Robert Agnew: General Strain Theory

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Until the 1980’s Robert Merton’s theory of Anomie Strain was the theory that was used to explain why crime was committed. However Merton primarily focused on the economic goals and means of American society. Robert Agnew expanded on Merton’s theory by broadening the causes of strain beyond economic boundaries. Building on Anomie Strain Agnew was able to define three types of strain that have been able to withstand empirical testing.

The inspiration for Agnew’s general strain theory comes from Robert Merton’s Anomie-Strain theory. Merton’s (1938) theory was a structural level explanation of how society socializes all individuals to strive towards the goals of monetary success but fails to provide equal access to all, mainly the lower social class and minorities, for achieving these cultural goals in an institutionally prescribed way. The result of this disjuncture between goals and means is strain. Merton (1938) argued that individuals can respond to situations of strain in one of five ways several of which encompass deviant and criminal actions. While Merton’s (1938) theory was very popular, it was rarely tested and criticized for providing a more individualistic explanation of the decision to adapt in criminal or deviant ways (Thio 1975; Cohen 1965). In reaction these criticisms, Robert Agnew (1984) developed a social-psychological version of strain theory that addresses individual differences in adaptation to strains and also broadened the types of strain that an individual could be exposed to beyond the economic focus of Merton’s theory.

Agnew (1984) argued that Merton was too singularly focused on the idea that the only type of strain individuals can be exposed to is economic strain. As such, he broadened the explanation of strain to encompass three separate types of strain. The first is the failure to achieve positively valued goals. Within this type there are multiple categories. The first is a disconnection between an ideal goal and what they expect to achieve. This category focuses on societal goal, such as becoming rich, and what the individual achieves in reality. Often the disjunction is caused by social factors. The second type is the difference between expectations and actual achievements. In this category the individual uses past experiences or the experience of others as a comparison of what they expect to achieve (Agnew 1992). For example, one would use the income levels of other employees of similar status to gauge how much they should make. Finally, strain can occur due to the difference between just outcomes and actual outcomes. In this category the individual believes that they should get out an equal proportion to what they put in. When an unjust relationship is perceived, such as lower pay, individuals engage in theft to increase their half of the ratio (Froggio 2007).

Another category of strain within failure to achieve positively valued goals is the disjunction between expectations and actual achievements. Within this category the idea of what is expected comes from observations of those who are similar to the individual and from any experience (Agnew 1992). Since people base their expectations on generalizations of other people it is hard to develop a measurement that can measure expectancy levels. Often times measurements can be taken to measure disproportions of expected income levels and actual income levels (Froggio 2007).

The final category of disjunctions is a disjunction between fair outcomes and actual outcomes. In this category a person has no specific goal. They base their own outcome on the way others have been treated. The individual does not expect to receive anything other than what everyone else receives. This can apply to both negative and positive outcomes such as monetary reward and incarceration time. Equity in this category is based on a ratio comparing the input to the output. This is separate from the other two categories because the individual has no specific outcome but the other two categories do (Agnew 1992). Under strain from unjust outcomes people engage in deviance to increase their outcome profit or lower how much effort they put in. In the event the ratio shifts too much out of an individual’s favor the individual may then leave the situation or attempt to try to make others leave the situation (Froggio 2007).

A second broad type of strain outlined by Agnew that can cause strain is the removal of a positively valued stimulus. For example, in adolescents having a significant other is highly valued and the loss or anticipated loss of that stimuli can lead to delinquent behavior (Froggio 2007). The individual may use illegal acts to prevent the loss of the stimuli or to regain the stimuli (Agnew 1992). This source of strain does not have to be an actual removal of a stimulus; it can also include the anticipation of losing the stimulus. Anger is commonly the emotion that is related with the anticipated loss of a stimulus. Often this can lead to the individual becoming violent (Froggio 2007).

The final source of strain is the presentation of negative stimuli. Until Agnew decided to study this source of strain there had been no previous studies or research done into the presentation of a negative stimuli (Agnew 1985). When presented with negative stimuli the emotion of anger often facilitates the corresponding behavior. Agnew proposed and found evidence for a causal relationship between the negative stimuli and the delinquent behavior. Agnew found that the negative behavior happens before the behavior and therefore causes the behavior (Agnew 1992). The negative stimuli causes the individual to try to escape from the negative stimuli, dispose of the stimuli, attempt to get back at the source that is causing the negative stimuli, or deal with the stimuli by taking drugs (Froggio 2007).

While we are all exposed to strains that fall into one of these three categories on a general basis, not everyone becomes criminal or deviant. General strain theory does offer explanations as to why individuals do not become delinquent. Within the theory these explanations are referred to as coping strategies for or adaptations to strain. One way that coping occurs happens when the individual chooses to believe that the behavior does not have importance to them or that the individual deserves the strain therefore minimizing the impact the strain has on them (Agnew 1992). Behavioral strategies to coping are attempting to increasing positive outcomes while reducing negative outcomes and engaging in vengeful behavior, though engaging in vengeful behavior can lead to an increase in negative outcomes. Researchers debate about whether or not engaging in vengeful behavior produces any positive results. There are other coping strategies that can effectively produce positive results without the chance of as many negative outcomes. Emotional coping is the final strategy. In order to emotionally cope, individual act to change their emotions, this is where the use of drugs comes in. The goal of this strategy is then to get rid of the negative emotions (Froggio 2007). With a wide variety of factors that are involved in coping Agnew (2013) identified three factors that must occur at the same time in order to increase the likelihood that coping will occur. Individual must have a set of traits that when put together create the tendency that coping will occur, experience the strain of becoming delinquent and then their perception of acting delinquents has to be unfair, and finally their environment must promote coping.

Research indicates that there are gender differences in the application of general strain theory. While males and females experience the same or similar levels of strain overall, the types of strain experienced by males and females differs (Broidy and Agnew 1997). For example, males are more likely to experience strains related to the gain of material objects and fair distributions and females are more likely to experience strains related to gender discrimination, behavioral restrictions, demands coming from the family, and being the victims of crimes (Kaufman 2009). In addition to experiencing different types of strains, research has found that males and females are likely to react to these stressors in different ways with males being more likely to externalize their reactions to negative emotional states in violent ways and females being more likely to internalize their reactions to negative emotional states in self-destructive ways such as eating disorders, drug use and self-mutilating or suicidal behaviors (Broidy 2001). While males and females adapt to stress in different ways, research has indicated that males are overall more likely to engage in deviant or criminal reactions than are females due to differing levels of positive coping mechanisms and support systems (Broidy 2001). More recent research has indicated that the gendered effects found in previous studies may be more relevant to an adult population and that differences in deviant reactions between male and females are relatively equal among the youth population (Baron 2007).

Using Merton’s theory Agnew was able to find three sources of strain. The failure to achieve positively valued goals contained many subsections of disjunctions. The second and third are the presentation of a negatively valued stimuli and the removal of a positively valued stimuli. Tests have been run to test whether or not these categories actually cause strain. The results have found differences and similarities between the sexes. After discovering these sources of strain, policies using cognitive behavioral therapy are being used to alter an individual’s view of their situation.

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