



Applying Theory to Crime: **DRUG SELLING/TRAFFICKING AND DRUG USE**

This section applies two theoretical frameworks of crime to two of the primary offenses discussed in this chapter—drug selling/trafficking and drug use. Although readers may think the theoretical explanations for these activities are similar because both deal with illegal drugs, the most likely theories supported by research are different. This is a good example of how theories can differ, even within the same general category of criminal behavior.

Specifically, regarding drug selling/trafficking, the most logical and empirically supported theory is traditional strain theory.¹⁷⁴ Traditional strain theory places a high emphasis on individuals' innovating ways they can obtain the goals of financial success, without having to go through common conventional means (e.g., education, employment). Drug selling/trafficking can be a fast, albeit risky, way of obtaining a lot of money, without having to work hard in school or at a conventional job. Scientific studies have shown that this theory is supported as a primary reason for why individuals engage in this activity. After all, the lure of a fast payoff, given the high demand for various drugs, provides an extremely high motivation for people who have low levels of education and/or mainstream work experience.

On the other hand, drug use is not as well explained by traditional strain theory. Although Merton¹⁷⁵ did identify a type of retreatist adaption to strain (i.e., escaping from reality), which would include chronic drug users, this is not a strong motivation for their behavior. Rather, other theories are likely better for explaining why some individuals become habitual drug users. Specifically, various types of social learning theory and subcultural theory have been shown by empirical research

to be highly supported as explanations of chronic drug use.¹⁷⁶

Regarding the social learning theories of drug use, differential association/reinforcement theory emphasizes the importance of peer influences in decisions to commit certain behaviors. This is likely most important in terms of drug use. After all, virtually no individuals take drugs for the first time when they are alone; rather, their initial experience in taking any drug (from alcohol to marijuana to cocaine to heroin) is almost always with other persons providing it and showing them how to ingest it, which for higher drugs (e.g., freebasing and injecting heroin) can be a complicated process. To a large extent, the initial taking of any drug is typically a social process; the person does it because a friend or group motivates him or her to “try it.”

Of course, later episodes of drug use often become more solo, but the first experience is almost always peer influenced, which highly supports the social learning theories of differential association/reinforcement models of offending. The initial experience of engaging in taking illegal substances goes back to one's significant others and what they are doing and, thus, what they are exposing one to regarding drug behavior. This is supported by recent empirical studies, such as that by Golub et al., which showed that the influence of friends, peers, and intimate partners was key in engaging in drug use.¹⁷⁷

Furthermore, numerous empirical studies have shown a cultural or subcultural emphasis regarding the initial engagement in drug use. After all, it is likely that many individuals would not engage in drug use if it wasn't highly prevalent in their community or neighborhood

culture. Recent studies, such as that by Golub, Johnson, and Dunlap, have supported this drug subcultural effect among many individuals not only regarding their initial use but also their subsequent chronic use.¹⁷⁸

General strain theory¹⁷⁹ is also a good explanation for such chronic drug use. This model places an emphasis on coping mechanisms (or lack thereof) to deal with various stressors and frustrations in our lives. When an individual has not developed healthy coping mechanisms for dealing with life stressors (e.g., exercise, watching television, religion), then he or she has a high likelihood for using drugs to self-medicate and “deal” with reality. Unfortunately, this usually leads such drug users into a downward spiral, in which the drugs create even more stressors, which in turn lead to further heavy drug use and addiction.

Ultimately, the key purpose of this section is to demonstrate that several different theories are likely explanations for various illegal behaviors regarding drugs. Furthermore, it is likely that the most fitting theories for drug selling/trafficking are somewhat different from those of chronic drug use, which reveals how important theory is for understanding certain criminal behaviors, even those within a given category of offending, such as drug activity.

THINK IT ABOUT:

Critical thinking question:

1. Can you think of any other theories that would be likely explanations for various illegal behaviors regarding drugs?