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Agnew, Robert: General Strain Theory

Contributors: Timothy Brezina
Editors: Francis T. Cullen & Pamela Wilcox
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Robert Agnew's *general strain theory* (GST) represents a modification and extension of previous strain theories of crime and delinquency. Whereas prior strain theories emphasized the importance of goal blockage (such as the inability of groups or individuals to achieve economic success), GST identifies several additional types of “strain.” In addition, Agnew argues that these strains tend to generate negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, depression, and despair. These negative emotions, in turn, are said to create pressures for “corrective action,” with crime or delinquency being one possible response.

Since its publication, GST has attracted a considerable amount of attention and interest from the criminological community. The relative success of GST can be attributed to several factors. First, GST helps to address the limitations of previous strain theories, many of which had fallen out of favor among criminologists. Second, GST is one of the few criminological theories to highlight the role of negative emotions, such as anger and depression. In the words of Agnew, GST brings “the bad” back into criminological theory. For this reason, GST has much intuitive appeal. Also, by stressing the importance of emotional states, GST helps to fill a void in a field currently dominated by social cognitive theories. Third, GST has garnered a moderate amount of empirical support. Below, these and other aspects of GST are explored in some detail.

Development and Core Assumptions

Traditional or classic strain theories (including theories authored by Robert Merton, Albert K. Cohen, Richard A. Cloward, and Lloyd E. Ohlin) emphasize the importance of goal blockage, or the inability of individuals to attain conventional goals through legitimate means. According to these theories, individuals are encouraged by the larger [p. 7 ↓] cultural system to pursue the goals of monetary success or middle-class status. However, when prevented from achieving these goals through legitimate means—due to their position in the class system, real or perceived lack of opportunity, or lack of resources—individuals may resort to illegitimate and innovative means of goal attainment, such as crime or delinquency.

Although classic strain theories were highly influential during much of the 20th century, they were sharply criticized during the 1970s. Prominent criminologists criticized classic strain theories for their failure to explain the delinquency of middle-class individuals, for their failure to explain why only *some* strained individuals turn to crime or delinquency, and for their neglect of goals other than monetary success or middle-class status. Classic strain theories were also seen as lacking in empirical support. If such theories were correct, one would expect to find high levels of delinquency among strained individuals; namely, among individuals who aspire to conventional success but who do not expect to achieve this goal through legitimate means (in other words, among individuals who experience a gap or *disjunction* between their aspirations and expectations). Yet contrary to expectations, researchers observed that the highest levels of delinquency were to be found among individuals who lack aspirations for conventional success (e.g., among individuals who do *not* aspire to a college education or high-status occupation)—a fact that appears to be more consistent with social control theory than classic strain theories.

Agnew developed GST in part as a response to these criticisms. In particular, Agnew broadened the conception of strain to include a wider array of potential stressors—stressors that are not limited to lower-class individuals, but that can also be experienced by individuals from middle-class backgrounds. For instance, while frustration and innovation may result when goals are seen as “out of reach” for the individual, Agnew argues that other types of goal blockage may be more consequential in terms of crime and delinquency. Although a disjunction between aspirations and expectations is the type of goal blockage most often associated with classic strain theories, Agnew points out that aspirations typically involve *ideal* goals or outcomes and are somewhat utopian in character. For this reason, unfulfilled aspirations may not be a key source of strain or frustration. GST recognizes that the experience of goal blockage can also result from the failure to achieve *expected* outcomes (e.g., the failure to receive an expected income) as well as the failure to achieve outcomes that are perceived as fair and just (e.g., the failure to receive a “deserved” income). These latter types of goal blockage, in turn, are more consistently associated with the experience of anger, hostility, disappointment, and dissatisfaction.

Moreover, in GST, the goals and outcomes that are important to individuals are not limited to income or middle-class status. For example, some additional goals and

outcomes that are recognized by the theory, and that appear to be especially important to young males, include respect and masculine status (e.g., the expectation that one be treated “like a man”), autonomy (e.g., the goal or desire to enjoy a certain amount of personal independence), and the desire for thrills or excitement. GST, then, recognizes that individuals pursue a variety of goals beyond economic success, and it expands the notion of goal blockage accordingly. In particular, GST defines goal blockage more broadly to include *the failure to achieve positively valued goals*.

In addition, Agnew highlights two other categories of strain, including *the loss of positively valued stimuli* and *the presentation of noxious or negatively valued stimuli*. The loss of positively valued stimuli includes a potentially wide range of negative events or experiences, including the theft of valued property, the loss of a romantic relationship, or the withdrawal of parental love. The presentation of noxious stimuli also includes a wide range of negative experiences, such as harassment and bullying from peers, negative relations with parents and teachers, or criminal victimization.

According to GST, strain increases the likelihood that individuals will experience negative emotions. Anger is one possible response and is of special interest to general strain theorists. Anger occurs when strain is blamed on others, and it is believed to be especially conducive to crime and delinquency. Among other things, anger reduces one's tolerance for injury or insult, lowers inhibitions, energizes the individual to action, and creates desires for retaliation and revenge.

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In GST, a criminal or delinquent response to strain is viewed as an attempt by the individual to cope with negative emotional states and, specifically, as an attempt to obtain immediate relief from emotional distress. For example, individuals who experience high levels of strain, and who become angry when they blame this strain on others, may experience a sense of satisfaction or relief when they strike back at the perceived source of their strain. As demonstrated in laboratory experiments, angry individuals who have an opportunity to retaliate at the source of their anger often experience a significant reduction in angry arousal. Likewise, individuals may resort to drug and alcohol use to ward off feelings of depression and despair—feelings that occur when they blame themselves for the experience of strain. Although such coping

strategies are likely to exacerbate problems in the long run, such individuals may nonetheless obtain immediate relief from psychic pain.

According to GST, then, offending behavior is often a response to the negative emotions generated by strain. It should be noted, however, that offending behavior does not necessarily require the experience of negative affect. At times, crime or delinquency may represent a *direct* response to strain, or an attempt to avoid or escape strain, as when an abused child runs away from home. Likewise, strained individuals may find that acts of aggression allow them to terminate noxious treatment. As observed by family researchers, violent children often deal with their problems (such as physical punishment or teasing by other family members) with aggression because they have learned that aggressive counterattack can be successful, forcing others to “back off.”

It is important to note here that, although GST interprets offending behavior as an adaptation to strain—one that may allow individuals to cope with strain in the short run—the theory does *not* contend that crime is an effective solution. Crime is only one possible response to strain and, in the long run, may prove to be maladaptive, especially if it leads to other problems for the individual. Moreover, the intent of GST is *not* to excuse or justify criminal behavior. As Agnew is careful to note, the main purpose of the theory is to identify the processes that foster criminal conduct in the hopes that such knowledge may lead to improved strategies for the prevention and control of crime.

Criminal versus Conventional Coping

As stated earlier, one criticism of classic strain theories is that they do not adequately explain why only some strained individuals resort to crime or delinquency. Many people experience strains and stressors of various types, yet most of us do not turn to crime as a result. Rather, if we believe we have been unfairly treated, we may file a complaint. If we obtain an unexpected low grade in a college course, we may revise our study methods accordingly, attempt to negotiate with the instructor, or convince ourselves that the course was not important anyway. Likewise, if we experience a major disappointment, we may turn to a friend for emotional support and hope for a better

tomorrow. In short, most people find legal ways to cope with strain. Why, then, do some individuals respond to strain with violence, theft, or drug use?

GST recognizes that strain does not *automatically* lead to crime or delinquency. Indeed, the theory specifies a number of conditions that are said to make a criminal/delinquent response more or less likely. It is beyond the scope of this entry to discuss all of the relevant conditions, but roughly speaking, these conditions involve the nature of the strain in question, the coping abilities and resources available to the strained individual, and the extent to which the strained individual is predisposed to crime.

Nature of the Strain

According to GST, strains are not created equal. Indeed, many if not most strains are relatively trivial in nature and are not sufficient to increase the odds of criminal offending. The kinds of strains that generate strong pressure for corrective action, and that are most likely to lead to criminal behavior, include chronic or repeated strains, strains that are seen as severe or unjust (and hence capable of generating strong negative emotions), strains that occur in contexts where individuals have little to lose by engaging in crime (i.e., when individuals are low in social control), and, finally, strains that can be resolved through crime. Some examples of strain that meet one or more of these conditions include parental rejection, child abuse, negative school experiences (e.g., the experience of being bullied by other students, or having teachers that frequently talk down to and publicly humiliate the [p. 9 ↓] individual), harsh or excessive punishment, a strong desire or need for “fast cash,” persistent unemployment or underemployment (especially for adults), homelessness, residence in an economically deprived community, and racial discrimination.

Coping Abilities and Resources

Crime, of course, is not the only possible response to the types of strain described above. Individuals may instead cope in legal or conventional ways. For example, they may seek assistance from others in an effort to reduce strain, as when a child asks an older sibling for help in dealing with a bully at school. Likewise, they may try

to negotiate with parents or teachers in an effort to resolve interpersonal problems. If such behavioral strategies are unavailable or ineffective, individuals may rely on cognitive or emotional coping strategies of a non-criminal nature. For example, they may try to convince themselves that the strain they are experiencing is “not so bad,” they may seek comfort or reassurance from friends, family, or religion, or they may find a distraction in music or television.

According to GST, a criminal or delinquent response is most likely to occur when these conventional coping strategies are unavailable, when they prove ineffective, or when the coping resources of the individual become taxed (as may occur when the individual is subjected to chronic or repeated strain). These facts help explain why, in comparison to adults, young people have a greater tendency to deal with strain in criminal or delinquent ways. In the face of strain, young people tend to have fewer options of a conventional nature available to them. In comparison to adults, young people generally have less control over their lives and, as a result, have difficulty removing themselves from those environments in which they may face chronic or repeated strain, such as the family or school. Indeed, attempts by adolescents to escape such environments through running away or truancy are defined as delinquent by adult society. Also, when responding to strain, young people have less life experience to draw on and thus have a greater tendency to react in immature and ineffective ways. This may be especially true for young people who lack conventional social support, such as the support of a caring and law-abiding adult.

In addition, a criminal or delinquent response to strain is more likely to occur when individuals lack the ability or skill to cope in a legal way. For example, individuals who are impulsive, easily upset and quick to anger, who have difficulty controlling their anger, or who struggle to express themselves verbally tend to have greater difficulty enacting conventional coping strategies.

Existing Predispositions to Crime

All else equal, a criminal or delinquent response to strain is more likely to occur among individuals who are already predisposed to offending behavior. Individuals who are predisposed to crime or delinquency include those who have a past history of

offending, low self-control, a tendency to attribute their problems to others, few stakes in conformity, or who have extensive associations with criminal or delinquent peers.

Empirical Status

A number of studies have attempted to assess the validity of GST. Although a full, comprehensive test of GST and its many propositions has yet to be conducted, researchers have managed to assess some of the core propositions of the theory. While the results of these research efforts have not always been consistent, the findings appear to indicate that, overall, GST has promise.

For instance, empirical tests of GST regularly show that various strains increase the likelihood of criminal and delinquent involvement, including parental rejection, harsh or erratic discipline, child abuse, negative experiences in school, homelessness, chronic unemployment, criminal victimization, and residence in economically deprived communities. Consistent with GST, some (but not all) studies indicate that these strains tend to generate negative emotions and, for this reason, increase the likelihood of offending behavior. Notably, some of the findings in this area are based on longitudinal studies. Longitudinal studies follow individuals over a period of time and allow researchers to examine the effects of strain on the future development of crime and delinquency. The results of such studies increase confidence in the assumption that strain plays a causal role in the development of offending behavior.

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There is also evidence to suggest that criminal and delinquent adaptations are experienced by offenders as partly successful, at least in the short run, allowing strained individuals to minimize the deleterious consequences of strain on emotional well-being. In other words, crime or delinquency may be experienced by offenders as a reasonably effective coping technique, allowing them to escape or avoid strain (e.g., running away, truancy), to compensate for a lack of positive emotions (e.g., through drug or alcohol use), or to strike back at the source of strain, perhaps in an effort to restore their dignity or a sense of justice. This fact may help to explain why many individuals are attracted to crime and delinquency and why such behavior is resistant to change.

It appears that GST also has potential to explain why only some strained individuals resort to crime and delinquency. Consistent with GST, certain studies indicate that a delinquent response to strain is more likely among individuals who are impulsive, easily upset, quick to anger, who lack conventional social support, or who associate with delinquent peers. As a whole, however, studies have produced mixed results in this area, indicating that additional research is needed to understand the processes that shape the likelihood of a criminal or delinquent adaptation to strain.

While acknowledging the need for future research, Agnew contends that, based on the evidence collected to date, GST has earned its place as a leading explanation of crime and delinquency. In light of the mixed findings that have been reported in the research literature, it is not entirely clear that rival theorists would concur with this assessment. Nevertheless, it seems clear that tests of GST have produced moderate support for the theory and that the key propositions of the theory appear to have some merit. Consequently, the theory may have important implications for the control and prevention of crime and delinquency.

Implications for Crime Control

As described above, GST is relatively unique in that it is one of the few crime theories to emphasize the importance of negative emotions, such as anger and despair. Although GST borrows heavily from other crime theories, especially when explaining why only some strained individuals resort to crime, it is GST's focus on negative emotions, and on negative experiences in general, that help to distinguish it from other leading explanations. While social learning theory focuses attention on the processes that lead individuals to view crime as desirable or justifiable, and while control theorists draw attention to the factors that restrain or inhibit individuals from engaging in crime, GST highlights the negative relations and negative emotions that *pressure* individuals into crime. Consequently, the crime control recommendations that follow from GST are relatively unique as well.

The major crime control strategies that follow from GST include efforts or interventions that are designed to (1) reduce or alleviate the strains that are conducive to crime or delinquency, (2) equip individuals with the tools and skills that will allow them to avoid

such strains, and (3) reduce that likelihood that individuals will cope with strain in a criminal or delinquent manner. The task of reducing or alleviating strain may seem idealistic, but existing interventions have already shown some potential to reduce the kinds of strains and stressors highlighted by GST. For example, one such intervention is designed to repair the strained relationships that have developed between parents and children in troubled families, and involves the development of a parent-child contract. With the aid of a counselor, both parent and child negotiate an agreement specifying mutual responsibilities, obligations, and privileges. If the child attends school regularly throughout the week, for instance, the parent agrees to reward such behavior by allowing the child to stay out late on the weekend. The contract provides a lesson in effective parent-child negotiation and offers a method of conflict resolution based on communication as opposed to combativeness. This approach has shown promise in reducing both parental maltreatment (one type of strain) and juvenile delinquency.

Successful parenting programs also teach unskilled parents techniques that help them to avoid the strains that might otherwise lead to child abuse. For example, in addition to effective disciplinary techniques, such programs teach parents to use reframing techniques and other cognitive strategies that allow them to interpret their children's misbehavior in ways that reduce anger-based reactions. For instance, parents may be encouraged to [p. 11 ↓] view noncompliance as a symptom of the child's immaturity instead of purposeful spite.

Interventions also exist that are designed to help individuals cope more productively with the strains they have already experienced. For example, among young people who have a history of abuse, anger-management programs have shown some success in reducing aggressive behavior. Such programs encourage maltreated youths to recognize their feelings, the connection between their anger and aggression, and the triggers of their anger and aggression. These programs also teach young people alternative ways of coping with anger.

Recent Advances

Agnew offered his initial statement of GST as a foundation for further development. Since the publication of GST, Agnew and his colleagues have extended and elaborated

the theory in a number of ways. These efforts have evolved from attempts to apply GST to a number of key issues in criminological theory, including persistent offending, gender differences in criminal conduct, and community-level differences in crime.

Explaining Persistent Offending

Most offenders desist from crime as they age into adulthood. However, a small group of individuals maintain a high level of offending into adulthood. These individuals have been referred to as *life-course-persistent* offenders. They exhibit very aggressive behavior as young children, are highly delinquent during adolescence, and persist in serious offending as they age. Moreover, these offenders commit a disproportionate share of serious, violent crime.

Why do these individuals persist in their offending? Some criminologists try to explain persistent offending in terms of the stable personality traits that these individuals are believed to possess, including traits that may be partly inherited such as low intelligence, impulsivity, hyperactivity, or low self-control. Individuals who possess these traits tend to be viewed as “mean” or “out of control” by others. As a result, these individuals have difficulty developing strong attachments to conventional others. They also are less likely to succeed at school, develop few stakes in conformity, and tend to associate with criminal and delinquent peers.

GST adopts a similar explanation of persistent offending but places special emphasis on the trait of “aggressiveness,” which involves irritability, minimal tolerance for frustration, and a “difficult temperament.” According to GST, aggressiveness may partly result from the experience of chronic strain in early childhood, such as harsh or erratic discipline. The trait of aggressiveness, in turn, helps to maintain persistent antisocial behavior for a number of reasons related to GST. First, being irritable and having a low tolerance for frustration, aggressive individuals are more likely than others to interpret any given situation as aversive and to blame this adversity on others. They are thus more likely to respond to any given situation with anger and delinquency.

Second, aggressive individuals are often treated negatively by others and, because of their undesirable traits, may provoke negative reactions. For example, having a difficult

temperament, aggressive children often frustrate parents—especially unskilled parents—and as a result are at risk of emotional and physical abuse. At school, aggressive individuals may irritate their peers and teachers, leading to social rejection.

Third, aggressive individuals tend to sort themselves into environments that are characterized by high levels of strain. Because they possess a “bad temper,” for example, aggressive individuals tend to have difficulty maintaining stable relationships and employment. As a result, they may end up in poor marriages and bad jobs—environments in which they are likely to experience chronic or repeated strain. These are also the type of environments that increase the likelihood of a criminal or delinquent response. From the perspective of GST, these facts can account for persistent, high-rate offending.

Explaining Gender Differences in Crime

Males are far more likely than females to engage in offending behavior, and this is especially true for serious acts of violence and theft. Criminologists have tried to explain this gender gap in a variety of ways. Some argue that socialization processes help explain why males are more likely to engage in crime. It is said, for example, that males are [p. 12 ↓] encouraged to adopt “masculine” values that are conducive to crime, such as competition and aggressiveness. Other criminologists stress the importance of control and opportunity factors. In comparison to males, females are subject to higher levels of parental supervision, tend to have higher levels of commitment to family and school, and are less likely to associate with criminal or delinquent peers. For these reasons, it is argued, the female crime rate is much lower than that of males.

GST attempts to shed further light on this issue by providing an additional explanation for the gender gap in crime. In addition to the factors described above, Agnew and his colleagues argue that this gap can be explained, in part, in terms of the different types of strains that males and females experience. In particular, evidence suggests that, while females may experience as much strain as their male counterparts, males are more likely to experience those strains that are most likely to lead to criminal adaptations, such as harsh parental discipline, negative school experiences, criminal victimization, and homelessness.

Although the evidence is somewhat mixed, there is also some suggestion in the research literature that males are more likely than females to react to strain with crime or delinquency. There may be several reasons for this gendered response to strain. One possible reason is that males are more likely to respond to strain with “moral outrage,” which is especially conducive to serious violence and property crime. Although females also get angry, their anger is more often accompanied by depression, anxiety, and other negative emotions—perhaps because females tend to blame themselves for strain or because they worry more about possible harm to interpersonal relationships. A second possible reason for this gendered response to strain is that males tend to have fewer coping resources of a conventional nature (e.g., lower levels of social support). A third possible reason is that, as described above, males tend to have a higher level of association with criminal or delinquent peers, making a deviant response to strain more likely.

Community Differences in Crime

Like many other leading theories of crime, GST is pitched at the social psychological level of analyses and focuses on the relationship between the individual and his or her immediate social environment. Agnew, however, argues that processes related to social psychological strain can also be used to explain patterns of crime appearing at the level of schools, neighborhoods, and larger communities.

Why, for example, do some communities have especially high rates of crime and violence? Consistent with the approach of GST, Agnew points to the persistent strains that tend to exist in high-crime communities, such as high rates of poverty, unemployment, and family disruption. These factors may contribute to crime for a number of reasons, but Agnew stresses that one such reason is that these strains contribute to high levels of anger and frustration in the resident population. Furthermore, when there exists a high density of angry, frustrated persons in the same community, this serves to increase the likelihood that residents will interact with angry, upset, and potentially hostile individuals. It also increases the likelihood that angry and potentially hostile individuals will interact with one another, which is likely to lead to an escalation in crime or violence.

Although data in this area are limited, researchers have found some support for these arguments. For example, one study found that schools that harbor a high percentage of angry students tend to have more problems with student aggression, especially fights between students. It was also observed that, in such schools, students in general (not just angry students) have an elevated risk of becoming involved in fights. Presumably, students in these schools may have more encounters with angry, upset, and potentially hostile individuals, whether or not they themselves are angry. This fact leads to relatively high levels of interpersonal conflict and aggression.

Conclusion

General strain theory is distinct from other theories of crime in that it highlights the importance of negative relations and argues that individuals are *pressured* into crime. It is also one of the few crime theories to emphasize the role of negative emotional states, such as anger, depression, or despair. From the perspective of GST, criminal and delinquent acts occur in response to the “corrective [p. 13 ↓] pressure” generated by strain or associated negative emotions. Criminal and delinquent responses to strain are most likely to occur when conventional coping strategies are unavailable, ineffective, or when the coping resources of the individual have become taxed in the face of chronic or repeated strain.

Empirical tests of GST have produced moderate support for the theory, indicating that it can help to inform our understanding of the etiology of crime and delinquency as well as crime control and prevention efforts. Although more research needs to be conducted on GST, thus far the theory has attracted considerable attention from criminologists and has played an important role in revitalizing the strain theory tradition.

TimothyBrezina

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See also

- [Broidy, Lisa M., and Robert Agnew: A General Strain Theory of Gender and Crime](#)

- [Cloward, Richard A.: The Theory of Illegitimate Means](#)
- [Cloward, Richard A., and Lloyd E. Ohlin: Delinquency and Opportunity](#)
- [Cohen, Albert K.: Delinquent Boys](#)
- [Merton, Robert K.: Social Structure and Anomie](#)
- [Messner, Steven F., and Richard Rosenfeld: Institutional-Anomie Theory](#)

References and Further Readings

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