



# Anomie, Strain and Subcultural Theories of Crime

*Edited by*

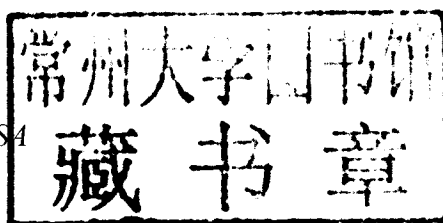
Robert Agnew

*Emory University, USA*

and

Joanne M. Kaufman

*University at Albany, SUNY, New York, USA*



ASHGATE

© Robert Agnew and Joanne M. Kaufman 2010. For copyright of individual articles please refer to the Acknowledgements.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wherever possible, these reprints are made from a copy of the original printing, but these can themselves be of very variable quality. Whilst the publisher has made every effort to ensure the quality of the reprint, some variability may inevitably remain.

Published by  
Ashgate Publishing Limited  
Wey Court East  
Union Road  
Farnham  
Surrey GU9 7PT  
England

Ashgate Publishing Company  
Suite 420  
101 Cherry Street  
Burlington, VT 05401-4405  
USA

[www.ashgate.com](http://www.ashgate.com)

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Anomie, strain and subcultural theories of crime. -- (The  
library of essays in theoretical criminology)

I. Crime--Sociological aspects.

I. Series II. Agnew, Robert, 1953- III. Kaufman, Joanne M.  
364.2-dc22

**Library of Congress Control Number:** 2010921159

ISBN 9780754629122



Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

# Acknowledgements

---

The editor and publishers wish to thank the following for permission to use copyright material.

American Society of Criminology for the essays: Robert Agnew (1992), 'Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency', *Criminology*, **30**, pp. 47–87; Thomas J. Bernard (1990), 'Angry Aggression among the "Truly Disadvantaged"', *Criminology*, **28**, pp. 73–96; Jody Miller (1998), 'Up It Up: Gender and the Accomplishment of Street Robbery', *Criminology*, **36**, pp. 37–65; Eric P. Baumer and Regan Gustafson (2007), 'Social Organization and Instrumental Crime: Assessing the Empirical Validity of Classic and Contemporary Anomie Theories', *Criminology*, **45**, pp. 617–63.

American Sociological Association for the essay: Albert K. Cohen (1965), 'The Sociology of the Deviant Act: Anomie Theory and Beyond', *American Sociological Review*, **30**, pp. 5–14.

Elijah Anderson for the essay: Elijah Anderson (1994), 'The Code of the Streets', *Atlantic Monthly*, **273**, pp. 81–94.

Jock Young for the essay: Jock Young (2010), 'Sub-Cultural Theory: Virtues and Vices'. From <http://www.malcolmread.co.uk/JockYoung/>

Steven F. Messner, Helmut Thome and Richard Rosenfeld for the essay: Steven F. Messner, Helmut Thome and Richard Rosenfeld (2008), 'Institutions, Anomie, and Violent Crime: Clarifying and Elaborating Institutional-Anomie Theory', *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, **2**, pp. 163–81.

Sage Publications Inc. for the essays: Thomas J. Bernard (1984), 'Control Criticisms of Strain Theories: An Assessment of Theoretical and Empirical Adequacy', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, **21**, pp. 353–72. Copyright © 1984 Sage Publications Inc.; Lisa Broidy and Robert Agnew (1997), 'Gender and Crime: A General Strain Theory Perspective', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, **34**, pp. 275–306. Copyright © 1997 Sage Publications, Inc.; Robert Agnew (2001), 'Building on the Foundation of General Strain Theory: Specifying the Types of Strain Most Likely to Lead to Crime and Delinquency', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, **38**, pp. 319–61. Copyright © 2001 Sage Publications, Inc.; David J. Bordua (1961), 'Delinquent Subcultures: Sociological Interpretations of Gang Delinquency', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, **338**, pp. 119–36. Copyright © 1961 Sage Publications, Inc.

Simon and Schuster, Inc. for the essay: Emile Durkheim (1951 [1897]), 'Anomic Suicide', in *Suicide*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, New York: Free Press, pp. 246–58.

Social Justice for the essay: Nikos Passas (2000), 'Global Anomie, Dysnomie, and Economic Crime: Hidden Consequences of Neoliberalism and Globalization in Russia and Around the World', *Social Justice*, **27**, pp. 16–44. Copyright © 2000 Social Justice. All rights reserved.

Springer for the essay: David F. Greenberg (1977), 'Delinquency and the Age Structure of Society', *Contemporary Crises*, **1**, pp. 189–223. Copyright © 1997 Elsevier Scientific Publishing Co.

Taylor & Francis for the essay: Steven F. Messner (1988), 'Merton's "Social Structure and Anomie": The Road Not Taken', *Deviant Behavior*, **9**, pp. 33–53. Copyright © 1988 Hemisphere Publishing Corporation.

The University of North Carolina Press for the essay: Steven F. Messner and Richard Rosenfeld (1997), 'Political Restraint of the Market and Levels of Criminal Homicide: A Cross-National Application of Institutional-Anomie Theory', *Social Forces*, **75**, pp. 1393–416. Copyright © 1997 The University of North Carolina Press.

Every effort has been made to trace all the copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangement at the first opportunity.

# Series Preface

---

Because of its pervasive nature in our mass mediated culture, many believe they are experts in understanding the reasons why offenders violate the law. Parents and schools come high on the public's list of who to blame for crime. Not far behind are governments and legal systems that are believed to be ineffective at deterring offenders – too many legal protections and too few serious sentences. Some learn how to behave inappropriately as children, while others are said to choose crime because of its apparent high reward/low cost opportunity structure. Yet others hang out with the wrong crowd, or live in the wrong neighborhood, or work for the wrong corporation, and may get their kicks from disobeying rules in the company of like-minded others. A few are seen as evil, insane or just plain stupid. While such popular representations of the causes of crime contain glimpses of the criminological reality, understanding why people commit crime is a much more complex matter. Indeed, for this reason the quest to establish the causes of crime has been one of the most elusive searches confronting humankind.

Since the mid-19th century, following the advent of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, those who sought scientific knowledge to understand crime abandoned philosophical speculation and economic reductionism. In its place they founded the multifaceted interdisciplinary field of criminology. Unlike criminal law and legal theory that explored the logic of prohibitions against offensive behavior, and in contrast to criminal justice that examined the nature and extent of societies' responses to crime through systems of courts, police and penology, criminology's central focus is the systematic examination of the nature, extent and causes of crime. Criminological theory as a subset of criminology, comprises the cluster of explanation seeking to identify the causes or etiology of crime. This *Library of Essays in Theoretical Criminology* is designed to capture the range and depth of the key theoretical perspectives on crime causation.

While there are numerous criminological theories, most can be clustered into 10 or 12 theoretical perspectives. Moreover, each of these broad theoretical frameworks is, itself, rooted in a major academic discipline. The most predominant disciplines influencing criminological theory include: economics, anthropology, biology, psychology, geography, sociology, politics, history, philosophy, as well as the more recent multi-disciplinary fields such as gender studies, critical race studies and postmodernist social theory.

Criminological theories are rarely discrete. Although they often emphasize a particular disciplinary field, they also draw on aspects of other disciplines to strengthen their explanatory power. Indeed, since 1989 a major development in criminological theory has been the emergence of explicitly integrative theoretical approaches (See Gregg Barak, *Integrative Criminology*; Ashgate, 1998). Integrative/interdisciplinary approaches bring together several theories into a comprehensive explanation, usually to address different levels of analysis; these range from the micro-individual and relational approaches common in biology and psychology, to the meso-level institutional explanations that feature in sociological analysis, to the macro-level geographical, political, cultural and historical approaches that deal with

societal and global structures and patterns. Recent developments in criminological theory have seen an acceleration of this trend compared with that of single disciplinary explanations of crime (See Stuart Henry and Scott Lukas, *Recent Developments in Criminological Theory*; Ashgate, 2009).

Although there are now over 20 English-language criminological theory textbooks and numerous edited compilations, there is a need to make available to an international audience a series of books that brings together the best of the available theoretical contributions. The advantage of doing this as a series, rather than a single volume, is that the editors are able to mine the field for the most relevant essays that have influenced the present state of knowledge. Each contribution to the series thus contains many chapters, each on a different aspect of the same theoretical approach to crime causation.

In creating this series I have selected outstanding criminologists whose own theories are discussed as part of the literature and I have asked each of them to select a set of the best journal essays to represent the various facets of their theoretical framework. In doing so, I believe that you will receive the best selection of essays available together with an insightful and comparative overview placing each essay in the context of the history of ideas that comprises our search to better understand and explain crime and those who commit it.

STUART HENRY

*Series Editor*

*School of Public Affairs*

*San Diego State University, USA*

# Introduction

---

This volume focuses on three related, but distinct theoretical perspectives in criminology: anomie, strain and subcultural theories. Anomie theories state that crime results from normlessness or a lack of social regulation. The dominant version of the theory states that some societies place much emphasis on the pursuit of certain goals such as monetary success, but little emphasis on the norms regulating goal achievement. As a result, individuals attempt to achieve their goals in the most expedient manner possible, which for some is through crime. This anomie is said to be partly rooted in structural strain, with the inability to achieve cultural goals through legitimate channels reducing the commitment to norms regulating goal achievement.

Strain theories focus on the individual reaction to stressful conditions and events. The early versions of this theory focus on the inability of individuals to achieve monetary success through legitimate channels. More recent versions focus on a range of strains or stressors, such as child abuse, financial problems and racial discrimination. These events and conditions lead to negative emotions, including anger and frustration, which in turn create pressure for corrective action. Crime is one possible response. Crime may allow individuals to reduce or escape from strain (for example theft, running away), seek revenge (for example assault, vandalism) or alleviate negative emotions (for example illicit drug use).

Subcultural theories state that crime stems from membership in groups that hold values and beliefs conducive to crime. These groups may be organized along friendship, neighbourhood, age, gender, class, race/ethnic and/or regional lines. The origin of these groups is usually explained in terms of strain theory, with criminal subcultures emerging as individuals attempt collectively to exploit illicit opportunities for goal achievement, reduce their strain through adopting alternative goals and values, or express 'resistance' to those who create strain.

These theoretical perspectives were first formulated in criminology by Durkheim (1951 [1897]), Merton (1938; Chapter 2 this volume), Cohen (1955) and Cloward and Ohlin (1960). This volume opens with classic selections by these theorists. The volume then presents a set of essays dealing with strain, subcultural and anomie theories, with two sections on each theory. The first section focuses on the development of the theory and the second on the major contemporary statement(s) of the theory.

## **The Origins of Anomie, Strain and Subcultural Theory: Classic Statements**

Emile Durkheim (1951 [1897]) provided the first modern statement of anomie and strain theory in his classic book: *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, written at a time when Western societies had recently gone through rapid social change from agrarian communities to modern industrial societies. This volume opens with a selection from that book, describing the nature and sources of anomic suicide. Durkheim (Chapter 1) begins by stating that 'No living being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means' (p. 3).



When individuals lack the means to satisfy their needs or goals, the result is 'constantly renewed torture' (or strain). Durkheim then argues that it is necessary for society to set limits on the goals of individuals, since individuals are incapable of limiting their own goals. Without some limits on aspirations, individuals pursue unlimited or ever-escalating goals. And the misery that results from their inability to achieve such goals may eventually result in suicide. A key function of 'healthy' societies, then, is to limit or regulate the goals that individuals pursue, such that individuals have a reasonable chance of achieving them. But some societies lose their ability to regulate individual goals (and we have the state of anomie or normlessness). This occurs during periods of rapid economic change, including both economic crises and rapid increases in prosperity. Further, Durkheim argues that anomie has become a chronic state in the 'sphere of trade and industry', where economic activity is now largely free of all regulation. As he states, 'greed is aroused without knowing where to find ultimate foothold. Nothing can calm it, since its goal is far beyond all it can attain' (p. 13).

This selection from Durkheim introduces the key elements of both strain and anomie theory (see Agnew, 1997a; Bernard *et al.*, 2009; Cullen and Agnew, 2006). Strain for Durkheim involves unlimited goals and the consequent inability of individuals to achieve their goals, with a focus on economic goals. Strain manifests itself in a range of negative emotions (in the words of Durkheim, 'anger and all the emotions customarily associated with disappointment' (1951, p. 284)). And individuals may cope with such strain through crime and deviance, with Durkheim focusing on suicide. The source of strain for Durkheim is a type of anomie or normlessness, namely the inability of society effectively to regulate or set limits on individual goals. So the absence of regulation by society leads to strain at the individual level.

These arguments of Durkheim have not had a large impact in American criminology, but have had more resonance among European criminologists. Empirically, researchers have not measured strain in terms of the pursuit of unlimited goals (see Agnew, 1997a), although some have explored the impact of rapid social change on crime (for example Bernard *et al.*, 2009; Cao, 2007; Dicristina, 2004; Liu, 2005; Pridemore and Sang-Weon, 2007). Nevertheless, Durkheim's work provided the foundation for those theories of strain and anomie that are now dominant in criminology – beginning with Merton's theory formulated in the mid-twentieth century in Depression-era America.

Robert Merton introduced his version of strain and anomie theory in the 1938 essay reproduced as Chapter 2 in this volume; one of the most widely cited essays in criminology. Merton begins his classic essay by stating that societies differ in the relative emphasis they place on goals and the legitimate means for achieving goals. In some societies, equal emphasis is placed on goals and means. In other societies, much emphasis is placed on goal achievement, but little on the legitimate means that individuals are supposed to follow in pursuing their goals. Such societies reflect the view that 'it's not how you play the game, but whether you win or lose'. In these societies, individuals attempt to achieve their goals in the most expedient way possible, which for some is crime. So, while Durkheim's theory focuses on the failure of societies adequately to regulate goals, Merton's theory of anomie focuses on the failure of societies adequately to regulate the process of goal achievement. Merton's theory of anomie was neglected for a long while, but has recently experienced a major revival – as reflected in the essays in Parts VI and VII (see also the overviews in Agnew, 1997a; Bernard *et al.*, 2009; Cullen and Agnew, 2006).

While the first part of Merton's essay focuses on explaining why some societies have higher rates of crime than others, the second part addresses the question of why some groups within a society commit crimes at higher rates than others. Here Merton develops his version of strain theory. He argues that in the USA everyone – poor as well as rich – is encouraged to strive for the cultural goal of monetary success. But poor individuals often lack the means to achieve such success through legitimate channels, such as getting a good education and then a good job. This creates much frustration and such individuals may cope in a variety of ways, some of which involve crime. For example, individuals may attempt to achieve the goal of monetary success through illegitimate means, such as theft, prostitution and drug-selling. So for Merton, strain results from the presence rather than the absence of society; or at least from the presence of a certain kind of society with a certain set of cultural emphases. This kind of society, epitomized by twentieth-century America and its promotion of the American Dream, encourages individuals to pursue lofty material goals, but prevents or at least limits some individuals from achieving such goals through legitimate channels. Merton also notes that the strain these individuals experience may reduce their commitment to legitimate means, thereby increasing the level of anomie in the larger society. Merton's strain theory is a leading theory of crime in its own right, and it is the direct inspiration for subsequent versions of strain theory – with Albert Cohen (1955) developing the first major revision of Merton's theory. Cohen's theory became known as subcultural strain theory, since he discussed collective rather than individual adaptations to structural strain.

Cohen was a student of Merton and of Edwin Sutherland, who developed differential association theory (a version of social learning theory). This theory states that individuals engage in crime because they associate with others who teach beliefs favourable to crime (Sutherland *et al.*, 1992). Cohen wondered why some individuals held beliefs favourable to delinquency, and he drew on Merton's strain theory to provide an answer. In doing so, he helped develop subcultural theory. In his classic book on *Delinquent Boys* (1955), Cohen argued that delinquent gangs arise as a collective response to a particular type of strain: the inability to achieve middle-class status. Lower-class juveniles, like everyone else, are said to desire such status, which includes not only monetary success but also the respect and admiration of others. However, such boys have trouble achieving middle-class status through legitimate channels, not least because they are judged by middle-class standards of educational success. In particular, they find they lack the skills and habits necessary for success in school, which results in status frustration. If a sufficient number of lower-class boys are in regular interaction with one another, they may develop a collective solution to their status frustration. This solution involves the creation of an alternative status system in which they can successfully compete. Their hostility towards the middle-class people who frustrate them, among other things, leads them to develop an oppositional status system that values everything the middle-class condemns. So, for example, high status is accorded to those boys who show skill in theft, fighting and vandalism. (Chapter 10 by Bordua provides a more detailed overview of Cohen's theory.)

Cohen's use of strain theory to explain the development of criminal subcultures is at the heart of subcultural theory. Individuals face strains involving the inability to achieve monetary success or the broader goal of middle-class status. If conditions are right, these individuals develop a collective solution to their strains, with this solution sometimes taking the form of a criminal subculture. Cohen initially argued that the members of criminal subcultures

unconditionally approve of crimes such as theft and violence. He later backed away from this extreme position and, drawing on the work of criminologists such as Sykes and Matza (1957), argued that the members of these subcultures more often justify or excuse their criminal acts (Cohen and Short, 1958).

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960) elaborated on Cohen in their text on *Delinquency and Opportunity*. Like Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin argued that strains, particularly shared strains that are viewed as unjust and attributed to the larger social system, often lead individuals to form or join criminal subcultures. And these subcultures are a method for coping with strains; for example, the subcultures may focus on the pursuit of monetary success through illegitimate channels. Cloward and Ohlin went on to state that there are different types of criminal subcultures, some focused on theft, some on violence and some on drug use. And they discussed the factors that influence the development of these different types of subcultures, with a focus on neighbourhood characteristics. (See Chapter 10 for further information.) The types of subcultures described by Cloward and Ohlin are rarely found in pure form. For example, one rarely if ever finds a criminal subculture that engages only in violence. Members of criminal subcultures typically engage in a range of criminal acts. Nevertheless, subcultures do differ from one another in certain ways, with some focusing on particular types of crime, such as white-collar crime (Agnew, 2000).

In Chapter 3, Cloward does not discuss the development of criminal subcultures, but does make a critical point regarding the relationship between strain and such subcultures. Merton argued that strained individuals *may* turn to crime and he briefly discussed those factors that influence whether they turn to crime. But Cloward argues that Merton neglected a key factor: the availability of *illegitimate* means. In particular, Cloward argues that whether strained individuals turn to crime is strongly influenced by their exposure to criminal subcultures. These subcultures provide the means to engage in crime; in particular, they teach the skills necessary for certain types of crime, present beliefs that justify or excuse crime, and provide opportunities to engage in crime. Strained individuals exposed to such subcultures are therefore much more likely to engage in crime. Cloward discusses certain of the factors that influence exposure to criminal subcultures, factors such as class position and neighbourhood characteristics.

Cohen elaborates on these ideas in Chapter 4. He argues that the way in which individuals interpret and react to the strains they experience is heavily influenced by the experience of others – particularly those ‘reference others’ with whom they compare themselves. For example, individuals look to others in their reference group when setting their goals, determining how successful they are in achieving their goals and deciding whether crime is an appropriate strategy for achieving their goals. While these others may not necessarily constitute a criminal subculture, Cohen notes the important role that such subcultures play in the process leading from strain to crime. In sum, Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin extended Merton’s strain theory in fundamental ways. Most notably, they linked strain and differential association theories, arguing that criminal subcultures frequently emerge as a collective response to shared strains, particularly the inability to achieve monetary and status goals. Further, these subcultures play a key role in the interpretation of and reaction to strains. These ideas are discussed further in Parts IV and V on subcultural theory.

## The Development of Strain Theory

The strain theories of Merton, Cohen, and Cloward and Ohlin were perhaps the leading explanations of crime during the 1950s and 1960s. Such theories provided a compelling explanation for what, at the time, was believed to be the strong concentration of crime among lower-class individuals (a belief based partly on arrest data). Further, policy-makers drew heavily on these theories when designing the 'War on Poverty', one of the largest planned programmes of social change in the history of the USA (Lloyd Ohlin was a consultant to the programme, drawn in by Robert Kennedy who had read *Delinquency and Opportunity*). The War on Poverty programme was designed to reduce a range of social problems, including crime, by making it easier for individuals to achieve monetary success through legitimate channels (Empey *et al.*, 1999). Many of the programmes that were part of the War on Poverty have since been dismantled, but a few remain, such as Job Corps and Project Headstart – a preschool enrichment programme.

Strain theory, however, came under heavy attack in the late 1960s and was on the verge of being abandoned by the early 1980s. Several major criticisms were made against the theory. Most notably, self-report studies suggested that the relationship between social class and crime was weak or non-existent, contrary to the claims of strain theory (see Agnew, 2009 for an overview). Also, a series of studies found that conventional crime was highest *not* among those who desired a lot but expected a little (as strain theory would predict), but among those with both low aspirations and low expectations (Agnew, 2000; Kornhauser, 1978). Further, control theorists argued that strain is not a variable since all individuals desire more than they possess (see, for example, Hirschi, 1969; Kornhauser, 1978). Since strain is not a variable, it cannot explain variation in crime.

Thomas Bernard reviews these and other criticisms of strain theory in Chapter 5. And he finds these criticisms unconvincing (also see Agnew, Chapter 7 this volume; Burton and Cullen, 1992). Subsequent research has tended to support the arguments of Bernard. For example, Bernard states that the early self-report studies of the relationship between class and delinquency are flawed because they fail to sample the very poor and they focus on minor forms of delinquency. More recent self-report studies that correct for these problems usually find that very poor juveniles are more involved in serious delinquency (see Agnew, 2009). Also, Bernard is critical of how certain researchers measured the inability to achieve monetary goals. More recent studies, employing better measures of monetary strain, have found that such strain is related to crime (for example Agnew *et al.*, 1996, 2008; Baron, 2004; Baumer and Gustafson, Chapter 18 this volume; Cernkovich *et al.*, 2000; Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Kubrin *et al.*, 2009). In particular, individuals who are dissatisfied with their financial situation or who are experiencing serious financial problems are more likely to engage in crime. There is therefore some reason to believe that the attacks on strain theory were misguided.

At the same time, these attacks did prompt a number of revisions and extensions in the early strain theories (for example Agnew, 2000; Bernard, Chapter 12 this volume; Elliott *et al.*, 1979; Passas and Agnew, 1997). Chapter 6 by David Greenberg represents one of the best. Like many of the revisions, Greenberg substantially expands the focus of the early strain theories – arguing that strain may involve the inability to achieve a number of different goals, not simply monetary success or middle-class status. Greenberg wants to explain why

adolescents – especially adolescent males – have higher rates of offending than other groups. In doing so, he argues that adolescents pursue a variety of goals, including popularity with peers, money (which facilitates the achievement of popularity), autonomy and the achievement of masculine status. Certain recent research suggests that inability to achieve autonomy and masculinity goals does contribute to crime, although the relationship between monetary goals, popularity goals and *adolescent* offending is more complex (see, for example, Agnew and Brezina, 1997; Anderson, 1999; McCarthy and Hagan, 2004; Messerschmidt, 1993; Piquero and Brezina, 2001; Wright *et al.*, 2001). To illustrate, the achievement of monetary goals may reduce strain on the one hand, but provide adolescents with the freedom and means to engage in delinquent acts such as drug use on the other. Greenberg also discusses certain of the factors that influence the response to strain, with a focus on the costs of crime. And he examines why adolescents in contemporary societies often have difficulty achieving the goals he lists, with his analysis drawing heavily on critical criminology.

Greenberg's theory and other revisions substantially expanded the scope of the early strain theories, pointing to both new types of strain and additional factors influencing the effect of strain on crime. In doing so, these revisions set the stage for Robert Agnew's general strain theory of crime, now the dominant version of strain theory.

### General Strain Theory

Chapter 7 by Robert Agnew presents the first complete statement of general strain theory (GST). Agnew drew on prior versions of strain theory and a range of other literatures to substantially expand the scope of strain theory. GST focuses on three major categories of strain. Drawing on prior strain theories, it examines the inability of individuals to achieve positively valued goals, including monetary, status, autonomy and other goals. Drawing on the stress literature, it examines the loss of positively valued things or persons (for example romantic break-up, death of a loved one) and the presentation of negative stimuli (for example bullying, bad school experiences, criminal victimization).

GST more fully describes the reasons why such strain may lead to crime. Most notably, it states that strains lead to negative emotions such as frustration, depression and anger. These emotions create pressure for corrective action, and crime is one possible response. Crime may reduce strain (for example theft, running away from abusive parents), allow one to obtain revenge against the source of strain or related targets (for example assault) or alleviate negative emotions (for example illicit drug use). Anger is said to be a key emotion because it energizes the individual for action, lowers inhibitions and creates a desire for revenge. Finally, GST presents the most comprehensive list of those factors that influence or condition the effect of strains on crime. These factors include coping skills and resources, social support, social control, beliefs regarding crime and association with delinquent friends.

GST has stimulated much research on the links between strain and crime. Data suggest that the strains identified in the theory are associated with crime.<sup>1</sup> There is some evidence that

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Agnew and White (1992), Bao *et al.* (2004), Baron (2004), Froggio and Agnew (2007), Hoffman and Su (1997), Moon *et al.* (2008), Paternoster and Mazerolle (1994), Piquero and Sealock (2000) and Sigfusdottir *et al.* (2004).

these strains lead to a variety of negative emotions, particularly anger.<sup>2</sup> There is also some evidence that negative emotions, particularly situationally based emotions, partly mediate the effect of strains on crime.<sup>3</sup> The research on those factors said to condition the effect of strains on crime, however, has produced mixed results.<sup>4</sup> GST was originally developed to explain why some individuals are more likely than others to engage in crime. The theory has since been extended to explain group differences in crime, including age (Agnew, 1997b), community (Agnew, 1999) and race differences (Kaufman *et al.*, 2008). Chapter 8 by Lisa Broidy and Robert Agnew applies GST to gender and crime. Males are said to be more likely to engage in crime because they more often experience strains conducive to crime, react to such strains with rage and possess those factors that increase the likelihood of a criminal response to strain (for example they more often associate with delinquent peers). Broidy and Agnew also explain why some females engage in crime – for example, they note that certain strains – such as sexual assault and interpersonal network stressors – are especially relevant to female offending. This essay has simulated much research on gender, strain and crime.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 9 by Robert Agnew presents a major extension of GST. Agnew notes that some strains seem to increase crime, while others do not. This of course poses a major problem for strain theory, and in Chapter 9 Agnew identifies the characteristics of those strains most likely to cause crime. In brief, such strains are high in magnitude, are seen as unjust or unfair, are associated with low social control and create some pressure or incentive for crime. This essay has also stimulated some research.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, GST has become one of the leading social psychological theories of crime. Future researchers are likely to better measure strain and the emotional reaction to strain, examine a broader range of deviant responses to strain (for example suicide, purging behaviours) and continue to explore those factors said to condition the effect of strain on crime and apply GST to the explanation of group differences in offending.

## The Development of Subcultural Theory

Strain may lead directly to crime or may contribute to the development of criminal subcultures, which lead to crime. The most distinguishing characteristic of these subcultures is that the members hold values and beliefs conducive to crime. There has been much research on these subcultures, particularly in the USA and England.<sup>7</sup> Such research has examined the origins of

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bao *et al.* (2004), Brezina (1996), Broidy (2001), Mazerolle and Piquero (1997) and Piquero and Sealock (2000).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bao *et al.* (2004), Broidy (2001), Jang and Johnson (2003), Mazerolle and Piquero (1997, 1998), Mazerolle *et al.* (2003) and Tittle *et al.* (2008).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Agnew and White (1992), Jang and Johnson (2003, 2005), Mazerolle and Maahs (2000), Mazerolle and Piquero (1997), Paternoster and Mazerolle (1994) and Tittle *et al.* (2008).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Baron (2007), Eitle (2002), Hay (2003), Hoffman and Su (1997), Jang (2007), Jang and Johnson (2005), Mazerolle (1998), Piquero and Sealock (2004) and Sharp *et al.* (2001).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Baron (2004), Froggio and Agnew (2007), Hay and Evans (2006), Jang and Johnson (2005), Moon *et al.* (2009) and Sigfusdottir *et al.* (2008).

<sup>7</sup> For overviews, see Agnew (2000), Bernard *et al.* (2009), Brake (1985), Brownfield (1996), Cullen and Agnew (2006), Messerschmidt (1993), Tanner (1978) and Williams (2007).

these subcultures, with strain explanations being dominant. Most commonly, these subcultures are said to represent an attempt to cope with shared strains, particularly the inability to achieve monetary or status goals. The research on subcultures has also devoted much attention to the composition of subcultures. These subcultures are usually said to exist among lower-class individuals, particularly adolescent males, since the monetary, status and other problems that contribute to subcultural formation are often most acute here. Criminal subcultures, however, have been located in a wide range of groups, including middle-class adolescents, Southerners in the USA, certain immigrant groups, executives in certain corporations and a range of race and ethnic groups.

Further, researchers have devoted much attention to the nature of these subcultures, particularly the values and beliefs they possess. There has been some debate here over whether the members of subcultures unconditionally approve of crime or hold beliefs that simply justify or excuse crime. The most common view is that crimes are justified or excused, although certain minor crimes – such as drug use and gambling – may be unconditionally approved. Also, there has been some debate over the extent to which subcultures are organized around particular types of crime, such as theft or drug use, or are more general. Most criminal subcultures seem to possess beliefs conducive to a range of crimes, although some are focused on particular crimes. Finally, researchers have devoted much attention to the impact of subcultures on individuals, particularly the ways in which subcultures contribute to crime. Subcultures are said to foster crime by teaching beliefs favourable to crime, differentially reinforcing crime, providing models for crime, teaching the special skills and techniques necessary to engage in certain crimes (for example white-collar crime, drug-selling), providing opportunities to engage in crime and reducing concern about the consequences of crime.

It is impossible adequately to describe the extensive research on criminal subcultures in a few chapters, but the two essays in this section provide excellent overviews. Chapter 10 by David Bordua discusses the origin of subcultural research in the USA, with a focus on delinquent subcultures. Bordua describes the seminal contributions of Cohen and of Cloward and Ohlin, as well as those by Thrasher (1927) and Miller (1958). And Bordua discusses certain of the debates regarding the origin and nature of subcultures, many of which continue today. The work described in Bordua provided the foundation for subsequent work on criminal subcultures, much of which is described and critiqued in Chapter 11 by Jock Young.

The essay by Young, in particular, provides an excellent overview of the English work on subcultural theory. Although Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin developed subcultural theory in the USA, work on the theory also flourished in England. Many excellent works on subcultural theory and on particular deviant and criminal subcultures were produced, such as those by Downes (1966), S. Cohen (1972), Willis (1977) and Brake (1985). Chapter 11 begins by describing the core assumptions of subcultural theory – all centred on the idea that subcultures develop in response to problems faced by their members. Young then describes the major works on deviant and criminal subcultures, noting the ways in which the theory evolved. Most notably, subcultural theory in England took a Marxist turn, with subcultures often being portrayed as a method of expressing resistance to class and race/ethnic oppression. Finally, Young discusses recent developments in subcultural theory, including the role of the mass media in fostering values conducive to crime in what is an emergent ‘cultural criminology’ (see also Ferrell *et al.*, 2008).

## **Contemporary Subcultural Theories**

There has been a recent resurgence in subcultural theory in the USA, with most work attempting to explain the higher rates of violence in poor, inner-city communities. This work was stimulated partly by the growth in very poor, largely African-American inner-city communities in recent decades (Wilson, 1987) and partly by the sharp increase in violence that occurred in such communities from the mid-1980s to early 1990s (Agnew, 2009). While such violence is usually explained in terms of social disorganization theory, several researchers have explicitly or implicitly argued that the strains characterizing such communities have contributed to the development of violent subcultures (for example Bourgois, 2003; MacLeod, 1995; Sullivan, 1989).

Chapter 12 by Thomas Bernard represents one of the most sophisticated attempts to apply subcultural theory to the explanation of inner-city violence. Bernard traces the development of violent subcultures in such communities to the strains associated with urban life, low social position and racial and ethnic discrimination; strains exacerbated by the social isolation of poor, inner-city communities. These strains, however, do not lead to values that directly approve of violence. Rather, they lead to the development of subcultures that foster what Bernard calls 'angry aggression'. These subcultures, in particular, encourage individuals to blame their problems on others, to experience intense anger in response to these problems and to cope with this anger through violence. Bernard's ideas are compatible with the research on anger and aggression, but they have not yet been empirically tested. Many of his ideas, however, have informed general strain theory.

Chapter 13 by Elijah Anderson is less theoretical and more descriptive in nature. In particular Anderson describes those values conducive to violence in a poor inner-city community. These values, part of the 'code of the street', are said to exert an especially powerful effect on adolescent and young adult males. Among other things, they encourage individuals to be especially sensitive to slights and provocation and to respond to them in a violent manner. And while Anderson does not draw explicitly on strain theory to explain the origin of the code of the street, he traces the code to several strains prevalent in poor, inner-city, African-American communities. Such strains include the inability to achieve respect through conventional channels, the failure of the police to respond when disputes arise and the general tensions associated with poverty. Anderson provides perhaps the best description of a contemporary subculture of violence, and research suggests that individuals who adopt the code of the street are more likely to engage in violence (Brezina *et al.*, 2004; Mullins, 2006; Stewart and Simons, 2006; Wilkinson, 2003). Research, however, suggests that blacks are no more likely than whites to adopt the code. The code seems to be more common among those who live in disadvantaged communities, poor individuals, males, those who associate with violent peers and those who experience certain types of strain – such as harsh discipline, criminal victimization and limited opportunities for success (Agnew, 2000; Cullen and Agnew, 2006).

Most of the work on subcultures and violence has focused on males. Males are said to be more likely to be a part of violent subcultures, a fact that helps explain their higher rates of violence. In fact, some accounts state that a key component of violent subcultures is a particular conception of masculinity – one stressing such things as toughness and dominance. And violence is said to be a 'resource' for accomplishing masculinity, particularly when conventional resources are unavailable (Messerschmidt, 1993). But as Jody Miller points out



in Chapter 14, females also engage in violence and it is critical to explain such violence. Miller's essay is based on interviews with male and female robbers in a poor urban area, and examines the similarities and differences between female and male robberies. While female violence often involves an effort to resist victimization, this is not the case with the female robbers in her sample. These females often commit robberies for many of the same reasons as males, such as a desire to obtain money and increase their status. At the same time, gender – including gendered norms and values – does structure the nature of robberies committed by males and females. Miller's essay reminds those working in the subcultural and other traditions to attend to the gendered nature of crime and to be sensitive to the similarities and differences in the causes of crime across gender.

### The Development of Anomie Theory

Merton's 1938 article on 'Social Structure and Anomie' (Chapter 2) contained both an anomie theory, designed to explain societal differences in crime, and a strain theory, designed to explain differences in crime within a society (see also Merton, 1964, 1968). Strain theory attracted much attention, but anomie theory was neglected for many years. This began to change in the 1980s, with several researchers calling for new attention to be paid to Merton's anomie theory (for example Bernard, 1987; Cullen, 1984; Rosenfeld, 1989). Chapter 15 by Steven Messner clearly distinguishes between Merton's strain and anomie theories, argues that these theories are independent and encourages researchers to focus on and test Merton's anomie theory.

The work of Messner and others led to the further development of anomie theory and the application of this theory to issues such as organizational deviance and corporate crime (see, for example, Cohen, 1995; Passas, 1990; Vaughan, 1983, 1996, 1997). Vaughan (1996, 1997), for example, drew on anomie theory in an attempt to understand and explain NASA's role in the *Challenger* disaster. The rediscovery of anomie theory continued with two edited volumes in the mid-1990s that brought together important theoretical and empirical pieces: *The Legacy of Anomie Theory* (Adler and Laufer, 1995) and *The Future of Anomie Theory* (Passas and Agnew, 1997). More recently, several researchers have tested anomie theory at the macro-level within a single country or across countries, with qualified support (Baumer and Gustafson, Chapter 18 this volume; Cao, 2007; Gill, 1999; Stephens, 1994; Zhao, 2008). And certain others have explored the micro-level implications of anomie theory (see Konty, 2005; Menard, 1995).

Chapter 16 by Nikos Passas provides an excellent illustration of the application of anomie theory, with Passas drawing on the theory to explain transnational crime. In particular, Passas explores the ways in which neoliberalism and globalization have contributed to anomie, dysnomie and economic forms of crime. Passas contends that globalization and neoliberal economic policies have led to increases in relative deprivation and the loss of the traditional safety nets in various countries around the globe. These effects, in turn, have contributed to increases in crime, especially economic crime. A case study of Russia illustrates these points. Passas provides a timely and critical application and extension of Merton's anomie theory, and his work has led other scholars to examine both transnational crime and crime in the former Soviet-bloc countries (see Bennett, 2004; Karstedt, 2003; Sheptycki *et al.*, 2005; Siegel *et al.*, 2003; Zhang and Chin, 2002).