



Updates



**The
Crime and Deviance
Channel**



**Strain Theory
(Part 2)**

Strain Theory: Part 2

It's generally accepted that males have higher rates of delinquency than females, whether you measure this in terms of something like official crime statistics (where the differential seems to be greatest across the board) or self-report studies (where the differential, while narrower, is still biased in favour in males) and there have, of course, been many attempts, both sociological and psychological, to explain a fundamental difference in gender behaviour that seems to persist not merely in our society but across all Western cultures.

In Part 1 of this Update we outlined some of the basic concepts behind General Strain Theory.

In this second Part we outline an example of how the theory has been empirically applied to explain various forms of deviant response to strain.

From your reading of **Part 1** you'll be familiar with two ideas:

Firstly, that **Agnew's** General Strain Theory accepts the fundamental proposition put

forward by writers such as **Merton** that social strain is a causal factor in deviance.

Secondly, however, **Agnew** develops strain theory by arguing that while strain is of primary importance it is necessary to refine the general concept by putting forward the idea that people experience **different types of strain** – and it is this notion that **Agnew** develops in order to explain differences in male and female criminality.

While strain theory itself provides an explanation for different forms of conforming and deviant behaviour – people respond in different ways to different forms of social tension and pressure – it doesn't satisfactorily explain why people seem to choose different responses. To take one

example, while strain theory suggests that "innovation" is a particular response to strain it doesn't satisfactorily explain why some forms of innovative response take the form of deviance (such as robbing a bank as a means of making money) while others are "deviantly conformist" (such as a business man or woman who pursues a new and innovative means towards making money).



What General Strain Theory does, according to **Agnew**, is provide an explanation as to why, for example, some responses take a deviant form while others do not – an argument we can illustrate by looking at how GST explains differences in male and female responses to strain.

Stress research by **Agnew and Broidy** (1997), for example, noted how both males and females in American society were subject to broadly similar levels of strain – something that does not, on the face of things, fit neatly with strain theory since if males display higher levels of delinquent behaviour they should be under higher levels of strain. General Strain Theory, however, resolves this problem by examining two distinctive areas:

1. Different Experiences of Strain:

Agnew and Broidy argued that people experience strain differently, depending on a range of possible social factors and these different experiences produce different responses. For example, males and females in our society undergo different types of primary and secondary socialisation, something that leads each gender type to respond in different ways to similar types of strain. For example:

Males in our society are generally socialised to see material success as a desirable goal and their competitive pursuit of materialism creates a greater likelihood of:

- Peer and stranger conflicts.
- Victimisation, as men are targeted by other competitive males.
- Property and violent crime if legitimate material success goals are not achieved.

A general summary of these experiences is that men have a greater tendency to:

- Externalise their goal frustration.
- Blame others for their failure to achieve legitimate material success.

Females on the other hand are generally socialised towards the creation and maintenance of close, personal and intimate bonds with others (such as family, friends and peers). There is less pressure on females to achieve material success (something that helps to explain far lower rates of property crime) and consequently less competitive pressure within and between the sexes (which is an explanation for much lower rates of violent crime). In addition, females generally experience pressures (such as

sexual discrimination in the workplace or the demands and restrictions placed on their behaviour by family and (male) friends) that create non-material goals (such as caring for and making others happy). Where these goals are not met women have a greater tendency to:

- Internalise their goal frustration.
- Blame themselves for their failure to achieve goal success.



While writers such as **Agnew** argue that males and females have different experiences of strain they also, as we've suggested, have:

2. Different Responses to Strain:

Individual emotional responses to strain also differ by gender and are influenced by different experiences of strain. For example, according to **Agnew and Broidy**:

Males are far more likely to respond to blocked goals with anger and a sense of moral outrage. The externalisation of such anger and outrage means male behaviour is more likely to lack concern for others (the primary behavioural motivation is the satisfaction of personal

needs and goals) and, consequently, males are less concerned about violating both the property and bodies of others.

Female frustration and anger, on the other hand, is much more likely to be internalised – turned inwards rather than outwards – which results in personal feelings of guilt, shame and fear. Consequently, where females “blame themselves” for goal frustration they are much more likely to take-out their anger on themselves (through various forms of self-destructive behaviours – from self-mutilation to different types of eating disorders). This, of course, means females are less likely to engage in criminal behaviour towards others as an outlet for their frustration and as a way of satisfying desired goals.

When we turn to thinking about the specific reasons for greater male involvement in criminal behaviour across the board (from crimes against property to those against people) a range of possible explanations are presented. These include:

- Lower levels of social control (males are less restricted, for example, in their choice of behaviours by parents, friends and the like).
- Lower levels of personal control, whereby males are less understanding of the needs of others (since they have lower levels of emotional attachment) and are consequently able to “objectivise” their behaviour in two ways. Firstly, the lack of consideration for the needs of others means males are more likely to discount the effects of their behaviour on others. Secondly, a more self-centred approach to goal satisfaction leads males to see their personal needs as being more important than the needs of others.



- The observation that males tend to socialise in larger, more competitive and more hierarchical social groups (they have different forms of association to females) provides a further impetus towards deviant behaviour – especially where males join or attach themselves to groups already involved in routine criminal behaviour.

These features of male (and female) social conditioning and behaviour mean that, for General Strain Theorists, males are far more likely to respond to social strains through crime. For lower class males in particular – where other possible responses are blocked by the culture and society in which they live – criminal behaviour becomes an attractive alternative means of goal satisfaction.

Although females, for a range of reasons we’ve outlined, generally respond in non-criminal ways to goal blockage (or, indeed, they experience and create alternative forms of goal satisfaction through agencies such as the family – being responsible for childcare, for example, may increase the emotional and relational ties that make the

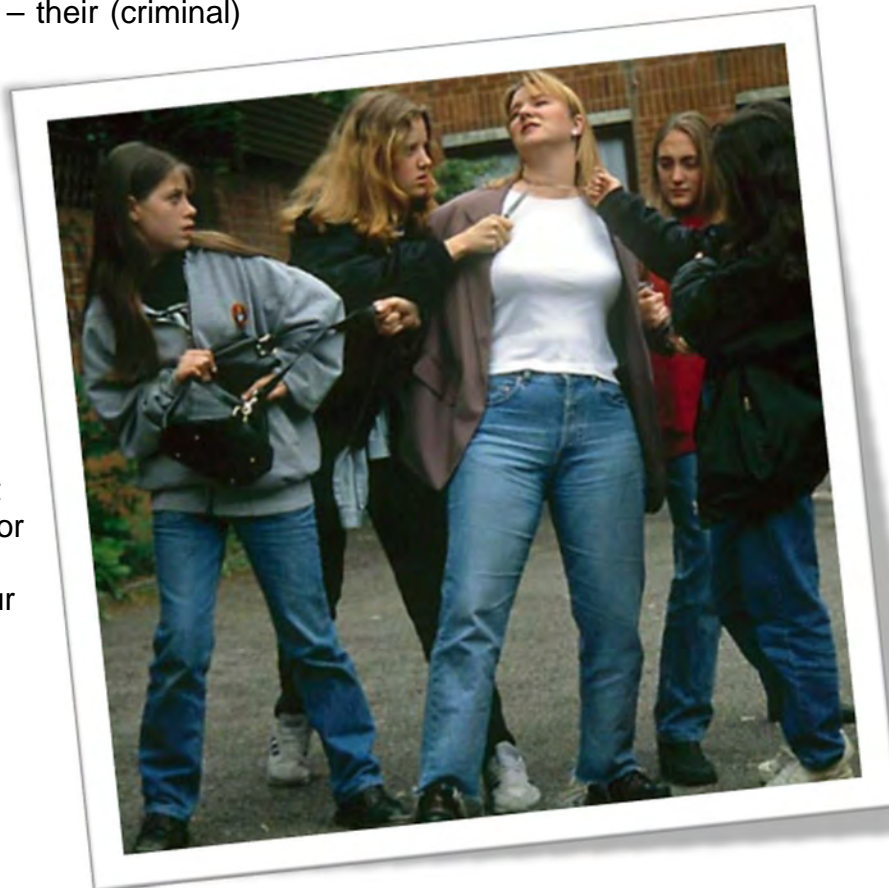
consequences of criminal behaviour far greater for females than for males) this is not to say that females do not respond in criminal ways.

Indeed, for GST one of the characteristics of female criminality is that where females share similar social characteristics to males – they are part of a delinquent peer group, lack strong emotional ties to family and friends, have consequently lower levels of social control, experience blockages in their ability to legitimately achieve certain desired goals and have opportunities for crime as a means of satisfying social needs and goals – their (criminal) response is similar to that of males.

This suggests, therefore, that the psychological characteristics and differences between males and females are far less important as explanations for criminal and non-criminal behaviour than their sociological characteristics.

What research such as that carried-out by **Agnew and Broidy** suggests, therefore, is that our understanding of male and female criminality – its similarities and differences – needs to be conditioned by our understanding of both the personal social characteristics of criminals and the social climate in which they're raised and operate.

In this respect, therefore, GST is an advance on traditional forms of strain theory in the sense that it uses the analysis of social constraints – both internal and external – as a way of understanding how certain individuals and groups will respond to social strains.



References

Agnew, Robert and Broidy, Lisa (1997) "Gender and crime: a general strain theory perspective.": *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 34, No. 3.

