Lecture Notes

# Chapter 8: Social Structure Theories of Crime I: Early Development and Strain Models of Crime

**Learning Objectives**

1. Distinguish social structure theories from other models or perspectives presented in this book.
2. Explain what contributions and conceptual development Émile Durkheim added to the evolution of this perspective around the turn of the 19th century. Describe how his studies showed a significant breakthrough in social science.
3. Explain why Robert K. Merton’s theory of strain become popular when it did, as well as how his conceptualization of “anomie” differed from Durkheim’s.
4. Identify some of the revisions or variations of strain theory presented a couple of decades

later and how they differ from Merton’s original theory. Specifically, explain types of elements that these derivative theories emphasized that Merton’s model did not include and what types of categories of individuals or gangs were labeled in these later models.

1. Evaluate how Robert Agnew’s proposed model of general strain added more sources of strain to Merton’s original framework.
2. Identify some ways the various models of strain theory have informed policy making in attempts to reduce criminality.

**Summary**

This chapter focuses on the early development of social structure theory and different strain models of crime. Social structure theories vary from the previously discussed theories because they disregard any biological or psychological variations across individuals. Instead, social structure theories assume that crime is caused by the way that societies are structurally organized. In other words, social structure theories emphasize group differences (macro level) instead of individual differences (micro level). In 1893, Durkheim developed a general model of societal development based on the economic/labor distribution, in which societies are seen as evolving from a simplistic mechanical society toward a multilayered organic society and how this development impacted crime. In addition, Durkheim claimed that with rapid change, the ability of society to serve as a regulatory mechanism breaks down and the selfish, greedy tendencies of individuals are uncontrolled, causing a state of anomie, or normlessness. Societies in such anomic states experience increases in many social problems, particularly criminal activity. This theoretical proposal was perhaps the most influential of modern structural perspectives on criminality.

The chapter continues with the discussion of different forms of strain theory. Strain theories vary regarding the exact causes of frustration and how individuals cope with such frustrations, but they all identify strain on individuals as the primary causal factor in the development of criminality. The first strain theory discussed is Merton’s Strain Theory. Merton’s work was perhaps the most influential theoretical formulation in criminological literature. For Merton, anomie was the disequilibrium in the emphasis between the goals and the means of societies. Specifically, Merton argued that everyone is socialized to believe in the American Dream. The failure to reach the American Dream that leads to the majority of strain and stress. In response, Merton identifies five adaptations to strain: conformity, ritualism, innovation, retreatism, and rebellion. It is the innovators, retreatist, and rebels that are the most likely to engage in criminal behavior. In 1955, Cohen presented a theory of gang formation using Merton’s strain theory as a basis for why individuals resort to such behavior. Specifically, Cohen argued young males from the lower classes are at a disadvantage in competing in school because they lack the normal interaction, socialization, and discipline instituted by educated parents of the middle class. The failure to succeed leads to a rejection of the middle-class values. In addition to this concept of the delinquent boy, Cohen proposed the concepts of college boy and corner boy. Five years later, Cloward and Ohlin proposed the Theory of Differential Opportunity. Like the previous propositions, they believe all youth were socialized to believe in the American Dream. What distinguishes their theory from previous theories is that they emphasized three different types of gangs that form based on the characteristics of the social structure in the neighborhood. The last strain theory discussed is Agnew’s General Strain Theory. General Strain Theory assumes that people of all social classes and economic positions deal with frustrations in routine daily life. Like previous models, general strain theory focuses on the failure to achieve positively valued goals; additionally, the theory emphasizes two additional categories of strain: presentation of noxious stimuli and removal of positively valued stimuli. Ultimately, these three categories of stain will lead to stress and this results in a propensity to feel anger. It is predicted that to the extent that three sources of strain cause feelings of anger in an individual, that is the extent to which he or she is predisposed to commit crime and deviance. The chapter concludes with the discussion of policy implications related to strain theory. The primary policy implications are related to intervention programs for high-risk youth that focus on educational and/or vocational training and developing healthy coping mechanisms.

**Chapter Outline**

* **Early Theories of Social Structure: Early to Late 1800s**
  + **Early European Theorists: Comte, Guerry, and Quetelet**
    - All of their work was largely inspired by the social dynamics that resulted from the Industrial Revolution.
    - The transition from primarily agriculturally based economies to industrial-based economies led to populations moving from primarily rural farmland to dense urban cities, which seemed to cause an enormous increase in social problems.
    - These social problems ranged from failure to properly dispose of waste and garbage, to constantly lowing children and not being able to find them, to much higher rates of crime.
    - Auguste Comte
      * Widely credited with coining the term “sociology,” because he was the first to be recognized for actually emphasizing and researching concepts based on more macro-level factors, such as social institutions (e.g., economic factors)
    - Andre-Michel Guerry
      * Published a report that examined the first modern national crime statistics that were published in France.
      * Concluded that property crimes were higher in wealthy areas, but violent crime was much higher in poor areas.
      * Ultimately, Guerry concluded it was opportunity, in the sense that the wealthy had more to steal, that primarily causes property crime.
    - Adolphe Quetelet
      * Examined French statistics in the mid-1800s.
      * Certain types of individuals were more likely to commit crime.
        + Young, male, poor, uneducated, and unemployed individuals were more likely to commit crime than their counterparts.
      * Greater inequality or gaps between wealth and poverty in the same place tends to excite temptations and passions (**relative deprivation**).
  + **Durkheim and the Concept of Anomie**
    - *The Division of Labor in Society*
      * Developed a general model of societal development largely based on the economic/labor distribution, in which societies are seen as evolving from a simplistic mechanical society toward a multilayered organic society.
    - Primitive mechanical societies exist as one in which all members essentially perform the same functions, such as hunting (males) and gathering (females).
      * Virtually everyone experiences the same daily routine and experiences.
      * Such similarities in daily routines and 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.
    - **Mechanical Societies**
      * Individuals tend to share similar norms and values.
      * People have more-or-less the same jobs.
      * Strong solidarity among its members.
      * Law functions to enforce the conformity of the group.
    - **Organic Societies** 
      * Distribution of labor becomes more highly specified.
      * Still a form of solidarity in organic societies, called “organic solidarity,” because people tend to depend on other groups in the society.
      * The primary function of laws is to regulate the interactions and maintain solidarity among the groups.
    - Durkheim was clear in stating that crime is not only normal, but necessary in all societies.
      * Crime is important because it defines the moral boundaries of societies.
      * The identification of rule-breakers creates a bond among the other members of the society, perhaps through a common sense of self-righteousness or superiority.
      * Bonding
        + Given the possibility that a community does not have any law violators, the society will change the legal definitions of what constitutes a crime in order to define some of its members as criminals.
    - Emphasized 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 satiated.
      * The selfish desires of humankind are limitless and the more an individual has, the more he or she wants.
    - He also noted that in times of rapid change, society fails in this role of regulating desires and expectations.
      * With rapid change, the ability of society to serve as a regulatory mechanism breaks down and the selfish, greedy tendencies of individuals are uncontrolled, causing a state of anomie, or “normlessness.”
      * Societies in such anomic states would experience increases in many social problems, particularly criminal activity.
    - It really did not matter whether the rapid change was for good or bad; either way, the rapid change would have effects on society that would be negative.
    - 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.
    - *Suicide*
      * Claimed that suicide was a “social fact,” meaning that it was a product of meaning and structural aspects that result from interactions among persons.
      * The rate of suicide was significantly lower among individuals who were married, younger, and practiced religions that were more interactive and communal.
        + The more social interaction and bonding with the community, the less the suicide.
      * He showed that in both times of rapid economic growth as well as rapid decline suicide rates increased.
* **Strain Theories**
  + The one thing that all forms of strain theory have in common is the emphasis that is placed on a sense of frustration in crime causation, hence the name “strain” theories.
  + **Merton’s Strain Theory**
    - Drew heavily on Durkheim’s idea of anomie.
    - Merton’s structural model became one of the most popular perspectives in criminological thought in the early 1900s, and remains as one of the most cited theories of crime in criminological literature.
    - **Cultural Context and Assumptions of Strain Theory**
      * Discussed the nearly universal socialization of the “American Dream” in U.S. society.
        + This Dream is the idea that as long as someone works very hard and pays their dues, they will achieve their goals in the end.
      * It is this near-universal socialization of the American Dream without it being true that causes most of the strain and frustration in American society.
      * Furthermore, Merton claims that most of the strain and frustration is not necessarily due to the failure to achieve the conventional goals (i.e., wealth) that is the problem, but rather the differential emphasis placed on the material goals and the de-emphasis on the importance of the conventional means.
    - **Merton’s Concept of Anomie and Strain**
      * In an ideal society, there would be an equal emphasis on the conventional goals and means in society.
        + However, in many societies, one of them would be emphasized more than the other.
      * The disequilibrium in emphasis between the goals or means of societies is what he called anomie.
      * 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 of the truth will likely take place when people are in their late-teenage to mid-twenties years, the time that crime tends to peak.
      * This realization leads some individuals to innovate ways in which they can achieve the goals of society.

**Means**

* + - **Adaptations to Strain** 
      * Conformity

**Accept**

**Reject**

* + - * Ritualism

**Goals**

**Accept**

* + - * Innovation
      * Retreatism

Innovation

Conformity

* + - * Rebellion

Rebellion

Retreatism

Ritualism

**New Means**

**New Goals**

**Reject**

* **Evidence and Criticisms of Merton’s Strain Theory**
  + - Many scientific studies showed mixed support for strain theory.
      * Research that examines the effects of poverty on violence and official rates of various crimes has found relatively consistent support (albeit weaker effects than strain theory implies).
      * A series of studies of self-reported delinquent behavior found little to no relationship between social class and criminality.
      * The idea that unemployment drives people to commit crime has received little support.
    - Some experts have argued that Merton’s strain theory is primarily a structural model of crime that is more a theory of societal groups, not individual motivations.
      * 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 when the level of analysis is the macro-level, and official measures are being used to indicate criminality.
    - 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.
      * Some researchers have focused on the disparity in what individuals aspire to in various aspects of life (e.g., school, occupation, social life) versus what they realistically expect to achieve).
        + If an individual has high aspirations, but also has low expectations 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 linking a large gap between these two levels with criminal activity.
        + Most of the subjects who reported the highest levels of criminal activity tended to report low levels of both aspirations and expectations.
    - Farnworth and Leiber
      * Claimed it was a mistake to examine the differences between education goals and expectations, or differences between occupational goals and expectations.
      * They proposed testing the gap between economic aspirations (i.e., goals) and educational expectations (i.e., means of achieving the goals).
        + Found support for a gap between these two factors being predictive of criminality.
    - Other criticisms of Merton’s strain theory include some historical evidence and its 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.
      * In virtually every society in the world, predatory street crimes tend to peak sharply in the teenage years to early-twenties, and then drop off very quickly.
        + However, most studies show that feelings of stress and frustration tend to continue rising after age 30 and do not diminish significantly.
        + It can be argued that the reason why strain can continue or even increase as one ages but the rates of crime go down is because individuals develop coping mechanisms for dealing with the frustrations they feel.
  + **Variations of Merton’s Strain Theory: Cohen and Cloward & Ohlin**
    - **Cohen’s Theory of Lower Class Status Frustration and Gang Formation**
      * Young males from lower classes are at a disadvantage in competing in school because they lack the normal interaction, socialization, and discipline instituted by educated parents of the middle class.
      * Such youths are likely to experience failure in school due to this lack of preparation to conforming with middle-class values, so they fail to live up to what is considered the “middle-class measuring rod,” which emphasizes certain factors including motivation, accountability, responsibility, deferred gratification, long-term planning, respect to authority and property, controlling emotions, etc.
        + This strain that they feel in failure in school performance and respect among their peers, often referred to as “status frustration,” leads them to develop a system of values that is contrary to the 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 of them.
      * Instead of abiding to middle-class norms of obedience to authority, school achievement, and respect for authority, these youth change their normative beliefs to value the opposite characteristics: namely they value malicious, negativistic, and non-utilitarian delinquent activity.
      * Cohen claimed that while these behaviors do not appear to have much utility or value, he claimed that they are quite valuable and important from the perspective of the strained youth.
        + Specifically, they do these acts to gain respect from their peers (those who have gone through the same straining experiences and reactionary formation), which they could not gain through school performance and adherence to the middle-class normative culture.
      * Responses to Structural Disadvantage
        + Delinquent Boy

Cohen believed that this tendency to reject middle-class values was the primary cause of gangs because a number of these lower class individuals who had experienced the same strains (i.e., status frustration) and experiences form together into a group.

* + - * + College Boy

Responds to his disadvantaged situation by dedicating himself to overcoming the odds and competing in the middle-class schools despite the unlikely chances for success.

* + - * + Corner Boy

Responds to the situation by accepting his place in the society as a lower class individual who will somewhat passively make the best of life at the bottom of the social order.

* + - * Comparison to Merton’s Original Adaptations
        + Delinquent boy is probably best seen as similar to rebellion, because the delinquent boy rejects the means and goals of conventional society, while replacing those with new means and goals.
        + 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 and means of middle-class society.
        + The corner boy probably best fits the adaptation of ritualism, because they know that they likely will never achieve the goals of society, so they essentially resign themselves to not obtaining financial success, but many hold stable blue-collar jobs or make ends meet in other typically legal ways.
      * At the time of theory development, official statistics showed that virtually all gang violence, and most violence for that matter, was concentrated among lower class male youth.
      * However, with the development of self-report studies in the 1960s, his theory was shown to be somewhat overstated in the sense that middle-class youth were shown to be well represented when it comes to committing delinquent acts.
      * Although the findings are mixed, many studies have found that delinquency is often higher before the youth drops out of school, and may actually decline once they drop out and become employed.
      * Other studies have clearly shown that lower class youth are far more likely to have problems in school, and that school achievement is consistently linked to criminality.
      * Ultimately, it appears there is some face validity to what Cohen proposed, in the sense that some youth engage in behavior that has no other value than earning peer respect, even though that behavior is negativistic and non-utilitarian.
    - **Cloward and Ohlin’s Theory of Differential Opportunity**
      * Similar to Merton and Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin’s model assumed that all youth, including those in the lower class, are socialized to believe in the American Dream, and 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 emphasized three different types of gangs that form based on the characteristics of the social structure in the neighborhood.
      * Three Types of Gangs
        + Criminal Gangs

Form in lower class neighborhoods that have an organized structure of adult criminal behavior.

Primarily commit property or economic crimes, with the goal of making a profit through illegal behavior.

Are most like the Merton adaptation of “innovation” because the members still want to achieve the goals of conventional society.

* + - * + Conflict Gangs

Develop in neighborhoods that have weak stability and little or no organization.

The primary illegal activity of conflict gangs is violence because they lack the skills and knowledge to make a profit through criminal activity.

Not only blocked from legitimate opportunities, but blocked from illegitimate opportunities as well.

If applying Merton’s adaptations, conflict gangs would probably fit the category of rebellion the best.

* + - * + Retreatist Gangs

Made up of individuals who had failed to succeed in the conventional world, and could not achieve status in the criminal or conflict gangs of their neighborhoods.

The primary form of offending in retreatist gangs is usually drug usage.

Like Merton’s retreatist adaptation to strain, the members of retreatist gangs often want to simply escape from reality.

* + - * Criticisms
        + There is little evidence that gaps between what lower class youth aspire to and what they expect to achieve are not necessarily predictive of feelings of frustration and strain, nor do such gaps appear predictive of gang membership or criminality.
        + The inability to find empirical evidence that supports their model of the formation of three types of gangs and their specialization in offending.
      * Despite the criticisms of Cloward and Ohlin’s model of gang formation, their theoretical framework inspired policy largely due to the influence their work had on Attorney General Robert Kennedy.
        + Kennedy asked Ohlin to assist in developing federal policies regarding delinquency, which resulted in the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1961.
      * Cloward 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 youth.
  + **General Strain Theory**
    - Proposed by Robert Agnew in the 1980s.
    - Assumes that people of all social classes and economic position deal with frustrations in routine daily life, which virtually everyone can relate to.
    - Like the previous models, general strain theory focuses on individuals’ failure to achieve positively valued goals; however, general strain theory emphasizes two additional categories of strain: presentation of noxious stimuli and removal of positively valued stimuli.
    - In addition to 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 a parent that is abusive, a teacher who always picks on an individual, or a boss who puts undue strains on one person.
    - The other strain category that was identified by Agnew was the removal of positive stimuli (i.e., good things), 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 love one(s).
    - 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, that is the extent to which he or she is 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.
    - For the most part, studies have generally supported the model.
      * Specifically, most studies find a link between the three categories of strain and higher rates of criminality, as well as the link between the sources of strain and feelings of anger or other negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression).
    - Criticisms
      * The way the theory has been tested.
      * Using only objective indicators.
    - A number of studies 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.
    - 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.
* **Policy Implications**
  + The factors that are most vital for policy implications regarding social structure theories are those regarding educational and vocational opportunities, and programs that 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 and/or vocational training and opportunities.
  + Another key area of recommendations from this perspective involves developing healthy coping mechanisms to strain.
* **Conclusions**

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| Theory | Concepts | Proponents | Key Propositions |
| Early European Social Structure Theories | Relative Deprivation | Quetelet | Areas that have the greatest differences in wealth in close proximity (i.e., very poor living close to very rich) tend to have the highest crime rates. |
|  |  | Guerry | Violent crime rates tend to be highest in poor areas, whereas property crimes tend to cluster in more wealthy areas. |
| Early Strain Theory | Mechanical vs. Organic Societies  Anomie  Collective Conscience | Durkheim | Societies evolve from mechanical to organic, with the former having a limited division of labor/roles, which strengthens the “collective conscience” of members; as the division of labor increases in the move to a more organic society, the collective conscience breaks down and results in “normlessness” or anomie. |
| Merton’s Strain Theory | Anomie (different meaning from Durkheim’s)  Adaptations to Strain | Merton | U.S. economic structure causes a differential emphasis on the goals (“wealth”) as compared to the conventional means of obtaining the goals, which results in anomie; individuals with limited access to obtain success and wealth adapt to such strain in different ways, with many innovating ways to achieve the goals via illegal methods instead of through legitimate means. |
| Lower Class Frustration Theory | Reaction Formation  Corner Boy  College Boy  Delinquent Boy | Cohen | Lower class youth are not prepared for school and are at a disadvantage because schools are based on middle-class norms; due to failure at school, they hand with other failures and defy the middle-class norms/rules (“reaction formation”), which leads to gang formation; different adaptations to this frustration exist, with delinquent boy being the most likely to commit crimes. |
| Differential Opportunities Theory | Criminal Gangs  Conflict Gangs  Retreatist Gangs | Cloward & Ohlin | Gangs in lower class city areas are a manifestation of the type of neighborhood structure that exists there, as well as the ability of youth to have the opportunity to be accepted by adult criminal enterprises; some youth are given opportunities to engage in illegal structures (e.g., mafia) and others are blocked from these illegitimate opportunities as well as legitimate ones. |
| General Strain Theory | Failure to Obtain Goals  Loss of Positive Stimuli  Presentation of Noxious Stimuli  Coping Mechanisms (or lack thereof) | Agnew | Greatly expanded the sources of strain to include everything that had been presented by previous models (economics, school frustration, etc.), and also added much more in the sense of having constant stressors (noxious stimuli) and the loss of positive aspects in one’s life; also added the component of coping mechanisms and the ability of individuals to deal with stress in a healthy way. |