats of Brenda Lafferty and 15-month-old Erica while she stood in her crib (Krakauer, 2003). Ronald then reassured his younger brother Daniel by putting a hand on his shoulder (Peterson, 2003). Describing his role in the murders, Dan stated “I held Brenda’s hair and did it pretty much the way they did it in the scriptures . . . Then I walked in Erica’s room. I talked to her for a minute, I said, ‘I’m not sure why I’m supposed to do this, but I guess God wants you home’ (“1984 Lafferty Case Still Haunts”, 2004).

The two did not continue with the killings as the revelation commanded, but rather fled the state, driving to Wyoming, then finally to Reno, Nevada where they were apprehended in a casino (Krakauer, 2003). Ron was sentenced to death and Daniel to life imprisonment with no possibility of parole (Krakauer, 2003). Speaking 30 years later, Dan stated “I have to conclude that Brenda and the baby were assholes. I just can’t imagine God would have any of his children take the life of those that were wheat as opposed to tares” (Peterson, 2014). (This refers to a parable of Jesus in which humans are metaphorically divided into good people [wheat] and bad [tares/weeds].) Dan and Ron Lafferty had a falling out that culminated in Dan attempting to kill Ron in jail (Krakauer, 2003). Toward the end of his life, Daniel Lafferty believed himself to be an incarnation of the prophet Elijah (Peterson, 2014). After exhausting his final appeal, Daniel died of natural causes in November of 2019, just months before facing death by firing squad, his chosen method of execution (Boroff, 2019).

Learning to Kill

In this section, Daniel Lafferty’s criminal behavior is considered through the theoretical lens of the four aspects of Social Learning Theory: differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation.

From his birth, Daniel Lafferty was subject to differential association with his father Watson, a deviant figure of substantial priority who dominated Daniel’s childhood with his violent rages and physical

aggression toward Daniel's mother. Witnessing this behavior in his primary male role model shaped the boy's beliefs regarding manhood, violence, and aggression, normalizing this deviant behavior in Daniel's eyes. This experience led Daniel to develop deviant definitions of violent behavior as masculine, effective, and justified because he had learned that a man has an inherent right to coerce and control women and children. The fact that Daniel's mother and siblings all obeyed Watson's orders and submitted to his will further normalized the family violence, causing Daniel to learn to anticipate rewards for such behavior through the process of differential reinforcement. Years later, Daniel's ability to commit the violent murders of two innocents was shaped, at least in part, by witnessing and imitating the violence his father displayed toward his mother and helpless animals. Additionally, Watson's anti-government beliefs and practices normalized the acceptance of an aberrant, idiosyncratic belief system.

As an adult, Daniel fell under the sway of his brother Ronald's deviant version of religious faith, and day after day spent many hours with Ronald and other followers, all of whom admired Ron and believed him to be a prophet of God. For Daniel this prophet, also his beloved older brother, was a figure to be admired and imitated, and Dan modeled much of his own behavior after Ron's. Daniel's differential association with the non-traditional religious sect was powerful in its frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. Indeed, it became the most powerful influence in Dan's life, one he valued above his wife and child. Daniel's adherence to this divergent belief system allowed him to justify his own troubling sexual impulses and desire for "plural wives" as the will of God, and to believe that anything done in the name of God was right, regardless of how the secular world might regard it. Thus, Daniel learned to define immoral and violent acts in a positive manner. He even anticipated that he would be sexually rewarded in the afterlife by God for carrying out the "removal revelation," an extreme form of differential reinforcement. An immediate differential reinforcement came when Ronald comforted Daniel with a hand on his shoulder after Brenda Lafferty's murder. Years after the murders and his falling out with Ron, Daniel still employed alternate definitions in order to justify his actions, deciding that his victims must have been "assholes" whom God wanted removed from the world. Though it appears mental illness may have been a factor in Daniel's beliefs and criminal acts, Social Learning Theory offers a convincing theoretical framework for understanding this heartbreaking, bizarre, and horrifying case.

CONCLUSION

Akers' Social Learning Theory is highly regarded among criminologists, provides a comprehensive structure for understanding the nature of crime, and has significant empirical support; however, it is not perfect. Identified weaknesses include lack of attention to gender and other categories of difference that might also influence criminal attitudes and behaviors, lack of support for the differential reinforcement and imitation factors of the theory, concern over the relationship of differential association to the other three factors, and concern that SLT is actually a cultural deviance theory. The literature also has gaps in longitudinal and causal studies and in exploring the relationship between social structure and social learning in Akers' expansion of his theory (Akers, 1999). Future research directions should address those gaps, and consider integrating a biosocial perspective into SLT, thus creating "a more accurate and modern model of criminal behavior" (Fox, 2017, p. 22). Additionally, research methodology that employs experimental rather than survey designs would strengthen empirical support for SLT, though financial and ethical considerations would present practical impediments to such studies.

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