Serial Murder and Social Learning Theory, Spring 2015

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Social Learning Theory (SLT) has been utilized to explain the development of deviant behavior. Criminologist Ronald Akers and Robert Burgess reformulated Edwin Sutherland’s Differential Association Theory to create a comprehensive theory that would allow them to understand criminal behavior (Burgess & Akers, 1966). Burgess and Akers indicated that criminal behavior is learned in social and non-social situations. SLT is organized in four themes: (1) differential association, (2) differential reinforcement or punishment, (3) definitions, and (4) imitation (Atchison & Heide, 2011). This theory suggests that a person’s likelihood of developing deviant behavior increases when he or she becomes associated with people who commit crime and have an attraction towards committing crimes (Atchison & Heide, 2011). The individual is also encouraged to continue committing deviant acts if they are likely to receive a reward versus being punished (Atchison & Heide, 2011). The deviant behavior continues to be encouraged upon the definition or attitudes the individual has towards crimes, these definition or attitudes are learned from their close friends or role models (Atchison & Heide, 2011). The individual will imitate the behaviors of those who he or she admires, close friends, family or role models. Thus, the individual can also be imitating from outside sources such as the media (Atchison & Heide, 2011). SLT has been utilized to analyze crimes like murder and property crimes. On this paper we will be providing an analysis of murder and Social Learning Theory.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program murder and nonnegligent manslaughter are defined as “a willful (nonnegligent) killing of one human being by another” (“Murder,” 2014). The classification of this offense is based on police investigations (“Murder,” 2014). In the year of 2013 the URC reported a total of 14,196 murders in the nation, a 4.4 percent decrease from the 2012 (“Murder,” 2014). The UCR
also reported that for every 100,000 people there are a total of 4.5 murders (“Murder,” 2014). The UCR also stated, “murder rate fell 5.1 percent in 2013 compared with the 2012 rate” (“Murder,” 2014). The UCR program compiles the number of offenses that come to the attention of the local law enforcement offices for violent crime and property crime (“Murder,” 2014). Not every county or law enforcement office reports to the UCR program. Although murder rate may be declining, it is important to remember that it's a crime that continues to occur on a daily basis.

Social Policy/ Social Control Application

According to the Official California Legislative Information website the California Statutes directed at the crime of murder states that the CA Penal code 187, “the unlawful killing of a human being or a fetus with malice aforethought” (“Penal Code,” 2014). There are three levels of severity of murder in California (“Penal Code,” 2014):

First-degree murder
1. Committing murder while
   a) Using destructive device, explosive, weapon of mass destruction, poison or metal piercing ammunition
   b) Torturing someone or waiting for someone
2. Murdering someone willfully deliberately and with premeditation
3. Felony murder i.e. killing someone while performing either of the following
   a) Arson
   b) Robbery
   c) Burglary
   d) Carjacking
   e) Train Wrecking
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Second degree Murder

This applies to any murder that was willful but not deliberate or premeditated. Second-degree murder can also be covered under the felony-murder rule on a case-by-case basis ("Penal Code," 2014).

Capital Murder


1. Murdering another for financial gain
2. Murdering a police officer firefighter prosecutor judge or elected official
3. Murdering someone because of his or her race color religion etc.
4. Murdering another by drive by
5. Murdering more than one victim.

Sentencing for each type of murder can vary substantially depending on defendant's criminal record and details of the case ("Penal Code," 2014). Typical sentencing is as follows ("Penal Code," 2014):

a) First-degree murder- 25 years to life in a state prison.
b) First-degree murder in a hate crime-life in prison without parole.

c) Capital murder-life in prison without parole or the death penalty.

d) Second-degree murder-15 years to life in a state prison.

e) Second-degree murder by use of a fire arm -15 years to life in a state prison with an additional 10, 20, or 25 years in a state prison, a strike on your record and loss of right to own or posses a firearm.

Literature Review

The abstracts of the three articles have been attached as directed.

Discussion and Analysis

In the first article that I chose, authors Andrew J. Atchison and Kathleen M. Heide examined the story of Charles Manson. Manson and his followers killed innocent people in attempts to start a counterrevolution in the United States (Atchison & Heide, 2011). In this article Atchison and Heide utilize social learning theory to understand these murders. The article provides a background of his personal life and three followers to be able to understand their actions (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Consistent with SLT, as a young child Manson had the opportunity to learn the deviant behavior of criminology. Restrain in the Gibault Home for Boys at age 12, Manson was exposed to resentment feelings towards authority, learning different methods on how to break the law (Atchison & Heide, 2011). The attitude that he was expose towards crime was favorable and encouraged, influencing Manson’s own attitude towards criminology (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Such attitude only increased Manson’s deviant behavior, he ran way from Gibault, place in Boys Town where he escape with a partner. The pair fled to the house of the other boy’s uncle who was a thief by trade, the kids eventually began to work with him, giving Manson experience in crime (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Ate age 13 Manson
was sent by the county jail to the Indianapolis School for Boys. Here Manson was sexually abused by four other boys and ridicule by the authority figures about the event in front of others (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Eventually Manson was housed in the federal reformatory in Ohio, where he resided alongside hard criminals. These criminals became Manson’s heroes; they were the “mobsters” who challenged the system that was keeping him lockup (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Manson met New York gangster Frank Costello and felt “admiration bordering on worship” when he sat at the same table or walk the same hall as Costello (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Manson had constant contact and association with those who saw criminal behavior as acceptable. The constant punishment, was the greater reward for him because as he exposed to “higher rank criminals” who he admired and learned from (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Such sample gives support to the theoretical tenets of Social Learning Theory.

The second article authored by Castle and Hensley, explores the possible links between serial murder and military experience applying Social Learning Theory (Castel & Hensley, 2002). Castle and Hensley explained that military booth camps provide a common social context in which serviceman can convert violence and aggression into learning how to kill (Atchison & Heide, 2011). SLT claim that deviant behavior is learned according to the principle of operant conditioning (Atchison & Heide, 2011). The deviant behavior can be learned in a nonsocial situations, for example where a behavior can be reinforced. Killing in the military or eliminating the enemy is positively reinforced behavior on servicemen (Atchison & Heide, 2011). One important element of learning deviant behavior occurs in groups that reinforce those behaviors. When an individual forms part of the military, the military becomes their major social group that reinforces their actions (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Servicemen in the military learn the techniques, attitudes, and avoidance procedures of deviant behavior. Servicemen are taught to
accept death and to kill. Learning the many techniques on how to kill reinforces attitude towards deviant behavior (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Two techniques that are common in serial killers is “Dehumanization and Compartmentalization” (Atchison & Heide, 2011), these skills are taught in the military. Servicemen are taught to see the enemy as a “subhuman” to counterbalance the guilt of killing someone and to be able to continue with their normal life with those people that they don’t kill (Atchison & Heide, 2011). Servicemen learn that killing is normal, and serial killers learn to conform in the military to embrace a way of life that encourages violence and aggression. Atchison and Heide also explain that servicemen learn values taught in the military will be positively reinforced, for the serial killer once they murder their reward is the satisfaction of having committed such crime.

Jeremy Wright and Christopher Hensley authors of the last article, attempted to find the possible motivations behind the rare phenomenon of serial murder (Wright & Hensley, 2003). Using several case study of childhood behavior and using SLT presents a clear linkage to the animal cruelty and aggression towards humans (Wright & Hensley, 2003). In one of the cases presented in the article, the mother of a young boy shows episodes of prolonged humiliation by dressing him as girl, and exposing him to sexual encounter with her lover. The child is threatened get beat up if tells anyone of what he has witness. Although the child kept his mother’s secret silent, the mothers attitude towards the boy is violent and constantly humiliates him in front of others. The child begins to isolate himself running off to a secluded area under the house; it was there that he was able to express his anger towards his mother, and developed hate toward women. Angry that he could gain retribution towards his mother, he transferred his anger to animal, which are defenseless creature (Wright & Hensley, 2003). The child in this case was not born with a deviant behavior. SLT explains that deviant behavior is learn with those around us,
Wright and Hensley explain this case the role model (the mother) expose the child to deviant behavior, and therefore developed an acceptable attitude towards it. The constant humiliation his expose to it, only adds to his deviant behavior and aggression towards women. Although he is expose to severe punishment, his reward of secluding himself under the house and continue with the act of killing animals is much more powerful than remorse (Wright & Hensley, 2003). Such behavior continues as gradually they graduate to humans; such behavior is learned and encouraged by due to the lifestyle the child is exposed too (Wright & Hensley, 2003). By the end of the article the author’s conclude that there is clear linkage of animal cruelty and the development of serial killers, however they note that not all children developed a desire to hurt animals (Wright & Hensley, 2003). The authors concluded by suggesting further research to be conducted regarding the linkage.

Conclusion

Through the literature review we are able to see examples on how SLT can be apply to understand how serial murder can develop. In my opinion I believe that majority of our social policies encourage us to see the serial killers as people who are born with such behavior. Psychologist have developed many theories associating being antisocial with being a serial murder. The lack of emotion and remorse in someone can lead to such behavior, and I am not implying that is not true, but its is important to also take in consideration social theories as SLT which gives another possible explanation why such behavior can be developed in a person. I agree with the authors of the articles, I believe that further research of SLT and serial murder should be done to better understand such behavior and have an early warning sign for law enforcement officials, educators, and parents. Writing this paper was a great learning experience,
it provided with great insight about the theory and the crime itself. I was able to better understand penal codes for murder and found it very interesting.
Bibliography

