



## LINKING EXPOSURE TO STRAIN WITH ANGER: AN INVESTIGATION OF DEVIANT ADAPTATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*Recent developments in strain theory have moved toward a broad conceptualization of strain. In a series of papers, Agnew (1992) has developed General Strain Theory (GST), which attempts to address past criticisms of more traditional theories of strain. There have, however, been few empirical tests of GST, and the critical role of anger has not been widely examined. In the present analysis, a partial empirical test of GST is presented that examines the mediating effects of anger as well as the possible instrumental, escapist, and violent adaptations to strain. The results reveal partial support for GST, but only for models predicting intentions to fight. In addition, the mediating effects of anger were not observed in models predicting intentions to drive drunk, shoplift, and fight. Implications of the results and future directions for GST are discussed. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd*

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary theoretical developments in criminology have centered on a number of themes. One such theme has been the redevelopment and reconceptualization of past theoretical approaches in criminology. Recent developments in labeling theory (Link et al., 1989; Matsueda, 1992), ecological theory (Bursik,

1988; Sampson and Groves, 1989), control theory (Cullen, 1994; Sampson and Laub, 1993), and Marxist theory (Colvin and Pauly, 1983) bear witness to major reevaluations of past theories of crime and delinquency. A second major theme in contemporary theoretical criminology recognizes the movement toward general theories of criminal behavior. Despite evidence of diversity in the causes and characteristics of of-

fending (Huizinga, Esbensen, and Wylie Weiher, 1991; Moffitt, 1993; Patterson and Yoerger, 1993), a number of significant theoretical contributions in criminology have attempted to move the field toward general theories (Agnew, 1992; Braithwaite, 1989; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Although the movement toward more general and parsimonious explanations of crime has been a matter of considerable debate (Hood and Sparks, 1970; Walker, 1977; Lynch and Groves, 1995), theories designed to explain specific aspects or types of offending behavior (i.e., crime typologies) may, at present, function as building blocks toward a more comprehensive general understanding of criminal behavior in the future (Clinard and Quinney, 1967; Tittle, 1985).

The development of a general theory of strain (Agnew, 1992), therefore, is consistent with some of the more recent and significant developments in theoretical criminology. In a number of articles, Agnew (1985, 1989, 1992) refined and reformulated traditional presentations of strain theory (Merton, 1938) toward the development of general strain theory (GST). In addition, Agnew and White (1992) offered an initial empirical test of GST that suggested the need to give attention to the theory and also to continue to refine it over time through further empirical testing.

In the current analysis, a partial test of Agnew's (1992) GST that uses data collected from a sample of college-aged youths is presented. An examination of the relationship between various types of strain and intentions to deviate is conducted using a questionnaire that captures important elements of Agnew's theory. Moreover, an investigation of the impact of different types of strain on anger, a crucial intervening mechanism between exposure to varying types of strain and possible deviant adaptations, is presented. Lastly, the results of models including anger and varying dimensions of strain predicting intentions to engage in three different types of deviant behavior are presented.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF GENERAL STRAIN THEORY

Recognizing past problems with classic strain theory (Merton, 1938) related to its lim-

ited scope and empirical support (Burton et al., 1994; Hirschi, 1969; Kornhauser, 1978), Agnew (1992) offers a reconceptualization that broadens the sources of strain as well as the application of the theory for explaining various forms of offending behavior. For example, Agnew identifies three distinct types of strain that may have an impact on an individual's risk toward crime and delinquency: the failure to achieve positively valued goals, the removal of positively valued stimuli, and the presentation of negative or noxious stimuli. The failure to achieve positively valued goals incorporates classic presentations of strain theory (i.e., the gap between aspirations and expectations). Agnew, however, offers more appropriate ways to capture the essence of this type of strain. He suggests that measures assessing the gap between expectations (for success) and actual achievements, the gap between just and fair outcomes, and actual outcomes (in terms of goal achievements) present better opportunities for capturing this source of strain.

The second major source of strain according to GST, the removal of positively valued stimuli, refers to the stress-inducing events that predominantly affect individuals when something of value is lost such as the loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend, changing or being suspended from school, or the death of a close relative or friend. According to the theory, the third major source of strain is the presentation of negative or noxious stimuli. This type of strain incorporates exposure to various adverse situations of experiences such as victimization, child abuse, or negative experiences at school or in the family.

According to the theory, the critical mechanism linking strain and potential deviant or delinquent responses is negative affect. When experiencing strain and stress, some individuals become depressed, others deflect the strain, and still others become angry. When anger becomes the response to strain and is coupled with an individual externalizing blame (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Hoffmann and Ireland, 1995), the probability of deviant adaptations increase. In addition, GST posits that deviant responses to strain may be escapist (e.g., using illicit drugs), instrumental (e.g., engaging in property crime), or retaliatory (e.g., engaging in violence). These re-

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