

Strain Theory Regarding Criminal Activities

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Criminology and the Social Origins of Strain Theory

Over time, scientists in the [field of criminology](#) have plunged into serious research to be able to come up with underlying factors that eventually result in criminal activities. So many theories have been established to attempt to unravel this mystery over time. One of the earliest theories developed in an attempt to explain this is the Strain theory. This theory originates from the English word “strain”, which basically means a ‘force’ which tends to pull someone to the extreme in most cases, whether positively or negatively (Robert K Merton in 2015).

Basically, it presumes that a community or society puts unnecessary pressure on an individual to achieve a certain goal universally agreed upon and accepted, which may result in a likelihood of entry into crime since most of these individuals lack the means of attaining such goals. This is basically what results in strain, which prompts the individual to elicit a reaction accordingly (Agnew R. 2014). Merton believes that a society that has accepted and laid down goals and aspirations puts strain on people to conform and ensure the realization of those goals. However, some people are always faced with challenges in the course of pursuing their goals, such as the gap between the universal goals to be realized and their current status and situations, especially in terms of finances in most cases as a result of extreme poverty. Others encounter negative stimulants such as loss of close family members and friends and abuse in life. As a result, individuals evoke response various responses, which may result in crime(Agnew R. 2014).

Conformity, Cultural Goals, and Legitimate Means of Achievement

Some people resort to compliance with the universally accepted goals by using all the legally, ethically, and socially accepted means, and these people develop the intrinsic motivation to work their way out in a clear manner. The second group of people resort to innovation by looking for creative means of achieving their goals; however, according to Merton, some of these innovative ways are illegal and socially unacceptable. Such people may resort to stealing in order to attain financial independence, others may resort to sale of narcotic drugs whereas others especially girls will resort to prostitution. Other people may resort to ritualism using acceptable means but may fail to reach the desired goal all in all. Furthermore, some people resort to retreatism, where they neither accept the goal nor the means, but they are escapists who try to evade both. Lastly, there are some who reject both the goal and the means. They rarely go far and are mostly referred to as the resisting poor.

Strain theory was backed up by research carried out by Merton in the USA. He found out that the American cultural system that ensued in the American Dream aimed at ensuring equality for all in terms of opportunity regardless of gender, class or even race. (Messner, 2017) It stimulated people to work and acquire material wealth through legitimate means such as education and work. He, however, pointed out that such goals were not attainable largely due to the uneven distribution of means that rendered it impossible for some to be able to achieve the American dream of financial success. This made some resort to unlawful means, as proved by the data from the USA that shows that the crime rates in areas where there was an unwavering commitment to monetary means and weak commitment to the legitimacy of the means were very high.

The movie “American Gangster” also clearly portrays the strain theory where one of the main characters, Frack Lucas, makes use of illegitimate means, such as smuggling and selling narcotic drugs, to be able to live up to the American dream of financial success. This is due to the yearning to provide a solution to the mysteries of life. Throughout the entire movie he is involved in smuggling of heroin and with deep connections with military able to smuggle and sell the “blue magic” the stage name for heroin. Eventually, he is caught and sentenced to 70 years’ imprisonment, further reduced to 15.

Explanatory Strengths and Limitations of the Strain Perspective

The strain theory has its strengths and weaknesses. One of its strengths is that it can be used to explain the rise in rates of crime in economically growing countries. It has also enormously helped in the critical study and analysis of crime and deviance in 1940 in the US. On the other side Merton’s theory only attempts to explain causes of economic crime, but not others such as violent crimes and extremism such as terrorism, moreover, this theory only applies to the low class in them strive to attain their goals. (Cohen A (1997))” It does not explain the middle class, which raises questions about its relevance as a theory. Strain theory also does not explain the existence of white collar crimes that makes use of fraud and slightly legal but unethical means to achieve goals. This theory only focuses on the individuals and not the group acts that crime entails at times. It is lastly important to note that other basis of crimes, such as gender differences and religion, is not taken into account. This, in my view, renders this theory incomplete in the full realization of its thesis.

Strain theory laid the foundation into such research that later led to advanced theories like the General Strain Theory, (Robert Agnew, 215), That paid close attention on the immediate social environment of one instead of being interpersonal or structural oriented. Institutional anomie theory of 1994 by Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld argued that institutional setup within an economy can also lead to criminal behavior when not limited.

In conclusion. Strain theory development was an eye opener into reasons for crime in the society and remarkably set a strong foundation into further research into crime and basic ways to prevent its rise

especially in the vulnerable 21st century.

Reference List

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