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Sociology

The Crime and Deviance Channel

Updates: Strain Theory (Part 1)

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While A-level sociology teachers will be very familiar with the kind of **traditional strain theory** formulated by writers like **Merton** they are probably less-familiar with its contemporary updating. In this Update we look briefly at traditional strain theory and suggest a more-contemporary interpretation that can be introduced to students through **Agnew**'s **General Strain Theory** (GST). In **Part 2** (forthcoming) we suggest some examples of how General Strain Theory has been used to explain differences in deviant responses.

Traditional Strain Theory

As originally formulated by Robert **Merton** (1938), this is pretty much a staple feature of the A-level Specification and you can, of course, find an outline of the theory in the Channel's "Theories of Deviance: Part 1" chapter (page 6). As you're aware, the theory has some clear **strengths** and **weaknesses**:

Strengths

• The idea that sociologists can both demonstrate and explain how and why different individuals with different positions in the social structure are effectively "pushed" into different types of conforming and deviant behaviours;

• It explains how and why different forms of criminal behaviour develop and, most importantly perhaps:

• It suggests how we **interpret** different forms of responsive behaviour – such as innovation – is a significant factor in understanding both conformity and deviance.

Weaknesses

• An over-socialised view of human behaviour that makes it hard, if not impossible, to explain changes in people's behaviour over time – if people are, for example, "socialised into conformity and deviance", why does criminal activity clearly and markedly decline with age?

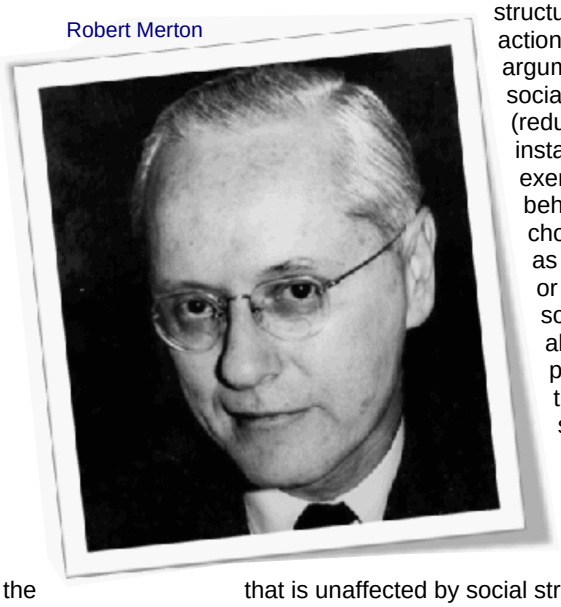
• The difficulty the theory has in explaining non-economic forms of crime;

• The difficulty of empirically defining and measuring concepts like "social success".

Aside from the kind of specific weaknesses we've just noted, traditional strain theory has some important general features that provide a valuable contribution to sociological theorising about the nature of crime and deviance:

1. it gives us a clear and powerful insight into the way writers (such as **Merton** and **Parsons**) working within a traditional Functionalist perspective have theorised the relationship between structure and action; in particular, strain theories of deviance help to demonstrate what **Parsons** (1937) has called "the structure of social action" That is, the argument that social actions (reduced in this instance to the exercising of behavioural choices – such as to conform to or deviate from social rules) always take place within the context of social structures (since it is not possible to engage in social action that is unaffected by social structures).

Robert Merton



To put this in simple terms, strain theory demonstrates the idea that the choices people make are necessarily influenced by social structural constraints. This is not, of course, to say, actions are *determined* by structures – the situation is far more complex than this; it is, however, to say that if we want to understand how and why people exercise certain types of broad choice – to conform to or deviate from social rules as well as choices about different types of conformity and deviation – we need to understand the structural pressures and constraints that surround and act upon their exercise of choice.

2. It clearly establishes the principle that when individuals are put under some sort of social strain they will react to those tensions. The problem for sociologists, of course, is how to explain why some people react deviantly while others do not.

3. **Anomie** is a central concept in strain theory since it is used to explain both how social strains occur (through, for example, a breakdown, loosening or tightening of **moral regulation**) and the possible consequences of such breakdown (different types of individual behavioural response).

In terms of the above, therefore, we are faced with a situation where although the general principle of social strain leading to various forms of deviant behaviour is basically sound (it is something that *should* logically occur), Merton's elaboration of the theory has serious and unresolved weaknesses. What we need, therefore, is a theory that builds on the strengths we've just noted and finds ways of eliminating or reducing the weaknesses – which leads us to the work of Robert **Agnew** (1992):

General Strain Theory

One of the major weaknesses of early versions of strain theory was that, following Merton's general lead, "success" was conceived and measured in largely economic terms; that is, the "success goal" was considered to be overwhelmingly related to the accumulation of money / wealth. In simple terms, where societies measure "success" (and, by extension, individual worth) in economic terms the general thrust of socialisation is to see economic gain as both highly desirable and a measure of individual success. Thus, those who are denied opportunities to achieve "success" experience an anomic reaction that plays out in a range of ways (with crime being but one possible reaction). While in principal this theoretical position is sound, it breaks-down empirically for two reasons:

1. It assumes that the success goal only has a single overriding (economic) dimension .

2. It assumes, on this basis, that the lower your social class the lower are your opportunities to achieve economic success and the higher, therefore, is the likelihood of turning to crime to achieve it.

Laughing all the way to the bank?

Robert Agnew

While this is supported by general statistical evidence (such as official crime statistics) that the lower classes have a higher criminal involvement than the middle or upper classes it neglects two things:

a. That middle and upper class crime is more-extensive (in raw number terms) than crime statistics suggest.

b. In terms of measurements like monetary values, middle and upper class criminality is far greater than lower class criminality; while there may arguably be fewer middle and upper people involved in crime its economic impact is arguably far higher than that of lower class crime.

Types of Strain

For **Agnew** (1992) these theoretical inadequacies could be resolved in a range of ways, the first of which was to broaden how we think about strain, in terms of three major types:

1. The actual or anticipated failure to achieve positively valued goals: This type of strain develops out of an individual's failure to achieve certain gaols that have a **positive value** (for both a society and, by extension, the individual); they are, in this respect, highly desirable outcomes for social actions. In this respect **Agnew** identified three major types of goals for which people strive:

a. Economic: The acquisition of wealth is a highly-valued goal in modern Western societies and, in line with **Merton**, **Agnew** argues that when individuals are denied opportunities - or for whatever reason fail - to achieve

economic success through legitimate means they will actively consider illegitimate means.

b. Status and respect: Although these goals may have an economic aspect (many in our society achieve high levels of status through the accumulation of large amounts of wealth) they can also be used to explain non-economic forms of crime since the demand for cultural status and personal respect is one that may apply, in particular, to young males – a group statistically highly-likely to be involved in deviant behaviour. The idea that blocked status, in particular, is a source of strain is not, of course, a new one (it has echoes, for example, of **Cohen's** (1955) concept of **status frustration**. However, a newer variation here is that young males may actively seek to "prove their masculinity" – and many of the classic traits associated with masculinity in our society (toughness, aggression, a lack of empathy and the like) are those that are frequently displayed through criminal behaviour.

Respect...

c. Autonomy involves the individual having a certain freedom of movement and behaviour – the idea that, in a sense, the individual has control over their own behaviour (rather than being controlled by others). In this respect the ability to exercise **power** (over both one's own behaviour and, if necessary, the behaviour of others) is seen to be a highly-valued cultural goal. The "denial of power" (especially where young males are concerned) can, therefore, be an important aspect of strain and may result in deviance as the denied individual strives to achieve autonomy, demonstrate their autonomy or, indeed, relieve their (status) frustration on those seen as responsible for status deprivation.

Disunities

Although the existence of these types of goal in our society is clearly significant, strains only occur when certain forms of **disunity** (a disparity between our socially-created desires to achieve certain goals and the denial of our ability to achieve them) enter into the overall equation. In this respect **Agnew** identifies three main types of **disunity**:

a. Aspirations and Expectations: This form follows traditional strain theory in the sense that it argues societies create certain goal aspirations in their members (such as being wealthy) but then fail to provide the legitimate means through which these expectations can be satisfied (**Merton's** classic example of the "American Dream"). While this type may explain some aspects of lower class criminality (since they are most likely to experience the blockages that both create strain and lead to criminal forms of reaction) it is less useful for explaining middle class criminality and, as we've suggested, non-economic deviance.

b. Expectations and Achievements: Although, on the face of things, similar to the first type of strain, this is actually a more-subtle form created when individuals with certain expectations fail to achieve them. The significance of this form is that it operates at the micro-level of social behaviour and interaction in the sense that it widens the theoretical scope to include all social classes (since "expectations" are now considered at the level of each individual rather than "society as a whole") and a wider variety of deviant behaviours. This idea is very similar to the concept of **relative deprivation** used by Left Realists – and is further reflected in the third type:

c. Outcomes and Expectations: When people enter into social interactions they generally do so with some notion about both the possible or likely outcome and, most importantly, the **justness** of the outcome. In other words, where traditional strain theory sees the blocking of goals as, in itself, sufficient to create strain, GST argues that it is not blocked goals that necessarily creates a problem for the individual; rather, it is whether or not the individual accepts the **fairness** of the blockage. For example, being turned

Just look at his wad.

down for an important job may create strain – but the individual's reaction to this strain is by no means automatic; if, for example, they accept they were not the best person for the job or they discover, in the process of applying, that their aspirations / expectations are unrealistic then strains are effectively negated (an idea we'll develop in a moment when we look at the idea of **coping strategies**).

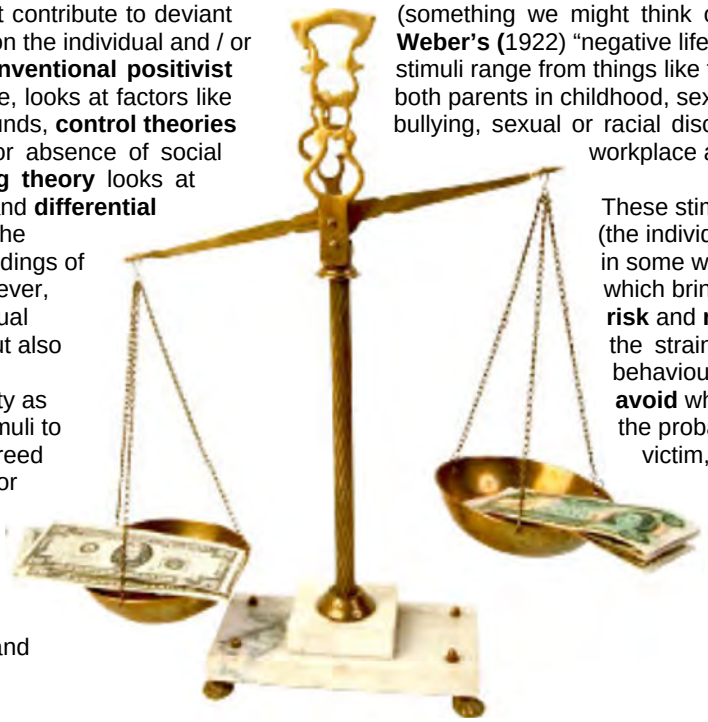
2. The actual or anticipated removal of positively valued stimuli: This is addition to strain theory suggests people may be tipped into deviant behaviour through a sense of loss - the sudden and, in the individual's eyes, unjustifiable removal of something from their life. In other words, significant "life events" (a bereavement, the loss of a job, the denial of an important educational qualification or work promotion and so forth) that remove the positively valued stimuli that keep the individual on the "straight and narrow" are a potential source of strain. This tension can produce a deviant response as the individual seeks to regain what they feel they have lost or take revenge on those they believe responsible for the loss. In addition, in some instances it's possible for strains to occur without the actual loss of positive stimuli – the threat of their removal may be a sufficient source of strain.

Y'Farred

The removal of positively valued stimuli links into both the **disunity** between **aspirations and expectations** and that between **outcomes and expectations**. Many theories of crime, when they consider "background factors" that contribute to deviant behaviour tend to focus on the individual and / or their cultural history. **Conventional positivist criminology**, for example, looks at factors like family and peer backgrounds, **control theories** examine the presence or absence of social controls, **social learning theory** looks at socialisation processes and **differential association** examines the immediate social surroundings of the individual. GST, however, looks not just at individual cultural characteristics but also at the collective cultural characteristics of a society as the source of positive stimuli to conform to generally-agreed social rules. This could, for example, involve collective beliefs about the general fairness and justice of the judicial system – is it, for example, seen as fair and equitable?

In other words, if there is a general perception that people of different class, gender, age and ethnic backgrounds are treated impartially – judged, in effect, by what they've done rather than who they are – this represents a positive stimulation to conformity; changes to this perception, such that some groups are seen to be treated more favourably than one's own for example, involves the removal of positive stimuli which, in turn, loosens people's commitment to conformity and increases their propensity to deviate.

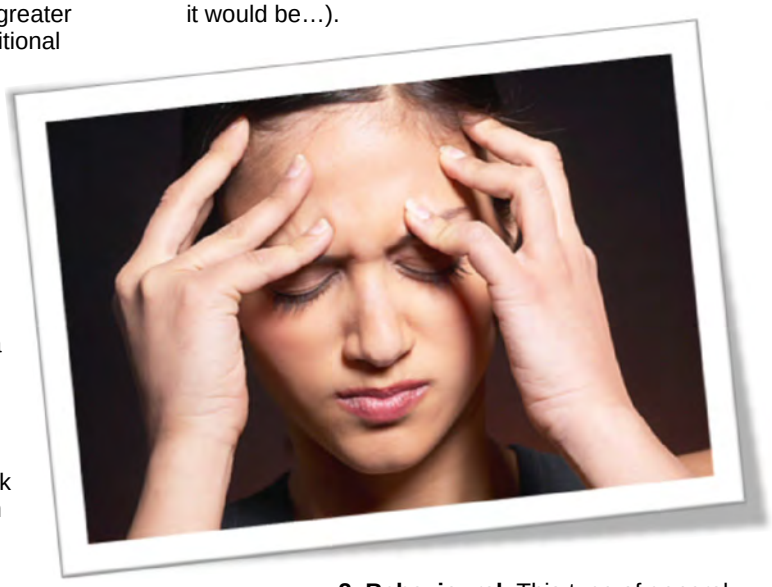
3. The actual or anticipated presentation of negatively valued stimuli: As you will recall, traditional strain theory focuses on blockages to the achievement of desired goals; **Agnew**, however, highlights a hitherto-neglected aspect of strain in terms of the idea that the individual may be hit with one or more different forms of negative stimulation (something we might think of as similar to **Weber's (**1922) "negative life chances"); negative stimuli range from things like the loss of one or both parents in childhood, sexual abuse, school bullying, sexual or racial discrimination in the workplace and so forth.



These stimuli can be both real (the individual actually suffers in some way) or anticipated – which brings the concepts of **risk** and **risk-avoidance** into the strain equation (how behaviour may change to **avoid** what someone sees as the probability of becoming a victim, for example).

Coping with Strain

As we've suggested, General Strain Theory has a greater theoretical sophistication than its traditional counterpart, not only in terms of specifying different types of strain but, most importantly, in recognising the relationship between the individual and society is more-complex than that suggested by writers like **Merton**. In particular, **Agnew** suggests people do not simply react to strain in a mechanical way (if something happens to them they react in a certain way); rather, the individual is surrounded by a complex array of emotional defences that can be used to minimise, avoid or deflect stains. **Agnew** (1992), for example, suggests three main forms of coping strategy (which we can also think of as "rationalisations" or "neutralisation techniques"):



1. Cognitive strategies represent ways that an individual, while subject to some form of strain, may lesson or deflect its impact by rationalising their response. **Agnew** suggests three main ways that cognitive strategies may operate:

a. Minimising the significance of strain: Using this strategy the individual attempts to neutralise a strain-causing situation by downplaying the importance of a particular goal in order to avoid the tension that would result from their inability to reach it. For example, the individual copes with the failure to achieve success in an important exam, land a dream date or achieve a deserved promotion by consciously downgrading the significance of the original goal. If the individual can convince him / herself the goal was actually not that important, the strain potentially caused by failure to achieve it is minimised.

b. Accentuate the positives: This strategy involves rationalising the fact someone failed to achieve a desired goal by minimising this negative outcome. However this is achieved – by taking comfort in the fact that some progress was made towards achieving a desired goal, for example – the outcome is to deny or ignore the overall negative stimuli by an insistence on taking positives form the experience (a technique frequently employed by professional athletes).

c. Accept the negatives: This strategy is likely to be used in situations where the individual accepts a negative outcome is what they expected; in other words, for whatever reason the individual initially has no great expectation of achieving a desired goal and so their eventual – and inevitable – failure comes as no surprise and, consequently causes no great tension. Indeed, in some situations an outcome that could, in objective terms, be seen as negative is interpreted subjectively by the individual as broadly positive (it wasn't as bad as they expected it would be…).

2. Behavioural: This type of general strategy involves the individual changing their behaviour in some way – to consciously seek out, for example, positive experiences while avoiding situations that potentially involve negative stimuli. In some instances this may involve the individual re-orientating their expectations about certain situations (such as school or the workplace) or, indeed, escaping from a potentially fraught (i.e. negative) situation. For example, frustration at a lack of workplace promotion may simply result in the individual changing jobs. This type of avoidance-strategy may also, occasionally, represent a non-deviant revenge on those who have, in the eyes of the individual, blocked their opportunities – by removing themselves from negative stimuli the individual denies others what they see as something positive (friendship, their working knowledge and so forth).

3. Emotional: In contemporary Western societies this strategy has become reasonably common in that it involves the individual attempting to remove the negative feelings that cause strain in a particular situation (rather than avoiding or confronting failure). Techniques of emotional neutralisation include things like physical exercise, massage, relaxation techniques and the like.

In Part 1 of this Update we've outlined some of the basic concepts behind General Strain Theory. In Part 2 we'll outline examples of how the theory has been empirically applied to explain various forms of deviant response to strain.

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