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CRIMINALITY THROUGH A SOCIETAL  
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## **STRAIN THEORIES: HYPOTHESIZING CRIMINALITY THROUGH A SOCIETAL PRESSURE PERSPECTIVE**

Ishaan Deepak Joshi<sup>1</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

Merton's seminal contribution in 1957 expanded upon Durkheim's concept of anomie, introducing the sociological framework known as strain theory. According to Merton, anomie refers to a state characterised by a disparity between the goals set by society and the available resources people possess to attain those goals. Merton observed a correlation between elevated crime rates and the American society, positing that this phenomenon could be attributed to the pervasive influence of the American Dream, specifically the pursuit of wealth acquisition. Merton argued that this aspiration was deeply embedded within the American populace, irrespective of the socio-economic barriers such as socioeconomic status and race that significantly hindered the likelihood of attaining substantial financial prosperity. Given the significant importance placed on this cultural value, many resort to illicit methods of acquiring riches, thereby engaging in criminal activities. The concept of 'strain theory' emerged to describe the tension or incongruity between individuals' objectives and the available resources or methods to attain them.

### **KEYWORDS**

Strain, Anomie, Working-Class, Delinquency, Criminal Sociology, Response, Societal Pressure, Utilitarian Crime, Societal Order

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Robert Merton's viewpoint implies that the variables contributing to

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societal order and disorder, such as the contrast between criminal behaviour and adherence to social standards, are not inherently separate. Additionally, Merton suggests that cultural values, which serve beneficial purposes, may also give rise to unfavourable outcomes. The prevailing societal emphasis on wealth building as a measure of success poses a challenge to the comprehensive regulation of institutionalised methods for amassing fortunes. Instances of fraud, corruption, vice, and crime, collectively including a comprehensive range of prohibited conduct, are observed to be on the rise.<sup>2</sup>

## **II. RESPONSES TO STRAIN**

The societal prioritization of financial success and materialistic pursuits, as perpetuated by the American Dream narrative, can induce stress among those whose opportunities for achieving this ideal are constrained. The benefits of conforming to societal norms are exclusively accessible to those who are capable of pursuing sanctioned objectives via accepted methods. Any alternative amalgamation of methods and objectives might be considered aberrant to some extent.<sup>3</sup> Merton posited that persons situated in the lower echelons of society possess a range of potential responses to this tension. Various approaches towards society's objectives and unequal opportunities to attain those objectives interact to generate distinct classifications of deviation.

- **Conformity**

Individuals are pursuing a collective objective using lawful methods. While it is not certain that a conformist would attain the desired societal objective, they possess sufficient trust in society to adhere to lawful methods. An illustration of this concept may be observed in the case of a student who attends school with the intention of enhancing their

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<sup>2</sup> Hagan, F. E., & Daigle, L. E. (2018). Introduction to criminology: Theories, methods, and criminal behavior: Sage Publications

<sup>3</sup> Merton, R.K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. American Sociological Review 3(5), 672-682.

professional prospects. In doing so, the student is adhering to the prevailing American cultural norm that associates success with the pursuit of acceptable avenues.<sup>4</sup>

- **Innovation**

The individual aligns with the cultural objective of the society, although employing illicit methods to achieve it. Thieves, who pursue the cultural objective of acquiring riches, but by illegal means such as drug trafficking or embezzlement, might be regarded as individuals who exhibit innovative behaviour.

- **Ritualist**

These are individuals who have relinquished their aspirations of attaining society's endorsed objectives, yet continue to conform to society's sanctioned methods. A ritualist can be exemplified by a someone occupying a middle management role who acknowledges the absence of career advancement opportunities yet chooses to remain in their current job.

- **Retreatists**

These are individuals who have consciously chosen to reject the goals set by society as well as the lawful means of achieving those goals, and instead choose to live beyond the boundaries of traditional standards. Individuals struggling with substance abuse and notable personalities like Chris McCandless, a graduate of Emory University who tragically lost his life in Alaska while attempting to renounce capitalism, go on a journey northward by hitchhiking, and sustain themselves by living off the wilderness. This endeavour represents a deliberate withdrawal from both established social norms and conventional methods of society

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<sup>4</sup> Inderbitzin, M., Bates, K. A., & Gainey, R. R. (2018). Perspectives on deviance and social control: Sage Publications.

integration.<sup>5</sup>

- **Rebellion**

Rebellion is a phenomenon that lies beyond the scope of Merton's theoretical framework. Rebels strive to supplant prevailing society objectives with their own and develop alternative strategies to accomplish them. Terrorist organisations are a prominent manifestation of rebellion, wherein they seek to promote a certain objective, often of a political nature, by resorting to methods using violence.

### **III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MERTON'S THEORY**

Merton's strain theory emerged as a fundamental framework within the field of criminal sociology throughout the 1950s and 1960s; yet, it encountered significant and detrimental critique. Scholars ranging from Kornhauser, Hirschi as well as Johnson have put forward the contention that Merton's theory lacks empirical validity. Conversely, there are proponents who assert that empirical evidence does indeed substantiate Merton's theory. The available empirical support for Merton's strain theory is limited and exhibits contradictory findings. Several studies have indicated that individuals who exhibit a significant disparity between their ambitions and expectations do not necessarily exhibit elevated delinquency rates. Conversely, those individuals who possess little ambition and low aspirations tend to demonstrate higher rates of engagement in offensive behaviours. Nevertheless, there are some who have expressed their endorsement of this idea.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to empirical measurement, Merton's strain theory has faced criticism for his premise that materialistic aims are consistently embraced by the United States. However, it is important to acknowledge

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<sup>5</sup> Krakauer, J. (2018). *Into the wild* (Vol. 78): Pan Macmillan.

<sup>6</sup> Agnew, R., Cullen, F. T., Burton Jr, V. S., Evans, T. D., & Dunaway, R. G. (1996). A new test of classic strain theory. *Justice Quarterly*, 13(4), 681-704.

that the cultural values inside the U.S. are very pluralistic and diversified, resulting in individuals pursuing a diverse range of goals.

As an instance, individuals may exhibit a tendency to accord higher importance to assisting those who are comparatively less privileged, such as educators or healthcare professionals, or to pursuing a harmonious equilibrium between their professional and personal lives, rather than only pursuing monetary prosperity. Merton's concentration on criminality among lower classes has been subject to criticism by sociologists, who argue that it overlooks the examination of the reasons for law-breaking behaviours among elites, including corporate and white-collar offenders.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the theory places emphasis on monetary offences rather than acts of violence, prompting the inquiry. If Merton's assertions are accurate, what accounts for the comparatively lower rates of property crimes in the United States in relation to several other industrialised nations? There have been efforts made by scholars to alter Merton's strain theory. One particular change is the introduction of the idea of relative deprivation, which posits that individuals who possess fewer resources in contrast to their immediate social environment exhibit elevated levels of criminal behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have posited that teenagers exhibit a diverse range of non-financial objectives, including but not limited to seeking popularity, achieving high academic performance, excelling in sports, and fostering strong connections with their parents.

#### **IV. GENERAL STRAIN THEORY BY ROBERT AGNEW**

The fundamental tenet of General Strain Theory posits that persons who encounter stress or stressors frequently manifest emotional distress and

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<sup>7</sup> Valier, C. (2001). Criminal detection and the weight of the past: critical notes on Foucault, subjectivity and preventative control. *Theoretical Criminology*, 5(4), 425-443.

<sup>8</sup> Cullen, F. T., & Agnew, R. (2003). *Criminological theory. Past to present.*

may resort to engaging in criminal behaviour as a means of coping. General Strain Theory posits that crime rates are influenced by the experience of strain, since it engenders a range of adverse emotional states including anger, frustration, melancholy, and fear.<sup>9</sup>

Individuals aspire to address these emotional states, and their specific circumstances may render engaging in criminal behaviour as the most viable coping mechanism available to them. These adverse feelings may potentially reduce the inhibitions towards engaging in criminal behaviour. An illustration of this phenomenon is that individuals who experience anger frequently exhibit a pronounced inclination towards seeking retribution. Agnew posits that individuals who encounter adverse life circumstances, including divorce or economic hardship, are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour.

Furthermore, the author posits that delinquency might be attributed to the incapacity to navigate distressing contexts, such as educational settings characterised by interpersonal difficulties between students and teachers. This phenomenon engenders adverse emotional states, leading individuals to resort to delinquent behaviours as a method of acquiring what they have been deprived of, seeking retribution, or seeking an escape. Agnew posits that there exist three distinct categories of strain. The psychological stress experienced by individuals due to the loss of something they hold dear. Instances of potential adversities that individuals may encounter include the possibility of financial theft, the unfortunate event of a friend's demise, or the termination of a love relationship by a partner.<sup>10</sup> The experience of strain arises when individuals are subjected to unfavourable or negative treatment, including various forms of maltreatment, including verbal and physical mistreatment. One potential source of strain arises from individuals

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<sup>9</sup> Agnew, R., & Brezina, T. (2019). General strain theory. In *Handbook on crime and deviance* (pp. 145-160): Springer.

<sup>10</sup> Agnew, R. (2002). Experienced, vicarious, and anticipated strain: An exploratory study on physical victimization and delinquency. *Justice Quarterly*, 19(4), 603-632.

experiencing an inability to attain their desired objectives, such as the acquisition of financial resources or the attainment of social recognition.

General Strain Theory distinguishes between two distinct dimensions of strain, namely objective strain and subjective strain. Additionally, the theory recognises three types of strains, namely experienced strain, vicarious strain, and expected strain. Objective strain arises from events and situations that are generally despised by the majority of individuals within a certain group, whereas subjective strain emerges from instances and circumstances that are disliked by a specific individual or individuals under investigation. The significance of this differentiation lies in the substantial variation in the perception of negative experienced by different individuals.

For instance, an individual may perceive divorce as a profoundly negative life event, whilst another individual may view it as a reason for commemoration. Many studies inquire about how to measure degree of strain, specifically focusing on whether individuals have encountered experiences that are commonly perceived as unfavourable by researchers. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that events often seen as bad may hold good implications for specific individuals, and conversely, occurrences typically regarded as positive may have negative consequences for others. Agnew further distinguishes between three types of strain: real, vicarious, and expected. Experienced strains refer to strains that are directly encountered by an individual, whereas vicarious strains pertain to stresses endured by other individuals, commonly those towards whom the person feels a sense of protectiveness.<sup>11</sup> Anticipated strains refer to strains that persons foresee encountering, particularly in the immediate future.

## **V. EXEMPLIFICATIONS OF STRAIN**

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<sup>11</sup> Konty, M. (2005). Microanomie: The cognitive foundations of the relationship between anomie and deviance. *Criminology*, 43(1), 107-132.

The General Strain Theory posits that crime rates among trained persons are not solely influenced by negative emotions. Strain has the potential to diminish the extent of social control, as evidenced by a decline in individuals' inclination to prioritise compliance and their conviction regarding the moral reprehensibility of criminal behaviour. When individuals experience pressure resulting from adverse treatment by figures of power, such as educators, parents, bosses, and law enforcement personnel,<sup>12</sup> This phenomenon has the potential to diminish an individual's inclination towards conformity and adherence to traditional societal norms. In contrast to adhering to conventional notions of societal regulations, persons under strain prefer to embrace a value system that diminishes their care for others and prioritises self-interest.

The phenomenon of strain can also serve as a catalyst for the facilitation of social learning pertaining to criminal behaviour. persons who experience bullying as students may frequently encounter instances of aggressiveness, whereas persons who are consistently employed and reside in places with limited economic prospects may associate themselves with social groups that endorse stealing and drug trafficking as socially acceptable behaviours.<sup>13</sup> The stresses that are most prone to engender criminal behaviour are those characterised by high intensity, perceived injustice, low levels of social control (e.g., parental rejection), and strains that provide a compelling impetus or inducement to engage in criminal coping mechanisms, such as an acute financial necessity.

Numerous sociologists have conducted study to determine the stresses that are most prone to precipitating criminal behaviour. Familial factors, which include familial rejection, neglect and abuse of children, marital

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<sup>12</sup> Baron, S. W., & Hartnagel, T. F. (1997). ATTRIBUTIONS, AFFECT, AND CRIME: STREET YOUTHS' REACTIONS TO UNEMPLOYMENT. *Criminology*, 35(3), 409-434.

<sup>13</sup> Ellwanger, S. J. (2007). Strain, attribution, and traffic delinquency among young drivers: Measuring and testing general strain theory in the context of driving. *Crime & Delinquency*, 53(4), 523-551.

disputes, the utilisation of denigration, threats, verbal outbursts, and physical disciplinary measures, contribute to the experience of tension. The school environment can be influenced by several educational and academic aspects that may contribute to strain. This strain can be observed through indicators such as diminished academic performance, unfavourable student-teacher dynamics, as well as instances of bullying and other forms of abusive peer interactions. The strain caused by economic factors can manifest in various ways, such as engaging in work that entails unpleasant tasks, limited autonomy, low remuneration, low social status, and restricted prospects for career progression. Other manifestations include experiencing unemployment, homelessness, and facing a combination of financial desperation, frequent conflicts, and criminal victimisation.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, residing in economically disadvantaged urban areas can further contribute to these challenges.

Individuals who have been victimised by criminal acts are very susceptible to experiencing psychological and emotional distress. Discrimination, which is typically predicated on variables including ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, and faith, tends to engender tension. Several sociologists, like De Coster as well as Kort Butler, have conducted research indicating that pressures experienced in certain life domains, especially households, educational institutions, and social networks, have a particularly strong association with delinquent behaviour within those respective domains.

Langton conducted a study that demonstrated the explanatory power of general strain theory in relation to certain categories of upper-class white-collar offences. However, it was observed that Agnew's theory does not possess the capacity to provide a comprehensive understanding of all forms of corporate criminal behaviour. According to Langton, it is evident

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<sup>14</sup> Langton, L., & Piquero, N. L. (2007). Can general strain theory explain white-collar crime? A preliminary investigation of the relationship between strain and select white-collar offenses. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 35(1), 1-15.

that the tension and unpleasant emotions encountered by white-collar professionals may exhibit variations compared to other demographic groups.

Not all individuals exhibit criminal behaviour as a response to stress. Individuals have the potential to address the challenges associated with being in a disadvantaged urban locality through relocation, mitigate the constraints imposed by limited financial means by seeking financial assistance, or enhance academic performance by adopting more efficient study strategies. However, General Strain Theory delineates certain elements that increase the likelihood of engaging in illegal coping strategies. Various factors contribute to an increased likelihood of engaging in criminal coping.

These factors include inadequate conventional coping skills, access to resources that facilitate criminal behaviour such as physical power and combat ability, limited financial and emotional support, a lack of direct assistance in managing stressors, minimal societal control, a diminished belief in conforming to societal norms, the formation of delinquent peer networks, experiencing negative emotions and possessing low self-control, as well as situations where the perceived costs of engaging in criminal activities are low and the potential benefits are high.

## **VI. PRACTICALITY OF THE INSTITUTIONAL ANOMIE HYPOTHESIS**

In their publication titled "Crime and the American Dream," Steven Messner & Richard Rosenfeld expand upon Agnew's General Strain Theory by introducing the concept of Institutional Anomie Theory.<sup>15</sup> According to this perspective, society is comprised of several social institutions, including religion, family, and financial framework. It is argued that higher rates of crime occur when the economic structure

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<sup>15</sup> Messner, S. F., Thome, H., & Rosenfeld, R. (2008). Institutions, anomie, and violent crime: Clarifying and elaborating institutional-anomie theory. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCV)*, 2(2), 163-181.

institution takes precedence over the others. In this particular societal context, individuals exhibit a tendency to prioritise the accumulation of material possessions above all other considerations. Consequently, the absence of effective regulation and oversight by non-economic establishments has led to the institutionalisation of a state of normlessness, sometimes referred to as anomie.

The study conducted by Hay and Meldrum focused on the phenomenon of self-harm among teenagers residing in rural areas of the United States. The researchers approached their investigation through the lens of Agnew's General Strain Theory. The authors placed particular emphasis on two relatively under-discussed domains of tension and nonconformity: the classification of self-harm as a kind of deviance, and the recognition of bullying as a source of strain.<sup>16</sup> According to Hay and Meldrum, self-harm may be classified as an internalised deviant behaviour, primarily impacting the individual engaging in it. This behaviour often arises from challenging interpersonal dynamics, such as experiencing peer-related strain, including instances of bullying.

Hay and Meldrum postulated three hypotheses. To begin with, there exists a notable and affirmative correlation between bullying and self-harm. Additionally, the act of self-harm is influenced by the adverse emotional encounters experienced by those who are subjected to bullying, including feelings of anxiety, sadness, and diminished self-esteem.

Furthermore, it is hypothesised that there exists a negative correlation between prosocial, authoritarian parenting styles and elevated levels of self-harm. Additionally, it is anticipated that those with higher levels of self-control will exhibit less tendencies towards self-harm. According to Hay and Meldrum, authoritative parenting is seen as a moderating

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<sup>16</sup> Hay, C., & Meldrum, R. (2010). Bullying Victimization and Adolescent Self-Harm: Testing Hypotheses from General Strain Theory. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39(5), 446-459.

variable due to its association with elevated levels of family support.

In conclusion, the researchers determined that the behaviour they saw was indeed consistent with General Strain Theory. Adolescents who were subjected to instances of bullying, whether in face-to-face interactions or through online platforms, had a greater prevalence of adverse emotional experiences. The prevalence of negative feelings was most pronounced among female individuals, those belonging to racial or ethnic minority groups, individuals residing in immigrant as well as broken/dysfunctional homes, and individuals with lower levels of self-control.<sup>17</sup> Individuals who experienced a greater prevalence of negative emotions, however lacked the means to effectively manage them, such as through robust and altruistic familial assistance, had elevated levels of self-harm.

Numerous scholars have endeavoured to formulate theoretical frameworks elucidating the phenomenon of terrorism, incorporating specific strains such as poverty, while comprehensively considering the multitude of circumstances that may contribute to the emergence of terrorism. Terrorism may arise as a consequence of a group, as well as collective encountering shared stresses.

Various variables can contribute to the emergence of tensions, including but not limited to ethnic origin or racial background, faith, socioeconomic position, political affiliations, or geographical associations. Nevertheless, the stresses that primarily lead to acts of terrorism are characterised by their significant impact, resulting in harm to civilians, being unfair in nature, or being instigated by individuals or groups with more authority.<sup>18</sup>

Individuals affiliated with terrorist organisations who do not appear to

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<sup>17</sup> Hoffman, B. (2006). Insurgency and counterinsurgency in Iraq. *Studies in conflict & terrorism*, 29(2), 103-121.

<sup>18</sup> Blazak, R. (2001). White boys to terrorist men: Target recruitment of Nazi skinheads. *American Behavioural Scientist*, 44(6), 982-1000

have encountered significant levels of stress yet assert suffering substantial levels of stress. These strains might be seen as unfair if they contravene deeply ingrained societal norms or ideals, or if they significantly deviate from the historical treatment of individuals within the collective.<sup>19</sup>

These pressures give rise to intense adverse emotions, including rage, shame, and helplessness, which impede the ability to manage challenges within legal and military frameworks. Consequently, terrorism emerges as one of the few possible strategies for coping. Additionally, they diminish societal control mechanisms and cultivate ideologies that promote and support acts of terrorism.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, Terrorist Organizations, in accordance with General Strain Theory, turn to deviant behaviour shown through collective violence.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

The Strain theory effectively elucidates the mechanisms by which people, both conforming and deviant, can emerge despite their shared aspirations. This phenomenon illustrates the manner in which individuals respond and adjust to societal pressures. The theories of Merton, Agnew, Hay, and Meldrum provide explanations for the occurrence of crime and deviance resulting from social strain. These theories, including the Anomie & Strain theories, are developed based on the foundational work of Durkheim. This proposition provides a plausible theory for the potential elevation of crime rates among the working class.<sup>21</sup> The concept that individuals occupying various positions within the social system employ distinct adaptations is examined within the

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<sup>19</sup> Callaway, R. L., & Harrelson-Stephens, J. (2006). Toward a theory of terrorism: Human security as a determinant of terrorism. *Studies in conflict & terrorism*, 29(8), 773-796.

<sup>20</sup> Jang, S. J., & Rhodes, J. R. (2012). General strain and non-strain theories: A study of crime in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40, 176-186.

<sup>21</sup> Featherstone, R., & Deflem, M. (2003). Anomie and strain: Context and consequences of Merton's two theories. *Sociological inquiry*, 73(4), 471-489.

framework of the Strain Theory.

Nevertheless, the reasons underlying non-utilitarian crime tend to be disregarded, since there is an exclusive emphasis on utilitarian crime. The Strain Theory adopts an individualistic perspective, disregarding the influence of group-level criminal behaviour. The theory has a strong inclination towards determinism and acknowledges that not all persons from the working class engage in criminal behaviour or possess an inherent inclination towards it. Strain theorists fail to acknowledge the influence wielded by the ruling class in establishing and implementing legislation aimed at curbing deviant adaptations.<sup>22</sup> Official figures are accepted without question. Labelling theorists, exemplified by Cicourel, contend that official statistics on crime shouldn't be considered as a dependable source of factual data, but rather be subject to scrutiny as a subject of investigation due to their potential unreliability. Law enforcement agencies employ the concept of typification to facilitate the apprehension of individuals seen to be typical delinquents. It has been observed that individuals from the working-class stratum are more prone to conform to the typification criteria, which include factors such as ethnicity, attire, demeanour, timing, and location.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, law enforcement officers will increase their presence in working-class neighbourhoods, leading to a higher frequency of arrests within this demographic. However, it is important to acknowledge that this approach may not accurately reflect the overall distribution of criminal activity.

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<sup>22</sup> Messner, S. F. (1988). Merton's "social structure and anomie": The road not taken. *Deviant Behavior*, 9(1), 33-53.

<sup>23</sup> Chamlin, M. B., & Cochran, J. K. (2007). An evaluation of the assumptions that underlie institutional anomie theory. *Theoretical Criminology*, 11(1), 39-61.

