JIRRS
Journal International Review of Research Studies

Received: 01/04/2026 - **Accepted:** 15/05/2026
Vol: 01.06
DOI: 10.66104/s0z4mz37
Pages: 1-11

CONTEXT AND APPLICATION OF AGNEW'S GENERAL STRAIN THEORY TO EXPLAIN CRIME

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Abstract

Robert Agnew's general strain theory is one of the most respected theories of crime in modern criminology. However, strain theory has not always occupied a respectable position among scholars in the criminological community. Although strain theory quickly achieved popularity in its early beginnings, in the 1960's it faced harsh criticisms as a result of competition with newer theories such as control and social learning. It was not until Agnew revised strain theory in 1985 that strain theory began to reestablish its credible position within the criminological community.

Keywords: Application, Context, Crime, Agnew, Strain theory

1. Introduction

Since Agnew's revision of strain theory, strain theory has been used to explain a variety of criminological phenomenon. An example of phenomenon that is germane to this study is patterns of herders versus farmer offending, and this will be further revised to overcome multiple criticisms. In this study, violence will be used to replace crime. Agnew constructed general strain theory by building upon the work of prior strain theorist, Robert Merton. Merton posited that violence was caused by strain, the difference between one's economic aspirations and their actual means of achieving those aspirations (Merton, 1938). Merton proposed that when individuals were unable to meet their goals through legitimate means they would resort to illegitimate, or illegal measures to achieve their goals (Merton, 1938).

However, Merton's strain theory endured several unanswered criticisms. First, Merton concentrated specifically on the lower class although persons of all socioeconomic classes engage in violence (Agnew, 1985). Secondly, Merton could not explain violence other than financial aspects (Agnew, 1992). Furthermore, Merton did not explain why only some individuals reacted with violence behavior

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when confronted with strain (Agnew, 1992). Each of these shortcomings was addressed by Agnew's revision of Merton's strain theory. Agnew proposed that various forms of strain caused individuals to experience negative emotional states such as anger, depression, and fear (Agnew, 1992).

2. Literature Review

Exploring Strain Theory

For Agnew, violence occurred when persons sought violent means to cope with their negative emotions. However, as Merton failed to explain, not all individuals resort to violence to cope with their negative emotional states. Agnew explained that an individual's coping strategy is the determining factor of whether or not one will engage in violence. Furthermore, to explain all violence, rather than just economic violence among the lower class, Agnew expanded upon Merton's definition of strain. Rather than defining strain as the difference between one's financial goals and one's legitimate means to achieve those goals, Agnew stated that strain was caused by the difference between one's aspirations towards any goal and the means to achieve that goal (Agnew, 1992).

Thus, the failure to achieve any goal, rather than strictly a financial goal, would result in strain. Agnew's modification of the definition of strain enabled strain theory to explain any type of violence rather than strictly financial violences. Prior to Agnew's revision of strain theory, strain theory could not explain violences such as domestic abuse, sexual assault, and drug use as those violent acts are not means to achieve an economic goal. It is added in line with this study that banditry, kidnappings, and herder-farmer clashes are not means to achieve an economic goal. Agnew's revision of strain theory offers an explanation of the previously listed violence as means of coping, albeit illegitimately, for the failure to achieve one's goal.

For example, in the situation of herder- farmer clashes, the goal is to have access to land for planting crop such that the herders will not destroy the crops with their animals, but reverse is the case, which resort to violence, sexual assault, and other issues that challenged food security. Additionally, in order to offer a more complete explanation of all violent behavior, Agnew added two additional sources of strain: the removal of a positive stimuli and the confrontation of a negative stimuli (Agnew, 1992). For example, the loss of one's job could be the removal of a positive stimulus as one loses something of value to them. A confrontation with a negative stimulus could be a farmer who must face a any form of violence every day in his farm to desert the farm and find something else doing, and if it continue to reoccur, there will be food insecurity.

In either case, the negative feelings induced by these strains could lead an individual to seek criminal behaviors as a means with which to cope with their emotions (Agnew, 1992). Not only did modifying Merton's definition of strain and adding two additional types of strain allow strain theory to explain a vast variety of

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crime, it enabled strain theory to explain crime among the middle and upper class. One of the leading criticisms of Merton, and prior strain theorists, was that they concentrated only upon explaining crime among the lower classes (Agnew, 1985).

However, Agnew, drawing from contemporary studies of the time, did not believe that the lower class was predominately responsible for the majority of criminal behavior; he believed criminality was more evenly distributed among all social classes (Agnew, 1985). Tittle, Villemez, and Smith (1978) tested the contemporary assumption that the lower class was responsible for a grossly disproportionate share of criminal behavior. Using self-report surveys, rather than official arrest data, they found that crime was much more evenly shared among all social classes than previously expected.

However, Tittle et al. was most successful in demonstrating the inaccuracy and methodological flaws of police data. Research by Tittle et al. was reflective of a larger trend of scholars beginning to question the reliance upon police data. Other studies, using a similar approach, built upon the research of Tittle et al. and yielded even more promising results. Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis (1979), found that while the lower class exhibited a greater tendency to offend in terms of violent crime, rates of minor crime were fairly consistent among all social classes. Influenced by contemporary research of the time, Agnew's general strain theory did not only seek to explain crime among the lower class.

Improved definitions of strain allowed Agnew's general strain theory to be applicable to members of all social classes rather than just the poor. For instance, a strain such as the failure to find a suitable marriage partner, an example of a failure to achieve one's positively valued goal, could be experienced by a member of any social class. Individuals of any social class could also experience the loss of a positively valued stimulus such as the death of a loved one. Strains such as these could motivate a member of any social class to resort to criminal behavior in seeking a coping strategy to their problems.

As social class was demonstrated to be a poor indicator of criminal offending, members of all social classes could share similar likelihoods of seeking criminal behavior as a strategy with which to cope with strain (Hindeland et al., 1979). This was further supported by the fact that rates of certain crimes, such as drug use, are fairly consistent among all social classes (Hindeland et al., 1979). However, not all individuals whom experience strain resort to criminal behavior as a coping mechanism. Merton's strain theory provided five possible adaptations individuals use when dealing with strain.

However, Merton could not explain why some individuals chose one method of adaptation over another, or why only some individuals engaged in crime. Agnew kept Merton's five adaptations to strain but expanded upon Merton's theory by providing a rationale for why individuals choose one adaptation over another (Agnew, 1992). Merton's five adaptations to strain are conforming, innovating, retreating, ritualizing, and rebelling (Merton, 1938). A conformist is one who seeks

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to achieve the societal norm of success, financial prosperity, through legitimate means.

An innovator is one who seeks to achieve the societal norm of success, but uses alternative, and typically illegitimate, means to accomplish their goal. A retreatist is one whom rejects socially normative goals and the means to achieve those goals (Merton, 1938). A ritualist is one who clings to the means to achieve societal goals but rejects the actual goal. A ritualist could be an individual who is satisfied to work a minimum wage job and never achieve financial wealth.

Finally, a rebel is someone who rejects both the established goals and means of society and seeks to replace the goals and means with something else (Merton, 1938). A rebel would be one to advocate for a violent overthrow of the government. Although keeping Merton's five modes of adaption, Agnew provided a rationale for why individuals may choose one mode of adaption over another as well as why only some individuals engage in crime. Agnew stated that individuals differ in their adaptions of strain due to variations in their coping mechanisms (Agnew, 1992). Agnew proposed that there are three types of coping mechanisms: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional (Agnew, 1992).

Cognitive coping occurs when an individual attempts to minimize or deny their negative feelings. An example of cognitive coping would be when an individual states "It does not matter," or "I am better off anyway," (Agnew, 1992). Behavioral coping takes place when an individual takes action to permanently solve the perceived cause of their negative feelings (Agnew, 1992). For instance, in the case of an unhappy marriage, an individual could seek a divorce as a solution to their problem. Behavioral coping could also result in criminal behavior when persons resort to illegitimate means to alleviate their negative emotions.

Using the example of an unhappy marriage, an individual could choose to murder, rather than divorce, their spouse (Akinloye 2024a). The third coping mechanism described in Agnew's general strain theory is emotional coping. Emotional coping occurs when an individual does not seek to deny or solve their negative feelings, but only reduce their negative emotions. Persons might choose exercise, go out with friends, or indulge in comfort food. However, emotional coping could become criminal when individuals decide to engage in illegal behaviors such as illicit drug use or domestic abuse to reduce their negative emotions (Akinloye, 2025). While Agnew's general strain theory was a vast improvement over Merton's strain theory, it exhibits criticisms of its own.

In particular, Agnew was criticized for creating a theory that was too broad (Agnew, 2001). Critics of Agnew contested that strain was far too vague and nearly any factor or event could be interpreted as strain (Jensen, 1995). It is problematic, critics argued, because testing an unlimited number of variables would consistently yield support making strain theory unable to be proven false (Jensen, 1995). To address this criticism, Agnew revised his theory to specify particular strains that were more likely than others to result in crime (Agnew, 2001). Furthermore, Agnew proposed

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there were two main categories of strain, objective and subjective, each holding a different likelihood of inducing criminal behavior (Agnew & Froggio, 2007).

Agnew (2001) stated that the types of strain that are most likely to result in the commission of crime are: those perceived to be unjust, high in magnitude, correlated with low self-control, and perceived to encourage illegitimate coping mechanisms. Strains perceived to be unjust are likely to result in crime as they tend to promote the negative effective state of anger. Anger, according to Agnew (1992), is the negative affective state most conducive to criminal behavior.

Anger inhibits the ability of individuals to think rationally often causing them to neglect alternative means to resolve issues in a non-violent manner. Especially in the case of experiencing feelings of injustice, anger distorts an individual's sense of appropriate action as they feel justified taking extreme measures in order to obtain revenge (Agnew, 2001). For example, a parent who reports to school authorities that their child was bullied at school might feel their child has been unjustly treated if the school fails to take action (Akinloye, 2024b). The feelings of unjust treatment could cause anger in the parent and lead them to physically assault their child's alleged bully. A second characteristic of strain that is particularly likely to cause criminal behavior are strains perceived to be high in magnitude (Agnew, 2001).

The negative emotions generated by high magnitude strains are more difficult to cope with using any of the three major coping strategies. Strains that are high in magnitude are much more difficult to cognitively ignore or deal with by legitimate behavioral means. In the case of high magnitude strains, illegal means of emotional coping, such as drug use, may seem more attractive than legitimate means of coping such as exercise (Agnew, 2001). Also, as the intensity of strain is increased, the more likely it is individuals will develop psychological problems such as depression (Agnew, 2001).

Agnew, (2001) states that psychological problems greatly inhibit one's ability to effectively cope with their problems. High magnitude sources of strain could also cause other negative emotions such as anger or fear which could further motivate an individual to resort to criminal behavior as a means to alleviate their negative emotions (Agnew, 2001). A third factor of strains that increase the likelihood of criminal offending is low social control (Agnew, 2001). Strains that are related to low social control such as overly permissive parenting increase the likelihood of crime by diminishing the attachment of an individual to society (Agnew, 2001).

In such cases, an individual perceives they have relatively little to risk by engaging in crime. Likewise, individuals who have high stakes in pro-social institutions, such as a strong relationship to family or an established career, are less likely to choose criminal behavior as a source of coping for fear of losing the institutions or persons to which they are attached. For instance, an individual could resort to the use of illegal drugs to cope with the stress of their minimum wage job which they despise. Should the individual be caught for using illegal drugs, they may lose their job.

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As the individual hates their job, they are not deterred from using drugs by the possibility of losing their job. Thus, persons whom experience strain as a result of circumstances relating to low social control such as negative relationships, or stressful jobs, are likely to resort to criminal behavior as a method of coping with their strain as they have little to lose. A fourth factor that Agnew proposed increases the likelihood of strain to result in criminal offending is an incentive to engage in criminal behavior (Agnew, 2001). Drawing from routine activities theory and social learning theory, Agnew (2001) posits that certain subcultures of individual's react to specific strains in specific manners.

By nature of association and principles of learning, individuals within groups learn that only specific responses are appropriate for coping with certain strains. In some cases, these encouraged responses are criminal. An example of an encouragement of criminal behavior could be drug use among adolescent peer groups. Adolescents often feel that they are only accepted into peer groups by abiding by group norms. If a norm of the specific group to which an adolescent desires to become acquainted happens to be drug use, the adolescent may feel they must engage in drug use or face the possibility of exclusion from the group. However, should an adolescent refuse, they could be neglected by the group, or at least lose respect among group members.

Additionally, an adolescent may be further encouraged to use drugs as doing so could result in greater notoriety among one's peers. For instance, should an adolescent prove to use drugs in greater doses or frequency than any of the other group members they could achieve an envied status within the group. After considering the four characteristics of strain that increase the likelihood of criminal behavior: feelings of injustice, strain of high magnitude, associations of low social-control, and encouragement to commit crime, Agnew (2001) designated the following types of strain as likely to result in criminal behavior: parental rejection, inconsistent parenting, child abuse, poor educational performance, unpleasant occupations, homelessness, abusive peer relations, criminal victimization, and experiences of racial or gender discrimination.

As a result of this study, strain theory currently holds a preference for the previously listed types of strain when considering strains that are likely to result in criminal behavior. To further specify strains that are likely to result in criminal behavior, Agnew introduced two categories of strain to which all strains are classified: subjective and objective strain (Agnew & Froggio, 2007). The majority of strain theory research, prior to Agnew's concepts of objective and subjective strain, had been conducted upon strains that were assumed to be universally stress inducing, or objective strains (Agnew & Froggio, 2007). Examples of objective strains would be poor grades in academic endeavors or the divorce of one's parents.

However, Agnew and Froggio (2007) argued that not all individuals find objective sources of strain equally stressful. For example, while one student might feel that receiving poor grades in school is very stressful another student may exhibit little concern. Agnew and Froggio (2007) posited that subjective strains, sources of strain that are perceived to be stress inducing by those who experience them, will be more

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predictive of criminal behavior than objective strains (Akinloye, 2024c). Using self-report surveys, Agnew and Froggio (2007) asked respondents to evaluate the negative influence of four strains: emotional distance from parents, break-up of a romantic relationship, demise of an important friendship, and academic failure.

To measure crime in relation to these strains, respondents how often they participated in a list of ten crimes in the past year (Agnew & Froggio, 2007). Crimes included, but were not limited to: hard and soft drug use, prostitution, theft, driving under the influence, and gang fights (Agnew & Froggio, 2007). Results demonstrated a considerable variation in the individual ratings of negativity of the four strains used to gauge subjective strain (Agnew & Froggio, 2007). This finding demonstrates that not all strains are perceived to be equally negative or even at all negative by those who experience them.

This finding is significant because in order for a strain to create a negative affective state to which an individual would seek a means to cope, the strain would have to be perceived as sufficiently negative. This finding supports Agnew's prediction that those strains which are rated the most negative by those who experience them will be most predictive of crime. Two of the four strains, the break-up of a romantic relationship and failure to achieve academic success, were found to be correlated with increased rates of criminal behavior only when they were rated high in negativity (Agnew & Froggio, 2007).

Furthermore, when the previous two subjective strains were rated as high in negativity, they had a greater positive impact on one's criminal behavior than any of the 24 objective strains. This finding provides support for Agnew's hypothesis that subjective strains, strains found to be particularly negative for certain individuals, have a much greater impact than objective strains, or those strains generally assumed to be negative for all whom experience them. The results of this study have contributed to revisions in manner in which strains are evaluated in terms their negative influence in strain theory.

Prior to this study, all strains that were assumed to be negative for most persons were thought to influence an individual's criminal behavior in relatively similar ways. The findings from this study illustrate that this assumption is incorrect as not all individuals perceive the same negative events to be equally influential in contributing to their negative affective states. The results from this study have influenced the manner in which strains are assessed in future research of strain theory and also changed the manner in which strains are thought to influence crime.

Agnew's general strain theory now acknowledges that events which are perceived to be especially negative by those who experience them are positively correlated with a greater likelihood of criminal behavior (Agnew & Froggio, 2007). Strain theory has been used to explain a variety of criminal phenomenon. One of the more notable uses of strain theory has been in providing an explanation on the differing criminal offending patterns of men and women. It is widely accepted in the field that men tend to be more criminally active than women, and especially more likely to engage violent crime (Broidy & Agnew, 1997).

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Women, however, nearly mirror men's behavior in terms of likelihood to participate in larceny and self-inflicting crimes such as drug use (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Broidy and Agnew (1997) attribute the variations in the criminal behavior of men and women to the different types of strain faced by men and women and the different coping mechanism men and women choose to alleviate their strain. Referencing Agnew's first source of strain, the failure to achieve one's goals, Agnew and Broidy (1997) state that men and women tend to differ in their positively valued goals.

According to Broidy and Agnew (1997) women are predominately concerned with developing and maintaining intimate interpersonal relationships and achieving economic success. Men are mostly concerned, much more than women, with achieving extrinsic goals in general (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Examples of extrinsic goals could be financial success, promotion in one's career field, or achieving high social status. The differences in the types of strain faced by men versus women are further reflected by the manner in which men and women measure their success.

Men, by nature of the motivation of external rewards, are content when they have received the benefit of their expected goal, regardless of the manner in which the goal has been achieved (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Women likewise, by nature of concern for relationships, are more concerned in the manner in which individuals within intimate circles have been treated in the course of achieving their goal (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). With respect to Agnew's (1992) two additional types of strain, removal of a positive stimuli and the confrontation of a negative stimuli, men and women also face different sources of strain.

Women, by nature of societal gender roles, are more likely to face gender related oppression, unrealistic demands of family, and restrictions of personal freedoms (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Likewise, men are more likely than women to experience both the increased societal pressure to achieve economic prosperity and the need to establish oneself as the most competent of their peer group (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Men and women, by virtue of the differing values and the sources of strain they face, tend to differ slightly in their negative emotional states and thus choose different coping strategies (Broidy & Agnew, 1997).

Men, for instance, do not value relationships as much as women and thus are quick to attribute their sources of conflict to the fault of others (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). When faced with sources of strain, men are more likely than women to feel they have been treated unjustly and thus feel justified in acting out with anger towards their perceived source of strain. Women, while also frequently experiencing the negative affective state of anger, usually also have feelings of guilt or shame (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Women tend to feel that their sources of strain are some manner their own fault; this would explain feelings of guilt and shame accompanying women's anger.

Feeling sources of strain are in some manner a fault of their own, and also valuing relationships, women are much less likely than men to assume that their sources of strain are directly the fault of others. The differences in the emotional affective states of men and women explain their different coping strategies. Since men are

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far more likely than women to respond to strain with anger wholly directed at others, they are more likely than women to resort to violent crime towards others (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Women, however, valuing personal relationships, are less likely to lash out at others for fear of disrupting relationships and more likely to internalize their conflicts.

This internalization of strain leads women to engage in self-destructive behaviors such as drug use, self-mutilation, or eating disorders (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Broidy and Agnew's (1997) explanation of the difference between male and female offending offers valuable insight into criminal behavior however it is not without criticism. Women's internalization of anger may explain why women tend to choose drug use over acting out in violence however it does not explain why men use drugs as well. Men are more prone to using acts of aggression and violence to cope with strain; however they are just as likely as women to use drugs.

Also, Broidy and Agnew (1997) also assume that all men and all women will behave in similar ways. While Broidy and Agnew (1997) cite research to support these claims they do not offer an explanation for outliers. Although Broidy and Agnew (1997) are not without criticism, their use of strain theory to explain the nature of criminal behavior of men versus women exhibits supported claims. Women do exhibit more self-destructive disorders than men and men are responsible for the vast majority of violent crime. Broidy and Agnew's (1997) hypothesis that men and women face different strains as well as cope with their respective strains differently serves as a reasonable explanation for the disparities in criminal behavior among men and women.

3. Conclusion

Through addressing the criticisms of prior strain theorist, Robert Merton, Agnew reestablished strain theory as a respectable theory of crime within the criminological community. Furthermore, Agnew, in response to contemporary criticisms, has modified his theory to specify which types of strain are likely to result in criminal behavior. Finally, Agnew's strain theory has been used to explain a variety of criminological phenomenon such as the disparities in male versus female criminal behavior. As demonstrated through the course of this paper, strain theory has generated considerable support through research and will likely be used to explain criminal behavior in the contemporary context as well as in the future.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

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Vol: 01.06
DOI: 10.66104/s0z4mz37
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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Received: 01/04/2026 - **Accepted:** 15/05/2026
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Author Responsibility Statement

OTO: Conceptualization, Writing; ADN: Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Introduction, Literature, Conclusion. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.