EXAMINING THE EMPIRICAL STATUS OF AKERS' SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON HUMAN REINFORCEMENT LEARNING

by

JONATHAN R. BRAUER

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APPROVED BY:

Charles R. Tittle
Chair of Advisory Committee

Stacy M. De Coster

Rodney L. Engen
ABSTRACT


Proponents of social learning theory suggest that decades of empirical criminological research have validated the core propositions of social learning theory, and that future efforts should be directed toward further theoretical elaboration and integration (see Akers 1998; Akers and Jensen 2006). In response, some critics have suggested that empirical research has failed to isolate the causal mechanisms underlying the correlates of crime and deviance, and, as a result, existing “data are seemingly consistent with several theories at once” (Sampson 1999:443). In this paper, I outline the causal importance of differential reinforcement in Akers’ social learning theory, and I provide a systematic review of a sample of psychological and criminological literature on human reinforcement learning in an attempt to evaluate the current empirical status of Akers’ social learning theory. I find that the empirical evidence supporting human reinforcement learning processes found in the behavioral psychology literature may not be directly generalizable to social learning theory, and that measurement difficulties have led criminology researchers to use indirect measures or to simply leave the concept of differential reinforcement out of empirical analyses altogether. As a result, many of social learning theory’s hypothesized causal linkages remain unexamined. I conclude that future research should be directed toward testing social learning theory’s central hypotheses regarding differential reinforcement before moving on to expand and test the theory’s macro-level implications.
BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan Richard Brauer was born on August 17, 1981 in Rockford, Illinois. After graduating from Guilford High School in 1999, Jonathan remained in Rockford to attend Rock Valley College, where he received an Associate of Arts (with Honors) in 2001. Afterwards, he attended Rockford College, a small liberal arts school, from which he received a Bachelor of Science in Sociology and Anthropology (Magna Cum Laude) with a minor in Philosophy in 2003. In 2004, Jonathan began pursuing a graduate education in Sociology at North Carolina State University, where he completed the requirements for a Master's degree in Sociology in March 2007. Currently, he is pursuing a Doctoral degree in Sociology.