A Conduit for Terror: General Strain Theory and Terrorism

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How do people become terrorists? That is a question that does not have very clear answer but there is a theory to explain what the motives of a person becoming a terrorist might be. When resources are low and the economy favors on ethnic group over another there is a gap where the lower social class feels oppressed. Robert Agnew’s General Strain theory summarizes why someone may do deviant acts, the theory casts a wide net on deviance and can possibly create a bridge between us and those perceived to be terrorist.

The basis of General Strain theory is that there are stressors or strain on someone’s life and because of this strain, the person experiences a multitude of negative emotions such as anger (Agnew, 1992). This in effect can lead to a person trying to relieve the strain they feel, this outlet can be many different things but many time will be deviant or even criminal (Agnew, 2001). Agnew defines strain as a person not being treated the way they would like to be, and even further breaks the types of strain into categories (Agnew, 2001). The first category is objective strain in which a person is experiencing something that most people of the same group would find to be negative (Agnew, 2001). The other category of strain Agnew describes is subjective strain these are things that the individual person finds to be stressful. This includes things that are perceived to be wrong that may not actually be the way things are. There can be a mixture of both types of strain in any event that may affect someone on a personal level. An event can be seen as objectively bad or wrong to the group but also have someone perceive this differently as subjective opinions change over time (Agnew, 2001).

In General Strain theory the subjective is often times focused on because it is the perception of the event or situation that usually causes a person to want to relieve that strain (Agnew, 2001). The same event may be seen a negative to multiple people and they may be subjected to an equal amount of stress yet they may not exhibit the same behaviors to relieve stress. This can lead to a difference between genders in how they handle subjective strain (Agnew, 2001). Agnew and his general strain theory suggest that there are three specific types of strain lead to delinquency (1992). The loss of positive stimuli, the presentation of a negative stimuli and the blockage of goals can create negative feelings and be more likely to lead to delinquent behaviors. Agnew describes a blockage of goals specifically monetary and those pertaining to masculinity as being a driver for many acts of deviance, especially the difference in the way men and women handle strain and the actions they take to relieve it (2001).

This leads into a discussion of terrorism because many if not all of the aspects of Agnew’s General Strain theory can lead to an understanding of terrorism and the people that become terrorist. Taylor and Lewis described the young men that usually join terrorist organizations as those that are seeking an identity, those that do not have the means to subscribe to their societies views of what they should be (2004). Agnew’s most applicable constraint to those that are involved in terrorism is the blockage of goals (2001). This can happen in many different ways either real or imagined. This often times begins with a general lack of resources or ways to financially support themselves and their families (Moghaddam, 2005). This leads to strain in communities that feel that their way of life is being hampered or suppressed by another group, the government or other ethnic groups are often the targets of these bad feelings (Moghaddam, 2005). This can lead to a hatred of the out-groups and a love of the in-group as described by Kruglanski et. al. (2013).

All of the bad feelings of being oppressed mixed with no positive outlet can lead to a terrorist group offering to give them an identity, and a purpose in the community (Taylor and Lewis, 2004; Agnew, 2001). In places where terrorism is prevalent there is often times a pervasive masculine aspect to society, in which the men are seen as the keepers of the others in society, which ties into Agnew’s aspect of men often times turning to deviant behavior when faced with strain (Agnew, 2001; Moghaddam, 2005). There are often times political and economic turmoil in places that terrorism is seen most, this can put a roadblock to success by anyone in the society, many times there are people that at one point were seen a role models in society that have lost their standing due to these dramatic shifts (Moghaddam, 2005; Kruglanski et. al., 2013). Agnew would describe this as a loss of positive stimuli the young people in these societies have seen everything that they valued crumble beneath them, there is nothing positive to see and the oppression becomes too great to find conventional means to combat these stressors (2001). This in effect creates groups of the oppressed and General Strain theory suggests that men often times socialize in groups so their love of the in-group would be strong and the bonds formed would be hard to break (Agnew, 2001 Kruglanski, et. al., 2013).

Overall, the people that engage in terrorism are much like us, put in similar circumstances with the strain and oppression that they feel on the everyday basis it is easier to see why a group that seems to support your thoughts would be a safe haven for those that have nothing. Terrorist are people that are not heartless, often times joining terrorist organizations because of their love of their family and in-group. They do not have an outlet for their feelings and a stagnant or crumbling economic system do no give them a chance to be productive. In all Agnew describes many of the aspect of terrorism perfectly in General Strain theory. The outside strains of just living life can influence a life so much they could join a group in which they are ordered to hurt or kill people, but if they feel the cause is justified then the acts lose their negative connotation and are seen as a fight for the greater good.

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