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

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Learning Objectives

As you read this chapter, consider the following topics:

- Distinguish social structure theories from other models or perspectives presented in this book.
- 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.
- Explain why Robert K. Merton's theory of strain became popular when it did, as well as how his conceptualization of "anomie" differed from Durkheim's.
- 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.
- Evaluate how Robert Agnew's proposed model of general strain added more sources of strain to Merton's original framework.
- Identify some ways the various models of strain theory have informed policy making in attempts to reduce criminality.

Introduction

This chapter will examine explanations of criminal conduct that emphasize the differences among varying groups in societies, particularly in the United States. Such differences among groups are easy to see in everyday life, and many theoretical models have been developed that place the blame for crime on observed inequalities and/or cultural differences among groups. In contrast to the theories presented in previous chapters, social structure theories disregard any biological or psychological variations across individuals. Rather than emphasizing physiological factors, 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 causing criminal activity. For example, some structural models place an emphasis on 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 (which we will examine in the [next chapter](#)). Regardless of their differences, all the theories examined in this chapter emphasize a common theme: Certain groups of individuals are more likely to break the law due to disadvantages or cultural differences resulting from the way society is structured.

The most important distinction of these social structure theories, as opposed to those discussed in previous chapters, is that they emphasize group differences instead of individual differences. In other words, structural models tend to focus on the macro level of analysis as opposed to the micro level (note: these units of analysis were discussed in the first chapters of this text). Therefore, it is not surprising that social structure theories are commonly used to explain the propensity of certain racial/ethnic groups to commit 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 their 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,¹ there is much validity to propositions in the theories discussed in this chapter, and there are numerous applications for social structure theories in contemporary society.

Early Theories of Social Structure: Early to Late 1800s

Early European Theorists: Comte, Guerry, and Quetelet

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, Andre-Michel Guerry, and Adolphe Quetelet.² Although we will not discuss the various concepts, propositions, and research findings from their work, it is important to note that all their work was largely inspired by the social dynamics that resulted from the Industrial Revolution (defined by most historians as beginning in the mid-1700s and ending in the mid-1800s), which was in full swing at the turn of the 18th century and continued throughout most of the 1800s. Societies were quickly transitioning from primarily agriculture-based economies to more industrial-based economies, and this transition inevitably 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 losing children and not being able to find them, to much higher rates of crime (which continue to grow in urban areas compared with suburban and rural areas).

Case Study

The Black Binder Bandit

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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 Urquijo, 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.

Urquijo 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 major federal crime of bank robbery—to deal with the economic strain or frustration of not being able to "get ahead" or achieve the American Dream of success. This chapter 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 chapter reviews the development of anomie/strain theory, starting with its origins among early social structure theorists, such as Durkheim, and moving to its further development by Merton. The chapter 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 perspective, which reveal that this framework remains one of the dominant theoretical explanations of criminal behavior in modern times. We will finish this chapter 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 chapter.

As surveillance photos show, Urquijo typically carried into the bank a black binder, in which he hid a revolver and the money he acquired from the bank robbery.



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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 "Mesh-Mask Bandit" (still at large in Texas; wears a mesh mask), the "Geezer Bandit" (still at large in Southern California; authorities believe that 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 making their nicknames notable 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 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 that moniker?

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"IT'S PRETTY SIMPLE. IT'S BLACK AND WHITE. I DON'T HAVE A JOB, I HAD TO WORK, AND I ROB TO SURVIVE."

The problems associated with such fast urbanization, as well as the shift in economics, led to a drastic change in basic social structures in Europe as well as the United States. In addition to the extraordinary implications of the Industrial Revolution on the Western world, other types of revolutions were also affecting social structure. One of the first important theorists in the area of social structure theory was Auguste Comte (1798–1857); in fact, Comte is widely credited with coining the term *sociology*, because he was the first to be recognized for emphasizing and researching concepts based on more macro-level factors, such as social institutions (e.g., economic factors).³ Although such conceptualization is elementary by today's standards, it had a significant influence on the sociological thinking that followed.

Soon after, the first modern national crime statistics were published in France in the early 1800s, and 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.⁴ Some experts have claimed that this report likely represents the first study of scientific criminology,⁵ and this was later expanded and published as a book. Ultimately, Guerry concluded that opportunity, in the sense that the wealthy had more to steal, was the primary cause of property crime. Interestingly, this conclusion is supported by recent U.S. Department of Justice statistics that show that property crime is just as common, if not more so, in middle- to upper-class households but that violent crime is not.⁶ It is clear, as Guerry stated centuries ago, that there is more to steal in the wealthier areas and that poor individuals will use opportunities to steal goods and currency from wealthy households or 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.⁷ Specifically, Quetelet showed that young, male, poor, uneducated, and unemployed individuals were more likely to commit crime than were their counterparts,⁸ which has also been supported by modern research. Similar to Guerry, Quetelet concluded that opportunities, in addition to the demographic characteristics, had a lot to do with where crime tended to be concentrated.

However, Quetelet added a special component by identifying that greater inequality or gaps between wealth and poverty in the same place tend to excite temptations and passions. In other words, areas that exhibited large differences in wealth, with many poor and many wealthy in close proximity, had the biggest problems. This is a concept referred to as **relative deprivation** and is a quite distinctive condition from that of just a state of poverty.

relative deprivation: the perception that results when relatively poor people live in close proximity to relatively wealthy people.

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 there are very poor people living in close proximity to very wealthy people, this causes animosity and feelings of deprivation compared with others in the area. Studies have supported this hypothesis,⁹ and this is one of the likely explanations for why Washington, DC, which is perhaps the most powerful city in the world but also has a large portion of severely rundown and poor areas, has such a high crime rate compared with any other jurisdiction in the country.¹⁰ Modern studies have also supported this hypothesis in showing a clear linear association between higher crime rates and localities with more relative deprivation. For example, in more modern times, David Sang-Yoon Lee found that crime rates were far higher in cities that had wider gaps in income; specifically, the larger the gap between the 10th and 90th percentiles, the greater the crime levels.¹¹

People window-shopping and passing by a woman begging for money.



Richard Baker/In Pictures Ltd./Corbis via Getty Images

In addition to the concept of relative deprivation, Quetelet showed that areas with the most rapidly changing economic conditions also showed high crime rates (this will be discussed later in the chapter when we review Durkheim). Quetelet is perhaps best known for this comment: “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.”¹² This statement makes it clear that crime is a result of societal structure and not of individual propensities or personal decision-making. Thus, it is not surprising that Quetelet’s position was controversial at the time when he wrote (when most theorists were focusing on free will and deterrence) and that 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 of the social structure (such as those between the wealthy and the poor).¹³

One of the essential points of Guerry’s and Quetelet’s work is the positivistic nature of their conclusions. Specifically, they both concluded that the distribution of crime is not random; rather, it is the result of certain types of persons committing certain types of crime in particular places, largely due to the way society is structured and distributes resources. This perspective of criminality strongly supports the tendency of crime to be clustered in certain places as well as among certain persons in these places. Such findings support a structural, positivistic perspective of criminality through which criminality is seen as being deterministic and, thus, caused by factors outside an individual’s control. So in some ways, the early development of structural theories was in response to the failure of the Classical approach to crime control. We will see that 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 positivistic theories of crime, such as the structural models developed by Guerry and Quetelet, attracted far more attention.

Durkheim and the Concept of Anomie

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Although influenced by earlier theorists (e.g., Comte, Guerry, and Quetelet), Émile Durkheim (1858–1916) was perhaps the most influential theorist in modern structural perspectives on criminality.¹⁴ As discussed above, like most other social theorists of the 19th century, he was strongly affected by the political (e.g., 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 the economic/labor distribution, in which societies are seen as evolving from a simplistic mechanical society toward a multilayered organic society (see [Figure 8.1](#)).

As outlined in Durkheim's dissertation, titled *The Division of Labor in Society*, primitive mechanical societies exist as those in which all members essentially perform the same functions, such as hunting (typically males) and gathering (typically females). Although there are a few anomalies (e.g., medicine men), virtually everyone experiences essentially the same daily routine. Such similarities in daily routine and constant interaction with like members of the society lead to a strong uniformity in values, which Durkheim called the **collective conscience**. The collective conscience is the degree to which individuals of a society think alike, or as Durkheim put it, the totality of social likenesses.

Due to very little variation in the distribution of labor in these primitive **mechanical societies**, or those with “mechanical solidarity,” the individuals in such societies tend to share similar norms and values, which creates a simple-layered social structure with a strong collective conscience. Because people have more or less the same jobs and mostly interact with similar individuals, they tend to think and act alike, which creates a strong solidarity among members. In mechanical societies, law functions to enforce the conformity of the group. However, as societies progress toward more modern, **organic societies** in the Industrial Age (most historians mark the Industrial Revolution as beginning in the 1750s and ending in the 1860s), the distribution of labor becomes more highly specified. There is still a form of solidarity in organic societies, called “organic solidarity,” because people tend to depend on other groups in the society through the highly specified division of labor, and law's primary function is to regulate interactions and maintain solidarity among the groups.

For example, modern researchers at universities in the United States tend to be trained in extremely narrow topics, some as specific as the antennae of certain species of ants. On the other hand, some individuals are gathering trash from cans on the same streets every single day. The antennae experts probably have little interaction with or in common with the garbage collectors. According to Durkheim, moving from such universally shared roles in mechanical societies to such extremely specific roles in organic societies results in huge cultural differences, which leads to giant contrasts in normative values and attitudes across such groups. Thus, the collective conscience in such societies is weak, largely because there is little agreement on moral beliefs or opinions. Therefore, the preexisting solidarity among the members breaks down and the bonds are weakened, which creates a climate for antisocial behavior.

collective conscience: according to Durkheim, the extent to which people in a society share similarities or likeness; the stronger the collective conscience, the less crime in that community.

mechanical societies: in Durkheim's theory, these societies were rather primitive, with a simple distribution of labor (e.g., hunters and gatherers) and thus a high level of agreement regarding social norms and rules because nearly everyone was engaged in the same roles.

organic societies: in the Durkheimian model, those societies that have a high division of labor and thus a low level of agreement about societal norms, largely because everyone has such different roles in society.

Learning Check 8.1

1. Which early social structure theorist emphasized the concept of “relative deprivation”?
 1. Merton
 2. Guerry
 3. Durkheim
 4. Comte
 5. Quetelet
2. Which early social structure theorist is credited with coming up with the term *sociology*?
 1. Merton
 2. Guerry
 3. Durkheim
 4. Comte
 5. Quetelet
3. Early studies by social structure theorists/researchers found that there were higher rates of property crime in _____ neighborhoods but higher rates of violent crime in _____ neighborhoods (which still holds true in modern times).
 1. poor/wealthy
 2. wealthy/poor

Answers located at www.edge.sagepub.com/schram2e

Durkheim was clear in stating that crime is not only normal but necessary in all societies. Because Durkheim saw even crime as needed in society, his theory is often considered a good representation of functionalism, which assumes that virtually all types of behaviors or groups (such as crime and criminals) serve some important role in a given community. Specifically, he claimed that all social behaviors, especially crime, provide essential functions in a society. To clarify, Durkheim claimed that crime was needed for several reasons. First, crime is important because it defines the moral boundaries of societies. Few people know or realize what is against the societal laws until they see someone punished for a violation. This reinforces their understanding of both what the rules are and what it means to break the rules.

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Furthermore, 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.

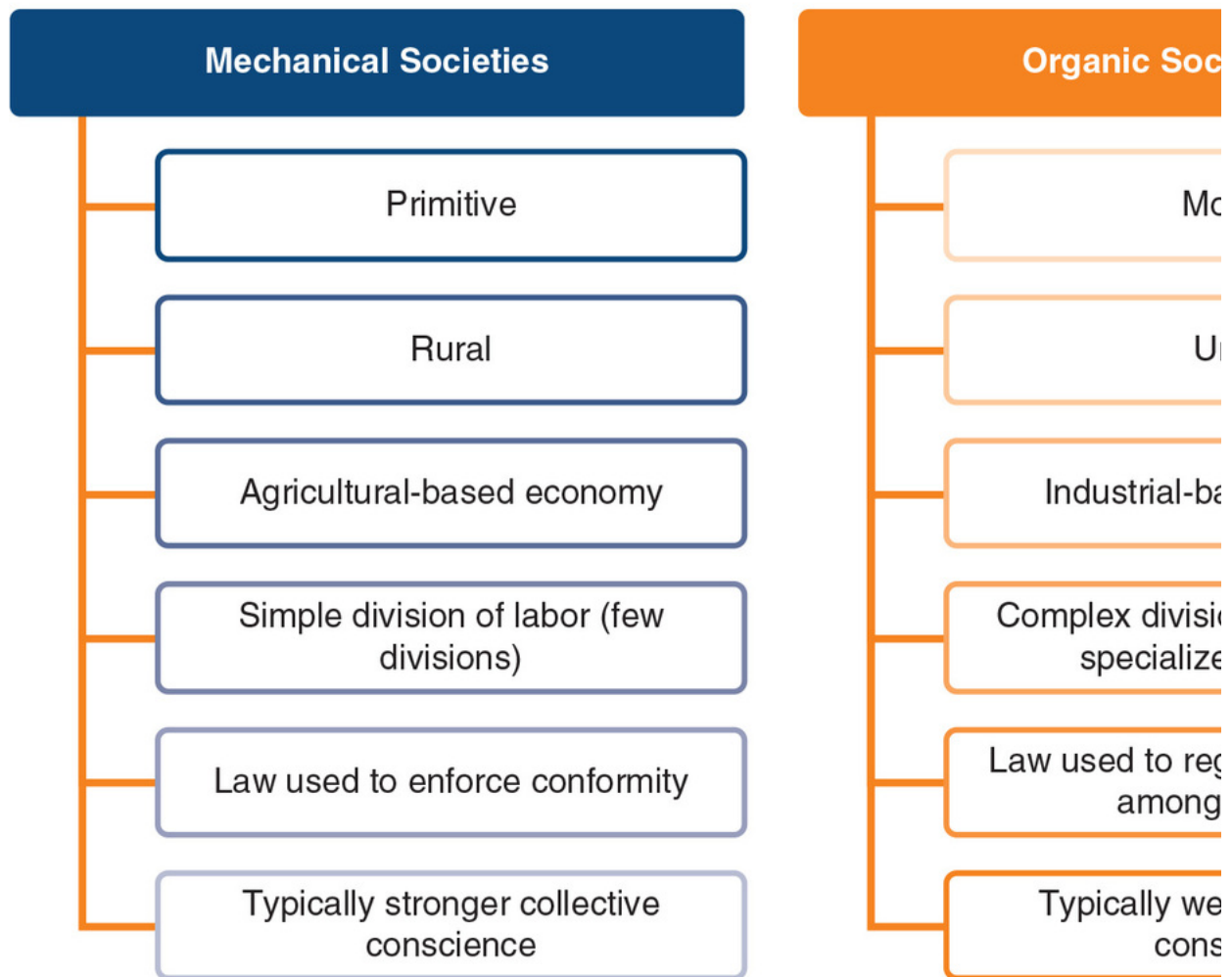
This type of urban decay and deterioration is key in theories that emphasize neighborhood environment and how it contributes to high crime rates in certain city areas.



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Figure 8.1 Durkheim's Continuum of Development From Mechanical to Organic Societies

Industrialization



In later works, Durkheim explained that this need for bonding is what makes crime so necessary in a society. Given the possibility that a community does not have any law violators, the society will change the legal definitions of what constitutes a crime to define some of its members as criminals. Examples of this are prevalent, but perhaps the most convincing is that of the Salem witch trials, in which hundreds of individuals were accused and tried for an almost laughable offense and more than a dozen were executed. Although this case is hard to relate to, Durkheim would say it was inevitable because crime was so low in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (historical records confirm this) that the society had to come up with a fabricated criterion for defining certain members of the population as offenders.

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Émile Durkheim's (1858–1916) theories on the progression of societies from mechanical to organic, as well as the “collective conscience” and “anomie,” have heavily influenced many modern theories of crime.



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Other examples are common in everyday life, but the most readily apparent are those in which a group of people are thrown together. The fastest way for such a group to bond is to unite over a common enemy, which often means forming into cliques and ganging up on others in the group. As college students can usually relate to, in a group of three or more roommates, two or more of the individuals will quickly join together and complain about the others in the housing unit. 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

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that the ordinary offense does in ordinary consciousnesses. . . . This society . . . will define these acts as criminal and will treat them as such.¹⁵

This is why law enforcement should always be cautious in “cracking down” on gangs, especially during relatively inactive periods, because crackdowns will likely make the gangs stronger by giving members a common enemy. Like all societal groups, when a common enemy rears its head, the persons in the group (even those who do not typically get along) will come together and “circle the wagons” to protect themselves via strength in numbers. This usually produces a powerful bonding effect, and one that many sociologists and especially gang researchers have consistently observed.¹⁶

While traditional (mostly mechanical) societies could count on relative consensus in regard to moral values and norms, this sometimes led to too much control and stagnation of creative thought. However, Durkheim claimed that progress typically depends on deviating from established moral boundaries in a society, especially one in the more mechanical stage. There are many examples of this, including virtually all religious icons. For example, Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed were all criminally persecuted for deviating from societal norms in the times when they preached. Political heroes have also been prosecuted and incarcerated as criminals, such as Mahatma Gandhi in India, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States. Perhaps one of the most compelling cases is that of scientist and astronomer Galileo, who proposed a theory that Earth was not the center of the universe. Even though he was right, he was persecuted for this theory because of the demand for strict adherence to the beliefs of his society. It is obvious that Durkheim was 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 the problems of more primitive mechanical societies, modern societies do not have such extreme restraint against deviations from the established norms. Rather, almost the opposite is true; there are too many differences across groups because the division of labor is highly specialized. Thus, the varying roles in society, such as farmers versus scientific researchers, have become quite different due to the natural transition from primitive societies to more modern, specialized groups found in our contemporary societies. This leads to extreme differences in the cultural values and norms of the various groups. In other words, there is a breakdown in the collective conscience because there is really no longer a “collective” nature in society. Therefore, law no longer is primarily interested in defining the norms of society but rather is focused on governing the interactions that take place among the different classes. According to Durkheim, law provides a service in regulating such interactions as societies progress toward more organic (more industrial) forms.

Importantly, Durkheim emphasized that human beings, unlike other animal species that live according to their spontaneous needs, have no internal mechanism to signal when their needs and desires are satiated. Therefore, the selfish desires of humankind are limitless, and the more an individual has, the more he or she wants. In other words, people are greedy by nature, and without something to tell them what they need and deserve, they will never feel content.¹⁷ According to Durkheim, it is society that provides the mechanism for limiting human individuals’ insatiable appetite for more and more. Specifically, he claimed that only society has the power necessary to create laws that tell citizens where the limits are drawn on their selfishness and passions.

Durkheim also noted that in times of rapid change, society fails in this role of regulating desires and expectations. This rapid change can be due to numerous factors, such as war or social movements (such as the changes seen in the United States in the 1960s). For Durkheim, the transitions he likely had in mind were those that affected the time in which he wrote—namely, just after the American and French Revolutions, and also immediately following the Industrial Revolution. 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 Durkheim called **anomie**, or “normlessness.” Societies in such anomic states would experience increases in many social problems, particularly criminal activity.

Durkheim was clear that it really did not matter whether the rapid change was for good or bad; either way, it would have negative effects on society. For example, whether the U.S. economy was improving (such as in the late 1960s) or quickly tanking (such as in the 1930s, during the Great Depression), according to Durkheim both of these would produce more criminal activity due to the lack of stability in regulating human expectations and desires. Interestingly, both of these periods (the late 1960s and 1930s) showed the greatest crime waves of the 20th century, particularly for murder.¹⁸ Another fact that supports Durkheim’s predictions is that middle- and upper-class individuals have higher suicide rates than those from lower classes. This is consistent with the idea that it is better to have stability, even if it means always being poor, than it is to have instability at higher levels of income.

In his most widely known work, *Suicide*, Durkheim applied his theoretical model to an act that was (and often still is) considered an individual decision—namely, the taking of one’s own life. This was a major step for several reasons. First, Durkheim took an act—suicide—that would seem to be the ultimate form of free choice or free will, and he showed that this decision to take one’s own life is largely determined by external, social factors. To clarify, Durkheim claimed that suicide was a “social fact,” meaning that it was a product of meanings and structural aspects that result from interactions among persons.

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

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The second reason Durkheim's examination of suicide was important was that he showed that in times of both rapid economic growth and rapid decline, suicide rates increased. Although researchers later argued that crime rates did not always follow this pattern,¹⁹ he used quantified measures to test his propositions as the positivistic approach recommended. In the least, Durkheim created a prototype of how theory and empirical research could be combined in testing differences across social groups. This theoretical framework would be drawn on heavily for one of the most influential and accepted criminological theories of the 20th century—strain theory.

anomie: a concept originally proposed by Durkheim, which meant normlessness or the chaos that takes place when a society (e.g., economic structure) changes very rapidly.

Learning Check 8.2

1. Durkheim's model emphasized the evolution of more primitive _____ types of societies to more advanced _____ types of societies.
 1. mechanical/organic
 2. organic/mechanical
2. Durkheim's proposed theory included the concept of "anomie," which can best be defined as:
 1. stability.
 2. normlessness.
 3. status quo.
 4. deprived.
 5. ritualistic.
3. Durkheim wrote an entire book on what type of behavior?
 1. Murder
 2. Robbery
 3. Rape
 4. Burglary
 5. Suicide

Answers located at www.edge.sagepub.com/schram2e

Merton's Strain Theory

The one thing that all forms of strain theory have in common is their emphasis on a sense of frustration in crime causation, hence the name "strain" theory. Although the theories differ regarding what exactly is causing the frustration as well as in the way individuals cope (or don't) with such stress and anger, they all identify the strain placed on individuals as the primary causal factor in the development of criminality. Another common feature of strain theories is that they all trace their origin to the seminal theory of Durkheim as well as to Robert K. Merton's theoretical framework.

When formulating his theory of structural strain in the 1930s, Merton drew heavily on Durkheim's idea of anomie.²⁰ As we shall see in this chapter, although Merton altered the way anomie was defined, it is apparent that Durkheim's theoretical framework was a vital influence in the evolution of strain theory. By 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 perhaps the most influential theoretical formulation in the criminological literature and one of the most frequently cited papers in sociology.²¹ Although partially due to its strong foundation in previous structural theories, the popularity of Merton's strain theory is likely more related to the timing of its publication. As we have discussed previously, virtually every theory addressed in this book became popular when it did because the political and social climate at the time desired that type of theory for its fit with the current perspective on how the world works. Perhaps no theory better represents this phenomenon than strain theory.

Virtually all Americans are raised to believe in the American Dream, in which we are led to believe that if we just work very hard we will gain financial success. However, this is certainly not the case, especially for those who are not given the educational and occupational opportunities that others are given, typically via heredity.



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Virtually all historians would agree that the most significant social issue in the 1930s was the economy. The Great Depression, largely a result of the stock market crash in 1929, affected virtually every aspect of life in the United States. Not only did unemployment and extreme poverty soar, but suicide rates rose and crime rates skyrocketed, particularly murder rates.²⁴ So it is not surprising that there was fertile ground in American society for a theory of crime that placed virtually all the blame on the economic structure in the United States.

Not only was society ready for a perspective such as strain theory, but on the other side of the coin, Merton was highly influenced by what he saw happening to the country during the Great Depression. Specifically, he observed 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. After all, many individuals who had once been successful 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 updated and supplemented.

One of the key assumptions distinguishing strain theory from Durkheim's perspective is that Merton altered his version of what "anomie" means, a definition we will explore below. Specifically, Merton discussed the nearly universal socialization of the American Dream in U.S. society. To clarify, this is the idea that as long as someone works hard and pays his or her dues, that person will achieve every goal 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). So the conventional model of the American Dream was consistent with the Protestant work ethic of working hard for a long time and knowing you will be repaid in the distant future.

Furthermore, Merton claimed that nearly everyone is socialized to believe in the American Dream, no matter what economic class they are raised in. There is some empirical support for this belief, which makes sense because virtually all parents, even if they are poor, want to instill in their children a hope for the future, particularly if one is willing to work hard in school and/or at a job. In fact, parents and society usually use celebrities as examples of this process—namely, those individuals who started off poor and rose to wealth. Modern examples include former secretary of state Colin Powell, Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, Oscar winner Hilary Swank, and Hollywood director/screenwriter Quentin Tarantino, not to mention Arnold Schwarzenegger, who went from teenage immigrant to Mr. Olympia and governor of California.

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These stories epitomize the American Dream, but parents and society do not always teach the reality of the situation. As Merton points out, while a small percentage of persons can rise from the lower class to become materially successful, the vast majority of poor children really don't have much chance of ever obtaining such wealth. So it is this near-universal socialization of the American Dream, without it being obtainable in most cases, that causes most of the strain and frustration in American society. Furthermore, Merton claims that most of the strain and frustration is due not necessarily to the failure to achieve conventional goals (i.e., wealth) but rather to the differential emphasis placed on the material goals and the deemphasis of the importance of the conventional means.

Merton's Concept of Anomie and Strain.

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

There are numerous examples of how the goals are emphasized more than the means in our society, but perhaps the best way to illustrate this is through hypothetical situations. Which of the following two men would be more respected by youth (or even adults) in our society: (1) John, who has his PhD in physics but lives in a one-bedroom apartment because he can find only a job as a postdoctoral student for a stipend of \$25,000 a year, or (2) Joe, who is a relatively successful drug dealer who 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 this question in our classes, the answer, with few exceptions, is usually Joe, the drug dealer. After all, he appears to have obtained the American Dream.

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 chapter and/or to attend college. Specifically, the question is this: If you knew for a fact that you would not get a better employment position by studying this book or, furthermore, by earning a college degree, would you be learning this material just for your own edification? In more than a decade of posing this question to about 10,000 students in university courses, one of the authors of this book found that only about 5% (usually less) of respondents said yes. Interestingly, when asked the reason they would put all this work into attending classes, many of them said they would do it for the partying or social life. Ultimately, it appears 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 the emphasis is on the goals, with little or no intrinsic value placed on the work itself (i.e., the means). This phenomenon is not meant to be disheartening or a negative statement; after all, it is only meant to exhibit the reality of American culture and to show that it is quite common in our society to place an emphasis on the goal of financial success as opposed to hard work for hard work's sake.

Merton went on to say 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 of people. For example, people can work very hard in school and then get stuck in jobs that will never produce the type of material success promised them via the dream they were socialized to believe in. This revelation of the truth will likely take place when people are in their late teens to mid-20s, the time when crime tends to peak.

According to Merton, this is when the frustration or strain is evident, which is consistent with the peak of offending at the approximate age of 17. Therefore, some individuals begin to innovate ways that they can achieve the goals of society (i.e., material success) without having to use the conventional means of attaining them. Obviously, this is often through criminal activity. However, not all individuals deal with strain in this way; after all, most people who are poor do not resort to crime. To Merton's credit, one of the good things about his theory is that he explained that individuals deal in different ways with the limited economic structure of society. Merton referred to these variations in dealing with the revelation of the economic structure as **adaptations to strain**.

adaptations to strain: as proposed by Merton, the five ways that individuals deal with feelings of strain; see *conformity, innovation, rebellion, retreatism, and ritualism*.

Adaptations to Strain.

There are five adaptations to strain, according to Merton. The first of these is **conformity**, in which persons buy into the conventional goals of society but also buy into the conventional means of working hard in school or labor.²³ This would include the vast majority of the readers of this book, in the sense that, like most of you, conformists want to achieve material success and are willing to do so by conventional means such as educational effort and diligent work. As the label suggests, these individuals are conforming to the goals and means that society suggests. Another adaptation to strain is **ritualism**. Ritualists do not seek to achieve the goals of material success, probably because they know they don't have a realistic chance of obtaining such success. However, they do buy into the conventional means in the sense that they like to do their jobs or are happy just making ends meet. For example, studies have shown that some of the most content and happy people in society are those that don't seek to become rich; rather, they are quite content with their blue-collar jobs and often have a strong sense of pride in the work they do, even if it is sometimes menial. To clarify, such a person considers his or her work a type of ritual and performs it without a goal in mind; rather, the work itself is a form of intrinsic goal. Ultimately, conformists and ritualists tend to be at low risk for offending, in contrast to those

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who adopt other adaptations to strain.

The other three adaptations to strain are far more likely to lead to 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 of obtaining those goals. Obviously, drug dealers and professional auto thieves, as well as many other variations of chronic property criminals (e.g., bank robbers), fit this adaptation. To clarify, as their name suggests, they are innovating ways to achieve material goals without doing the hard work usually needed to succeed. However, innovators are not always criminals. In fact, many of them are the most respected individuals in our society. For example, some entrepreneurs have used the capitalistic system of our society to produce useful products and services (e.g., the men who designed Google for the Internet) and have made a fortune at young ages without advanced college educations or years of work at a company. Another example is 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, in which individuals do not seek to achieve the goals of society or buy into the idea of conventional hard work. There are many varieties of this adaptation, such as persons who become homeless by choice or persons 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 Montana cabin, which had no running water or electricity, and 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 actively disengage from social life and try to escape via psychologically altering drugs. All these forms of retreatists seek to drop out of society altogether, thus refusing to buy into the means or goals of society.

conformity: in strain theory, an adaptation to strain in which an individual buys into the conventional means of success and also buys into conventional goals.

ritualism: in strain theory, an adaptation to strain in which an individual buys into the conventional means of success (e.g., work, school, etc.) but does not buy into the conventional goals.

innovation: in strain theory, an adaptation to strain in which an individual buys into the conventional goals of success but does not buy into the conventional means for getting to the goals.

retreatism: in strain theory, an adaptation to strain in which an individual does not buy into the conventional goals of success and also does not buy into the conventional means.

rebellion: in strain theory, an adaptation to strain in which an individual buys into the idea of conventional means and goals of success but does not buy into the current conventional means or goals.

The last adaptation to strain, according to Merton, is rebellion—the most complex of the five adaptations. Interestingly, rebels buy into the idea of societal goals and means, but they do not buy into the conventional goals and means currently in place. Most true rebels are criminals by definition, largely because they are trying to overthrow the established 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 captured 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, who will be discussed later in this text. He bought into the goals and means of society, just not those of the current American culture. Rather, he proposed socialism/communism as a means to the goal of utopia. So there are many contexts in which a rebel can become a criminal, but sometimes rebels end up becoming heroes.

Merton also noted that one individual can represent more than one adaptation to strain. Perhaps the best example is the Unabomber, who started out as a conformist in that he was a respected professor at University of California, Berkeley, well on his way to tenure and promotion. He then seemed to shift to a retreatist state, isolating himself from society (as mentioned above). 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 (and which subsequently resulted in his apprehension, because his brother read it and informed authorities that he thought his brother had written it!).

Finally, some have applied an athletic analogy to these adaptations, which often helps in translating them to actual, everyday behavior.²⁴ In a basketball game, conformists will play to win, but they will always play by the rules and won't cheat to win. Ritualists will play the game just because they like to play, and they don't care about winning. Innovators will play to win, and they will break any rules they can to triumph in the game. Retreatists don't like to play and obviously don't care about winning. Finally, rebels will not like the rules on the official court, so they will try to steal the ball and 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 resorting to criminal activity.

Learning Check 8.3

1. According to Merton's theory, which type of individual deals with strain by emphasizing the conventional goals of success without any consideration for the conventional means of gaining such success?
 1. Ritualists
 2. Conformists
 3. Retreatists
 4. Rebels
 5. Innovators

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2. According to Merton's theory, which type of individual deals with strain by emphasizing the conventional means of gaining success without any consideration for the conventional goals of such success?
 1. Ritualists
 2. Conformists
 3. Retreatists
 4. Rebels
 5. Innovators
3. According to Merton's theory, which type of individual deals with strain by emphasizing the conventional goals of success as well as strongly considering the conventional means for gaining such success?
 1. Ritualists
 2. Conformists
 3. Retreatists
 4. Rebels
 5. Innovators

Answers located at www.edge.sagepub.com/schram2e

Evidence and Criticisms of Merton's Strain Theory

Although Merton's framework, which emphasized the importance of the economic structure, appeared to have a high degree of face validity during the Great Depression, many scientific studies showed mixed support for strain theory. While research that examined 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 or no relationship between social class and criminality.²⁵ Furthermore, the idea that unemployment drives people to commit crime has received little support.²⁶

On the other hand, some experts have argued that Merton's strain theory is primarily a structural model of crime that is more a theory of societal groups than of individual motivations.²⁷ 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.²⁸ Furthermore, the case study provided at the beginning of this chapter, that of Cristian Alfredo Urquijo or the "Black Binder Bandit," clearly shows that in some cases economic desperation is a primary motivation in committing robberies for financial survival. 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.

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 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.²⁹ The rationale of these studies is that if an individual has high aspirations (i.e., goals) 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. In fact, several studies found that for most antisocial respondents, there was virtually no gap between aspirations and expectations. Rather, most of the subjects (typically young males) who reported the highest levels of criminal activity 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 unlikely. One interpretation of these findings is that individuals who have high goals will not jeopardize their chances for obtaining such aspirations, even when they realize their chances 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 (discussed in the following chapters), it does not provide support for strain theory.

Some critics have argued that most studies on the discrepancies between aspirations and expectations have not been done correctly. For example, Farnworth and Leiber claimed that it was a mistake to examine the differences between educational goals and expectations, or differences between occupational goals and expectations, which is what most of these studies did.³⁰ Rather, they proposed testing the gap between economic aspirations (i.e., goals) and educational expectations (i.e., means of achieving these goals). Not only does this make sense, but Farnworth and Leiber found support for a gap between these two factors being predictive of criminality. However, they also report that persons who reported having low economic aspirations were more likely to be delinquent, which supports the previous studies they criticized. Another criticism of this type of strain theory study is that it is possible that simply reporting a gap between expectations and aspirations does not necessarily mean that the individuals actually feel strained; rather, researchers have simply, and perhaps wrongfully, assumed that a gap between the two measures indicates feelings of frustration.³¹

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—namely, the late 1960s. Crime increased more than ever before (that we have measures for) between 1965 and 1973, which were generally good economic years in the United States. 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, it can be argued that the growth in the economy in the 1960s

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and early 1970s may have caused even more disparity between rich and 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. Specifically, in virtually every society in the world, across time and place, predatory street crimes (e.g., robbery, rape, murder, burglary, larceny, etc.) tend to peak sharply in the teenage years to early 20s and then drop off quickly, certainly before age 30. However, most studies show that feelings of stress and frustration tend to continue rising after age 30 and do not diminish significantly. For example, suicide rates tend to be just as high or higher as one ages, with persons over 55 showing the highest rates of suicide.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the reason why strain continues or even increases as one ages but the rates of crime go down is that individuals develop coping mechanisms for dealing with their frustrations. This idea seems to make sense, and while Merton never discussed (outside the adaptations) actual methods of coping with strain, a variation of Merton's theory—general strain theory—did emphasize this concept. Before we cover general strain theory, we will discuss two other variations of Merton's theory that were developed within a five-year period (1955–1960) to explain gang formation and behavior using a structural strain framework.

Variations of Merton's Strain 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.³² In Cohen's model, young males from lower classes are at a disadvantage in school because they lack the normal interaction, socialization, and discipline instituted by educated parents of the middle class, which is in line with Merton's original framework of a predisposed disadvantage among underclass youth. According to Cohen, such youths are likely to experience failure in school due to this lack of preparation in conforming with middle-class values, so they fail to live up to what is considered the "middle-class measuring rod," which emphasizes factors such as motivation, accountability, responsibility, deferred gratification, long-term planning, respect for authority and property, and controlling emotions.

Like Merton, Cohen emphasized the youths' internalization of the American Dream and fair chances for success, leading to frustration when they fail to be successful according to this middle-class standard. This strain that they feel due to 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 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 the opposite of what is expected—a form of defiance and avoidance of guilt for not living up to the assumed standards. According to Cohen, these lower-class male youths will adopt a normative value system that defies the very values they are expected to live up to. 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: namely, they value malicious, negativistic, and nonutilitarian delinquent activity.

For example, these 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 defy the conventional order. In other words, they turn the middle-class values upside down and consider activity that violates the conventional norms and laws, thereby psychologically and physically rejecting the cultural system placed on them without benefit of equal 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 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 middle-class normative culture.

Cohen stated that he believed this tendency to reject middle-class values is the primary cause of gangs, because a number of these lower-class individuals who have experienced the same strains (i.e., status frustration) and experiences form a group—a classic example of "birds of a feather flock together." Cohen claimed that 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**, are 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 the middle-class schools despite his unlikely chances for success. On the other hand, the "corner boy" responds to the situation by accepting his place in society as a lower-class individual who will somewhat passively make the best of life at the bottom of the social order.

As compared with Merton's original adaptations, Cohen's delinquent boy is probably most similar to rebellion, because the delinquent boy rejects the means and goals (middle-class values and success in school) of conventional society and replaces them with new means and goals (negativistic behaviors and peer respect in a gang). Some would argue that delinquent boys should be seen as innovators, because their goal is ultimately the same: peer respect. But the 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 best is conformity, because the college boy continues to believe in the conventional goals (i.e., financial success/achievement) and means (i.e., hard work via education/labor) of middle-class society. Finally, the corner boy probably best fits the adaptation of ritualism, because he knows that he likely will never achieve the goals of society, so he essentially resigns himself to not obtaining financial success. At the same time, he does not resort to predatory street crime but, rather, holds a stable blue-collar job or makes ends meet in other typically legal ways. Some corner boys who end up simply collecting welfare and giving up on work altogether may actually become more like the adaptation of retreatism, because they have virtually given up on the conventional means (hard work) of society

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as well as the goals.

reaction formation: a Freudian defense mechanism applied to Cohen's theory of youth offending, which involves adopting attitudes or committing behaviors that are opposite of what is expected.

delinquent boy: a type of lower-class male youth, identified by Cohen, who responds to strains and status frustration by joining with similar others in a group to commit crime.

college boy: a type of lower-class male youth who has experienced the same strains and status frustration as his peers but responds to his disadvantaged situation by dedicating himself to overcoming the odds and competing in the middle-class schools despite his unlikely chances for success.

corner boy: a type of lower-class male youth who has experienced the same strains and status frustration as others but responds to his disadvantaged situation by accepting his place in society as someone who will somewhat passively make the best of life at the bottom of the social order. As the label describes, such youth often hang out on corners.

At the time when Cohen developed his theory, official statistics showed that virtually all gang violence—and most violence, for that matter—was concentrated among lower-class male youths. However, with the development of self-report studies in the 1960s, his theory was shown to be somewhat overstated in the sense that middle-class youths were well represented in committing delinquent acts.³³ 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 a gang. Although the findings are mixed, many studies have found that delinquency is often higher before the youths drop out of school and may actually decline once they drop out and become employed.³⁴ Some critics have pointed out that such findings discredit Cohen's theory, but this is not necessarily true. After all, delinquency may be peaking right before the youths drop out because that is the time when they feel most frustrated and strained, whereas delinquency may be decreasing after they drop out because some of the youths are raising their self-esteem by earning a wage and taking pride in holding a job.

Organized crime syndicates are typically found in neighborhoods with more structured criminal organizations, which mentor youth in these neighborhoods and result in a prevalence of criminal gangs.



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Still, studies have clearly shown that lower-class youths are far more likely to have problems in school and that school achievement is consistently linked with criminality.³⁵ 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 tagging walls? This is an act that will never gain much in the lines of money or any other form of payoff aside from 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 other value 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 A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin presented yet another structural strain theory of gang formation and behavior.³⁶ Similar to Merton and Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin assumed that all youths, including those in the lower class, are socialized to believe in the American Dream and that when they realize they are blocked from conventional opportunities, they become frustrated and strained. What distinguishes Cloward and Ohlin's theory from 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. To clarify, the nature of gangs varies 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, and 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 (see [Chapter 10](#)) influence on their theory, and this influence is evident in their focus on the neighborhood associations that largely determine what type of gang will form. According to differential opportunity theory, the three types of gangs are criminal gangs, conflict gangs, and retreatist gangs.

Criminal gangs are those that form in lower-class neighborhoods that have an organized structure of adult criminal behavior. Such neighborhoods are so organized and stable that the criminal networks are often known and accepted by the conventional portion of individuals in the area. The adult gangsters in these neighborhoods mentor the youth and take them under their wing. This can pay off for the adult criminals, too, because youth can often be used to do the “dirty work” for the criminal enterprises in the neighborhood without risk of serious punishment if caught. The successful adult offenders supply the youth with the motives and techniques for committing crime. So while members of criminal gangs are blocked from legal opportunities, they are offered ample opportunities in the illegal realm.

Due to the strong organization and stability of such neighborhoods, criminal gangs tend to reflect this high degree of organization and stability. Therefore, criminal gangs primarily commit property or economic crimes, with the goal of making a profit through illegal behavior. These crimes can range from “running numbers” as local bookies to “fencing” stolen goods to running businesses that are a front for vice crimes (e.g., prostitution, drug trading). Regardless of the type, they all involve making a profit illegally, and there is often a system or structure in which the criminal activity takes place. Furthermore, these criminal gangs are most like the Merton adaptation of innovation (discussed previously in this chapter) because the members still want to achieve the goals of conventional society (financial success). Because of the strong organizational structure of these gangs, they are not as conducive to individuals who are highly impulsive or uncontrolled as they are to those who have self-control and are good at planning for the future.

Examples of criminal gangs are seen in movies depicting highly organized neighborhoods (often consisting of primarily one ethnicity)—movies such as *The Godfather*, *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 these depictions involve a highly structured hierarchy in a criminal enterprise, which is largely a manifestation of the organization of the neighborhood. The Hollywood motion pictures also involve stories about the older criminals in the neighborhood taking younger males from the neighborhood under their wing and training them in the ways of the criminal network. Furthermore, virtually all ethnic groups have examples of this type of gang/neighborhood; for example, in looking at the list of movies above, there are Italian-American, Irish-American, African-American, and Asian-American representations. 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 are another type of gang that Cloward 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 because people are constantly moving in and out of the area. Because the youth in the neighborhood do not have a solid crime network or adult criminal mentors, they tend to form together as a relatively disorganized gang. Due to this disorganization, they typically lack the skills and knowledge to make a profit through criminal activity. Therefore, the primary illegal activity of conflict gangs is violence. This violence is used to gain prominence and respect among themselves and the neighborhood, but due to the disorganized nature of the neighborhood as well as the gang itself, conflict gangs never quite achieve the respect and stability of criminal gangs. The members of conflict gangs tend to be more impulsive and lack self-control compared with members of criminal gangs, largely because there are no adult criminal mentors to control them.

criminal gangs: a type of gang identified by Cloward and Ohlin that forms in lower-class neighborhoods with an organized structure of adult criminal behavior. Such gangs tend to be highly organized and stable.

conflict gangs: a type of gang identified by Cloward and Ohlin that tends to develop in neighborhoods with weak stability and little or no organization; gangs are typically relatively disorganized and lack the skills and knowledge to make a profit through criminal activity.

According to Cloward and Ohlin, conflict gangs are blocked not only from legitimate opportunities but also from illegitimate opportunities. If applying Merton's adaptations, conflict gangs would probably fit the category of rebellion best, largely because none of the other categories fits

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well. But it can 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 result in a mostly violent gang culture include *Menace to Society*, *Boyz n the Hood*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Colors*, *The Outsiders*, and others that emphasize the chaos and violence that results when neighborhood and family organization is weak.

Many gangs thrive more on violence than on profit-making activities. Such gangs, called conflict gangs, tend to be more territorial and are often found in neighborhoods lacking the structure provided by established crime syndicates.



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Finally, if an individual is a “double failure” in both the legitimate and illegitimate worlds, meaning he or she can’t achieve success in school or status in a local gang, that person may join other such people to form a retreatist gang. **Retreatist gangs** are made up of those individuals who have failed to succeed in the conventional world and also could not achieve status in the criminal or conflict gangs of their neighborhoods. Because members of retreatist gangs are no good at making a profit from crime (like criminal gang members) or at using violence to achieve status (like conflict gang members), their primary form of offending is usually drug usage. Like Merton’s retreatist adaptation to strain, members of retreatist gangs often simply want to escape from reality. Therefore, the primary activity of the gang is usually getting high, which is well represented in such movies as *Trainspotting*, *Drugstore Cowboy*, and *Panic in Needle Park*. In all these movies, the only true goal of the gangs is to get stoned and escape from the world in which they have failed.

There were a number of empirical studies and critiques of Cloward and Ohlin’s theory, with much of the criticism being similar to that of Merton’s strain theory—specifically, that there is little evidence that gaps between what lower-class youth aspire to and expect to achieve are predictive of feelings of frustration and strain, or that such gaps are predictive of gang membership or criminality.³⁷ Another criticism of Cloward 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 specialization 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 specialization of gangs is not exactly the way Cloward and Ohlin proposed.³⁸ 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 Cloward and Ohlin’s model of gang formation, their theoretical framework inspired policy, largely due to the influence of their work for Attorney General Robert Kennedy. In fact, Kennedy asked Ohlin to assist in developing federal policies regarding

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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. Although evaluations of this program showed little effect in reducing delinquency,³⁹ it was impressive that such theorizing about lower-class male youths could have such a large impact on policy interventions.

Ultimately, the variations of strain theory presented by Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin provided additional revisions that seemed at the time to advance the validity of strain theory. However, as discussed above, most of these revisions were based on official statistics that showed lower-class male youths as committing the most crime, which were later shown by self-reports to be exaggerated.⁴⁰ Due to the realization that most of the earlier models of strain were not empirically valid for most criminal activity, strain theory became unpopular for several decades. But during the 1980s, another version of strain was devised by Robert Agnew, who rejuvenated the interest in strain theory by devising a theory that made the theory more general and applicable to a larger variety of crimes and forms of deviance.

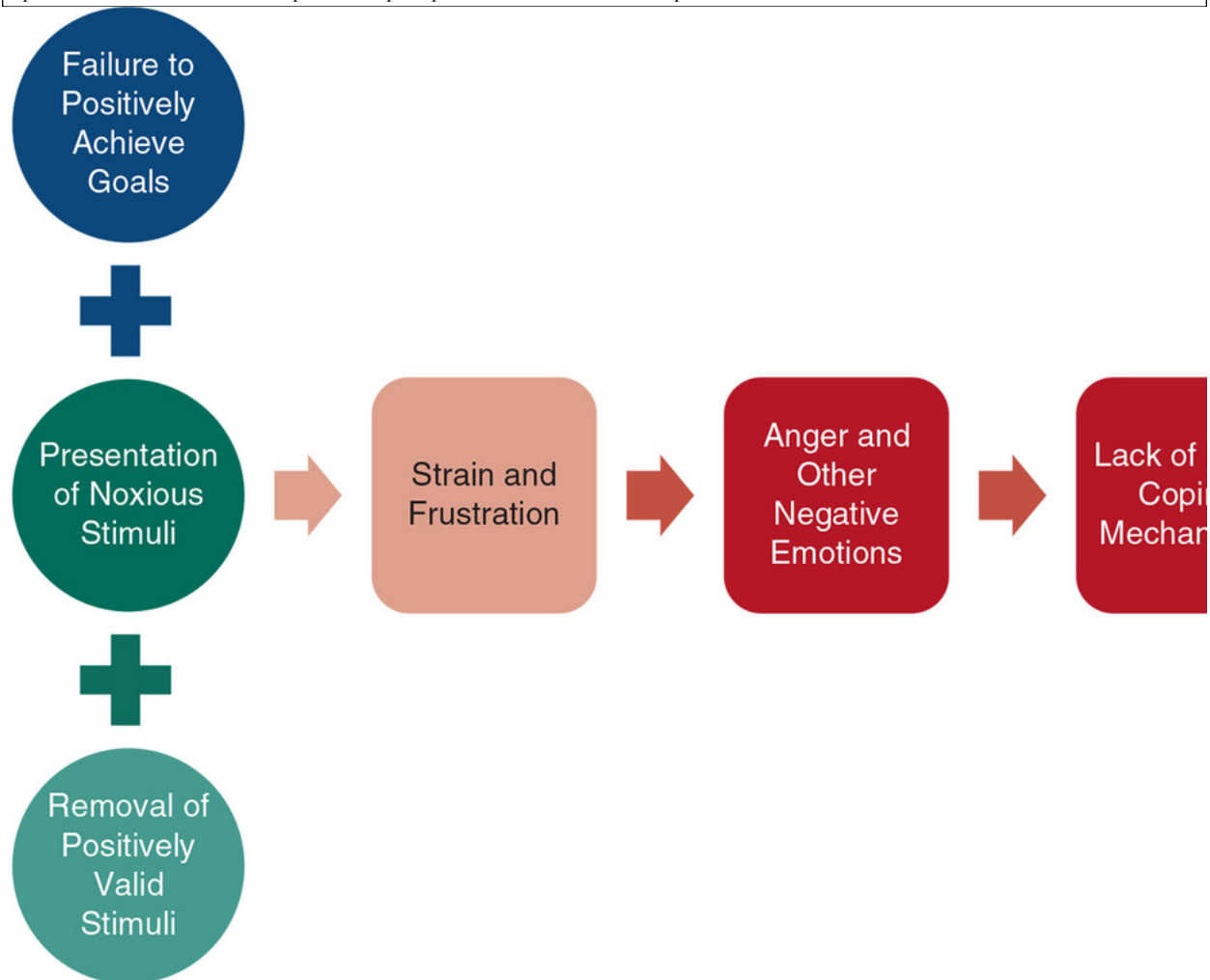
retreatist gangs: a type of gang identified by Cloward and Ohlin that tends to attract individuals who have failed to succeed in both the conventional world and the criminal or conflict gangs of their neighborhoods.

General Strain Theory

In the 1980s, Robert Agnew proposed general strain theory, which includes a much larger range of behavior due to not concentrating on simply the lower class and provides a more applicable model for the frustrations that all individuals feel in everyday life.⁴¹ Unlike other strain theories, which all assumed the internalization of the American Dream and the resulting frustration when it was revealed as a false promise to those of the lower classes, general strain theory does not necessarily rely on this assumption. Rather, this theoretical framework assumes that people of all social classes and economic positions deal with frustrations in routine daily life, which virtually everyone can relate to.

Specifically, 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 toward. Like these previous models, general strain theory also focuses on this source of strain; however, general strain theory emphasizes two additional categories of strain: *presentation of noxious stimuli* and *removal of positively valued stimuli* (see [Figure 8.2](#)). 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 an abusive parent, a teacher who always picks on one student, or a boss who puts undue strain on one employee. These are just some of the many negative factors that can exist in one's life, and the examples of this category of strain are endless.

Figure 8.2 Model of General Strain Theory



Why Do They Do It?



Christopher Dorner

In early February 2013, Christopher Dorner went on a killing spree in Southern California that resulted in four people dead, including two police officers, and three officers wounded. His intent was to murder as many law enforcement officers as possible, especially those whom he blamed for losing his job with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), where he had served as an officer from 2005 to 2008. One of the initial victims of his killing spree included the daughter (and her fiancé) of the LAPD captain who unsuccessfully represented him in his appeal of charges of misconduct while on patrol.

Dorner made his intentions quite clear in a “manifesto” he wrote and posted on his Facebook page just before he began his killing spree. In this manifesto, he listed many individuals he planned to stalk and kill, as well as celebrities and others whom he claimed to admire, such as the actor Charlie Sheen. He also made very clear in the manifesto that his goal was to get the LAPD to admit that his termination was in retaliation for reporting excessive force by a fellow officer. After his initial killings, he fled to Big Bear, California, in San Bernardino County, where he burned his truck and holed up in a vacant residence.

Dorner’s rampage led to one of the largest manhunts in LAPD history, involving many other agencies in the search. These agencies included the San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Office and several federal agencies, such as the U.S. Fish & Wildlife agency, whose agent finally spotted Dorner and exchanged gunfire with him just before the siege that took place at the cabin near the small town of Angelus Oaks, California, in the San Bernardino National Forest.

Despite Dorner’s killing of innocent victims, many people came out to support him for taking a stand against the LAPD. Although the authors of this book find it hard to believe, he did gain much support in stalking and killing police officers and their family members. Perhaps Dorner gained this support by articulating his reasons, albeit sometimes delusionally (e.g., praising drug-addicted, sex-crazed celebrities), in his manifesto.

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Christopher Dorner went on a shooting spree, killing police officers and innocent victims in retaliation for his termination from the LAPD.



U.S. Marshals Service photo

Dorner shot himself in the head during the mountain siege, after an intense gun battle that killed two more officers. (It is notable that one of the coauthors of this book [Tibbetts] lives in Angelus Oaks. The official population, according to the 2010 Census, is 535.) Law enforcement authorities used incendiary devices to force Dorner out of the cottage, which elicited an outcry from some of Dorner's supporters, who saw this as an attempt to kill the suspect by whatever means available. Regardless of the motives of law enforcement officers, Dorner was neutralized.

So why did Dorner do it? Given the reasons laid out in his manifesto, he likely was feeling frustrated or strained after being fired from the LAPD as well as being relieved from his service in a U.S. Naval Reserve unit on February 1, 2013. So in addition to an unstable psychological state (which his manifesto reveals, along with documented past domestic issues with several of his former romantic partners), he was likely acting out a deep-seated anger that stemmed from his being fired by the LAPD. Thus, general strain theory, which places a focus on anger, as well as lack of more conventional coping mechanisms is likely the best theory for explaining why Dorner took out his frustrations by killing both law enforcement officers and innocent family members of persons against whom he wanted to exact revenge.

Think About It:

1. Can you articulate reasons why Dorner's case is a good example of strain/general strain theory?
2. Do you see any justification to Dorner's actions, based on the issues in his past and his frustrations?

Sources: Cart, J., & Stevens, M. (2013, February 12). Dorner manhunt: Fish and Wildlife officers make the big break. *Los Angeles Times*. Lloyd, J., Ebright, O., Pamer, M., & Tata, S. (2013, February 28). Charred human remains found in rubble of Big Bear-area cabin. *NBC News*.

Individuals experience stressors every day, and general strain theory emphasizes the importance of stress and anger in increasing the likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior, especially when individuals have not developed healthy coping mechanisms.



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The other strain category Agnew identified was the removal of positive stimuli (i.e., good things), which is likely the largest cause of

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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 loss of a loved one. Like the other two sources of strain, examples of removal of positive aspects are infinite, and these may have varying degrees of influence depending on the individual. To clarify, one person may not feel much frustration from losing a job or divorcing his or her 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 a propensity to feel *anger*. Anger can be seen as a primary mediating factor in the causal model of the general strain framework. In other words, it is predicted that to the extent that the three sources of strain cause feelings of anger in an individual, that individual will be predisposed to commit crime and deviance. However, Agnew was clear in stating that if an individual can somehow cope with this anger in a positive way, then such feelings do not necessarily have to result in criminal activity. These coping mechanisms vary widely across individuals, with certain strategies working better for some people than for others. For example, some people destress by working out or running, whereas others do so by watching 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 stress. Another is yoga, which largely includes simple breathing techniques such as taking several deep breaths, which is physiologically shown to enhance release of stress (see any studies on stress reduction done in the past few decades).

Although he did not originally provide details on how coping mechanisms work or explore the extant psychological research on these strategies, Agnew specifically pointed to such mechanisms in dealing with anger in prosocial ways. The primary prediction regarding coping mechanisms is that individuals who find ways to deal with their stress and anger in a positive way will no longer be predisposed to commit crime, whereas individuals who do not find a healthy, positive outlet 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 with strain, such as drug usage, aggression, and so forth, which are either criminal in themselves or increase the likelihood of offending.

Evidence and Criticisms of General Strain Theory

Fortunately, recent research and theoretical development have 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 their personal abilities to cope with such feelings, general strain theory places more emphasis on the micro level of analysis. Still, due to its origins in structural strain theory, it is included in this chapter and is typically classified as belonging to the category of strain theories that includes the earlier, more macro-level-oriented theories. Additionally, recent studies and revisions of the theory have attempted to examine the validity of general strain theory propositions at the macro, structural level.⁴²

Since general strain theory was first proposed in the mid-1980s, there has been a vast amount of research examining various aspects of the theory.⁴³ 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 a link between the sources of strain and feelings of anger or other negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression).⁴⁴ However, there have been criticisms of the theory, and especially of the way the theory has been tested.

For example, similar to the problems with using objective indicators to measure perceptions of deterrence (as discussed in previous chapters), 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 looked only at the latter, and the validity of such findings is questionable.⁴⁵ Fortunately, a number of other studies have directly measured subjective perceptions of frustration as well as personal feelings of anger.⁴⁶

Such studies have found mixed support for the hypothesis that certain events lead to anger⁴⁷ but less support for the prediction that anger leads to criminality, and this link is particularly weak for nonviolent offending.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the most recent studies have found support for the links between strain and anger as well as between anger and criminal behavior, particularly when coping variables are considered.⁴⁹ Still, many of the studies that do examine the effects of anger incorporate indicators of anger using 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.⁵⁰ This is similar to the methodological criticism, discussed in other chapters in this text, that has been leveled against studies of self-conscious emotions, particularly shame and guilt; namely, 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 straining 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 the tendency to react differently to similar situations based on what type of day they are having. For example, we all have days when everything seems to be going great—it is 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 on such a day, you will probably be inclined to let it go. On the other hand, we also all have days when everything seems to be going horribly wrong—it is Monday, you get blamed for mishaps at work, and you have a fight with your spouse or significant other. On a day such as this, if someone yells at you or cuts you off in traffic, you may be more inclined to respond aggressively. Or perhaps more commonly, you will overreact and snap at a loved one or friend when he or she didn't do much to deserve it; this is a form of displacement in which a cumulative buildup of stressors causes us to lash out. In many ways, this supports general strain theory and its prevalence in everyday life.

Learning Check 8.4

1. According to Agnew, which of the following is NOT one of the key reasons why individuals become strained or frustrated?
 1. Failure to acquire goals/expectations
 2. Dealing with negative stimuli
 3. Loss of positive stimuli
 4. Low self-control
2. Which type of adaptation to strain did Cohen NOT label/identify in his theory?
 1. Corner boy
 2. Drug boy
 3. College boy
 4. Delinquent boy
3. Which of the following types of gangs did Cloward and Ohlin NOT label/identify in their theory of gangs?
 1. Ritualistic gangs
 2. Conflict gangs
 3. Criminal gangs
 4. Retreatist gangs

Answers located at www.edge.sagepub.com/schram2e

Why Do They Do It?



Gang Lu

Gang Lu was a PhD graduate at the University of Iowa in 1991 when he entered a meeting of his former academic department and shot and killed several faculty members (including the chair of his PhD dissertation committee and two other committee members). He also shot and killed a student, his former roommate and winner of the elite Spriestersbach Dissertation Prize—awarded to an outstanding PhD candidate for exemplary research in the field of physics, including a \$2,500 reward and nomination as a candidate for a prize on the national level. After Lu shot these people, he proceeded to another building, where he shot and killed the associate vice president for academic affairs and the campus grievance officer, to whom Lu had made numerous complaints about not being nominated/chosen as a candidate for the Spriestersbach prize. In addition to the prize money, Lu believed that winning this award would have helped him get hired as a tenure-track professor.

He also shot a temporary student employee in the grievance office; she was paralyzed but survived the attack. Apparently, the president of the university was also on Lu's "hit list," but he happened to be out of town the day of the shootings. Lu was later found dead in a campus room, where he had shot himself in the head. Lu used a .38-caliber revolver in the attack.

So why did Lu perform this massacre? It is likely that one of the primary reasons can be explained by both traditional and general strain theories examined in this chapter. Specifically, he failed to obtain positively valued goals (the dissertation award) despite high expectations, which is consistent with the original version of strain theory proposed by Merton. However, anger over not winning the award and his complaints going unaddressed was clearly a key factor in his actions, and this anger is best explained by Agnew's general strain theory, which was also discussed in this chapter as a more recent and robust framework regarding how strain and frustration can increase propensities to commit crimes. Lu obviously did not deal or cope with this frustration and anger in a healthy way, which is also key in general strain theory; those with healthy coping mechanisms to strain and stress are typically fine, but those who can't deal with it in a positive way are likely to be predisposed to violence or other illegal activity.

A movie—titled *Dark Matter*—starring Meryl Streep and Aiden Quinn and largely based on this event was released in 2007 and won the Sloan Prize at the Sundance Film Festival that year. It is not a factual depiction of what occurred in this case, but it hits close to the mark in portraying why Lu might have committed this act.

Think About It:

1. Can you articulate why Gang Lu's case appears to be a good example of general strain theory?
2. Do you see a way that there could have been some early predictors or interventions that could have prevented Gang Lu's actions?

Sources: Beard, J. A. (1997, June 24). The fourth state of matter. *New Yorker*. Eckhardt, M. L. (2001, November 1). 10 years later: U. Iowa remembers fatal day. *Daily Iowan*; Marriott, M. (1991, November 3). Gunman in Iowa wrote of plans in five letters. *New York Times*.

Applying Theory to Crime: Bank Robbery



Bank robbery is a special type of robbery that, unlike the everyday "street" robberies we discussed in a [previous chapter](#), is within the jurisdiction of the FBI as opposed to local police authorities. Robbery is defined by the FBI in its Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) as "the taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force or violence and/or putting the victim in fear." Thus, bank robbery is a special form of robbery but robbery nonetheless. A working definition of bank robbery is the act of entering a bank when it is open (or when some person is on the premises) to take money or other goods, and then taking them by force or threat of force. It should be noted that if a break-in occurs at a bank and no one is there, it is typically defined as a burglary (see [Chapter 5](#)).

Each year, the FBI puts together a comprehensive review of the many thousands of bank robberies in the United States, which we will review below. But first, it is important to mention that there is no established, systematically collected database of bank robberies for other countries throughout the world. In fact, virtually all other countries simply include bank robberies with other types of robbery that occur in a given year. That said, the United States likely is well represented in the world in terms of bank robbery. We say that with confidence given the data from the FBI.

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In 2015, the FBI reported that at least 4,030 bank robberies were committed in the United States. Notably, this did not include more than 50 bank burglaries (those occurring when the bank was closed); as you may recall from a [previous chapter](#), robberies are inherently violent, so someone must be present for a robbery to occur.

Some interesting statistics about these bank robberies in 2015 (largely because such distributions do not tend to differ much from year to year) include gender and race of the offender, day of the week, time of day, type of bank, areas of the bank involved, and modus operandi. Regarding gender, the vast majority of bank robbers were male (4,388; note: this number exceeds the number of incidents because sometimes there are multiple offenders in these bank robberies) versus female (359). This statistic backs up data previously reviewed in the text showing that males commit the overwhelming majority of violent crimes; in this case, females made up less than 8% of all bank robbers. In terms of race, black robbers (2,121) outnumbered white offenders (1,919), despite making up only about 13.3% of the general population. This is likely due to their high rates of poverty in our nation, which makes sense especially in terms of the theories reviewed in this chapter.

Another notable factor in the etiology of bank robbery in the United States is that of day of the week as well as time of day. The modal category for day is Friday (789), which makes sense because offenders may be thinking about getting money for weekend activities. Friday is followed by Tuesday (710) followed by Monday (672) and Wednesday (672), perhaps because offenders didn't have the foresight to anticipate the weekend but feel that they need to make up for what they spent on the weekend (just an educated guess), or perhaps they believe the banks have the most money on hand those days. Consistent with this theory, Saturday is the least likely day for bank robberies.

One of the more consistent predictors of bank robbery is the time of day when most robbers hit banks. In the report, as well as for the past few decades, bank robbers were most likely to offend between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m., with the highest peak coming in the hour between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. A theory for why offenders seem to choose this time most often is that they want some of the money that flows in during the first hour (with most banks opening at 9 a.m.) but want to avoid the "lunch-hour" banking rush, when there are many witnesses.

Another factor highlighted by the FBI's 2015 report is that of the type of bank location robbed. In 2015, the main office was rarely robbed, whereas the primary robberies were among branch offices (3,926 robberies), with other locations such as in-store branches and other remote facilities being robbed infrequently. Also, in 2015, metropolitan banks were robbed far more often (1,940 robberies) than were banks in suburbs, small cities, or rural locations. Additionally, in 2015, nearly all the bank robberies were carried out at the bank counter (3,920 robberies) as opposed to the vault/safe, safe deposit boxes, office area, drive-in/walk-up, armored vehicles, or other areas.

Finally—and this may come as a surprise, given the current Hollywood depictions of "takeover robberies," such as in the movies *Heat* and *The Town*—the vast majority of bank robberies in 2015 (as well as for every year in the past few decades) were committed by a demand note (2,416) followed by an oral demand (2,146), usually presented to the teller at the counter.

It is likely that bank robbery is largely driven by unemployment and/or poverty, especially during hard economic times. In one notable recent incident, a jobless man was arrested for committing a dozen bank robberies across the Phoenix valley. The man, Cristian Alfredo Urquijo, discussed in the case study at the beginning of this chapter, told authorities that he did it to survive and that "desperation was a great motivator."

Urquijo's case is reflective of some of the various theories discussed in this chapter, especially those regarding strain theory. After all, we are talking about a man who, up to that time, appeared to have a clean record. However, when he was suddenly unemployed, he innovated a new way to obtain the money he needed to survive. In addition, according to general strain theory, when positive stimuli are removed (such as a stable job), individuals are more likely to engage in criminal offending, especially when such illegal acts are attempts to replace the lost positive stimuli (in this case, income from work).

Think About It:

1. How do peak times of bank robberies differ from that of other robberies? Can you provide a reason or reasons for this?
2. Why do you think "takeover" bank robberies are far rarer than "oral command" or "passing note to the teller" bank robberies?

Sources: Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2016). *Bank crime statistics 2015: Federally insured financial institutions, January 1, 2015–December 31, 2015*. Washington, DC: Author; Jobless Arizona bank robber says he "stole to survive." (2011, August 23). *Reuters*.

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 or handle such 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 points throughout the 20th century, they all became accepted during eras that were politically and culturally conducive to such perspectives, especially regarding the differences across the strain models. For example, Merton's formulation of strain, which emphasized the importance of the economic institution, was developed and became 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 the 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 period when a number of general theories of crime were being developed (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi's low self-control theory and Sampson and Laub's developmental theory); thus, such models were popular at that time, particularly those that emphasized personality traits (such as anger) and experiences of individuals. So all the variations of strain, like all the theories discussed in this book, were manifestations of the periods in which they were developed and became widely accepted by academics, politicians, and society.

Policy Implications of Strain Theory

Although this chapter deals 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 policies that are most relevant in contemporary times and

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are key factors in the most modern versions of this perspective. Specifically, the factors that are most vital for policy regarding social structure are those involving educational and vocational opportunities and programs that develop healthy coping mechanisms to deal with stress.

Comparative Criminology: Bank Robbery



Ranking U.S. States on Bank Robbery and Notable Findings From Other Nations

There is no systematic database for occurrences of bank robbery across various nations. Thus, we are largely going to compare various states and regions of the United States and then discuss some findings from other foreign nations.

First, it must be said that bank robbery in the United States has declined significantly over the past two decades, which is consistent with other violent crimes (e.g., homicide) during this most recent time period. For the most recent year for which preliminary data are available (2010), bank robberies once again declined. In 2010, there were just over 5,600 bank robberies (a significant decrease [by about 400] from 2009), in which the offenders got away with about \$42 million (of that, authorities recovered about \$8 million). As in previous years, the vast majority of these offenses were committed at the bank counter via a demand note. Of course, there are many other types of bank robberies, such as “takeover” robberies (which usually include more than one armed offender forcing everyone in the bank to “get down”). But regardless of type or modus operandi of the robberies, they are all counted the same in most FBI data because they are all attempted or true bank robberies.

In 2010, California, as usual, recorded by far the most bank robberies, at 805 for the year; Texas was a distant second at 464. It should be said that California does have more people than any other state, but even when accounting for the population, California remains overrepresented in bank robberies compared with virtually all states. The other primary states that had high bank robbery numbers were Ohio (263) and Florida (243). Just for comparison among U.S. states, it is notable that North Dakota had only two bank robberies in 2010. Once again, it is important to note that North Dakota has a far lower population than the other states discussed above, but even when standardizing the rates per capita, North Dakota is far lower in bank robberies than those other jurisdictions.

Virtually no foreign nations keep, or at least release publicly, records on bank robbery (at least on the government level) as the FBI does in the United States. Rather, most countries tend to lump incidents of bank robbery in with other types of robbery. Therefore, in this comparative section, we will simply examine some of the statistics and findings that have been provided regarding bank robberies in various countries.

As in the United States, bank robberies in Canada in recent years took place in more urban areas. In fact, banks in only seven cities in Canada were responsible for about 66% of all bank robberies despite having only about 30% of bank branches. The same can be said for the United Kingdom; London has only about 10% of bank branches but reported about 39% of the bank robberies in the whole United Kingdom. The concentration of bank robberies in urban areas is largely attributed to their location, especially in terms of the nearby highways or freeways that allow for more opportunity to escape via fast-moving traffic. Furthermore, a recent study showed that one third of the banks robbed in the United Kingdom were robbed again soon after, specifically in the following three months. However, the same can be said for banks in the United States; if a particular bank is robbed, it greatly increases its chances of being robbed again, especially if the first robbery was successful (i.e., the offenders were not caught).

A study by the Australian Institute of Criminology examined more than 800 bank robberies that occurred in Australia between 1998 and 2002. It was found that the majority (55%) of the incidents were committed by a lone offender, similar to incidents in the United States. This study also found that pairs or multiple offenders inflicted the most injuries on victims at the scene and used disguises most often.

Overall, the trends regarding bank robberies in other similar, industrialized countries seem highly consistent with the trends in the United States. It is important to note that recent developments in crime prevention (e.g., bulletproof teller windows) and biometric technology (e.g., video, fingerprint scanners) make it much harder to access the vaults of various banks in the countries we have discussed. Perhaps this is why bank robberies have fallen dramatically in most of these countries, especially in the United States—even in Southern California, where bank robberies occur less than half as often as they did two decades ago.

Ultimately, although the rates of bank robberies vary across nations, many of the countries that are most like the United States (e.g., Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia) appear to have the same trends in the way bank robberies are committed. So perhaps the most intriguing conclusion is that offenders tend to think the same way across various countries. Still, given that most of the countries in the world do not report specific data on bank robberies, we are going only on what official data have been reported by the countries discussed above. Hopefully, in the future, there will be more readiness among nations to report rates and characteristics of bank robbery.

Think About It:

1. Are there more similarities or differences between other countries and the United States in terms of various issues regarding bank robberies? What specific factors are you examining to make your conclusion?
2. Do you think it is important to have a more systematic collection of data regarding bank robberies in countries around the world, or do you think the cultural differences are too different to compare them?

Sources: Australian Institute of Criminology. (2003, July). *Bank robbery in Australia*. Canberra, Australia: Author. Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2010). *Bank crime statistics 2009: Federal insured financial institutions, January 1, 2009–December 31, 2009*. Washington, DC: Author. Home Office. (n.d.). *Policy: Reducing and preventing crime*. Richey, W. (2011, April 5). Which state has the most bank robberies? FBI releases its annual report. *Christian Science Monitor*.

Empirical studies have shown that intervention programs that focus on educational and/or vocational training and opportunities are needed for high-risk youths, because those that do not have much motivation for such endeavors can have a significant impact on reducing their offending rates.⁵¹ Specifically, providing an individual with a job, or the preparation for such, is key to building a more stable life, even if the position is

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not a high-paying job. Thus, the individual is less likely to feel stressed or “strained.” In modern times, people are lucky to have a stable job, and this must be communicated to our youth. And ideally they will find some intrinsic value in the work they perform.

Another key area of recommendations from this perspective involves developing healthy coping mechanisms to strain. After all, every individual deals with stress virtually every day. The key is not to avoid stress or strain, because that is impossible. 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 develop coping mechanisms for handling such stress without resorting to antisocial behavior. There has been some success in such “anger-management” programs, particularly the ones that take a cognitive-behavioral approach, which teaches individuals to think before they act and often involves role playing.⁵²

Conclusion

This chapter examined the theories that emphasize inequitable social structure as the primary cause of crime. We examined early perspectives that established that societies vary in the extent to which they are stratified, as well as the consequences that result from inequalities and complexities of such structures. Early European researchers showed that certain types of crimes were clustered in different areas based on their socioeconomic levels. These early models set the stage for later theoretical development in social structure models of crime, especially strain theories.

Our examination of strain theories explored theoretical models stating that individuals and groups who are not offered equal opportunities for achieving success can experience feelings of stress and frustration and, in turn, develop dispositions toward committing crime. There have been many versions of strain theories proposed by scholars over the past century, with some focusing on economics and others emphasizing school performance, neighborhood dynamics, or many other factors beyond economic ones that can also produce frustration among individuals.

We also examined the policy recommendations suggested by the various strain theoretical models, which included the need to help provide individuals with educational and job opportunities as well as helping them to develop healthy coping mechanisms to deal with the daily stressors we all face. Some of these programs have shown success in reducing the level of criminality from stress and frustrations, especially recent programs that have helped high-risk individuals develop better coping mechanisms to deal with their stressors. These programs hold much promise for future interventions.

Finally, we followed up on our initial case study of a jobless man—Cristian Alfredo Urquijo, or the “Black Binder Bandit”—arrested for committing a dozen bank robberies across the Phoenix valley. He confessed to authorities that he engaged in these bank robberies to survive and that “desperation was a great motivator,” as he had been laid off and could not find a stable job. This “Black Binder Bandit,” so nicknamed because he often hid a revolver in a black binder, is a good representation of some of the theories discussed in this chapter, especially those regarding strain theory.

Summary of Theories in Chapter 8

THEORY	CONCEPTS	PROponents	KEY PROPOSITIONS
Early European social structure theories	Relative deprivation	Adolphe Quetelet	Areas that have the greatest differences (poor living near very rich) tend to have the highest crime rates.
Early European social structure theories		André-Michel Guerry	Violent crime rates tend to be highest in areas that tend to cluster in wealthier areas.
Early strain theory	Mechanical vs. organic societies Anomie Collective conscience	Émile Durkheim	Societies evolve from mechanical to organic division of labor/roles, which strengthen social members. As the division of labor increases in a society, the collective conscience breaks down or anomie.
Merton's strain theory	Anomie (different meaning from Durkheim's) Adaptations to strain	Robert K. Merton	U.S. economic structure causes a different type of anomie compared with the conventional means. Individuals with limited access to legitimate means of strain in different ways, with many innovating through illegal methods instead of through legitimate means.
Lower-class frustration theory	Reaction formation Corner boy College boy Delinquent boy	Albert Cohen	Lower-class youth are not prepared for success because schools are based on middle-class values; they socialize with other failures and develop a "reaction formation", which leads to gang membership. To this frustration exist, with delinquent behavior and crimes.
Differential opportunities theory	Criminal gangs Conflict gangs Retreatist gangs	Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin	Gangs in lower-class city areas are a major part of the social structure that exists there as well as the adult criminal enterprises. Some youths seek out illegitimate structures (e.g., the mafia), and others seek out legitimate 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)	Robert Agnew	This greatly expanded the sources of strain presented by previous models (economic strain added much more in the sense of having fewer opportunities and the loss of positive aspects in one's life) and the loss of positive aspects in one's life, coping mechanisms and individuals' abilities to cope with strain.

Key Terms

adaptations to strain, 208
anomie, 204
collective conscience, 201
college boy, 212
conflict gangs, 214
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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 the 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?
4. What type of adaptation to strain do you think fits you most? Least? What adaptation do you think best fits your professor? Your postal delivery worker? Your garbage collector?
5. Do you know people you went to school with who fit Cohen's model of status frustration? What did they do in response to the feelings of strain?
6. How would you describe the neighborhood where you or others you know grew up in terms of Cloward and Ohlin's model of organization/disorganization? Can you relate to the types of gangs they discussed?
7. If you were the attorney general of the United States, what types of policy recommendations would you give to help alleviate some of the financial (or other types of) strain on individuals or disadvantaged groups?

Web Resources

Émile Durkheim

A brief, but very insightful, review of Durkheim's personal and professional life:

<http://durkheim.uchicago.edu/Biography.html>

This site provides an extensive list of scholarly sources that explain virtually all of Durkheim's theoretical perspectives and their influence on modern criminology:

<http://www.emile-durkheim.com>
Strain Theory

This site provides a concise synopsis of key factors in Merton's strain theory:

<https://www.boundless.com/sociology/textbooks/boundless-sociology-textbook/deviance-social-control-and-crime-7/the-functionalist-perspective-on-deviance-62/strain-theory-how-social-values-produce-deviance-375-6183/>

This bibliographical site provides a basic introduction as well as a list of the key publications for classic strain theory and general strain theory:

<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396607/obo-9780195396607-0005.xml>

Student Study Site



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FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION AND APPLICATION, VISIT THE STUDENT STUDY SITE:



Ban the Box Laws, Do They Help Job Applicants With Criminal Histories?



In Panama, Restoring Streets and Reforming Gangs at the Same Time



The maximizer: Clarifying Merton's theories of anomie and strain



An intersectional analysis of differential opportunity structure for community-based anticrime efforts



Toward an understanding of the emotional and behavioral reactions to stalking: A partial test of general strain theory



SOCIOLOGY - Émile Durkheim



Robert Agnew on Strain Theory and the American Society for Criminology



Christopher Dorner Manhunt: Search for Ex-LAPD Cop Goes On Amid California Snowstorms



A Community Safety Net to Prevent Rampage Shootings: Bernice Pescosolido at TEDxBloomington



Law Enforcement Tries to Curb Increasing Gang Violence in La, OC Counties



The Great Moldovan bank robbery



Strain theory



Extreme Body Modification



Robbery

PREMIUM VIDEO:

Check out the Interactive eBook for premium videos, including videos from author Stephen Tibbetts, who discusses real-world examples and strange crimes; and

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videos from former offenders, who share their stories from a first-person view, and touch on key theories and concepts from the chapter.