

5.9: Strain Theories

Strain theories assume people will commit crime because of strain, stress, or pressure. Depending on the version of strain theory, strain can come from a variety of origins. Strain theories also assume that human beings are naturally good; bad things happen, which “push” people into criminal activity.

Emile Durkheim viewed economic or social inequality as natural and inevitable. Furthermore, inequality and crime were not correlated unless there was also a breakdown of social norms. According to Durkheim, when there is rapid social change (like moving from an agrarian society to an industrial society) social norms breakdown. There is too much too fast, and society needs to reevaluate normative behaviors. He referred to the decline of social norms, or “normlessness,” as “anomie.” Moreover, social forces have a role in dictating human thought and behaviors. He thought anomie was an inability of societies to control or regulate individuals’ appetites. Although Durkheim was interested in looking at how societies change, other researchers adapted his idea of anomie. In the previous section, Shaw and McKay retained the spirit of Durkheim’s anomie but focused on neighborhoods instead of societies at large. Robert K. Merton also utilized Durkheimian anomie.

Merton (1938) thought many human appetites originated in the culture of American society rather than naturally.^[1] Moreover, the “social structure” of American society restricts some citizens from attaining it. Most, if not all, Americans know of the “American Dream.” No matter how you conceptualize the dream, most people would define the American dream as achieving economic success in some form. The culturally approved method of obtaining the American dream is through hard work, innovation, and education. However, some people and groups are not given the same opportunities to achieve the cultural goal. When there is a disjunction between the goals of a society and the appropriate means to achieve that goal, a person may feel pressure or strain. Everyone is aware of the definition and promotion of the American dream. When someone does not achieve this goal, he or she may feel strain or pressure. A person could be rejected or blocked from achieving a cultural goal. Merton claimed there were five personality adaptations between the goals of a society and the means to achieve them.

Table 5.9.1:

Personality Adaptation	Cultural Goals	Institutionalized Means
I. Conformity	+	+
II. Innovation	+	–
III. Ritualism	–	+
IV. Retreatism	–	–
V. Rebellion	+ / –	+ / –

Conformists are the most common adaptation. Without it, societal norms and values would undermine the cultural goals. Conformists accept the goals and legitimate means to achieve the goal. Innovators accept the goal, but they reject the means or have their means blocked. Thus, they innovate ways to meet society’s goal. Ritualists conform to the predominant means of achieving wealth and success through hard work, but they may be blocked from achieving success, or they drop the social goal. For example, some people work hard for the sake of working hard. They want their children to see the significance of work ethic above all else, including monetary achievement. Retreatists do not share the shared values of society. Thus, they adjust by dropping out of conventional society. Drug addicts, alcoholics, and vagrants are just some examples who select this adjustment. Finally, rebels reject the current goals and means of society, but they want to replace them with new goals and standards. They seek to establish a new social order.

Even though Merton’s theory could explain any strain, he emphasized economic strains. Cohen (1955) claimed stress could come from a lack of status.^[2] Cohen wanted to know why most juvenile crimes occurred in groups. He explained that many youths, especially those in lower class families, rejected education and other middle-class values. Instead, many teenagers would seek status and self-worth as a new value system. When teens have no status, reputation, or self-worth, it led to severe strain. To achieve status, youths commit a crime to gain status among their peer group. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) claimed more serious delinquents sought “fast cars, fancy clothes, and well dames” (p. 97).^[3] Assuming youths had no legitimate opportunities to improve their economic position, youths would join gangs to pursue illegitimate opportunities to achieve financial success. Criminal gangs

provided youths illicit opportunities to gain money, conflict gangs permitted youths to vent their frustrations, and retreatist gangs were double failures; they had no legitimate or illegitimate means to increase income.

The **general strain theory**, by Robert Agnew, claimed strains come from myriad sources. Agnew defined strain as any event that a person would rather avoid. Three types of strains include the failure to achieve a positively valued stimulus, the removal of a positively valued stimulus, and the confrontation of negative stimuli. Examples include parental rejection, child abuse, bullying, loss of job, loss of a loved one, discrimination, and criminal victimization. However, the characteristics of some strains are more likely to lead to crime. When a person views a strain as high in magnitude and unjust, and the pressure promotes criminal coping mechanism, people with minimal social control are more likely to commit a crime. Strains lead to negative emotions such as anger, depression, and fear. Some people without prosocial coping mechanisms may commit a crime to vent, which can create social control issues (trouble in school, parents, employers) as well as facilitate social learning (joining peers who also need to vent their frustration). Overall, criminal behavior serves a purpose – to escape strain, stress, or pressure.^[4]

Coping Mechanism

Every one feels stress and each of us copes with stress, pressure, or shame differently. Shame can motivate us to change for the better. For example, if you did poorly on an exam, you may start to study better. When you feel stress, what do you do? When I ask students how they deal with stress, many go for a run or a walk, lift weights, cry, talk, or eat ice cream. These are healthy (maybe not ice cream eating) and pro-social coping mechanism. When I feel stress I write. Often, I write nasty emails and then delete them. Fortunately, I have never accidentally sent one.

1. Merton, R.K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3. ↩
2. Cohen, A.K. (1955). *Delinquent boys: The culture of the gang*. New York, NY: Free Press. ↩
3. Cloward, R.A., & Ohlin, L. (1960). *Delinquency and opportunity: A theory of delinquent gangs*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press. ↩
4. Agnew, R. (2006). *Pressured into crime: An overview of general strain*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. ↩

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