



Perceived injustice and delinquency: A test of general strain theory[☆]

Cesar J. Rebellon^{a,*}, Michelle E. Manasse^b, Karen T. Van Gundy^a, Ellen S. Cohn^c

^a Department of Sociology, University of New Hampshire, Horton Hall, Durham, NH, 03824, USA

^b Department of Sociology, Anthropology, & Criminal Justice, Towson University, 8000 York Rd., Towson, MD 21252, USA

^c Department of Psychology, University of New Hampshire, Conant Hall, Durham, NH, 03824, USA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: While a growing body of empirical literature supports many key predictions of General Strain Theory (GST), the subjective perception of injustice remains a theoretically important but empirically under-researched type of strain. The present study therefore examines the relations among perceived injustice, anger, and rule-violation.

Methods: Using a sample of middle- and high-school students from 12 schools in Southern New Hampshire, the present study tests GST via a series of OLS, negative binomial, and structural equation analyses using a more precise measure of perceived injustice than prior work and extensive statistical controls for such variables as self-control, differential association, attitudes toward delinquency, and alternative strain measures in a longitudinal context.

Results: Results yield strong support for the notions that perceived injustice promotes delinquency and that this relationship is mediated by situational anger.

Conclusions: Perceived injustice appears to be an important type of strain that should be incorporated into future research and addressed by future delinquency prevention efforts.

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Introduction

Early strain theories applied Merton's (1938) macro-level anomie framework to the individual level of analysis, suggesting that interpersonal variation in crime results partly from lower class individuals' frustration with their low expectations for achieving their idealized aspirations. In particular, Cohen (1955) argued that the inability to achieve the respect that comes with middle-class status contributed to offending among working class boys. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) extended this micro-level framework by suggesting that not only could blocked legitimate opportunities promote greater crime, but that the nature of individuals' deviant opportunities could influence the types of delinquency that they might use to cope with frustrated aspirations. Although these early versions of strain theory have received relatively little empirical support, Agnew's (1992, 2006) General Strain Theory (GST) has broadened the concept of strain beyond blocked economic aspirations and sparked a resurgence of research specifying the process by which crime may be used as an adaptive response to strain.

Within the GST framework (Agnew, 1992, 2006), individuals may be pressured into crime by a variety of stressors, including the

experience of negative stimuli, the loss of positive stimuli, and the disjuncture between valued/actual outcomes. Crime is therefore seen as a coping strategy, as strain elicits negative emotion and creates incentive for corrective action, although strained individuals may also cope through legitimate means. Empirical research has yielded extensive support for the GST proposition that strain promotes crime (e.g., Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen, 2002; Agnew & White, 1992; Hoffman & Cerbone, 1999; Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994), particularly in the case of strains that lower social constraints, incentivize crime, and are perceived as high in magnitude (Hay & Evans, 2006; Manasse & Ganem, 2009; Moon, Blurton, & McCluskey, 2008; Ostrowsky & Messner, 2005; Piquero & Sealock, 2004; Spano, Rivera, & Bolland, 2006). Recent work on GST has therefore continued to specify the types of strain most conducive to crime, to explore the mediating role of emotion, and to examine those variables most likely to condition the relationship between strain and offending.

Injustice as a form of strain

While a growing body of empirical literature supports many key predictions of General Strain Theory, unfair treatment remains a theoretically important (see e.g., Agnew, 2001, 2006) but empirically under-researched type of strain. The perception that a strain is not just unpleasant, as all strains are, but also undeserved, may increase the likelihood of negative emotional reactions, which may increase pressure for corrective action and decrease the ability to engage in legal forms of coping (Agnew, 2001, 2006; Broidy, 2001). Agnew

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 603 862 2500; fax: +1 603 862 3558.
E-mail address: cesar.rebellon@unh.edu (C.J. Rebellon).

(1992) originally conceptualized unfair treatment as a distinct category of strain arising from a disjunction between fair/just outcomes and actual outcomes. More recent elaborations of GST (Agnew, 2001, 2006) suggest that any strain, from the death of a loved one to the application of a curfew, will be more likely to lead to crime if it is considered unjust. Nonetheless, much of the GST research on injustice (see Eitle, 2002; Hinduja, 2007; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1998; Moon, Hays, & Blurton, 2009a; Peter, LaGrange, & Silverman, 2003; Rebellon, Piquero, Piquero, & Thaxton, 2009; Walls, Chapple, & Johnson, 2007) has focused on objective, rather than subjective, strain (but see Broidy, 2001).

In particular, many tests of GST examine the association between discrimination and crime, yielding mixed support for Agnew's predictions. Cernkovich and Giordano (1979), for example, examined broad, group-based discrimination but found no effect on individual-level offending. Eitle (2002), on the other hand, found that crime and substance abuse were more likely among those who reported personal experience of discrimination. Similarly, Moon et al. (2009a) found that the experience of racial discrimination was significantly related to violent, but not non-violent, offending. Mazerolle and Piquero (1998) and Mazerolle, Piquero, and Capowich (2003) found that perceptions of being unfairly graded were predictive of intention to fight, but not other offending measures. Using a randomized experimental design, Rebellon et al. (2009) found that economic inequity was associated with situational anger which, in turn, was associated with greater criminal intent. This study, however, failed to find the anticipated direct association between economic inequity and criminal intent.

Although the above studies suggest a generally positive, albeit inconsistent, relationship between unjust treatment and criminal behavior, they suffer from a number of significant limitations. First, the studies often ask respondents if they have experienced a particular strain, but do not ask how "unfair" they perceive it to be. While some strains, such as discrimination, are considered objectively unjust, individuals often do not evaluate strains they experience in a negative manner (Agnew, 2001; Froggio & Agnew, 2007) and preliminary findings suggest subjective strains to be more strongly associated with crime (Froggio & Agnew, 2007). Second, existing studies tend to use narrow and/or dichotomous measures of unfair treatment (e.g., Rebellon et al., 2009). It is therefore impossible to capture the full variation in sources of perceived injustice across respondents or to evaluate the effect of relative levels of injustice on offending. Third, existing research often fails to control for variables from alternative theoretical perspectives, which may actually account for the relationship between injustice and crime. For example, while Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory of self-control might suggest that low self-control promotes both crime and perceptions of injustice, Aker's (2009) social learning theory might argue that delinquent associates promote both delinquent behavior and associated rationalizations that could invoke perceived injustice. Finally, prior research has been largely cross-sectional, thereby raising the issue of causal direction. In particular, delinquency could conceivably lead to stressful circumstances that a perpetrator could interpret as unjust.

The role of negative emotion in GST

While the bulk of GST research has focused on the causal relationship between strain and offending, a growing body of work has explored the central argument that strain increases the likelihood of crime through its effect on negative emotion. Agnew (1992, 2006) argues that crime is an adaptive response insofar as it allows people to achieve effective, though often short-term, relief from the unpleasant negative emotions caused by strain (see Brezina, 1996, 2000). Anger has been given particular attention as a mediating mechanism because it tends to create the desire for corrective action and lower constraints against criminal coping strategies. Indeed, much of the GST

research on unjust treatment has examined anger as an intervening mechanism, suggesting mixed support for GST predictions. Broidy (2001), for example, found that the perception of unfairness increased anger and that anger, in turn, increased illegitimate coping, although the study did not explicitly examine mediating effects. Mazerolle and Piquero (1998) found that, while perceptions of injustice were significantly related to increased anger, anger did not mediate the strain/offending relationship. Using a measure of racial discrimination, Moon et al. (2009a) also found that anger had only a minimal mediating effect. In general, while research has clearly shown that the experience of anger increases the likelihood of offending (Bao, Haas, & Pi, 2004; Broidy, 2001; Hollist, Hughes, & Schaible, 2009; Jang & Johnson, 2003; Jennings, Piquero, Gover, & Pérez, 2009; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1998; Mazerolle et al., 2003; Moon et al., 2009a; Piquero & Sealock, 2004; Rebellon et al., 2009; Sigfusdottir, Farkas, & Silver, 2004), most research on anger has shown only partial mediating effects (see Aseltine, Gore, & Gordon, 2000; Capowich, Mazerolle, & Piquero, 2001; Hay & Evans, 2006; Hollist et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2009; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1997; Moon et al., 2009a; Piquero & Sealock, 2004) or mediating effects for only violent/aggressive forms of offending (e.g. Aseltine et al., 2000; Bao et al., 2004; Mazerolle et al., 2003).

Although the above studies that examine mediation effects tend to yield only mixed or partial support for GST's mediation hypothesis, these findings may reflect the disjuncture between GST's claims about emotions like anger and the measures often used to reflect them. Specifically, most studies evaluating emotion as an intervening mechanism use dispositional measures of emotion, which do not focus primarily on a respondent's emotional state at the time of offense. For example, dispositional measures of anger tend to capture whether a respondent has a "bad temper" relative to other respondents, which may reflect a component of Gottfredson and Hirschi's self-control construct as much or more so than they reflect Agnew's conception of strain-induced, situational anger (see Rebellon et al., 2009). Examining these particular methodological concerns, Mazerolle et al. (2003) considered the mediating role of both situational and dispositional measures of anger. Tellingly, the authors found mediating effects for situational measures of anger, but no mediating effect for dispositional measures of anger. It is therefore likely that dispositional measures of emotion underestimate the mediating effects of emotion on offending (Agnew, 2006; Mazerolle et al., 2003).

A limited number of other studies provide further reason to believe that measures of situational emotion are critical for proper tests of GST's mediation hypotheses. For example, Jang and Johnson (2003) and Moon, Morash, McCluskey, and Hwang (2009b) found that measures of situational anger fully mediated the relationship between strain and offending, although neither of these studies looked explicitly at measures of injustice. In their examination of economic inequity, Rebellon et al. (2009) found that objective economic inequity was significantly associated with situational anger and that situational anger, in turn, was significantly associated with criminal intent. The latter study, however, failed to find a direct relationship between economic inequity and criminal intent but this may be due, at least in part, to the limitations intrinsic to a vignette study evaluating intention rather than behavior, or to the limited variance in the study's measure of economic inequity.

The present study

Using data from several waves of the New Hampshire Youth Study, the present study provides a more extensive test of the relationship between unjust treatment and delinquency than prior research. Specifically, it addresses several of the methodological issues limiting prior work to provide a more thorough test of (a) the extent to which perceptions of unjust treatment predict delinquency and (b) the extent to which this relationship is mediated by situational anger.

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