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 Emile Durkheim, then Robert K. 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 a 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 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 economics, 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 1851 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; probably for this reason, Comte is generally considered the founder or father of sociology. Comte’s work set the stage for the positivist perspective, which emphasized social determinism and rejected the notion of free will and individual choice that had been common up until that time.

André-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.

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 (DOJ) statistics, which show that, compared to lower-class households, property crime is just as common—and maybe 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 crime than their counterparts, 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.

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 quite 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, animosity and feelings of
being deprived develop. Studies have supported this hypothesis. It may well explain why Washington, DC, perhaps the most powerful city in 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 Sang-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 economic conditions have high crime rates. He is perhaps best known for commenting that "the crimes... committed seem to be a necessary result of our social organization... Society prepares the crime, and the guilty 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 or personal decision making. Thus, it is not surprising that Quetelet's position was controversial at the time in which he wrote, and he was rigorously attacked by critics for 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 positivistic 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 of criminality strongly supports the tendency of crime to be clustered in certain neighborhoods as well as among certain people. Such findings support a structural, positivistic perspective of criminality, in which criminality is seen as being deterministic and, thus, caused by factors outside of an individual's control. In some ways, early structural theories were a response to the failure of the classical approach to crime control. As the 19th century drew to a close, 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), Durkheim (1858–1916) was perhaps the most influential theorist in the area of modern structural perspectives on criminality. Like most other social 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 multifaceted, organic society (see Figure 6.1).

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41U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sourcebook, Table 3.124, 290.


43Reineke, Inventing Criminology, 88, as cited in Bernard et al., Vold's Theoretical Criminology, 25.


45Much of this discussion of Durkheim is taken from Bernard et al., Vold's Theoretical Criminology, 106–116 as well as Vander Zanden, Sociology: The Core, 11–13.
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 wherein 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 gangning 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 . . . . society . . . will define these acts as criminal and will treat them as such.”

Law enforcement should always be cautious in cracking down on gangs, especially during relatively inactive periods, because it may make the gang stronger. Like all societal groups, when a common enemy appears, gang members—even those who do not typically get along—will come together and “circle the wagons” to protect themselves via strength in numbers. This very powerful bonding effect is one that many sociologists, and especially gang researchers, have consistently observed.14

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 the 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 astronomer 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


did not always follow this pattern. Durkheim used quantified measures to test his propositions as the positivistic approach recommended. At the least, Durkheim created a prototype of how theory and empirical research could be combined in testing differences across social groups. This theoretical framework was drawn on heavily for one of 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 in the evolution of strain theory. Combining Durkheimian concepts and propositions with an emphasis on American culture, 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 in the 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 strong foundation in previous social structures, Merton's strain theory also benefited from the timing of its publication. Virtually every theory discussed in this book became popular because it was well suited to the political 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 influence of the Great Depression, largely 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.

On the other side of the coin, Merton was highly influenced by what he saw happening to the country during the Depression and how much the economic institution impacted almost all other social factors, particularly crime. He watched how the breakdown of the economic structure drove people to kill themselves or others, not to mention the rise in property crimes such as theft. Many once-successful individuals were now poor, and some felt driven to crime for survival. Notably, Durkheim's hypotheses regarding crime and suicide were supported during this time of rapid change, and Merton apparently realized that the framework simply had to be brought up-to-date and supplemented.

One of the key assumptions that distinguishes strain theory from Durkheim's perspective is that Merton altered his version of what anomie means. Merton focused on the nearly universal socialization of the American Dream in U.S. society—the idea that as long as people work very hard and pay their dues they will achieve their goals in the end. According to Merton, the socialized image of the goal is material wealth, whereas the socialized concept of the means of achieving the goal is hard work (e.g., education, labor). The conventional model of the American Dream was consistent with the Protestant work ethic, which called for working hard for a long time, knowing that you will be paid off in the distant future.

Furthermore, Merton thought that nearly everyone was socialized to believe in the American Dream no matter what economic class he or she was raised in as a child. There is some empirical support for this belief, and it makes sense. Virtually all parents, even if they are poor, want to give their children hope for the future if they are willing to work hard in school and at a job. Parents and society usually use celebrities as examples of this process—individuals who started off poor and rose to become wealthy. Modern examples include former secretary of state Colin Powell, owner of the NBA Dallas Mavericks Mark Cuban, Oscar-winning actress Hilary Swank, and Hollywood director and screenwriter Quentin Tarantino, not to mention Arnold Schwarzenegger and his amazing rise from teenage immigrant to Mr. Olympia and California governor.

These stories epitomize the American Dream, but parents and society do not also teach the reality of the situation. As Merton pointed 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 obtaining 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 societies is what Merton called anomie. So, like Durkheim, Merton saw anomie as a negative state of 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 means.

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 why 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., the means). This phenomenon is not meant to be a disheartening or a negative statement; it is meant in order to exhibit the reality of American culture. It is quite 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 American Dream is a lie or at least a false illusion for the vast majority. This revelation will likely take place when people are in their late teens to mid-20s, and according to Merton, this is when the frustration or strain is evident. That is consistent with the age-crime peak of offending at the approximate age of 17. Learning that hard work won’t necessarily provide rewards, some individuals begin to innovate ways that they can achieve material success without the conventional means of getting it. Obviously, this is often through criminal activity. However, not all individuals deal with strain in this way; most people who are poor do not resort to crime. To Merton’s credit, he explained that individuals deal with the limited economic structure of society in different ways. He referred to these variations as 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.34 Like conformists, most readers of this book would probably like to achieve material success and are willing to use conventional means of achieving success through educational efforts and doing a good job at work. Another adaptation to strain is ritualism. Ritualists do not pursue the goal of material success—probably because they know they don’t have a realistic chance of obtaining it. However, they do buy into the conventional means in 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. They take 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 innovating 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 capitalist 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, 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 governing state—English rule—and clearly committed treason in the process. Had they lost or been caught during the American Revolution, they would have been executed as the criminals they were by law. However, because they won the war, they became heroes and presidents. Another example is Karl Marx. He bought into the idea of goals and means of society—just not those of capitalist societies. Rather, he proposed socialism or communism as a means to the goal of utopia. So, there are many contexts in which rebels can be criminals, but sometimes they end up being heroes.

Merton also noted that one individual can represent more than one adaptation. Perhaps the best example is that of the Unabomber, who obviously started out as a conformist in that he was a respected professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who was well on his way to tenure and promotion. He then seemed to shift to retreatism in that he isolated himself from society. Later, he became a rebel who bombed 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.35 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 break any rules they can to triumph in the game. Retreating 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 rules on another court. Although this is a somewhat simplistic analogy, it is likely to help readers remember the adaptations and perhaps enable them to apply these ways of dealing with strain to everyday situations, such as criminal activity.

**Case Study: The Black Binder Bandit**

A recent news story reported on a jobless man who was arrested for committing a dozen bank robberies across the Phoenix valley. The man, Cristian Alfredo Urquiolo, 39, told authorities that he did it to survive and that "desperation was a great motivator." He was accused of robbing at least a dozen banks between 2010 and 2011. The criminal complaint noted that he had been laid off from work, was unable to find employment, and robbed the Phoenix-area banks to survive. He went on to say, "It's pretty simple. It's black and white. I don't have a job, I had to work, and I rob to survive." During his crime spree, authorities called him the "Black Binder Bandit" because he typically hid a revolver in a black binder and also would usually place the stolen money in this binder.

Urquiolo pleaded guilty to nine counts of bank robbery, three counts of armed bank robbery, and one count of use of a firearm in a crime of violence, which carries an enhanced sentence. He had originally been charged with 16 counts of bank robbery, but as often happens in plea negotiations, the counts were reduced. He did admit that he had robbed at least 12 banks and also that he had obtained more than $49,000 from these bank robberies.

It is obvious that this man committed these crimes because he wanted to provide for himself in an economic recession. This is just one of many examples of individuals who are strongly motivated to commit crimes—even the most serious offenses—to deal with the economic strain or frustration of not being able to "get ahead" or achieve the American Dream of success. This section discusses the evolution of theories that address this concept of trying to provide for oneself or succeed while dealing with societal and economic dynamics in American society. Specifically, this section reviews the development of anomie or strain theory, starting with its origins among early social structure theorists, such as Durkheim, and moving to its further development by Merton. The section also examines the development of various strain models of offending as well as the most modern versions of strain theory (e.g., general strain theory). We will also examine the empirical research findings on this framework, which reveal that this framework remains one of the dominant theoretical explanations of criminal behavior in modern times. We will finish this section by examining the policy implications suggested by this perspective for explaining criminal behavior, and we will further discuss the case of the Black Binder Bandit toward the end of this section.

It should be noted that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) typically assigns nicknames (such as the Black Binder Bandit) to serial bank robbers. The FBI does so for a very important reason: The public is more likely to take note of serial bank robbers when there is a catchy moniker or nickname attached to them. Apparently, this strategy is useful, because bank robbery actually has a much higher clearance rate than other types of robbery. Other notable nicknames of serial bank robbers in the past few years are the "Masked Bandit" and the "Geezer Bandit" (still at large in California; authorities believe the offender may be a young person disguising himself as an elderly person), and the "Michael Jackson Bandit" (still at large in Southern California; wears one glove during robberies). Although all these bank robbery suspects are still at large, many others have been caught as a result of matching their nicknames to the public.

**Think About It**

1. Can you articulate why the Black Binder Bandit seems to be a good example of Merton's strain theory?

2. Based on what he said to the police and his behavior, what adaptation of strain would you say best fits him?

3. Outside of the nicknames already listed in this discussion, do you know of any other robbers the authorities have nicknamed and the reason(s) the robbers were given their monikers?

**Evidence and Criticisms of Merton's Strain Theory**

Merton's framework, which emphasized the importance of economic structure, had a high degree of face validity during the Great Depression; however, many later scientific studies showed mixed support for strain theory. Although 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. Furthermore, the idea that unemployment drives people to commit crime has received little support.27

On the other hand, some experts have argued that Merton's strain theory is primarily a structural model of crime that is more of a theory of societal groups, not individual motivations. Therefore, some modern studies have used aggregated group rates (i.e., macro-level measures) to test the effects of deprivation as opposed to using individual (micro-level) rates of inequality and crime. Most of these studies provide some support for the hypothesis that social groups and regions with higher rates of deprivation and inequality have higher rates of criminal activity. In sum, there appears to be some support for Merton's strain theory at the macro level of analysis when official measures are being used to indicate criminality. 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 high 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, this predisposes them 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, Margaret Farnworth and Michael J. Leiber claimed that it was a mistake to examine differences between educational goals and ambitions or differences between occupational goals and aspirations. Rather, they proposed that the gap between educational aspirations (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 study 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 unfortunately, assumed that a gap between the 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. In virtually every society in the world, across time and place, predatory street crimes (robbery, rape, murder, burglary, larceny, etc.) tend to peak sharply in the teenage years to early 20s and then drop off very quickly, certainly before age 30. However, most studies show that feelings of stress and frustration tend not to follow this pattern. For example, suicide rates tend to be just as high or higher as one gets older, with middle-aged and elderly people having much higher rates of suicide than those in their teens or early 20s.

On the other hand, it can be argued that crime rates go down even though strain can continue or even increase with age because individuals develop coping mechanisms for dealing with the frustrations they feel. But even if this is true regarding criminal behavior, apparently this doesn't seem to prevent suicidal tendencies. General strain theory emphasized this concept. However, before we can determine whether general strain theory will explain other variations of Merton's theory that were both developed between 1955 and 1960 to explain gang formation and behavior using a structural strain framework.

Variations of Merton's Strain Theory: Cohen's Model and Cloward and Ohlin's Theory

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 individuals resort to such group behavior. In Cohen's model, young, lower-class males are at a disadvantage in school because they lack the normal interaction, socialization, and discipline instilled by educated parents of the middle class. This is in line with Merton's original framework identifying a disadvantage for underclass youth. According to Cohen, such youth are likely to experience failure in school because they are unprepared to conform with middle-class values and fail to meet the middle-class measuring rod, which emphasizes motivation, accountability, 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 would be very frustrating for them. The strain felt as a result of failure in school performance and lack of respect 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 expected as a response to failure.
form of defiance so as to feel less guilty for not living up to unachievable standards. Specifically, instead of abiding by middle-class norms of obedience to authority, school achievement, and respect for authority, these youths change their normative beliefs to value the opposite characteristics: malicious, negativistic, and nonutilitarian delinquent activity.

Delinquent youths will begin to value destruction of property and skipping school not because these behaviors lead to a payoff or success in the conventional world but simply because they deny the conventional order. In other words, they turn middle-class values upside down and consider activity that violates the conventional norms and laws good, thereby psychologically and physically rejecting the cultural system that has been imposed on them without preparation and fair distribution of resources. Furthermore, 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 strained youths. Specifically, they do these acts to gain respect from their peers.

Cohen stated that he believed that this tendency to reject middle-class values is the primary cause of gangs, a classic example of "birds of a feather flock together." Not all lower-class males resort to crime and join a gang in response to this structural disadvantage. Other variations, beyond that of the delinquent boy described previously, 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 school despite his unlikely chances for success. The corner boy responds to the situation by accepting his place in a lower-class individual who will somewhat passively 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 rebel because he rejects the means and goals of conventional society (i.e., middle-class values and success in school), substituting new means and goals (negativistic behaviors and peer respect in the gang). Some would argue that delinquent boys should be seen as innovators because their goals are ultimately the same: peer respect. However, the actual peers involved completely change, so we argue that, through the reaction formation process, the delinquent boy actually creates his own goals and means that go against the conventional, middle-class goals and means. Regarding the college boy, the adaptation that seems to fit the best is that of conformity, because the college boy continues to believe in the conventional goals (i.e., financial success and achievement) and means (hard work via education or labor) of middle-class society. Finally, the corner boy probably best fits the adaptation of ritualism because he knows that he will likely never achieve the goals of society but retains 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 makes ends meet in other, legal ways. Some corner boys end up simply collecting welfare and give up working altogether; they may actually become more like the adaptation of retreatment 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 of violence for that matter, was concentrated among lower-class male youth. However, with the development of self-report studies in the 1960s, Cohen's theory was shown to be somewhat overstated. 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 right 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 nonutilitarian 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 peer respect other than peer respect. So, ultimately, it appears that there is some face validity to what Cohen proposed in the sense that some youths engage in behavior that has no value other than earning peer respect, even though that behavior is negativistic and nonutilitarian according to the values of conventional society. Regardless of some 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, Richard Cloward and Lloyd 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 the 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 lack of legal opportunities, Cloward 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 name differential opportunity theory. Furthermore, the authors acknowledged Edwin Sutherland's influence on their theory (see Section VIII), and it is evident in their focus on the associations made in the neighborhood.

According to differential opportunity theory, the three types of gangs that form are criminal gangs, conflict gangs, and retreatist gangs. Criminal gangs form in lower-class neighborhoods that have an organized structure of adult criminal behavior. Such neighborhoods are so organized and stable that criminal networks are often known and accepted by the conventional individuals in the area. In these neighborhoods, the adult grooming mentors the youth and take them under their wings. This can pay off for the adult criminals, too, because youths can often be used to do the dirty work for the criminal enterprises in the neighborhood without risk of serious punishment if they are caught. The successful adult offenders supply the youths with the motives and techniques for committing

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![Image](image_url)
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, Godfather Part 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 organization of the neighborhood. Hollywood motion pictures also produce stories about older criminals taking younger males from the neighborhood under their wings and training them in the ways of the criminal networks. Furthermore, virtually all ethnic groups offer examples of this type of gang or neighborhood, the list of movies that was just given includes Italian American, Irish American, African American, and East Asian 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 Clayow 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 youths 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 gangs 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 Clayow 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 well, 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 Menace II Society, Boyz n the Hood, A Clockwork Orange, Colors, and The Outsiders, which all emphasize the chaos and violence that results when neighborhood and family organization is weak.

Finally, if individuals or families fail to achieve independence and illegitimate worlds, meaning that they can't achieve success in school or have in their local gangs, they join together to form a retreat gang. Because members of retreatist gangs are not able to make 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 try 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 Trainspottting, Drugstore Cowboy, and The Panic in Needle Park. In all of these movies, the only true goal of the gangs is getting stoned to escape from the world that they have failed.

There are a number of empirical studies and critiques of Clayow 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 Clayow 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 Clayow and Ohlin proposed. Additional studies have shown that many gangs tend not to specialize but rather engage in a wider variety of offending behaviors.

Despite the criticisms of Clayow 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 Ohlin to assist in developing federal policies regarding delinquency, which resulted in the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1961. Clayow 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 Clayow 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 statistics that showed that lower-class male youth committed most crime, which were later shown by work to be exaggerated. Once scholars realized that most of the earlier models were not empirically valid for most criminal activity, strain theory became unpopular for several decades. But during the 1980s, another version was devised by 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.

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4 Title et al., "Myth of Social Class"; Hindelang et al., "Correlates of Delinquency"
General Strain Theory

In the 1980s, Robert Agnew proposed general strain theory, which covers a much larger range of behavior by not concentrating on simply the lower class but providing a model more applicable to the frustrations that all individuals feel in everyday life. Unlike other strain theories, general strain theory does not rely on assumptions about the frustration arising when people realize that the American Dream is a false promise to the lower classes. Rather, this theoretical framework assumes that people of all social classes and economic positions deal with frustrations in routine daily life.

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 been socialized to work to obtain. 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 critical teacher, or an overly 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 these 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 the anger in a positive way, then such feelings do not necessarily have to result in criminal activity. These coping mechanisms vary widely across individuals; different strategies work 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 shown relatively consistent success in relieving stress is laughter, which psychologists are now prescribing as a release of tension. Another is yoga, which includes simple breathing techniques such as taking several deep breaths; it has been shown to physiologically enhance release of stress.

Although Agnew did not originally provide details on how coping mechanisms work or explore the extent psychological research on these strategies, he specifically pointed to such mechanisms for dealing with anger in noncriminal ways. The primary target of his prescription 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 either 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 structured strain theory, it is included in this section and is typically classified as belonging to the category of strain theories, which include the earlier theories that are more oriented to the macro 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 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 have 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

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27A recent review of this research can be found in Boren, "General Strain," 457–67.
Figure 6.2 • Model of general strain theory

Failure to achieve positively valued goals

Presentation of noxious (negative) stimuli

Strain and frustration

Anger and other negative emotions

Lack of legal coping mechanisms

Criminal Behavior

Removal of positively valued stimuli

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. 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 against 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, you 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. 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 such 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 Cohen 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 being 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., Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi’s low self-control theory and Rob Sampson and John 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.

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. 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 lucky 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.

Specifically, in regard to Merton's strain theory, there have been significant attempts to address the more global issues of deprivation that result from poverty in U.S. society. Perhaps the best example is the War on Poverty, a federal program introduced by President Lyndon B. Johnson during the 1960s. Although an enormous amount of money and other resources were spent in trying to aid the poor in order to reduce crime rates in America, crime rates soared during this period. Many experts noted that the federal investment was not efficiently handed out, but the rise in crime during this period still casts doubt on the effectiveness of such a strategy.

Rather, the Maryland Report of "What Works, What Doesn't?" (see Section V) concludes that vocational training for adult male offenders has consistently lowered offending rates, as have intensive residential training programs for at-risk youth (such as Job Corps). This conclusion appears consistent with our previous finding that a focus on certain high-risk individuals is more effective than programs addressing an entire group, such as all types of offenders. Perhaps this is because not all offenders have the target characteristic, but such programs tend to be effective for those who do. For example, some offenders are thrust into drug programs even though they have never used drugs or alcohol. Also, some offenders are coerced into engaging in vocational programs when they already have skills in a certain trade. Thus, it makes sense to focus resources (e.g., vocational programs, drug programs) on the people who are most at risk for the given risk factor.

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. 24

Conclusion

This section examined the theories that emphasize inequitable social structure as the primary cause of crime. First, 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 as well as a variety of social concepts that early seminal sociologists noted in the 19th century, such as relative deprivation, collective conscience, and anomie. An important part of this theoretical evolution was the proposition that decisions made by individuals that traditionally were thought to be entirely made by the individual, such as suicide, were actually highly predicted by societal factors.

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. We also examined more modern versions of strain, such as general strain theory, which has shown much support in empirical studies. 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 as well as 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 identified by Merton.
- We discussed the variations of strain theory of groups presented by Cohen as well as by Cloward and Ohlin, who presented models of youth delinquency or gang formation based on a strain perspective.
- Both Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin presented models that had similar categories of offenders based on the ways that individuals deal with the strain or frustration they face; these types of offenders or gangs mimic some of the adaptations that Merton presented in his original strain framework.
- General strain theory was examined with an emphasis on how it is far more robust and general a theory than Merton's original framework, which only focused on economic strain.
- We examined the empirical support of general strain theory, the emphasis that this theory has placed on factors outside of the economy that frustrate individuals, and the importance of coping mechanisms in dealing with such strain.

KEY TERMS

adaptations to strain 238  delinquent boy 244  retreatism 239
anomie 229  general strain theory 248  retreatist gangs 247
collective conscience 233  innovation 239  ritualism 239
college boy 244  mechanical societies 233  social dynamics 230
conflict gangs 246  organic societies 233  social statics 230
conformity 233  reaction formation 243  strain theory 229
corner boy 244  rebellion 239
criminal gangs 245  relative deprivation 231

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does sociological positivism differ from biological or psychological positivism?
2. Which of the early sociological positivism theorists do you think contributed most to the evolution of social structure theories of crime? Why? Do you think their ideas still hold up today?
3. Can you think of modern examples of Durkheim's image of mechanical societies? Do you think such societies have more or less crime than modern organic societies?