
An Overview of Strain Theory by Robert K. Merton

Merton's strain theory, in general, is a theory found in both sociology and criminology that states that society puts certain pressures, referred to as strains, on individuals to achieve socially accepted goals e.g. the American dream, despite having the means to do so, may lead these individuals to commit crimes as a method of conforming to social ideals, or rebelling against them. Everyone strives to achieve their goals, but when goals determined by society are out of reach for a large population, criminal activity becomes an alternative means of achieving these goals. The United States, especially, has problems with wage gaps, housing and income inequality; as a result, most Americans feel as if their quality of life isn't what they imagined it would be in this country, and that the 'American dream' is just a myth. There are different versions of the theory, but they all attempt to answer the same question: Does society and its pressures really lead otherwise ordinary citizens to commit crimes? Furthermore, should individuals bear all the blame, or does society need to reevaluate its standards and share in some of the responsibility, especially in a time of mass incarceration and frequent miscarriages of justice.

Society should have some partial responsibility in the development of criminal behavior, since its societal constructs are the reason so many people are fed up with the quality of their lives and see themselves as failing to live up to the high standards of living that the one-percenters are enjoying to the fullest. This comparison leads the underprivileged groups to turn to crime to better their lives and increase the odds of them finally reaching that status they've so desired. Larceny-related crimes, drug trafficking, and the selling of other illegal merchandise are typically what draw people to get-rich-quick schemes and it's the illusion of leading a better life following the heist that motivates them to take part in these illicit activities. An individual who has no source of income would be forced into committing a crime to temporarily fix that problem, and as a result, would face severe punitive measures that correspond to the extent of the crime.

According to Nicole Rafter's textbook, strain theory focuses on these pressures of society that force ordinary Americans to commit crimes to fit a certain mold that is created by the rich and their luxurious lifestyle. These pressures are instilled in the ordinary citizen, as they face certain hardships and challenges in meeting their wants for a life of contentment. Society puts up these ideals of what it means to live a fulfilling, meaningful life, summed up in the American dream of a suburban, upper-middle class lifestyle: a big, picket-fenced house, two cars, and great career. However, for most Americans, the middle-class is the hardest to enter, and the easiest to slip out of. The case being that the labor market is extremely selective, job availability is stagnant, and the systemic discrimination in every aspect of the socioeconomic relative to minorities is overwhelming, and serves as a barrier for success.

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One of the important aspects of strain theory is means, referring to the “how” an individual can achieve these culturally-oriented goals. Means can determine if or not a person can succeed in the framework of a socioeconomic system, such as that running in the United States, and if they are unable to, they oftentimes turn to crime as an alternative means of achieving this cultural standard imposed on the populace by a society founded on social mobility. Means can be synonymous with opportunity, and a lack thereof, is without a doubt, one of the root causes of excessive crime rates.

This lack of means may lead to deviance, which in this context refers to the development of a criminal subculture to go against the norm and the standard means of achieving socioeconomic success. Gangs are an excellent example of this, with the entire purpose of groups such as the Bloods or Crips is to use crime as a method of achieving that same success, though the means vary widely. That’s where tensions in competition plays in, as they both attempt to monopolize illegal industries centering on drugs, weapons, and prostitution. Deviant subcultures come about through group frustrations with a broken system, and use that same broken system meant to debilitate them, for their benefit.

Slightly different, Robert Agnew’s strain theory is more focused on social norms as opposed to dissimilarities in cultural environments and other social variables that may influence the development of criminal behavior. Here, the focus is less the problems with infrastructure e.g. education, health etc. and more so to do with individual and emotional wellbeing. Then there’s Jie Zhang’s strain theory on suicide, that emphasizes more psychological strains, that are co-occurring, as determined through the examination of suicide notes from the United States and China, whereby these strains wreak havoc on the individuals psyche until they believe they have no other options left aside from suicide.

In my opinion, there’s conclusive evidence to support the idea that society does indeed play a role in criminal behavior for citizens that feel that there are no other alternatives to reaching the top. Although crime may be a different route that may or may not lead to the same destination, it is filled with the most danger, with long-term consequences to one’s actions made for short-term pleasure. Personally, I believe society should be held to some degree of liability, however, the perpetrator should be held accountable for their actions, as they still have the freedom and choice to decide against performing the crime, no matter how desperate the situation. Society may shape the individual depending on circumstance, level of opportunity, etc., but ultimately, it is the individual that is responsible for him/herself and their own actions.

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