

Case Study: Differential Association Theory and Juvenile Delinquency

D.C. Sniper: Lee Boyd Malvo



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In October 2002 the Washington Metropolitan area was under siege of what appeared to be random sniper attacks, which led to the deaths of 10 unsuspecting individuals and injuries to three others. Their rampage in the Washington D.C. area lasted for 20 days and they used the trunk of a Chevrolet Caprice as a sniper nesting area; and randomly selected and shot their victims using a Bushmaster .223 caliber scoped rifle. The perpetrators of these vicious attacks were the 41-year-old John Muhammad and 17-year-old Lee Boyd Malvo. Muhammad who was a former United States Army National Guard member and expert rifleman and Malvo a transient from Kingston, Jamaica, who both met while Malvo in a homeless shelter in Antigua in 1998. After this meeting the two became close and Muhammad took on the role of father figure and mentor to Malvo. During this period is where Muhammad manipulated Malvo's thinking, taught him how to shoot a rifle, and instilled race hatred, which eventually led to their killing spree across the country. Their deadly rampage around the country led to three individuals being killed and two were injured between Washington State, Maryland, and Louisiana before targeting the Washington D.C. area. The two were eventually apprehended on October 24, 2004 while sleeping at a rest stop in Maryland. Both suspects were indicted and convicted with the sniper shootings, which Muhammad received the death penalty and Malvo life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. (Biography, n.d.)

The motive as to why these two perpetrated these murderous acts came when Malvo provided testimony to the Montgomery County, Maryland trial of Muhammad in 2006. Malvo stated that he and Muhammad's plan was constructed in three phases. The first phase was to kill 6 White people in 30 days.

Phase 2 targeted the Baltimore area at which time they would kill a pregnant woman by shooting her in the stomach; kill a Baltimore police officer; and during the funeral of the police officer they would kill a large number of police officers by using strategically placed explosive devices. Their final phase was to extort millions of dollars from the United States government and move to Canada in an effort to “recruit other effectively orphaned boys to use weapons and stealth, and send them out to commit shootings across the country.” These plans came to fruition due to heavy traffic; the lack of a clear shot and/or getaway at different locations; and their apprehension. (Crime Library: The DC Sniper Beltway Attacks | Crime Museum, n.d.)

After analyzing and investigating the facts of this incident, the criminological theory that closely associates with this case is the differential association theory by sociologist Edwin Sutherland. The differential association theory contends that criminal behavior is learned through the interaction or association with other like-minded individuals. This is how and where individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motivations of criminality. (Musick, D., 1995, pp. 124-127) Sutherland illustrates four factors associated with this theory: Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication; learning takes place primarily in intimate personal groups and includes not only the techniques of committing crime but the motives, rationalizations, and attitudes which accompany crime; differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity, and a person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law; and the learning process involves the same mechanisms whether a person is learning criminality or conformity. (University of Minnesota, Duluth, n.d.)

Malvo's behavior clearly falls in line with this theory because he viewed Muhammad as a pseudo father figure and a hero. Muhammad spent most of his time with him and locked the outside world out, including his mother. During this time period he placed Malvo on a strict diet and exercise routine. He also taught him how to shoot, play chess, commit acts of violence, racial hatred. Conversely, Muhammad provided him with the love and attention that no one else gave him. Muhammad was able to manipulate him because of these factors, which occurred in Malvo's earlier developmental stages of his life where he was often abandoned and abused by both his mother and father. Muhammad's obsessive behavior towards him increased Malvo's self worth and sense of belonging, which in turn increased his devotion to Muhammad. These dynamics exposed the strengths of the differential association theory because it takes into account that delinquent behavior is learned through intimate social interactions with those individuals who engage in criminality. The more exposure a particular individual receives the greater the likelihood they will engage in delinquent behavior, in turn the individual models themselves after those whom they like and respect. This was found to be true in this particular case.

The weakness of the theory that it fails to take into account how psychological factors influences criminality to include personality disorders and traits that interact with one's developmental and environmental influences, which are associated with the probability of committing an anti-social act. A psychological theory such as behaviorism contends that human behavior is a learned response as a result of inducements or stimuli in an individual's environment. It centers on behavior that is discernible rather than conceptual and how different experiences in our environment have an impact on ones learning and behavior. (Bartol & Bartol, 2014)

Malvo clearly displayed traits related to both antisocial personality disorder and borderline personality disorder because he ignored normal rules of social behavior; was impulsive, irresponsible, and callous; engaged belligerent and irresponsible behavior and partook in aggressive and even violent relationships. Also he was unstable in several areas, including interpersonal relationships, behavior, mood, and self-image. (Borderline Personality Disorder - Personality Disorders, n.d.) Malvo's antisocial behavior can be related to the social and environmental risk factors were observed which also might have led to Malvo's delinquency to include: "parental abuse, lack of parental involvement, parental criminality, single parent home, inadequate parental supervision, and a sense of abandonment." (Redding, Goldstein, and Heibrum, 2005, pp. 26-31)

The reason behind why Malvo committed these crimes cannot be related to one criminological, sociological or developmental theory in particular. A combination of the social control and social learning theories can provide a more accurate and detailed analysis as to why this incident occurred. Social control theories stress that positive bonds or attachments with parents, family, teachers, friends, and other authority figures can reduce the likelihood of an individual engaging in delinquent behavior. This also includes commitment to activities in which an individual has invested their time and energy, involvement in activities that serve to both further bond an individual to others and leave limited time to become involved in deviant activities; and a belief in societal values. (Ortiz, M., n.d.) An individual is more susceptible to engage in criminal activity when these bonds are nonexistent.

Conversely, social learning theories stress that the shared and unshared environment plays a large part in forming an individual's personality. In the social learning theory, individuals learn by watching what goes on in their environment.

They duplicate what they see others do on a consistent basis and model their behavior on what they've observed. Parents and peers are often either a good or bad influence on how an individual behaves. Children are impressionable and they emulate what is seen or heard. If a parent is a very loving person, the child will often replicate what he or she sees. If individual is exposed to a particular environment for a lengthy period of time their personality may emulate or model whatever their environment dictates to include criminality. (McLeod, S., 2011)

Malvo often lacked the proper social controls in his life to prevent him from engaging in criminal activity. His biological parents were non-existent in his life and failed to provide him with the proper guidance and discipline needed to prevent deviant behavior. Due to the lack of control at home Malvo sought that attention elsewhere, which led him to Muhammad, a role model, who exposed him to the criminal element by teaching a criminal and hatred belief system. These two theories combined clearly illustrate the possible reasons why Malvo engaged in the sniper attacks.

From the time we are infants till we are adults we are taught to behave in society. Our first lessons come from those individuals whom we maintain a close relationship with, to include parents, relatives, friends, teachers and other influential people. We learn how to model our behavior after these individuals through what we are accustomed to observing and tailor it to that environment. The lack of social controls and negative social learning can influence delinquent behavior in an individual. Conversely, psychological factors and personality traits can also influence criminality, which is increased when risk factors such as parental abuse, lack of parental involvement, parental criminality, single parent homes, and inadequate parental supervision are introduced into one's environment. The combination of the two theories can greatly influence a juvenile's road to delinquency.

Parents and other authority figures must continue to instill guidance, discipline and structure in children's lives at an early age in order to provide them with the best opportunity for success. Malvo clearly lacked these dynamics, which led him into the waiting arms of a manipulative and deranged individual who eventually persuaded him into committing these horrific acts of violence.

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