

Criminology delinquency and crime the general strain theory



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General Strain Theory (GST), introduced by sociologist Robert Agnew in 1992 (Cernkovich, Giordano, Rudolph, 2000), focuses on the individual effects of strain, and how it is that that strain then leads a person towards delinquency and crime.

This essay looks at the background of strain theory, its explanation of crime and deviance, evaluates the theory and ends with the writer's opinion of general strain theory.

General Strain Theory is more individualised than the first Anomie and Strain theory that was introduced by Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton. Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen (2002) suggest that it is personality traits within the individual that result in their reaction to strain, and it is then these certain traits that end up in the individual turning towards delinquency and crime as a way to relieve the tension that the strain has brought into their life. The major traits associated with individual strain are those traits of constraint and negative emotionality (Agnew et al., 2002), which when 'provoked' by strain, lead the individual to such emotions as anger and to delinquency and crime to relieve this anger. Also known as negative affect states (Seigel, 2003), these adverse emotions of anger and frustration can be controlled by many individuals, but coupled with those traits of low constraint and high negative emotionality in an individual, other individuals have trouble with controlling these negative affect states and delinquency is often the result when strain is added to their lives.

General strain theory does do the 'good deed' per se of explaining both crime and deviance as a theory, as most individuals who react negatively to

strain do so mainly in a delinquent way, but not always in a criminal way. If the reaction is in a criminal way though, it is only to the extent of income-generating criminality, and rarely results in crimes of a hurtful nature (Cernkovich, et al., 2000). Many researchers have found that the main type of strain that results in crime occurring is the strain of an individual's economic situation (Cernkovich et al., 2000), and thus most crime and delinquency to relieve this strain tension is ways in which income can be obtained. While some individuals only go as far as delinquency (such as acting out against someone) to relieve their 'tension' from strain pressures, others do go the extra distance and commit a crime, such as robbing another individual. The difference between committing a delinquent act and committing a criminal act is explained by general strain theory as a direct result of the level of constraint and negative emotionality that individual possesses (Agnew et al., 2002).

In support of general strain theory, Agnew et al. (2002) looked at 2300 children between the ages of 7 and 11 in 1976, and again five years later in 1981, measuring their individual strains (both at home and at school), and comparing it with their level of constraint and negative emotionality. Teacher and parental survey reports for each child were also used at each time period. Agnew et al. (2002) believed that it was mainly juveniles who reacted negatively to strain, and thus the researchers wanted to test whether the children with low constraint and high negative emotionality in 1976 were more likely in 1981 to act criminally and/or delinquently, if their levels of constraint and negative emotionality were the same or worse as previous. In response to their surveys, Agnew et al. did find that those juveniles with low

constraint and high negative emotionality in 1981 were more likely to act in a delinquent or criminal manner as a reaction to parental and educational strain that occurred in their lives.

Cernkovich et al.(2000) took a different approach in testing general strain theory, instead looking at race and the so-called ' American Dream' and the effect that these factors had on certain individuals. Two samples were used in the design: the first a sample of individuals living in private households, and the second a sample of previously institutionalised offenders. As in the previous study by Agnew et al. (2002), the samples were interviewed as adolescents in 1982 and then again in 1992 (household sample) and 1995 (institutionalised sample) (Cernkovich et al., 2000). When conceptualised in career and materialistic terms, the African-American commitment to the American dream was strong, although high levels of unemployment and low incomes were still common occurrences. While lacking access to money and materialistic objects, the importance of the American dream to many African-Americans was still quite high, resulting in the occurrence of delinquency and criminality in an effort to improve their chances of achieving the American dream (Cernkovich et al., 2000).

Thus it would seem that racial factors do play a role in general strain theory, in addition to those trait factors of low constraint and high negative emotionality. Either way it is looked at, general strain theory explains how it is that delinquency and criminality can both occur. In one case it is because of the extent of traits within an individual, in another case it is based on the importance one race holds towards materialism and status quo.

Evaluation

While it is true that general strain theory does do the job of explaining both crime and deviance, at the same time general strain theory does include some shortcomings as a criminology theory overall.

General strain theory has done a job of explaining why it is that those races other than Caucasian (or White) do commit crime and delinquent acts, but then why is it that Caucasians commit many of the delinquent and criminal acts in the world? General strain theory has no real explanation for this, other than the fact that they might possess the traits of low constraint and negative emotionality. But what about those people who commit crimes and delinquent acts and do not possess these traits? Why is it then that they are doing what they are doing? General strain theory has no explanation for this occurrence. Agnew et al. (2002) stated that it was mainly juveniles who possessed the traits of low constraint and negative emotionality, and thus were the ones to react negatively to strain, but what about those who are not juveniles? Obviously these individuals must possess these traits as well, but what if they do not? What is it then that has made them commit the act that they did? Seigel (2003) writes that negative affective states such as anger and frustration result in criminal and delinquent acts, but what about those psychopaths and sociopaths who do not 'have' these feelings at the time of their crime, or those individuals who commit crime 'just because' and not as a result of a negative state? General strain theory, while on the micro level, may be too much on the micro level, for it is not only those individual issues, but the larger macro societal issues as well that interact for an individual to commit a delinquent or criminal act.

Another 'issue' that general strain theory does not take into account, when explaining crime and deviance, is the crimes committed by those who have already achieved the 'American Dream'. With their economic situation already high, why is it that some people choose to risk it all for a few more dollars? General strain theory does not explain why many of the so-called 'white-collar crimes' occur. And in keeping with the American dream, what about those individuals who do not adhere to the American dream? Why is it that people in little villages halfway around the world commit crimes? They have no reason to adhere to the 'American dream' of the Western world, so what is their reason for committing crime? It can not be a racial issue, for they are the only race that is around in their part of the world, wherever that may be. And low constraint and high negative emotionality are not issues to them as traits, so why is it then that they have committed their crime?

General strain theory has no explanation.

According to general strain theory, those who commit crime should be non-white, poor, with low constraint and high negative emotionality. So why it is that poorer people are not committing crime? What about those who are 'okay' being poor? Should they not be adhering to the American dream? What about trying to 'strike it rich' by any means possible?

General strain theory states that juveniles commit crimes and delinquent acts because they do not have the means by which to properly 'deal' with their low constraint and high negative emotionality (Agnew et al., 2002). This explains why desistance occurs later in life for these juveniles, but what about for those who do not desist from crime as they get older? They have the means now of coping with their educational and parental strains, or <https://assignbuster.com/criminology-delinquency-and-crime-the-general-strain-theory/>

those strains have 'gone away', so why are they still committing criminal and delinquent acts? And what about those individuals who do not commit these such acts as juveniles but begin to do so later on in life? Why is it that with the means to cope with life strains some people choose to ignore their coping mechanisms and instead turn to a delinquent and criminal life? A general strain theorist would argue that the individual has the coping mechanisms to deal with life strains that they did not possess as juveniles and so should be able to desist from crime and delinquency, but what if they do not? General strain theory has no reason as to why this occurs.

It is a statement of fact that crime does occur in the slum areas, and this coincides with the views expressed in general strains theory, but what about those crimes that are not committed in the slum areas? Why are these crimes occurring? General strain theory would say that it is because that person has low constraint and high negative emotionality, but what if the individual is not a juvenile? Should they not have 'grown out' of these traits by now? Another issue not explained by general strain theory is why hate crimes occur. Why is it that gays, lesbians, transvestites, transsexuals are discriminated against? Why does discrimination occur at all? Why is it that terrorism occurs? Why is it that wars occur? General strain theory has no real solid explanation for any of these occurrences of crime. It can be explained why those who are discriminated against would feel strain and commit a crime or a delinquent act, but why is it exactly that they were discriminated against in the first place? In many instances those people who are 'non-white' are not further ahead in the American dream than are whites, and

discriminating against someone does not further an individual's chances of achieving the American dream, so why is it that discrimination occurs at all?

Another shortcoming of general strain theory is in concordance with achieving the American dream. General strain theorists state that crimes are committed to improve an individual's economic situation. What about the crime that is violent and non-monetary? Why does it occur? Yes, it is true that it could be a result of negative affective states, but once monetary gain is achieved, then the negative affective state that an individual is in is supposed to dissipate without the occurrence of violence. But what if this does not occur?

General strain theory also does not explain why it is that females commit crimes. Agnew et al. (2002) found that more males than females were prone to having the traits of low constraint and high negative emotionality, and Cernkovich et al. (2000) found the same to be true in their looking at race and adherence to the American dream, so why is it that some females still do commit crime? According to general strain theory, females are highly unlikely to possess high negative emotionality and low constraint, and do not put much importance on the American dream, so why do some not conform to these factors? What is it that makes some people commit delinquent and criminal acts under the same circumstances that others will not? General strain theory has no answer to these questions.

Overall, general strain theory does have its shortcomings, and only further research in more diversified areas such as those mentioned above will be able to improve on the shortcomings of the theory, as is the case with any

theory that has inadequacies. Once these many questions have answers backed by research, then and only then will general strain theory be able to adequately explain all areas of crime and deviance as they occur in society.

Opinion

I believe that general strain theory does a fairly adequate job of explaining crime and deviance. While mentioned in the previous few pages that general strain theory does have a few shortcomings in explaining crime and deviance, I believe these shortcomings to be minor in the overall picture of things.

General strain theory does what many other theories have trouble doing, and that is explaining both crime and deviance. Many theories only explain one or the other, but general strain theory does the job of explaining both.

Depending on the level of constraint and negative emotionality an individual possesses, coupled with the amount of strain that individual then faces, will result in whether or not their way of relieving that strain is criminal or delinquent.

Another thing that general strain theory does do is that it explains why both instrumental crimes and expressive crimes occur. One is for monetary reasons, and has the achieving of the American dream to back it; the other is for lack of coping mechanisms to deal otherwise, and has low constraint and negative emotionality as reasoning behind it.

General strain theory explains why some classes and races are more likely to commit crimes and delinquent acts than are other classes and races, even if it does not completely explain why it is that white collar crime occurs, or why

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some people of the lower class do not commit crime. Maybe they have stronger coping mechanisms than other people, maybe other factors are involved. This issue of other factors is where I think many theories go wrong, and why it is that I think general strain theory does an adequate job of explaining crime and deviance. No criminology theory ever really takes into account those outside factors that may change things on a day-to-day basis. Extenuating factors and circumstances are hard to control for when testing if a theory really works or not, and in accordance with this, allowances must be made for all theories when deciding if they really do their job or not.

It is for the above-mentioned reason that I think general strain theory does do what a theory is supposed to do: it offers an explanation as to why something is occurring or happening. General strain theory can be applied to crime and deviance, and most crimes are found to be the result of strain or monetary issues, and it is for these reasons that I think general strain theory does an adequate job of explaining crime and deviance. With the use of emotions and money as the background on which general strain theory is based, the occurrence of crime and/or deviance in today's society is fully explained.

The occurrence of terrorism and hate crimes are definite reasons as to why general strain theory does not do its job of explaining crime and deviance, but again allowances must be made. No theory completely explains everything that is supposed to; everything cannot be completely explained. General strain theory does its best and integrates a number of things into explaining why it is that one thing (crime) occurs in the world. It does not

just deal with one issue as an explanation, as some theories are prone to do, but focuses on a few different things instead.

Overall, general strain theory is found to be a fairly sufficient theory when used to explain why it is that crime and deviance occur in today's society, and in the societies of the past. Money makes the world go 'round and it is because of this that many crimes in the world do occur. General strain theory just takes this into account with emotions added to the equation to state why it is exactly that some people commit criminal and delinquent acts while others do not.

While it is true that the theory has its faults and shortcomings, this can be found to be true of any theory; no theory is perfect, and that is something to be taken into account.