


Early Social Structure and Strain Theories of Crime

This section will review the development of anomie or strain theory, starting with early social structure theorists, such as Durkheim, then Merton, and on to the most modern versions (e.g., general strain theory). We will also examine the empirical research findings on this perspective, which remains one of the dominant theoretical explanations of criminal behavior today. We will finish by discussing the policy implications of this research.

We'll begin with a review of explanations of criminal conduct that emphasize the differences among varying groups in societies, particularly in the United States. Such differences are easy to see in everyday life, and many theoretical models place the blame for crime on observed inequalities and cultural differences between groups. In contrast to the theories presented in previous sections, social structure theories disregard any biological or psychological variations across individuals. Instead, social structure theories assume that crime is caused by the way societies are structurally organized.

These social structure theories vary in many ways, most notably in what they propose as the primary constructs and processes responsible for causing criminal activity. For example, some structural models emphasize variations in economic or academic success, whereas others focus on differences in cultural norms and values. Still others concentrate on the actual breakdown of the social structure in certain neighborhoods and the resulting social disorganization that occurs from this process, a topic we will reserve for Section VII. Regardless of their differences, all of the theories examined in this section emphasize one common theme: Certain groups of individuals are more likely to break the law because of disadvantages or cultural differences resulting from the way a society is structured.

The most important distinction between these theories and those discussed in previous sections is that they emphasize group differences instead of individual differences. Structural models tend to focus on the macro level of 215
analysis as opposed to the micro level. Therefore, it is not surprising that social structure theories are commonly used to explain the propensity of certain racial or ethnic groups for committing crime, as well as the overrepresentation of the lower class in criminal activity.

As you will see, these theoretical frameworks were presented as early as the 1800s and reached prominence in the early to mid-1900s, when the political, cultural, and economic climate of society was most conducive to such explanations. Although social structural models of crime have diminished in popularity in recent decades, there is much validity to their propositions in numerous applications to contemporary society.

Early Theories of Social Structure: Early to Mid 1800s

Most criminological and sociological historians trace the origin of social structure theories to the research done in the early to mid-1800s by a number of European researchers, the most important including Auguste Comte, André-Michel Guerry, and Adolphe Quetelet. It is important to understand why structural theories developed in 19th-century Europe. The Industrial Revolution, defined by most historians as beginning in the mid-1700s and ending in the mid-1800s, was in full swing at the turn of the century, so societies were quickly transitioning from primarily agriculturally based economies to industrial based economies. This transition inevitably brought people from rural farmlands to dense urban cities, resulting in an enormous increase in social problems. These social problems ranged from failure to properly dispose of waste and garbage, to constantly losing children and not being able to find them, to much higher rates of crime (which urban areas continue to show today, as compared to suburban and rural areas).

The problems associated with such fast urbanization, as well as the shift in economies, led to drastic changes in the basic social structures in Europe as well as the United States. At the same time, other types of revolutions were also having an effect. Both the American (1776) and French (1789) Revolutions occurred in the last quarter of the 18th century. These two revolutions, inspired by the Enlightenment movement (see Section II), shared an ideology that rejected tyranny and insisted that people should have a voice in how they were governed. Along with the Industrial Revolution, these political revolutions affected intellectual theorizing on social structures, as well as on crime, throughout the 1800s.

Auguste Comte

One of the first important theorists in the area of social structure theory was Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who is widely credited with coining the term sociology. Comte distinguished the concepts of social statics and social dynamics. Social statics are aspects of society that relate to stability and social order; they allow societies to continue and endure. Social dynamics are aspects of social life that alter how societies are structured and pattern the development of societal institutions. Although such conceptualization seems elementary by today’s standards, it had a significant influence on sociological thinking at the time. Furthermore, the distinction between static and dynamic societal factors was incorporated into several criminological theories in decades to come.

Between 1831 and 1854, Comte published a four-volume work titled A System of Positive Polity that encouraged the use of scientific methods to observe and measure societal factors. Although we tend to take this for granted in modern times, the idea of applying such methods to help explain social processes was rather profound at the time.\(^{1}\)

Andre-Michel Guerry and Adolphe Quetelet

After the first modern national crime statistics were published in France in the early 1800s, a French lawyer named André-Michel Guerry (1802–1866) published a report that examined these statistics and concluded that property crimes were higher in wealthy areas, but violent crime was much higher in poor areas.\(^{2}\) Some experts have claimed that this report likely represents the first study of scientific criminology; it was later expanded and published as a book, titled Essay on the Moral Statistics of France, in 1833. Ultimately, Guerry concluded that the explanation was opportunity: The wealthy had more to steal, and that is the primary cause of property crime. Interestingly, this conclusion is supported by recent U.S. Department of Justice statistics, which show that, compared to lower-class households, property crime is just as common—and maybe even more so—in middle- to upper-class households, but violent crime is not. As Guerry stated centuries ago, there is more to steal in wealthier areas, and poor individuals take the opportunity to steal goods and currency from these households and establishments.

Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) was a Belgian researcher who, like Guerry, examined French statistics in the mid-1800s. Besides showing relative stability in the trends of crime rates in France, such as in age distribution and female-to-male ratios of offending, Quetelet also showed that certain types of individuals were more likely to commit crime. Specifically, young, male, poor, uneducated, and unemployed individuals were more likely to commit crimes than their counterparts,\(^{3}\) a finding also supported by modern research. Like Guerry, Quetelet concluded that opportunities, in addition to demographic characteristics, had a lot to do with where crime was concentrated.


\(^{3}\)Vander Zanden, Sociology: The Core, 8-9.

However, Quetelet added a special component: Greater inequality or gaps between wealth and poverty in the same place tend to excite temptations and passions. This is a concept referred to as relative deprivation, a condition distinct from simple poverty.

For example, a number of deprived areas in the United States do not have high rates of crime, likely because virtually everyone is poor, so people are generally content with their lives relative to their neighbors. However, in areas of the country where very poor people live in close proximity to very wealthy people, a sense of envy and feelings of being deprived city to the world and one with many neighborhoods that are severely run-down and poor, has a higher crime rate than any other jurisdiction in the country. Modern studies have also shown a clear linear association between higher crime rates and relative deprivation. For example, David Seng-Yoon Lee found that crime rates were far higher in cities that had wider gaps in income: The larger the gap between the 10th and 90th percentiles, the greater the crime levels.

In addition to the concept of relative deprivation, Quetelet also showed that areas with the most rapidly changing demographics have high crime rates. He is perhaps best known for commenting that "the crimes...are only the instruments by which it is executed." This statement makes it clear that crime is a result of societal structure and not the result of individual propensities of personal decision making. Thus, it is not surprising that removing all decision-making capabilities from his model of behavior. In response, Quetelet argued that his model could help lower crime rates by leading to social reforms that address the inequalities due to the social structure.

One of the essential points of Guerry's and Quetelet's work is the positivist nature of their conclusions: that the distribution of crime is not random but rather the result of certain types of people committing certain types of crimes in particular places, largely due to the way society is structured and the way it distributes resources. This perspective found support in the structural, positivistic perspective of criminals, in which criminals are seen as being determined and, thus, caused by factors outside of an individual's control. In some ways, early structural classical and deterrence-based perspectives of crime fell out of favor, while social structure theories and other positivist theories of crime, such as the structural models of Guerry and Quetelet, attracted far more attention.

Durkheim and the Concept of Anomie

Although influenced by earlier theorists (e.g., Comte, Guerry, and Quetelet), Émile Durkheim (1858–1916) was the most influential positivist in the area of modern structural perspectives on crime.6

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11Much of this discussion of Durkheim is taken from Bernard et al., Vold's Theoretical Criminology, 100–14, as well as Vander Zanden, Sociology: The Core, 11–13.

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12Social theorists of the 19th century, he was strongly affected by the American and French Revolutions and the Industrial Revolution. In his doctoral dissertation (1893) at the University of Paris, the first sociological dissertation at that institution, Durkheim developed a general model of societal development largely based on economic and labor distribution, in which societies are seen as evolving from a simplistic, mechanical society toward a multilayered, organic society (see Figure 6.1).

As outlined in this dissertation, titled The Division of Labor in Society, in primitive societies, all members essentially perform the same functions, such as hunting (typically done by males) and gathering (typically done by females). Although there are a few anomalies (e.g., medicine men), virtually everyone experiences essentially the same daily routine. Such similarities in work, as well as constant interaction with like members of the society, leads to a strong uniformity in values, which Durkheim called the collective conscience. The collective conscience is the degree to which individuals of a society think alike, or as Durkheim put it, the totality of social likenesses. The similar norms and values among people in these primitive, mechanical societies create mechanical solidarity, a very simple-social structure with a very strong collective conscience. In mechanical societies, law functions to enforce the conformity of the group.

However, as societies progress toward more modern, organic societies in the industrial age, the distribution of labor becomes more highly specified. An organic solidarity arises in which people tend to depend on other groups because of the highly specified division of labor, and laws have the primary function of regulating interactions and maintaining solidarity among the groups.

For example, modern researchers at universities in the United States tend to be trained in extremely narrow topics—one might be an expert on something as specific as the anatomy of certain species of ants. On the other hand, some individuals are still gathering trash from the cans on the same streets every single day. These experts probably have little in common with the garbage collectors and not much interaction with them other than what they pay them. According to Durkheim, moving from the universally shared roles of mechanical societies to the extremely specific roles of organic societal organization results in huge cultural differences and giant contrasts in normative values and attitudes across groups. Thus, the collective conscience in such societies is weak, largely because there is little agreement on moral beliefs or opinions. The preexisting solidarity among members breaks down and the bonds are weakened, which creates a climate for antisocial behavior.

Durkheim was clear in stating that crime is not only normal but necessary in all societies. As a result, his theory is often considered a good representation of structural functionalism. He claimed that all social behavior, especially crime, provide essential functions in a society. Durkheim thought crime serves several functions until they see someone punished for a violation. This reinforces their understanding of both the rules and what it means to break them. Furthermore, the identification of rule breakers creates a bond among the other

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Figure 6.1 Durkheim's Continuum of Development from Mechanical to Organic Societies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanical Societies</th>
<th>Organic Societies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primitive</td>
<td>Modern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural-based economy</td>
<td>Industrial-based economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple division of labor (few divisions)</td>
<td>Complex division of labor (many specialized divisions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law used to enforce conformity</td>
<td>Law used to regulate interactions among divisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Typically stronger collective conscience</td>
<td>Typically weaker collective conscience</td>
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members of the society, perhaps through a common sense of self-righteousness or superiority.

In later works, Durkheim said the resultant bonding is what makes crime so necessary in a society. Given a community that has no law violators, he thought, society will change the legal definitions of what constitutes a crime to define some of its members as criminals. Examples of this are prevalent, but perhaps the most convincing is that of the Salem witch trials, in which hundreds of individuals were accused and tried for an almost laughable offense, and more than a dozen were executed. Durkheim would say this was inevitable because crime was so low in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, as historical records confirm, that society had to come up with a fabricated criterion for defining certain members of the population as offenders.

Other examples are common in everyday life. The fastest way to have a group of strangers bond is to give them a common enemy, which often means forming into cliques and ganging up on others in the group. In a group of three or more college roommates, for example, two or more of the individuals will quickly join together and complain about the others. This is an inevitable phenomenon of human interaction and group dynamics that has always existed throughout the world across time and place. As Durkheim said, even in "a society of saints...crimes...will there be unknown; but faults which appear venial to the layman will create there the same scandal that the ordinary offense does in ordinary consciousnesses. This society...will define these acts as criminal and will treat them as such."

Traditional, mostly mechanical societies could count on relative consensus about moral values and norms, and this sometimes led to too much control and a stagnation of creative thought. Durkheim thought that progress in society typically depends on deviating from established moral boundaries, especially if the society is in a mechanical stage. Some of the many examples include virtually all religious icons. Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed were persecuted as criminals for deviating from societal norms in the times they preached. Political heroes have also been prosecuted and incarcerated as criminals, such as Gandhi in India, Mandela in South Africa, and Dr. King in the United States. In one of the most compelling cases, scientist and astronaut Galileo proposed a theory that Earth was not the center of the universe. Even though he was right, he was persecuted for his belief in a society that strictly adhered to its beliefs. Durkheim was clearly accurate in saying that the normative structure in some societies is so strong that it hinders progress and that crime is the price societies pay for progress.

In contrast to mechanical societies, modern societies do not have such extreme restraint against deviations from established norms. Rather, almost the opposite is true; there are too many differences across groups because the division of labor is highly specialized. Thus, the varying roles in society, such as farmers versus scientific researchers, lead to extreme differences in the cultural values and norms of each group. There is a breakdown in the collective conscience because there is really no longer a collective nature in society. Therefore, law focuses not on defining the norms of society but on governing the interactions that take place among the different classes. According to Durkheim, law provides a service in regulating such interactions as societies progress toward more organic (more industrial) forms.

Durkheim emphasized that human beings, unlike other animal species who live according to their spontaneous needs, have no internal mechanism to signal when their needs and desires are satisfied. Therefore, the selfish desires of human kind are limitless; the more an individual has, the more he or she wants. People are greedy by nature, and without something to tell them what they need and deserve, they will never feel content. According to Durkheim, society provides the mechanism for limiting this insatiable appetite, having the sole power to create laws that set tangible limits.

Durkheim also noted that in times of rapid change, society fails in this role of regulating desires and expectations. Rapid change can be due to numerous factors, such as war or social movements (like the changes seen in the United States in the 1960s). The transitions Durkheim likely had in mind when he wrote were the American and French Revolutions and the Industrial Revolution. When society’s ability to serve as a regulatory mechanism breaks down, the selfish, greedy tendencies of individuals are uncontrollable, causing a state Durkheim called anomie, or normlessness. Societies in such anomie states experience increases in many social problems, particularly criminal activity.

Durkheim was clear that, whether the rapid change was for good or bad, it would have negative effects on society. For example, whether the U.S. economy was improving, as it did during the late 1960s, or quickly tanking, as it did during the Depression of the 1930s, criminal activity would increase due to the lack of stability in regulating human expectations and desires. Interestingly, these two periods experienced the greatest crime waves of the 20th century, particularly for murder. Another fact that supports Durkheim’s predictions is that middle- and upper-class individuals have higher suicide rates than those from lower classes. This is consistent with the idea that it is better to have stability, even if it means always being poor, than it is to have instability at higher levels of income. In his best-known work, Suicide, Durkheim took an act that would seem to be the ultimate form of free choice or free will and showed that the decision to take one’s own life was largely determined by external social factors. He argued that suicide is a social fact, a product of meanings and structural aspects that result from interactions among people.

Durkheim showed that the rate of suicide was significantly lower among individuals who were married, younger, and practiced religions that were more interactive and communal (e.g., Jewish). All of these characteristics boil down to one aspect: The more the social interaction and bonding with the community, the less the suicide. Thus, Durkheim concluded that variations in suicide rates are due to differences in social solidarity or bonding to society. Examples of this are still seen today, as in recent reports of high rates of suicide among people who live in more rural areas, like Alaska (which has the highest rate of juvenile suicide), Wyoming, Montana, and the northern portions of Nevada. Another way of looking at the implications of Durkheim’s conclusions is that social relationships are what make people happy and fulfilled. If they are isolated or have weak bonds to society, they will likely be depressed and discontented with their lives.

Another reason that Durkheim’s examination of suicide was important was that he showed that suicide rates increased in times of rapid economic growth or rapid decline. Although researchers later argued that crime rates did...
not always follow this pattern. Durkheim used quantified measures to test his propositions as the positivist approach recommended. At the least, Durkheim created a prototype of how theory and empirical research could be the most influential and accepted criminological theories of the 20th century: strain theory.

Strain Theories

All forms of strain theory share an emphasis on frustration as a factor in crime causation, hence the name strain theories. Although the theories differ regarding what exactly is causing the frustration—and the way individuals cope (or don’t cope) with stress and anger—they all hold that strain is the primary causal factor in the development of criminality. Strain theories all trace their origin to Robert K. Merton’s seminal theoretical framework.

Merton’s Strain Theory

Working in the 1930s, Merton drew heavily on Durkheim’s idea of anomie in developing his own theory of structural strain. Although Merton altered the definition of anomie, Durkheim’s theoretical framework was a vital influence, and Merton’s structural model became one of the most popular perspectives in criminological thought in the early 1900s and remains one of the most cited theories of crime in criminological literature.

Cultural Context and Assumptions of Strain Theory

Some have claimed that Merton’s seminal piece in 1938 was the most influential theoretical formulation in criminological literature, and it is one of the most frequently cited papers in sociology. Although its popularity is partially due to its strength in previous structural theories, Merton’s strain theory also benefited from the timing and social climate of the times, fitting perspectives of how the world worked. Perhaps no other theory better represents this phenomenon than strain theory.

Most historians would agree that, in the United States, the most significant social issue of the 1930s was the economy. The Great Depression, a result of a stock market crash in 1929, affected virtually every aspect of life in the United States. Unemployment and extreme poverty soared, along with suicide rates and crime rates, particularly murder rates. American society was fertile ground for a theory of crime that placed virtually all of the blame on the U.S. economic structure.

Strain theories epitomize the American Dream, but parents and society do not also teach the reality of the situation. As Merton points out, a small percentage of people rise from the lower class to become materially successful, but the vast majority of poor children don’t have much chance of ever achieving such wealth. This near-universal socialization of the American Dream—which turns out not to be true for most people—causes most of the strain and frustration in American society, Merton said. Furthermore, he thought that most of the strain and frustration was due not to the failure to achieve conventional goals (i.e., wealth) but rather to the differential emphasis placed on material goals and the de-emphasizing of the importance of conventional means.

Merton’s Concept of Anomie and Strain

Merton claimed that, in an ideal society, there would be an equal emphasis on conventional goals and means. However, in many societies, one is emphasized more than the other. Merton thought the United States epitomized the type of society that emphasized the goals far more than the means. The disequilibrium in emphasis between the goals and means of society is what Merton called anomie. So, like Durkheim, Merton’s anomie was a negative state for society; however, the two men had very different ideas of how this state of society was caused. Whereas Durkheim believed that anomie was primarily caused by a society’s transitioning too fast to maintain its regulatory control over its members, for Merton, anomie represented too much focus on the goals of wealth in the United States at the expense of conventional situations.

Hypothetical situations can be used to illustrate Merton’s view: Which of the following two men would be more respected by youths (or even adults) in our society? (1) John, who has his PhD in physics and lives in a one-bedroom apartment because his job as a postdoctoral student pays $25,000 a year, or (2) Joe, who is a relatively successful drug dealer and owns a four-bedroom home, drives a Hummer, dropped out of school in the 10th grade, and makes about $90,000 a year? In years of asking such a question to our classes, we have found that the answer is usually Joe, the drug dealer. After all, he appears to have obtained the American Dream, and little emphasis is placed on how he achieved it.
Still another way of supporting Merton's idea that America is too focused on the goal of material success is to ask you, the reader, to think about how you are taking the time to read this book or to attend college. Specifically, the question for you is this: If you knew that studying this book—or earning a college degree—would not lead to a better employment position, would you read it anyway just to increase your own knowledge? In over a decade of putting this question to about 10,000 students in various university courses, one of the authors of this book has found that only about 5% (usually fewer) of respondents say yes. Interestingly, when asked why they put all of this work into attending classes, many of them say it's for the partying or social life. Ultimately, it seems that most college students would not be engaging in the hard work it takes to educate themselves if it weren't for some payoff at the end of the task. In some ways, this supports Merton's claim that there is an emphasis on the goals and little or no intrinsic value placed on the work itself (i.e., means). This phenomenon is not meant to be common in our society to emphasize the goal of financial success as opposed to hard work or education.

Merton thought that individuals, particularly those in the lower class, eventually realize that the ideal of the people are in their late teens to mid-20s, and according to Merton, this is when the frustration or strain is evident, necessarily provide rewards, some individuals begin to innovate ways that they can achieve material success without dealing with strain in this way; most people who are poor do not resort to crime. To Merton's credit, he explained that adaptations to strain.

Adaptations to Strain

According to Merton, there are five adaptations to strain. The first of these is conformity, in which people buy into the conventional goals of society and the conventional means of working hard in school or at their labor. Like conformists, achieving success through educational efforts and doing a good job at work. Another adaptation to strain is ritualism. However, they do buy into the conventional means is the sense that they like to do their jobs or are happy with just making ends meet through their current positions. For example, studies have shown that some of the most contented and happy people in society are those who don't hope to become rich, are quite content with their blue-collar jobs, and often have a strong sense of pride in their work, even if it is sometimes quite menial. To these people, work is a type of ritual, performed without a goal in mind; rather, it is a form of intrinsic goal in and of itself. Ultimately, conformists and ritualists tend to be at low risk for offending, which is in contrast to the other adaptations to strain.

The other three adaptations to strain are far more likely to be associated with criminal offending: innovation, retreatism, and rebellion. Perhaps most likely to become predatory street criminals are the innovators, who Merton claimed greatly desire the conventional goals of material success but are not willing to engage in conventional means. Obviously, drug dealers and professional auto thieves, as well as many other variations of chronic property criminals (bank robbers, etc.), would fit this category. They are innovators ways to achieve the goals without the hard work that is usually required. However, innovators are not always criminals. In fact, many of them are the most respected individuals in our society. For example, some entrepreneurs have used the capitalistic system of our society to produce useful products and services (e.g., the men who designed Google for the Internet) and have made a fortune at a very young age without advanced college education or years of work at a company. Other examples are successful athletes who sign multimillion-dollar contracts at age 18. So, it should be clear that not all innovators are criminals.

The fourth adaptation to strain is retreatism. Retreatists do not seek to achieve the goals of society, and they also do not buy into the idea of conventional hard work. There are many varieties of this adaptation: for example, people who become homeless by choice or who isolate themselves in desolate places without human contact. A good example of a retreatist is Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who left a good position as a professor at the University of California at Berkeley to live in an isolated cabin in Montana that had no running water or electricity; he did not interact with humans for many months at a time. Other types of retreatists, perhaps the most likely to be criminal, are those who are heavy drug users who actively disengage from social life and try to escape via mind-altering drugs. All of these forms of retreatists seek to drop out of society altogether, thus not buying into its means or goals.

Finally, the last adaptation to strain, according to Merton, is rebellion, which is the most complex of the five adaptations. Interestingly, rebels buy into the idea of societal goals and means, but they do not buy into those currently in place. Most true rebels are criminals by definition, largely because they are trying to overthrow the current societal structure. For example, the founders of the United States were all rebels because they actively fought the British government—English government. Later, he became a rebel who bombarded innocent people in his quest to implement his own goals and means as described in his manifesto, which he coerced several national newspapers to publish. This subsequently resulted in his apprehension when his brother read it and informed authorities that he thought his brother was the author.

Finally, some have applied a sports analogy to these adaptations. Assuming a basketball game is taking place, conformists will play to win, and they will always play by the rules and won't cheat. Ritualists will play the game just because they like to play; they don't care about winning. Innovators will play to win, and they will

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Merton, Social Theory.
break any rules they can to triumph in the game. Retreatists don't like to play and obviously don't care about winning. Finally, rebels won't like the rules on the court, so they will try to steal the ball and go play by their own adaptations and enable them to apply these ways of dealing with strain to everyday situations, such as during the Great Depression; however, many later scientific studies showed mixed support for strain theory. Therefore, research that examined the effects of poverty on violence and official rates of various crimes has found relatively consistent support for Merton's views (albeit with weaker effects than strain theory implies), a series of studies of self-reported delinquent behavior found little or no relationship between social class and criminality. On the other hand, some experts have argued that Merton's strain theory is primarily a structural model of used aggregated group rates (i.e., macro-level measures) to test the effects of deprivation, as opposed to using individual-level measures with higher rates of deprivation and inequality have higher rates of criminal activity.  

However, many critics have claimed that these studies do not directly measure perceptions or feelings of strain, so they are only indirect examinations of Merton's theory. In light of these criticisms, some researchers focused on the disparity between what individuals aspire to in various aspects of life (e.g., school, occupation, social life) and what they realistically expect to achieve. The rationale behind these studies was that, if an individual has aspirations (i.e., goals) but a low expectation of actually achieving the goals due to structural barriers, then that individual is more likely to experience feelings of frustration and strain. Furthermore, it was predicted that the larger the gap between aspirations and expectations, the stronger the sense of strain. Of the studies that examined discrepancies between aspirations and expectations, most did not find evidence to link a large gap between these two levels with criminal activity. In fact, several studies found that, for most antisocial respondents, there was virtually no gap between aspirations and expectations. Rather, most of the subjects who reported the highest levels of criminal activity (typically young males) tended to report low levels of both aspirations and expectations.

Surprisingly, when aspirations were high, it seemed to inhibit offending, even when expectations to achieve those goals were low. One interpretation of these findings is that individuals who have high goals will not jeopardize their chances even if they are slim. On the other hand, individuals who don't have high goals are likely to be indifferent to their future and, in a sense, have nothing to lose. So, without a stake in conventional society, they predispose themselves to crime. While this conclusion supports social control theories, it does not provide support for strain theory.

Some critics have argued that most studies on the discrepancies between aspirations and expectations have not been done correctly. For example, Farnworth and Leiber claimed that it was a mistake to examine differences between educational goals and expectations or differences between occupational goals and expectations, which is what most of these studies did. Rather, they proposed testing the gap between economic goals (i.e., goals) and educational expectations (i.e., means of achieving the goals). This makes sense, and Farnworth and Leiber found support for a gap between these two factors and criminality. However, they also found that people who reported low economic aspirations were more likely to be delinquent, which supports the previous studies that they criticized. Another criticism of this type of strain theory is that simply reporting a gap between expectations and aspirations may not mean that the individuals actually feel strain; rather, researchers have simply, and perhaps wrongly, assumed that a gap between these two measures indicates feelings of frustration. Other criticisms of Merton's strain theory include historical evidence and the theory's failure to explain the age-crime curve. Regarding the historical evidence, it is hard to understand why some of the largest increases in crime took place during a period of relative economic prosperity, namely the late 1960s. Between 1965 and 1973, which were generally good economic years in the United States, crime increased more than it had ever done since recording crime rates began. Therefore, if strain theory is presented as the primary explanation for criminal activity, it would probably have a hard time explaining this historical era. On the other hand, the growth in the economy in the 1960s and early 1970s may have caused more disparity between the rich and the poor, thereby producing more relative deprivation.

The other major criticism of strain theory is that it does not explain one of the most established facts in the field: the age-crime curve. According to the strain theory, there is a period of relative economic prosperity, namely the late 1960s. Between 1965 and 1973, which were generally good economic years in the United States, crime increased more than it had ever done since recording crime rates began. Therefore, if strain theory is presented as the primary explanation for criminal activity, it would probably have a hard time explaining this historical era. On the other hand, the growth in the economy in the 1960s and early 1970s may have caused more disparity between the rich and the poor, thereby producing more relative deprivation.
Variations of Merton's Strain Theory: Cohen, and Cloward and Ohlin

Cohen's Theory of Lower-Class Status Frustration and Gang Formation

In 1955, Albert Cohen presented a theory of gang formation that used Merton's strain theory as a basis for why school children who lack the norm of upward mobility, socialization, and discipline internalized by educated parents. According to Cohen, such youths are likely to experience failure in school because they are unprepared to conform ability, responsibility, deferred gratification, long-term planning, respect for authority and property, controlling emotions, and so on. Like Merton, Cohen emphasized the youths' internalization of the American Dream and the idea that they had a fair chance of success, which would mean that failure to be successful according to this middle-class standard among peers is often referred to as status frustration. It leads youth to develop a system of values opposed to middle-class standards and values. Some have claimed that this represents a Freudian defense mechanism known as reaction formation, which involves adopting attitudes or committing behaviors that are opposite of what is abiding by middle-class norms of obedience to authority, school achievement, and respect for authority, that is, delinquency activity. Delinquent youths will begin to value destruction of property and skipping school, not because these behaviors lead to a payoff of success in the conventional world, but simply because they deride the conventional order. In other words, they are reacting against the cultural system that has been imposed on them. Cohen claimed that while these behaviors do not appear to have much utility or value, they are quite valuable and important from the perspective of the strayed classic example of "birds of a feather flock together". Not all lower-class males resort to crime and join a gang in include the college boy and the corner boy. The college boy responds to his disadvantaged situation by dedicating himself to overcoming the odds and competing in middle-class schools despite his unfortunate chances for success. They make the best of life at the bottom of the social order. When compared to Merton's original adaptations, Cohen's delinquent boy is probably best seen as similar to a substituting new means and goals (negativistic behaviors and peer respect in the gang). Some would argue that actual peers involved completely change, so we argue that, through the reaction formation process, the delinquent Regarding the college boy, the adaptation that seems to fit the best is that of conformity, because the college boy education or labor) of middle-class society. Finally, the corner boy probably best fits the adaptation of ritualism

Because he knows that he likely will never achieve the goals of society but resigns himself to not obtaining financial success: at the same time, he does not resort to predatory street crime, but rather holds a stable, blue-collar job or steals ends meet in other typical, legal ways. Some corner boys end up simply collecting welfare and give up working altogether; they may actually become more like the adaptation of retreatism because they have virtually given up on the conventional means of society (hard work) as well as the goals.

At the time that Cohen developed his theory, official statistics showed that virtually all gang violence, and most violence for that matter, was concentrated among lower-class male youths. However, with the development of self-report studies in the 1960s, Cohen's theory was shown to be somewhat overestimated. Middle-class youth were well represented among those who committed delinquent acts. Other studies have also been critical of Cohen's theory, particularly the portions that deal with his proposition that crime rates will increase after youths drop out of school and join gangs. Although the findings are mixed, many studies have found that delinquency is often higher before youths drop out of school and may actually decline once they drop out and become employed. Some critics have pointed out that such findings discredit Cohen's theory, but this is not necessarily true. After all, delinquency may peak before the youths drop out because they feel the most frustrated and strained then, whereas delinquency may decrease after they drop out because some are raising their self-esteem by earning wages and taking pride in having jobs.

Still, studies have clearly shown that lower-class youths are far more likely to have problems in school and that school failure is consistently linked to criminality. Furthermore, there is little dispute that much of delinquency represents malicious, negativistic, and nonviolent activity. For example, what do individuals have to gain from destroying mailboxes or spraying graffiti on walls? These acts will never earn much money or any payoff other than peer respect. Thus, it appears that there is some face validity to what Cohen proposed in the sense that some youths are motivated to violate the law because it has no value other than earning peer respect, even though that behavior is negativistic and nonviolent according to the values of conventional society. Regardless of the criticisms of Cohen's model, he provided an important structural strain theory of the development of gangs and lower-class delinquency.

Cloward and Ohlin's Theory of Differential Opportunity

Five years after Cohen published his theory, Cloward and Ohlin presented yet another structural strain theory of gang formation and behavior. Like Merton and Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin assumed in their model that all youths, including those in the lower class, are socialized to believe in the American Dream, and that when individuals realize that they are blocked from conventional opportunities, they become frustrated and strained. What distinguishes Cloward and Ohlin's theory from that of previous strain theories is that they identified three different types of gangs based on the characteristics of each neighborhood's social structure. They believed the nature of gangs varied according to the availability of illegal opportunities in the social structure. So, whereas previous strain theories focused only on.  

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lack of legal opportunities, Coward and Ohlin's model emphasized both legal and illegal opportunities; the availability or lack of these opportunities largely determined what type of gang would form in that neighborhood, hence the theory (see Section VIII). Furthermore, the authors acknowledged Edwin Sutherland's influence on their theory (see Section VIII).

According to differential opportunity theory, the three types of gangs that form are criminal gangs, conflict adult criminal behavior. Such neighborhoods are so organized and stable that criminal networks are often known to youth and taken under their wings. This can pay off for the adult criminals, too, because youths can often be caught. The successful adult offenders supply the youths with the motives and techniques for committing crimes, while members of criminal gangs are blocked from legal opportunities, they are offered ample opportunities in the illegal realm.

Criminal gangs tend to reflect the strong organization and stability of such neighborhoods. Therefore, criminal gangs primarily commit property or economic crimes with the goal of making a profit through illegal behavior. These crimes can be run from numbers at local bookies to fencing stolen goods to running businesses that are fronts for vice crimes (e.g., prostitution, drug trading). All of these businesses involve making a profit illegally, and there is often a system or structure in which the criminal activity takes place. Furthermore, these criminal gangs most closely follow Merton's adaptation of innovation because the members still want to achieve the goals of conventional society (financial success). Because of their strong organizational structure, these gangs favor members who have self-control and are good at planning over individuals who are highly impulsive or uncontrolled.

Examples of criminal gangs are seen in movies depicting highly organized neighborhoods that often consist primarily of one ethnicity, including The Godfather, The Godfather II, A Bronx Tale, State of Grace, Sleepers, New Jack City, Clockers, Goodfellas, Better Luck Tomorrow, and many others that were partially based on real events. All of these depictions involve a highly structured hierarchy of a criminal enterprise, which is largely a manifestation of the organizational structure of the neighborhood. Hollywood movie pictures also produce stories about older criminals taking younger males from the neighborhood under their wings and training them in the ways of criminal networks. Furthermore, virtually all ethnic groups offer examples of this type of gang or neighborhood; the list of movies above includes Italian American, Irish American, African American, and Asian American examples. Thus, criminal gangs can be found across the racial and ethnic spectrum, largely because all groups have certain neighborhoods that exhibit strong organization and stability.

Conflict gangs were another type of gang that Coward and Ohlin identified. Conflict gangs tend to develop in neighborhoods that have weak stability and little or no organization. In fact, the neighborhood often seems to be in a state of flux, with people constantly moving in and out. Because the youth in the neighborhood do not have a solid crime network or adult criminal mentors, they tend to form as relatively disorganized gangs, and they typically lack the skills and knowledge to make a profit through criminal activity. Therefore, the primary illegal activity of conflict gangs is violence, which they use to gain prominence and respect among themselves and the neighborhood. Due to the disorganized nature of the neighborhoods as well as the gang themselves, conflict gangs never quite achieve the respect and stability that criminal gangs typically achieve. The members of conflict gangs tend to be more impulsive and lack self-control compared to members of criminal gangs, largely because there are no adult criminal mentors to control them.

According to Coward and Ohlin, conflict gangs are blocked from both legitimate and illegitimate opportunities. In applying Merton's adaptations, conflict gangs would probably fit the category of rebellion, largely because none of the other categories fit, but it can also be argued that conflict gangs have rejected the goals and means of conventional society and implemented their own values, which emphasize violence. Examples of motion pictures that depict this type of breakdown in community structure and a mostly violent gang culture are Mean Machine II Society, Boys n the Hood, A Clockwork Orange, Colors, and The Outsiders, which emphasize the chaos and violence that results when neighborhood and family organization is weak.

Finally, if individuals are double failures in both legitimate and illegitimate worlds, meaning that they can't achieve success in school or status in their local gang, they join together to form retreatist gangs. Because members of retreatist gangs are no good at making a profit from crime or using violence to achieve status, the primary form of offending is usually drug usage. Like individuals who choose Merton's retreatist adaptation to strain, the members of retreatist gangs often want simply to escape from reality. Therefore, the primary activity of the gang when they get together is usually just to get high, which is well represented by Hollywood in such movies as Trainspotting, Drug-Store Cowboy, and The Panic in Needle Park. In all of these movies, the only true goal of the gang is getting stoned to escape from the worlds where they have failed.

There are a number of empirical studies and critiques of Coward and Ohlin's theory, with the criticisms being similar to those of Merton's strain theory. Specifically, the critics argue that there is little evidence that gaps between what lower-class youths aspire to and what they expect to achieve produce frustration and strain, nor do such gaps appear predictive of gang membership or criminality. Another criticism of Coward and Ohlin's theory is the inability to find empirical evidence that supports their model of the formation of three types of gangs and their specializations in offending. While some research supports the existence of gangs that appear to specialize in certain forms of offending, many studies find that the observed specializations of gangs do not exactly follow the categories that Coward and Ohlin proposed. Additional studies have shown that many gangs tend not to specialize but rather to engage in a wider variety of offending behaviors.

Despite the criticisms of Coward and Ohlin's model of gang formation, their theoretical framework inspired policy, largely due to the influence that their work had on Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who had read their book. In fact, Kennedy asked Lloyd Ohlin to assist in developing federal policies regarding delinquency, which resulted in the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1961. Coward and Ohlin's theory was a major influence on the Mobilization for Youth Project in New York City, which, along with the federal legislation, stressed creating education and work opportunities for youths. Although evaluations of this program showed little effect on
Reducing delinquency, it was impressive that such theorizing about lower-class male youths could have such a large impact on policy interventions.

Ultimately, the variations presented by Cohen, as well as by Cloward and Ohlin, provided additional revisions that seemed at the time to advance the validity of strain theory. However, most of these revisions were based on official exaggerations. Once scholars realized that most of the earlier models were not empirically valid for the most criminal Robert Agnew, who rejuvenated interest in strain theory by devising a way to make it more general and applicable, to a larger variety of crimes and forms of deviance.

**General Strain Theory**

In the 1980s, Robert Agnew proposed the *general strain theory*, which covers a much larger range of behavior by not focusing on simply the lower class but providing a model more applicable to the frustrations that all individuals experience, which may result when people realize that the American Dream is a false promise to those of the lower classes.

Previous strain theories, such as the models proposed by Merton, Cohen, and Cloward and Ohlin, focused on individuals' failure to achieve positively valued goals that they had socialized to work toward. General strain theory also focuses on this source of strain; however, it identifies two additional categories of strain: *presentation of noxious stimuli* and *removal of positively valued stimuli*. In addition to the failure to achieve one's goals, Agnew claimed that the presentation of noxious stimuli (i.e., bad things) in one's life could cause major stress and frustration. Examples of noxious stimuli would include things like an abusive parent, a cruel teacher, or an over-demanding boss. These are just some of the many negative factors that can exist in one's life—the number of examples is endless.

The other strain category Agnew identified was the removal of positive stimuli, which is likely the largest cause of frustration. Examples of removal of positively valued stimuli include the loss of a good job, loss of the use of a car for a period of time, or the loss of a loved one. Such losses, like the other two sources of strain, may have varying degrees of influence depending on the individual. One person may not feel much frustration in losing a job or divorcing a spouse, whereas another person may experience severe anxiety or depression from such events.

Ultimately, general strain theory proposes that these three categories of strain (failure to achieve goals, noxious stimuli, and removal of positive stimuli) will lead to stress and that this results in a propensity to feel anger. Anger can be seen as a primary mediating factor in the causal model of the general strain framework. It is predicted that, to the extent that the three sources of strain cause feelings of anger in an individual, he or she will be predisposed to commit crime and deviance. However, Agnew was clear in stating that, if an individual can somehow cope with this anger in a positive way, then such feelings do not necessarily have to result in criminal activity. These coping mechanisms vary widely across individuals, with different strategies working for some people better than others. For example, some people relieve stress by working out or running, whereas others watch television or a movie. One type of activity that has been shown to consistently reduce anxiety in successful stress relief is laughter, which psychologists argue is now a necessary function of society. Another is yoga, which includes simple breathing techniques such as taking several deep breaths, which has been shown to physiologically enhance release of stress.

Although Agnew did not originally provide details on how coping mechanisms work or explore the exact psychological structure of these strategies, Agnew specifically pointed to such mechanisms for dealing with anger in prosocial ways. The primary prediction regarding coping mechanisms is that individuals who find ways to deal with their stress and anger positively will no longer be predisposed to commit crime, whereas individuals who do not find healthy, positive outlets for their anger and frustrations will be far more likely to commit crime. Obviously, the goal is to reduce the use of antisocial and negative coping mechanisms, such as drug usage or aggression, which are criminal in themselves or increase the likelihood of offending.

Recent research and theoretical development has more fully examined various coping mechanisms and their effectiveness in reducing anger and, thus, preventing criminal activity. Obviously, in focusing on individuals' perceptions of stress and anger, as well as on their personal ability to cope with such feelings, general strain theory places more emphasis on the micro level of analysis. Still, due to its origins in the structural strain theory, it is included in this section as belonging to the category of strain theories, which include the earlier ideas more macro-level to the more micro level. In addition, recent studies and revisions of the theory have attempted to examine the validity of general strain theory propositions at the macro, structural level.

Since it was first proposed in the mid-1980s, there has been a vast amount of research examining various aspects of the general strain theory. For the most part, studies have generally supported the model. Most studies...
find a link between the three categories of strain and higher rates of criminality, as well as a link between the sources of strain and feelings of anger or other negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression). However, the theory and especially the way it has been tested has also been criticized.

It is important for strain research to measure subjects' perceptions and feelings of frustration, not simply the occurrence of certain events themselves. Unfortunately, some studies have only looked at the latter, and the validity of such findings is questionable. Other studies, however, have directly measured subjective perceptions of frustration, as well as personal feelings of anger.

Such studies have found mixed support for the hypothesis that certain events lead to anger but less support for the prediction that anger leads to criminality, and this link is particularly weak for nonviolent offending. A recent review of this research can be found in Burton, "General Strain," 697-67.


On the other hand, the most recent studies have found support for the links between strain and anger, as well as anger and criminal behavior, particularly when coping variables are considered. Still, many of the studies that examine the effects of anger use time-stable, trait measures as opposed to incident-specific, state measures that would be more consistent with the situation-specific emphasis of general strain theory. This is similar to the methodological criticism that has been leveled at studies of self-conscious emotions, particularly shame and guilt; when it comes to measuring emotions such as anger and shame, criminologists should choose their measures carefully and make sure the instruments are consistent with the theory they are testing. Thus, future research on general strain theory should employ more effective, subjective measures of strain events and situational states of anger.

Regardless of the criticisms of general strain theory, it is hard to deny its face validity. After all, virtually everyone can relate to reacting differently to similar situations based on what kind of day they are having. For example, we all have days in which everything seems to be going great—it's a Friday, you receive accolades at work, and you are looking forward to a nice weekend with your friends or family. If someone says something derogatory to you or cuts you off in traffic, you will probably be inclined to let it go because you're in such a good mood. On the other hand, we also all have days in which everything seems to be going horribly—it's Monday, you get blamed for mishaps at work, and you have a fight with your spouse or significant other. At this time, if someone yells at you or cuts you off in traffic, you may be more inclined to respond aggressively in some way. Or perhaps you will overreact and snap at a loved one or friend when he or she really didn't do much to deserve it: this is often a form of displacement in which a cumulative buildup of stressors results in taking frustration out on another individual(s). In many ways, this type of behavior, which is prevalent and easy to see in everyday life, supports general strain theory.

Summary of Strain Theories

The common assumption found across all variations of strain theory is that crime is far more common among individuals who are under a great degree of stress and frustration, especially those who can't cope with stress in a positive way. The origin of most variations of strain theory can be traced to Durkheim's and Merton's concepts of anomie, which essentially means a state of chaos, or normlessness, in society due to a breakdown in the ability of societal institutions to regulate human desires, thereby resulting in feelings of strain.

Although different types of strain theories were proposed and gained popularity at various periods throughout the 20th century, they all became accepted during eras that were politically and culturally conducive to the perspectives, especially in terms of the differences across the strain models. For example, Merton's formulation of strain in the 1930s emphasized the importance of the economic institution, which was developed and became very popular during the Great Depression. Then, in the late 1950s, two strain theories that focused on gang formation were developed; by Cullen and by Cloward and Ohlin; they became popular among politicians and society due to a focus on official statistics suggesting that most crime at that time was committed by lower-class, inner-city male youths, many of whom were gang members. Finally, Agnew developed his general strain model in the mid to late 1980s, during a time in which a number of general theories of crime were being developed (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi's "low self-control theory" and Sampson and Laub's developmental theory), so such models were popular at that time, particularly those that emphasized personality traits (such as anger) and experiences of individuals. So, all of the variations of strain, like all of the theories discussed in this book, were manifestations of the period in which they were developed and became widely accepted by academics, politicians, and society.

Baren, "General Strain," Mausselle et al., "Examining the Links.

For example, see Mausselle et al., "Strain, Anger"; and Baren, "General Strain" see discussions in Mausselle et al., "Examining the Links" and Aker and Sellers, Criminological Theories, 180-82.
Policy Implications

Although this section dealt with a wide range of theories regarding social structure, the most applicable policy implications are those suggested by the most recent theoretical models of this genre. Thus, we will focus on the key policy factors in the most modern versions of this perspective. The factors that are most vital for policy implications regarding social structure theories are those regarding educational and vocational opportunities and programs that help people develop healthy coping mechanisms to deal with stress.

Empirical studies have shown that intervention programs are needed for high-risk youths that focus on educational or vocational training and opportunities, because developing motivation for such endeavors can have a significant impact on reducing their offending rates.34 Providing an individual with a job, or the preparation for one, is key to building a more stable life, even if it is not a high-paying position. As a result, the individual is less likely to feel stressed or strained. In modern times, a person is rarely to have a stable job, and this must be communicated to our youths, and hopefully, they will find some intrinsic value in the work they do.

Another key area of recommendations from this perspective involves developing healthy coping mechanisms. Everyone deals with stress virtually every day. The key is not avoiding stress or strain, because that is inevitable. Rather, the key is to develop healthy, legal ways to cope with such strain. Many programs have been created to train individuals on how to handle stress without resorting to antisocial behavior. There has been some success gained from anger management programs, particularly the ones that take a cognitive behavioral approach and often involve role-playing to teach individuals to think before they act.35

Conclusion

This section examined the theories that emphasize inequitable social structure as the primary cause of crime. We examined early perspectives, which established that societies vary in the extent to which they are stratified, and looked at the consequences of the inequalities in and complexities of such structures. Our examination of strain theories explored theoretical models proposing that individuals and groups who are not offered equal opportunities for achieving success can develop stress and frustration and, in turn, dispositions for committing criminal behavior.

Finally, we examined the policy recommendations suggested by this theoretical model, which include the need to provide individuals with educational and job opportunities and help them develop healthy coping mechanisms.

Section Summary

- First, we discussed the primary distinction between social structure theories and other types of explanations (e.g., biological or social process theories).
- We examined the importance of the early sociological positivists, particularly Guerry, Quetelet, and Durkheim, and their contributions to the study of deviance and crime.
- We explored reasons why strain theory was developed and became popular in its time and discussed the primary assumptions and propositions of Merton’s strain theory.
- We identified, defined, and examined examples of all five adaptations to strain.
- We discussed the variations of strain theory presented by Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin, and Agnew, as well as the empirical support that has been found regarding each.

34Wright et al., Criminals in the Making.
35Patricia Vau Vohria and Emily Salisbury, Correctional Counseling and Rehabilitation, 8th ed. (Cincinnati: Anderson, 2013).