

Agnew's general strain theory (gst) summary and analysis



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INTRODUCTION

According to an American Psychological Association survey, 73% of Americans named money as the primary affecter of their stress levels. Stress can be influenced by a variety of factors however, whether it is accumulation of wealth, death of a friend, or perhaps loss of job. Anger and depression are often are the results of failing to achieve goals, such as a student struggling to fit in with his peers or with the loss of a positively valued stimuli such as a friend or family member. Peoples methods of coping with stress can take two general avenues, the first avenue being the use of legitimate means of achieving goals or coping with stress, such as seeking professional help, and the second being illegitimate means, for example, bullying kids at school because of frustrations of not fitting in. Are people more likely to commit crime when stressed? This question would be answered yes by Robert Agnew and can be examined using his General Strain Theory which explores the causes strain, how to measure strain, the relationship between strain and crime, as well as policy implications based directly off his theory.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF STRAIN THEORY

Emile Durkheim first popularized the term anomie, which essentially is defined normlessness, or the instability that occurs when norms and cultural values breakdown. Durkheim argued that during rapid changes that take place in society, norms will breakdown.

Robert King Merton in 1938 used the idea of anomie to help develop the foundation for strain theory. Merton argues that the struggle to accumulate wealth is the chief cause of strain (Merton 1938: 670).

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Merton suggests that there are two important elements of social structure. The first contains cultural goals, the function of the goals, and interests (Merton 1938: 672). The second phase of the social structure defines how society is to go about achieving these goals, by placing regulations and creating laws (Merton 1938: 673). The American dream is a popular culturally defined goal, Merton argued, which through honest-dedicated work, anyone can achieve this “dream” of wealth. Society defines what avenues are to be considered legitimate to achieve this goal, for example, earning a college degree and earning a high paying job would be a legitimate path as defined by our society. Since wealth in American is not distributed equally Merton (1938) argued that strain often occurs for those who are undercapitalized and do not have access to these legitimate means.

Merton (1938) illustrates four responses to this strain. The first, conformity, Merton suggests that people who take this path subscribe to cultural goals and go about achieving these goals by using society’s “institutionalized means.” The second path, innovation, suggests that when a person finds that an obstacle inhibits the ability to achieve the cultural goals, the person will not use institutionalized means; rather, they will employ other means.

The third path, ritualism, describes a person that will reject the culture goals of society, but use its institutions as an avenue for advancement. The fourth, is the polar opposite of the path of conformity such that a person who is retreatist will reject cultural goals and its institutionalized means, people that take this path are people who essentially are not part of society (Merton 1938: 674).

Furthering Merton's ideas in 1994, Messer and Rosenfeld expanded on idea of the American Dream as an origin of criminality. Messer and Rosenfeld (1994) state that the heavy emphasis on American Dream encourages criminal impulses while creating a weak normative environment.

Agnew's Revision of Strain Theory

Robert Agnew, who devised a revision to previous strain theories, argued that most of the previous theories accredit crime to the failure of adolescents to accomplish traditional goals defined by society through legitimate avenues (Agnew 1985). Agnew (1992) states that despite criticism from distinguished theorists such as Travis Hirschi, strain theory can be vital in the explanation of some delinquency, although to do so effectively, strain theory needs revision.

Agnew cites that if in fact the previous theories were to be true, it would be expected that crime would occur when there would be there a strong desire for monetary success and a low expectation of fulfilling that desire (Agnew 1985). However, Agnew (1985), suggests that tests have proved differently.

According to Agnew (2001) studies show that delinquency peaks when desires, goals, and the expectation of achieving the desires or goals are low, and delinquency is lowest when desires, goals and the expectation of accomplishing the goals are high(Agnew 2001:). This is only one example of how Agnew began his revision

Agnew's General Strain Theory

Agnew's strain theory is focused on the individual level and "their immediate social environment" (Agnew 1992: 48). Where most other strain theories, such as Merton's, put a heavy focus on accumulation of wealth, a structural cultural goal, Agnew tends to focus on goals that cause strain other than wealth accumulation. Agnew (1992) identifies three major sources of strain, being, the prevention or blockage of achieving positively valued goals, the removal of positively valued stimuli, and the threat or presentation of negatively valued stimuli.

Failure to Achieve Goals

Agnew (1992: 51) describes multiple types of strain that fall under the category of failing to achieve positively valued goals. They are (1) strain as the disjunction between expectations and actual achievements; not achieving these goals is likely to cause anger, dissatisfaction, and disappointment, this cause of strain connects back to previous strain theories, such as Merton's (Agnew 1992: 51). (2) Strain as the disjunction between just or fair outcomes and actual outcome. This source looks beyond simply failing to achieve a goal of monetary success or doing well in school (Agnew 1992: 53). An example of this source of strain would be when an outcome of a situation conflicts with what the individual believed they deserved.

Let's say a sales worker who thought they deserved a promotion due to good sales performance gets demoted while someone with less credentials get promoted. This can lead to strain due to inequity, where an individual will feel that they are unequal to those of their peers and will subsequently

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increase the chances they engage in delinquency. The main reason for delinquency in this case is to attempt to improve their outcome, such as lying on sales and fudging the books, or affect others outcome, such as writing slanderous rumors that get someone fired (Agnew 1992: 54).

Removal of Stimuli

Agnew describes that by removing a positively valued stimuli it has the potential to cause strain. Getting something of great value stolen from you would be an example of the removal. The desire to get the object back could lead to a person committing delinquent acts by seeking revenge for those responsible.

Negative Stimuli

The existence of unpleasant stimuli can lead to delinquent behavior through the following avenue: Agnew (1992) states that a person may seek an escape from the negative stimuli, by trying to dispose of the stimuli. An example of removing stimuli could be someone shooting up a school because they were bullied, thus terminating the negative stimuli.

Crime

In short, using the above sources of strain, it is clear that negative relationships with other have potential to cause strain in an individual and in turn result in negative emotions. Agnew (1992) argues that the key emotion associated with General Strain theory is anger. A negative affect such as anger, is likely to lead an individual to take corrective steps to quell their anger. Often times anger leads an individual to seek revenge and is also a strong motivator for action.

Broidy's Test

Agnew's Theory state that " strains are shaped by various factors, including the nature, intensity, and duration of the strain, the emotions that the strain produces in the individual, the collection of coping mechanisms at an individual's disposal (Broidy 2001: 10)." By measuring these factors, primarily intensity and duration of strain, General Strain Theory can be empirically tested by criminologists. (Broidy 2001: 10)

Lisa Broidy, from the University of New Mexico, examined cross sectional data of 896 undergraduate students from seven different disciplines, who participated in self report surveys. Although Broidy (2001) suggests that the non random sample is not ideal, being neither representative of all college students nor representative to the population as a whole is useful for the purpose of this test. Broidy (2001) asserts that by testing the theory with most middle-class, white college age students, it ensures that the results of the test are not " spurious."

Using the survey data to test three hypothesizes, Broidy found that a failure to achieve goals that were set by an individual were less likely to result in anger where a failure to achieve goals due unfair circumstances were much more likely to cause negative emotions. This study done by Broidy appears to be consistent with general strain theory such that, anger induced from strain is likely to lead to illegitimate coping strategies. However, Broidy's study yielded some results that were not consistent with General Strain Theory. For example, the finding that " anger is unrelated to the likelihood of legitimate coping," is a finding that is not assumed in General Strain Theory

(Broidy 2001: 29), as the theory does in fact predict that negative emotions like anger would be associated with legitimate coping strategies.

Also found in this study was that females were much less likely to employ illegitimate coping strategies than males, leading Broidy to suggest that future studies of general strain theory should study the effect that gender has on assumptions described in general strain theory. (Broidy 2001:)

Since Agnew's major revision in 1992 there has been a substantial amount of empirical tests like Broidy's, which there had not been previously (Froggio 2007: 392-394). Much of the test results conducted between 1992 and 2003 confirms that correlation exists between stressful events, strain induced anger, and criminal activity. However, Froggio (2007) argues that despite evidence of correlation between delinquency and assumptions of General Strain Theory, the correlation is not clear cut in that many of the surveys conducted were limited. Moreover, Froggio (2007), argues that surveys in the future should incorporate Agnew's assumptions of when crime is most likely to occur.

Policy Implications

After reading the literature, policy implications for General Strain Theory become obvious. Since General Strain Theory builds off the idea that blocked goals cause negative emotions such as anger, it should be emphasized that going to anger management is appropriate route to coping with stress rather than using alternative means such as beating someone up. Encouraging K-12 schools to teach children that the accumulation of wealth is not what is success necessary is could be another implication based off of this theory, by

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doing this it could encourage children to value family, job stability, and good health rather than simply becoming wealthy. Although difficult, equalizing the opportunity for all to become successful would prove to be effective based on the assumptions of strain theories. Equalizing opportunities could include paying females equal wages, or provide more intensive education in low income areas, as well as making it easier for those in lower socioeconomic classes to attend college.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Comments

General strain theory can be easy to subscribe to due in part to its broad scope, and General Strain Theory unlike previous strain theories is able to focus on middle and lower class delinquency, rather than exclusively lower class like Merton. Some empirical evidence regarding general strain theory shows a strong correlate between negative emotions (anger) caused by strain and criminal activity.

However, General Strain Theory fails to explain why some individuals who experience great amounts of strain fail to resort to illegitimate coping strategies.

General Strain Theory by definition is a logically sound theory, as it is not tautological, and can clearly be falsified. General Strain theory in my opinion is parsimonious in its general explanation of why strain causes crime, but latent variables such as gender, age, race, neighborhood, and other factors make it complicated when it boils down to experimental testing. Although the theory appears to be logical and fits the criteria for being a “good” theory by what was learned in CRMJ 301, I have become a skeptic of the

theory. In order for a person like me, who is eternally critical, to become an advocate of a theory like such, I would like to see more comprehensive studies done. If money and resources were not an issue I would suggest organizing a birth cohort study, where a team follows children from birth until they are in their 25. This would let the researchers look at various factors that cause strain firsthand, by doing interviews and surveys more frequently. Until then I believe that General Strain Theory is incomplete but if incorporated with other theories it can be helpful in explaining some delinquency.