

## General Strain Theory of Delinquency: the Developmental Process of Robert Agnew's Works from a Historical Perspective

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### Abstract

*Extending the studies of Merton (1938; 1957), Cohen (1955), Cloward and Ohlin (1960), Criminologist Robert Agnew has given a new impetus to a fading theory of strain. He brought a new perspective to the science of criminology by analyzing psychological literature and including the components of research on stress. Rather than focusing only on discrepancies of cultural norms, Agnew not only utilized from sociology, but also from the psychology literature. In this sense, Agnew's strain theory of crime and delinquency is not purely structural in nature. Rather, it appeals to a blend of different levels of analysis. In Agnew's opinion, the causes of strain may be found outside the structural and cultural characteristics of society. More precisely, strain does not always stem from the blockage of monetary success and achievement of middle-class status. Rather, it may also develop from social-psychological causes such as removal of a positive stimulus or presentation of a negative stimulus. As such, he showed that the causes of delinquency cannot be attributable to a particular factor. His analysis of the variables of other theories prove that the complex nature of crime and delinquency should be examined both in the social and psychological levels (Maxim, Whitehead, & Nettler, 1998).*

**Key Words:** Strain, Crime, Delinquency, General Strain Theory

### Introduction

Public policy decisions are not always based on solid theoretical foundations. Traditionally, findings of studies in the field of criminology have been credited only if implicated policies gained a popular support. The emergence of early versions of strain theory coincided with the end Great Depression years. The theory was first articulated in late 1930s, when the wealth was presented as a success symbol and people were highly motivated to achieve so-called "American Dream". When the social atmosphere changed and the crime rate peaked towards the end of the 1960s, the theory lost reputation and was replaced by theories that put a strict emphasis on social control. The theory was then abandoned or given a less credit until criminologist Robert Agnew developed his general strain theory.

During his career, Agnew has expended significant effort to restore the so-called abandoned strain theory. To reconstruct the so-called fading strain theory, he initially introduced his revised version. Later, he articulated his general strain theory building upon this revision. This paper is organized in such a way that it examines the developmental process of Agnew's works from a historical perspective. The first section elaborates his preliminary works on the classical strain theory and his revised strain theory. The second section provides a detailed account of his general strain theory. Agnew's work is not limited to his studies on strain theory only. He also conducted extensive research on other criminological theories. Therefore, the third section is dedicated to some examples from his studies on other theories and their comparisons to the general strain theory.

### Agnew's Early Works: a Historical Context

Robert Agnew was awarded a Ph.D. in 1980 upon his graduation from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His dissertation topic was titled "A Revised Strain Theory of Delinquency" (Agnew, 1980).

During 1970s when Agnew was a graduate student, classical strain theories of Merton (1938; 1957), Cohen (1955), Cloward and Ohlin (1960) were heavily criticized to the extent that some researchers called for their complete abandonment (Hirschi, 1969; Kornhauser, 1978)<sup>1</sup>. Such criticism of the classical strain theory had an influence on Agnew's motivation toward a revised strain theory. Agnew (1980) articulated this motivation in his dissertation when he said "I don't think that it is necessary to abandon strain theory. However, I do think that strain theory is in need of major revision" (p. 1). For Agnew, such abandonment was redundant because the theory had already been supported (p. 2). In his dissertation, Agnew mainly focused on the problems of classical strain theory; construction of a revised application of strain and testing his revised theory through the use of cross-sectional and longitudinal data from a national survey of adolescent boys (p. 2). With a closer examination, it is clearly seen that Agnew started his academic career fixing the issues of strain theory.

### ***Agnew's Criticisms of Classical Strain Theories***

During his career, Agnew has given a particular attention to strain theory (1980a; 1985a; 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1997, 2001). In his early years of academic career, he tested the assumptions of the classical strain theory and its revised versions (Agnew, 1980b, 1983, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c). Agnew (1980a) identified five critical points for the failure of classical strain theory: (1) Empirical evidence does not support the link between social class and delinquency even though the classical strain theory assumes that delinquency is a lower class phenomenon; (2) The strain, to which a delinquent boy is a subject, does not diminish after school, but strain theories cannot explain the reduction in delinquency after school; (3) Although strain is assumed to be constant, there is variability in delinquent acts of adolescents. More precisely, adolescents do not commit delinquency on a regular basis; (4) Previous strain theories of Merton (1938; 1957), Cohen (1955), Cloward and Ohlin (1960) ignore many variables related to delinquency. For example, these strain theories do not include any family-related variables; (5) The fundamental assumption of strain theory is that delinquency results when individual is blocked from realizing his or her goals. Researchers, such as Gold (1963, 1966), Hirschi (1969), Liska (1971), Elliot and Voss (1974), and Johnson (1979), had a tendency to test this assumption by examining the difference between aspiration and expectation. Strain theory suggests that delinquency should be higher when the difference between aspiration and expectation is high. Studies which then tested this assumption with a focus on occupational and educational goals did not find any support for the strain theory. Rather, they found that delinquency was high when the difference between aspiration and expectation was low. These findings were then interpreted as supportive of social control theory: High aspiration and expectation is considered to be an indicator of a strong commitment to the conventional institutions.

Agnew attributes the aforementioned problems to three primary weaknesses of classical strain theory. First, the theory focuses only on future goals rather than immediate goals. Second, the classical strain theory introduces only one or few variables (mostly related to each other) rather than a variety of goals that adolescent may pursue. Third, people not only pursue the achievement of certain goals, but also attempt to avoid painful situations. The focus of classical strain theory, on the other hand, was concentrated only on goal-seeking behavior. For Agnew (1980a), aforementioned three issues accounted for the existing problems of the classical strain theory (p. 12, 17). Agnew's criticisms were not based mere on his own tests. Rather, he based his criticism on findings of previous studies. His first tests of classic strain theory appeared after his dissertation study. Two examples of these tests are presented below.

### ***A Test of Immediate Goals as a Function Delinquency***

After a close examination of the literature, Agnew noticed that previous studies did not find any support for the assumption that monetary success (or middle-class status) is the primary goal of adolescents.

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<sup>1</sup> Merton's strain theory was challenged on the base of its assumption first. The notion of universal success goal was counteracted with the notion of diverse American society. Second, Merton did not articulate the types of deviances that are associated with his adaptation modes. In its original form, the theory implied that the innovation, which Merton defined as the mode of those who have a strong commitment to the culture but not the convention, is mostly associated with utilitarian types of deviance. Yet, the mode seemed to be weak in explaining non-utilitarian types of deviances because it placed the monetary success as the sole motivation factor for the individual who deviates. Finally, the ambiguity in the conceptualization led to a mis-operationalization of strain, which in turn resulted in weak support for the overall scientific merits of the theory.

Researchers such as Greenberg (1977), Empey (1978), Elliot and Voss (1974), and Quicker (1974) revised the classical strain theory challenging the assumption of monetary success and middle class status as the primary goal of adolescents. These revisions treated the goal commitment as a variable and focused on the immediate goals of adolescents rather than focusing solely on future goals. Accordingly, one may turn to delinquency either (1) to achieve immediate goals through illegitimate means or (2) to vent his or her frustration. Despite such revisions, empirical findings were not promising. For Agnew, such revisions were not definitive since they only focused on a limited number of immediate goals (1984a). Agnew (1984a), instead, measured goal achievement in seven different categories, such as academic goals, intellectual goals, and athletic goals (p. 439). Agnew (1984a) assumed that delinquency would be higher among those who are unable to achieve such goals. However, the results of his tests did not support the assumption of revised strain theories neither. Agnew (1984a) then concluded that strain theory should be revised in a different way than those suggested by Greenberg (1977), Empey (1978), and Elliot and Voss (1974). According to Agnew, the primary weakness of their revised theories, similar to those of Merton (1938; 1957), Cohen (1955), Cloward and Ohlin (1960), was their center of attraction: The blockage of goal-seeking behaviors. Agnew further argued that researchers should also focus on avoidance of painful or aversive situations as another source of frustration and strain (1984a, p. 447).

### ***A Test of Desire for Autonomy as a Function of Delinquency***

Agnew (1984b) conducted another study to analyze the impact of autonomy on delinquency before he presented his revised version of strain theory. Researchers, such as Marwell (1966), argued that American adolescents have a strong desire to be autonomous. According to Agnew, there were two different explanations cited in the literature for the relationship between the need for autonomy and delinquency. The need for autonomy, for social control theorists, can be an indicator of weak social control, which in turn leads adolescents to delinquency. For strain theorists, on the other hand, the denial of autonomy can lead to delinquency either in the form of innovation or frustration<sup>2</sup>. By using a dataset derived from Youth in Transition Survey, Agnew tested the impact of the need for autonomy on delinquency. Findings were notable. The impact of the need for autonomy is mostly explained by the level of social control and frustration. Agnew stressed that the findings were consistent with the revised strain theories of Greenberg (1977), Quicker (1974), and Empey (1978), because, as suggested by these researchers, autonomy can be considered as one of the immediate goals of adolescents (p. 238)<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Agnew's Major Works: a Theoretical Context***

Aformentioned two examples clearly show that Agnew not only tested the assumptions of classical and revised strain theories before he formulated his own strain theory, but also measured the impact of plausible rival assumptions of other theories. In the first example, he did not find any support for the hypothesis that adolescents are more interested in immediate goals (as suggested by revised strain theories) rather than future goals. In the second study, however, he found support for the hypothesis that the blockage of a positively valued goal can lead to frustration, which in turn leads adolescents to delinquency. In a later text, Agnew (1992a) formulated the strain "as the discrepancy between the expected and actual outcome (p. 52)". The difference between the classical strain theory of Merton (1938; 1957), Cohen (1955), Cloward and Ohlin (1960) and the revised strain theory of Agnew lies in their emphasis on the type of goals, immediate versus future.

### ***Agnew's Revised Strain Theory***

As stated in the previous section, Agnew's tests provided mixed support for both classical and revised strain theories (1984a, 1984b). Drawing from the past versions of "frustration and aggression" studies, Agnew (1985a) expanded the scope of strain theory by introducing negative *stimuli* as another source of strain (p. 154). Agnew suggested that adolescents not only pursue positively valued goals, but also try to escape from painful situations. Adolescents, such as those abused by their parents, may not be able to avoid harmful situations. As positively valued goals are blocked, escaping from a negative stimulus can also be blocked. This blockage may cause frustration; thus, individual adaptation to the new situation may lead him to commit delinquency.

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<sup>2</sup>Delinquency may result from the need for obtaining autonomy. For example, theft may provide adolescent with financial independence from parents. Delinquency may also result from anger towards parents who control adolescent.

<sup>3</sup>As stated earlier, classical strain theories of Merton (1938), Cohen (1955), and Cloward and Ohlin (1960) assert that adolescent are only concerned with the achievement of monetary success and middle-class status.

Avoiding negative stimuli can be manifested in two different ways. Individuals may either commit delinquency to escape from the painful situation or to remove the source of that situation; or they may commit delinquency to express anger when he cannot escape from the painful situation (p. 156).

Agnew (1985a) tested his revised strain theory using data from the Youth in Transition Survey of 1966. He tested the impact of environmental aversion on delinquency. With this purpose, he measured parental punitiveness, dissatisfaction with school and anger towards parents and teachers, which all hypothetically contribute to constructing environmental adversity. To determine a new direction and to help develop his revised strain theory, he also included variables from social control and deviant subculture theories such as father attachment, mother attachment, teacher attachment, value placed on academic achievement, the amount of time spent on homework and occupational aspirations (p. 157,158).

Findings supported his assumption that the behaviors geared towards avoiding or removing the negative stimulus has an impact on delinquency (Agnew, 1985a, p. 160). The relationship continued to hold especially in situations where frustration is highly involved, even after social control and deviant subculture variables were controlled. Agnew believed that the revised theory also can overcome previous criticisms placed early on strain theories. For example, unlike delinquency in the form of achieving positively valued goals, delinquency in the form of escaping from an aversive situation or removing the source of strain is not only valid for lower class people. Second, the revised strain theory cannot be challenged by the researches that explain frustration by the discrepancies between aspirations and expectations because Agnew's conception of strain does not concern a frustration that is based on future goals. Third, the theory can explain why people desist on delinquency as they age. Such an explanation is plausible for Agnew when one thinks that adolescents leave the environment (family and school) that may potentially be the source of his or her frustration as they grow old (p. 162, 163). Finally, the theory can explain occasional nature of delinquency when one considers that aversive situations would also be sporadic rather than being only periodic. Consequently, Agnew was very optimistic about his revised strain theory as his initial test found a strong support for his new concept of environmental adversity as one of the sources of strain (p. 164).

### ***A Longitudinal Test of the Revised Theory***

Agnew (1989) was optimistic about the robustness of his revised strain theory long after his revision in 1985. He was optimistic because findings from previous experimental data and surveys showed a strong support for the relationship between aversive situations and delinquency while classical strain theories lacked such an empirical support (p. 374). As Agnew investigated the validity of earlier methods used in previous studies, he found that they, as well as his first test, suffered basically from two problems. First, experimental design used to measure the impact of negative stimuli on delinquency cannot always reflect real life situations because indicators of frustrations are often indirect and difficult to observe. The findings from experimental data cannot be generalizable to a greater population. Second, the data from previous surveys were cross-sectional, in which construction of causal order was hard to establish. Therefore, questions that whether an aversive situation causes delinquency or delinquency causes an aversive situation should be addressed to further clarify the revised theory (p. 375).

Agnew (1989) used longitudinal data from a national survey of adolescent boys to examine the relationship between aversive situations and delinquency. For Agnew, there should not be any lag effect. Rather, frustration and delinquency should occur concurrently because it is hard to expect an aversive situation to stimulate delinquency if there is a lag between the two variables. Agnew then developed a causal model that assumes a simultaneous effect on aversive situations and delinquency. Findings of his analysis supported the revised strain theory; previous cross-sectional association was not due to the impact of delinquency on frustrating circumstances, rather it was due to the impact of environmental adversity on delinquency. Delinquency occurs either in the form of an illegal attempt to escape from a frustrating situation or in the form of an attack on the source of that frustrating situation (p. 376). Agnew concluded by suggesting a new direction for future researches.

The alternative hypothesis that environmental adversity can cause delinquency as a result of decreasing social control should be tested to understand the extent of variance in delinquency that can be attributed to control theory or vice versa. Therefore, according to Agnew, it had yet to be examined whether it was social control or anger that would mediate the relationship between adversity and delinquency (p. 384).

### ***The Birth of General Strain Theory (GST)***

Agnew and White (1992b) indicated that no one of the recent revisions of classical strain theory, including Agnew's (1985a) own, could challenge the dominance of control and differential association theories because of the fact that strain variables played a very limited role in recent causal models of delinquency (p.475). Seven years after his first revision of the classical strain theory, Agnew presented a full manifestation of his own strain theory (Agnew, 1992a). This theory was developed building upon the previous revisions of classical strain theory with a particular emphasis on such variables as stress, aggression equity and justice, which are mostly used in psychology and sociology research.

In his article titled "*Foundation of General Strain Theory of Delinquency*", Agnew (1992a) introduced three types of strain. Accordingly, the strain may result from when others (1) prevent an individual from achieving positively valued goals; (2) remove positively valued stimuli pertaining to individual; (3) present individual with negative stimuli. The first type of strain was gleaned from the earlier versions of strain theory. The last two types were derived from justice/equity literature (p.51).

#### ***Strain as the Failure to Achieve Positively Valued Goals***

Classical strain theory puts a strong emphasis on the first type of strain; the blockage of positively valued goals. Accordingly, lower class individuals are institutionally blocked from achieving monetary success or middle-class status. Strain had always been measured as the difference between aspirations and expectations. For Agnew (1992a), previous researchers' tendency to measure strain only in this way led to an empirical failure of the theory (p. 52). Farnworth and Leiber (1989) pointed out those conceptual ambiguities of Merton's strain theory prompted past researchers to construct it only as the blockage of positively valued goals in their researches (p. 264).

Agnew (1992a) claimed that strain as the discrepancy between aspirations and expectations puts an extreme importance on future goals (p. 51). As a result, a number of researchers had to revise classical strain theory (Agnew, 1980a). One of these revisions argued that there is a subculture among adolescents that emphasizes various immediate goals. Accordingly, individuals are not only concerned about future goals, but also about immediate goals. Achievement of these goals is contingent on a variety of factors - such as athletic ability, intelligence, and psychical attractiveness - as well as social class (Agnew, 1984c). Therefore, Agnew (1992a) suggested, strain as the blockage of positively valued goals should be measured as the discrepancy between expectations and actual achievements (p. 52).

Unlike criminologists, justice/equity researchers mostly focused on the last two categories, namely strain as removal of a positively valued stimulus and strain as presentation of negative stimuli. In justice literature, failure to achieve expectations may lead to certain types of emotions such as anger, resentment, disappointment, and unhappiness. To reduce the gap between expectations and achievements, individual may deviate from the norm. This literature, however, did not show any interest in deviance as a possible outcome. Therefore, empirical support for strain as the gap between expectations and achievements remained limited (p. 53).

However, Agnew (1992a) thought that there is a couple of reasons to be optimistic about this category of strain. First, the discrepancy between expectations and achievements seem to be more realistic than the discrepancy between aspirations and expectations in the formation of strain. It is legitimate for one to expect the time between expectations and achievements to be more stressful than the disjunction between aspirations and expectations because the former one has more emphasis on immediate goals. Second, this alternative conception puts a strong emphasis on social comparison process in the formation of one's expectation, which was neglected by early strain theorists. Third, such notion of strain does not give credit to the claim that goals are culturally defined. In this form of strain, goals are related to the reality itself. An individual may have a legitimate expectation after he or she witnesses others who realize those goals (p. 53, 54).

#### ***Strain as the Removal of Positive Stimuli***

Strain as the blockage of a positively valued goal was first introduced by Merton (1938). Agnew (1992a) developed his concepts of strain by incorporating two additional types; strain as the removal of positively valued stimuli and strain as the presentation of negative stimuli. Relying on justice/equity literature, Agnew asserted that mere blockage of positively valued goals cannot be the only source of strain (p. 57). Moreover, the blockage of positively valued goals was shown as a weak predictor of strain. Literature on stressful life events mostly focuses on the loss of positive stimuli and the introduction of negative stimuli.

Stressful life events may include the loss of loved ones such as boy/girlfriend, moving from a loved neighborhood, divorce or separation, and suspension from school. Such events may lead to delinquency when individual attempts to prevent the removal of positively valued stimuli; tries to find a substitution for the loss; seeks revenge or tries to alleviate his or her grievances using illicit drugs (p. 57, 58).

### *Strain as the Presentation of Negative Stimuli*

The presentation of negative stimuli was another source of strain discussed in psychology literature. Criminology literature had neglected this category of strain until Agnew (1985a) introduced it in his revised strain theory. Agnew (1992a) argued that negative relationships with families, teachers, and others in the immediate social environment of adolescents may lead delinquency when they (1) try to escape from negative stimuli; or (2) try to remove the source of those stimuli; (3) seek revenge against the source of negative stimuli; and (4) try to manage the situation by taking illicit drugs (p. 58). Agnew (1992a) listed some of the most cited factors of negative stimuli as child abuse and neglect, criminal victimization, physical punishment, negative relations with parents, negative relations with peers, negative school experiences, verbal threats and insults, and physical pain (p. 58). In his studies, Agnew found empirical support for the relationship between delinquency and negative stimuli (Agnew, 1989, p. 376).

### *Coping Mechanisms Other Than Delinquency*

Agnew (1992a) asserted that strain does not always cause delinquency. There are some non-delinquent options as well as delinquency. An individual may either place a less importance on the source of strain to ease its negative impacts or manage the negative impact within legal boundaries. Strain results in delinquency when non-delinquent coping mechanisms are constrained, or delinquent coping mechanisms are not constrained. There are three types of non-delinquent coping mechanisms: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. Cognitive mechanisms help an individual rationalize the strain. This rationalization may take three different forms. Individual may minimize the importance of events that cause strain and escape the strain; or deny the fact that there has been a negative event and maximize the positive outcomes and minimize the negative outcomes; or accept responsibility saying that he deserves the adversity he faced. Individual may also appeal to some behavioral coping mechanisms to reduce the amount of strain. He may look for positive stimuli, escape from negative stimuli or look for revenge. The third type of coping mechanism is the emotional type, in which individual attempts to remove negative feelings, for example, through mediation or exercise (p. 66-70).

### *Empirical Support for General Strain Theory*

When Agnew was presenting his general strain theory, he did not provide an accompanying instantaneous evidence for the theory. After the publication of *Foundation of General Strain Theory of Delinquency*, he and Helene Raskin White tested the general strain theory using data from Rutgers Health and Human Development Project. Consistent with Agnew's earlier proposition about the measurement of strain (1992a, p. 61), the data were collected in a longitudinal process between 1979 and 1981 in New Jersey with a focus on alcohol and drug use (Agnew & White, 1992b, p. 479). As suggested by Agnew in an earlier study (Agnew, 1985a), Agnew and White (1992b) used social control and differential association variables in addition to strain variables because each of these theories have overlapping accounts about the nature of deviant behaviors. For instance, while a negative stimulus may create a negative impact on delinquency by imposing a pressure for coercive action, it may also create a similar kind of impact by reducing social control or by teaching that certain types of action are appropriate (p. 481). Hence, while testing a theory researchers should consider using control variables from rival theories. It is evident in Agnew's studies that he has adhered to his own assertion (1985a, 1989, 1991a, 1992b). Agnew and White (1992b) found empirical support for the argument that strain may result in delinquency. Accordingly, the impact of general strain variables on delinquency was comparable to social control variables. More specifically, strain variables had a substantial influence on delinquency and a moderate influence on drug use. Agnew and White admitted that their work made no reflections on differential effects of strain across the subgroups of age, sex, class, and race and left the issues for consideration to future studies (p. 494).

### ***Criticisms of General Strain Theory***

Agnew's general strain theory has gained partial support from recent studies. Studies which focused on strain as negative stimuli found that negative family and school environments and stressful life events can predict various types of deviance (Broidy, 2001; Mazzerolle & Piquero, 1998; Paternoster & Mazzerolle, 1994; Piquero & Sealock, 2000). These studies, however, found limited or no support for positively valued goals. For instance, Paternoster and Mazzerolle (1994) could not find any support for the relationship between strain and crime when strain is measured as expected outcomes of education and employment (p. 252). By incorporating all three types of strain, Mazzerolle and Piquero (1998) found that failure to achieve the positively valued goal of education is associated with deviance, but this association is restricted to the intention of the use of violence (p. 208). On the other hand, Broidy (2001) measured multiple sources of strain, but found no support for the link between crime and goal blockage and perception of fairness (p. 29).

Support for the relationship between strain and anger is mixed. Mazzerolle and Piquero (1998) found that failure to achieve positively valued goals, when measured by education, is associated with anger, which is subsequently associated with intention to use violence. This type of anger has no relationship with other types of offenses such as property crimes (p. 208). Similarly, Piquero and Sealock (2000) found that anger is associated with violent crime, but not with property crime (p. 475). Broidy (2001) found that anger is associated with crime reporting that the perception of unfair outcome increases anger while failure to achieve a positively valued goal reduces anger (p. 29). In conclusion, past researches on Agnew's general strain theory found support for the strain as negative stimuli. The strain as negative stimuli and perception of unfair outcome is more likely to cause crime than the strain as failure of a positively valued goal. Additionally, strain is more likely to cause violent crime rather than property crime.

Based on these findings, Agnew (2001) admitted that not all types of strain are associated with crime. Agnew stated that failure to achieve positively valued goals such as educational and occupational success seems not to be associated with crime. He then described the types of strains that are associated and not associated with crime. Agnew argued that strains are likely to result in crime when they are presumed unjust, high in magnitude, associated with low social control, or create some pressure or incentive to engage in criminal coping. Based on these criteria, he designated a list of several specific strains (parental rejection, strict and erratic discipline, child neglect and abuse, negative secondary school experience, work in the secondary labor market, and homelessness) that might have relatively strong impact on crime (p. 326). Later, Agnew (2006) declared that he turned away from his original argument that an individual's reaction to strain with a crime is a function of personal characteristics, such as coping skills, social support, social control, and disposition of a crime. He then argued that an individual's reaction to strain with a crime is a function of both individual characteristics and features of strain that are experienced (p. 103).

### ***Agnew's Contributions to Other Criminological Theories***

Agnew's focus was not centered only on strain theory (1985b; 1986; 1991a; 1991b; 1994). For Agnew (1985a), strain is one possible explanation to delinquency. There are, however, other possible explanations such as social control, differential association, and social learning because the nature of delinquency is fairly complex (p. 156). Therefore, Agnew has always favored the idea that any study of strain or other theories should consider each other's variables in addition to its own or, at least, to control these variables in the process of understanding their absolute and relative importance (Agnew, 1995, p. 364). Consistent with this view, one can clearly see that Agnew's contribution to delinquency literature provided a variety of theoretical explanations ranging from social control theories to delinquent subcultures (1985b, 1991a, 1991b, 1994). For Agnew (1992a), negative relationship is not the only type of communication people set up when interacting with others. People, on the other hand, may engage in neutral and positive relationships as well (p. 48). Negative relationships, in the form of strain, are not the only source of deviant behaviors. More specifically, Agnew (1985a) does not consider strain as the sole cause of delinquency. As conceived by social control and associational theories, strain may have an interaction with other variables.

An individual who is experiencing an extremely negative stimulus may lose his or her attachment to family and/or his ability to learn from others about how to overcome the situation at the same time (p. 159). For that reason, Agnew has always favored a complementary analysis of delinquency (1985a, 1989, 1991a, 199b).

Agnew (1985a, 1992a) stated that social control theory provides a base for understanding neutral relationship with others, in which an individual has no ties to conventional institutions. Deviant subculture theory explains how positive relationships with deviants have an impact on delinquency. In the absence of social control, an adolescent is free to engage in delinquency while an adolescent in a deviant subculture receives positive reinforcement from his or her immediate environment for delinquency. Agnew states that strain theory complements these approaches by incorporating the impact of negative relationship with significant others with delinquent behaviors. In an environment where an adolescent has a negative relationship with others, he or she is pressured into delinquency as a result of the impact of negative relationship (p. 49; p. 160-161). As evident in his work, Agnew had acknowledged the value of considering rival explanations when he first revised strain theory in 1985. In his later studies, Agnew tested the assumptions of other theories along with the assumptions of strain theory (1985b; 1986; 1991a; 1991b; 1994). In this section, three examples of such tests and their findings are presented.

### ***Agnew's Test of Peer Delinquency***

As reported by Agnew (1991a), the impact of goal blockage as one of the sources of strain may be conditioned by exposure to delinquent peers. He stated that peer relation formed the most significant explanatory variable in the literature. On the other hand, differential association, subcultural deviance and social learning can also explain some of the variances in delinquent relationship. Agnew indicated a negligence of previous researches, which simply measured the number of delinquent friends and the frequency of committing a delinquent act with a friend. For Agnew, measuring the impact of frequency, duration, intensity, and priority in an additive manner is simplistic because the dynamics of peer influence may vary in accordance with the nature of peer relationship. Agnew then highlighted the importance of measuring non-additive or interactive relationship of aforementioned factors in determining the nature of peer relationship (p. 47-48). Agnew (1991a) found that as the influence of peer attachment, peer approval, peer pressure and time spent with peers increase, delinquency rates also increase. When the influences of these variables are weak, even a delinquent friend has no significant effect on delinquency.

Agnew's findings were highly impressive as he discovered that it is not necessary to remove adolescents from delinquent friends entirely - an act which is sometimes difficult in a real life setting - to reduce delinquency. For Agnew, the influence of peer delinquency can be reduced by merely altering the relationship between adolescents and their delinquent friends (p. 68-69). Agnew was then criticized by Haynie and Osgood (2005, p. 1113) for his methodology and statistical analysis in this study. According to Haynie and Osgood, Agnew heavily relied upon respondents' reports about their friends' delinquency and failed to control peer selection process. Peer selection is an alternative explanation to delinquency, which assumes that delinquency is not learned through socialization with delinquent peer, rather that adolescents are attracted to delinquency by their peers because they have no other choice.

### ***Agnew's Tests of Social Control Theory***

Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992a) assumes that negative relationship leads to delinquency because strain that results from a negative relationship creates an adverse effect. On the other hand, control theory proposes that the negative relationship (although such relationships are not the direct focus of this theory) leads to a reduction in social control and weak social control encourages delinquency (p. 48-50). Agnew believes that the individual level of social control is one of the mechanisms that constrains delinquent coping with strain (p. 72). Agnew (1985b) assumes that the empirical support for social control theory is suspect since most tests conducted with cross-sectional data. For Agnew, this is a serious problem because delinquency has a causal impact on social bonds. Agnew notes that Hirschi's longitudinal tests of bonding theory suffered from weak methodology such as failing to control time-1 delinquency and employing self-report and official data (p. 48). Considering such flaws, Agnew conducted two longitudinal tests and found that control theory can explain only about 1% to 2% of the variances in future delinquency. (1985b; 1991b). Agnew's finding suggested that the relationship between social control and future delinquency is weak (1985b, p. 58; 1991b, p. 152). Agnew's criticisms of the scientific validity of social control theory were not responded by any of the control theorists.



On the other hand, his criticisms of cross-sectional studies of social control variables were cited extensively by researchers who used longitudinal data in their test of social control variables<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Agnew's Tests of Techniques of Neutralization***

Agnew also examined the scientific validity of neutralization theory. Agnew and Peters (1986) argued that to explain some of the variances in deviant acts, the long-standing discussion of delinquents' approval of delinquent behaviors should be studied (p. 82). To measure the power of neutralization theory, Agnew and Peters conducted a study on a sampling of college students using following hypotheses. In order for neutralization techniques to lead somebody to deviance, as proposed by Sykes and Matza (1957, p. 207-215), a person should (1) justify a neutralization technique; (2) perceive that he or she is in a situation that neutralization technique is applicable (p. 83). Previous studies on the merits of neutralization technique found mixed results. Agnew and Peters (1986) attributed their failures to their partial, if not complete, ignorance of these hypotheses (p. 83). According to Agnew and Peters, the first part of these hypotheses can be seen as a predisposing factor, while the second as the situational factor that ignites the deviant acts. In their study, Agnew and Peters examined the effect of both factors on shoplifting and cheating. They found that when these two (factors) occur concurrently (in an interactive manner), neutralization can explain some of the variances in deviant acts (p. 92).

Agnew and Peters (1986) suggested that tests of neutralization theory should be conducted with longitudinal data (p. 93). As asserted by Agnew (1994), longitudinal data is important since previous research found that neutralization may lead someone to delinquency rather than cause delinquency (p. 573). Agnew (1994) conducted another test on neutralization theory by employing longitudinal data to examine the influence of neutralization on violence or violent behavior. Contrary to some opposing arguments, he found that only a small portion of research subjects approved violence (p. 573). On the other hand, the majority approved at least one or more neutralization technique(s) for their violent acts. Agnew's interest in neutralization theory can be attributed to his argument that strain or any other theory cannot provide a full account for the broad range of causes of deviance (1985a, p. 156). More specifically, in the context of his tests regarding neutralization theory, he attempted the analysis of the techniques of neutralization to find the crucial components of "definitions favorable to crime". In a much broader sense, he examined whether moral belief regarding neutralization is significant in the expression of criminal behaviors. He assumed that neutralization is needed for most delinquents because most delinquents do not approve violence (Agnew, 1994, p. 556).

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<sup>4</sup>No record has been found as an answer given to Agnew's criticisms on the cross-sectional nature of social control studies in SocINDEX database. Yet, there are articles that refer Agnew's criticisms, all of which used longitudinal data in their studies of social bonding theory. Explaining the Academic Performance-Delinquency Relationship. By: Felson, Richard B.; Staff, Jeremy. *Criminology*, May2006, Vol. 44 Issue 2, p299-320; Self-Control and Social Bonds: A Combined Control Perspective on Juvenile Offending. By: Longshore, Douglas; Chang, Eunice; Messina, Nena. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, Dec2005, Vol. 21 Issue 4, p419-437; Delinquency, schools, and families: Elaborating and testing social control theories with the NLSY97. By: Plank, Stephen; Gasper, Joseph. *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association, 2005 Annual Meeting, Philadelphia*, p1-20; Father Absence and Youth Incarceration. By: Harper, Cynthia C.; McLanahan, Sara S. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (Blackwell Publishing Limited), Sep2004, Vol. 14 Issue 3, p369-397; Low Self-Control, Social Bonds, And Crime: Social Causation, Social Selection, Or Both? By: Entner Wright, Bradley R.; Caspi, Avshalom; Moffitt, Terrie E.; Silva, Phil A.. *Criminology*, Aug99, Vol. 37 Issue 3, p479-514; Developmental Variation in the Context of Marijuana Initiation among Adolescents. By: Bailey, Susan L.; Hubbard, Robert L.. *Journal of Health & Social Behavior*, Mar90, Vol. 31 Issue 1, p58-70; (cover story) By: Thornberry, Terence P.; Lizotte, Alan J.; Krohn, Marvin D.; Farnworth, Margaret; Sung Joon Jang. *Criminology*, Feb94, Vol. 32 Issue 1, p47-83.

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