

## *Chapter 1*

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# Why Do Individuals Engage in Crime?

**W**hy do individuals engage in crime? Below are several explanations for individual offending. All are quotes from criminals who were asked why they engaged in crime or were thinking about doing so.

[The idea of committing an armed robbery] comes into your mind when your pockets are low; it speaks very loudly when you need things and you are not able to get what you need. (Quote from an armed robber [Wright and Decker, 1997:33])

My stepfather . . . used to sexually assault me a lot. And uh, I got fed up with it, and once I turned 13, I started running away. (Quote from a runaway living on the street [Hagan and McCarthy, 1997:29])

I worked as a busboy for a week once. It was like being a pig in everyone else's slop. Why should I put up with that shit? . . . Doing crime is a lot more fun and pays a lot better. (Quote from a criminal [Fleming, 2003:101])

I get depressed. Things start to pile up and I start shoplifting. Sometimes it's at finals [final exams] or when I have a fight with my boyfriend. One time when I thought I was pregnant. Who knows why. It's like I take out my feelings on them [the stores]. (Quote from a shoplifter [Cromwell, Parker, and Parker, 2003:117])

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It was my way of getting even. You know, teachers were saying and doing all this nasty shit, and I wasn't going to put up with that anymore. . . . I guess I was trying to protect my dignity. . . . To them I was like shit. Just because you're Puerto Rican or Latino, they treat you like dirt. (Quote from a delinquent describing why he misbehaved at school [Padilla, 2003:245])

That night I was really pissed off about a lot of things. . . . I had been looking for a job, and that was not going well. Money was tight, and I was getting hassled over the bills. I was just mad at everything in general, nothing seemed to be going my way. And then, out in the bar, I saw this girl who seemed to have it all together, who seemed to have a lot. I decided right then and there I was going to show her before the night was over what it was like to lose something . . . what it felt like to hurt. (Quote from a rapist [Hale, 2004:58])

We were at the White Castle one day and one of my partners stepped on this guy's foot. . . . He punched my partner in the face and we just got to fighting. (Quote from a gang member [Decker and Van Winkle, 1996:177])

One of the guys said that he had fucked this guy's sister and he heard it and they got to fighting. . . . He was just defending his sister's name. (Quote from another gang member [Decker and Van Winkle, 1996:178])

I was faced with the choice of all of a sudden, and I mean now, closing the doors or doing something else to keep that business open. . . . You're sitting there with a dying patient. You are going to try to keep him alive. (Quote from an offender who passed "bad" checks [Benson, 2004:177])

These quotes illustrate the central ideas behind general strain theory (GST), one of the leading theories of crime. *According to GST, people engage in crime because they experience strains or stressors. For example, they are in desperate need of money or they believe they are being mistreated by family members, teachers, peers, employers, or others. They become upset, experiencing a range of negative emotions, including anger, frustration, and depression. And they cope with their strains and negative emotions through crime. Crime may be a way to re-*

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*duce or escape from strains.* For example, individuals engage in theft to obtain the money they desperately need or they run away from home to escape their abusive parents. *Crime may be a way for individuals to seek revenge against those who have wronged them.* For example, individuals assault those who have mistreated them. *And crime may be a way to alleviate the negative emotions that result from strains.* For example, individuals use drugs to make themselves feel better.

*Not all individuals respond to strains with crime.* If someone steps on your foot, for example, you are probably unlikely to respond by punching the person. *Some people are more likely than others to cope with strains through crime. Criminal coping is more likely when people lack the ability to cope in a legal manner.* For example, crime is more likely when people do not have the verbal skills to negotiate with those who mistreat them or do not have others they can turn to for help. *Criminal coping is more likely when the costs of crime are low.* For example, crime is more likely when people are in environments where the likelihood of being sanctioned for crime is low. *And criminal coping is more likely when people are disposed to crime.* For example, assault is more likely when people believe that violence is an appropriate response to being treated in a disrespectful manner.

I briefly elaborate on these arguments in this chapter. First, I describe what I mean by *strains* or *stressors*. Next, I describe why strains increase the likelihood of crime. I then discuss why some people are more likely than others to respond to strains with crime. I conclude by discussing how GST differs from other major theories of crime. GST is just one of several theories of crime, but it is distinguished from other theories by its argument that individuals are *pressured into crime by the strains they experience.*

Chapters 2 through 4 of this book provide a fuller description of GST. Chapter 2 explores in detail the reasons why strains lead to crime. Chapter 3 discusses the types of strains most likely to lead to crime. And Chapter 4 examines why some individuals are more likely than others to respond to strains with crime. Chapters 5 through 7 then use GST to explain many of the basic facts about crime, including why crime is higher among adolescents, males, lower-class individuals, members of certain racial and ethnic groups, residents of disadvantaged communities, and members of certain societies. Chapter 8 draws on GST to recommend several strategies for controlling crime. And Chapter 9 summarizes the key points made in this book and discusses the future of GST, including

efforts to combine GST with other theories of crime. This book, then, provides an overview of one of the leading theories of crime.

### **What Are Strains?**

*Strains refer to events or conditions that are disliked by individuals.* There are three major types of strains. *Individuals may lose something they value (lose something good).* Perhaps their money or property is stolen, a close friend or family member dies, or a romantic partner breaks up with them. *Individuals may be treated in an aversive or negative manner by others (receive something bad).* Perhaps they are sexually or physically abused by a family member, their peers insult or ridicule them, or their employer treats them in a disrespectful manner. Finally, *individuals may be unable to achieve their goals (fail to get something they want).* Perhaps they have less money, status, or autonomy than they want.

I sometimes ask the students in my juvenile delinquency and criminology classes to list the strains or stressors they have recently experienced. The strains they list are generally less severe than those listed at the start of this chapter, but they nevertheless illustrate the three major types of strains. A few examples follow:

I lost the paper that I was working on on my computer. I was almost done.

My roommate took my ethernet card with him to New Jersey without asking.

I got into a huge fight with my best friend and completely terminated our relationship.

My cheating ex is now engaged to the person he cheated with.

My roommate yelled at me for no good reason.

When I left for college this fall, I got into a fight with my dad right before leaving.

I was yelled at from a moving vehicle for biking in the near empty street, which I thought was legal.

When my light turned green, the intersection was blocked with cars running the red light. . . . Another car proceeded to

clog the intersection. . . . I honked and pointed to his red light and he flipped me off.

I recently received a poor grade on a test that I had studied a fair amount for.

I didn't have enough time to finish my Sex and Gender class exam, even though I knew the answers.

To give you a more complete idea of the types of strains examined by GST, Table 1.1 lists the strains examined by a few researchers who have tested GST. Two of the tests were conducted on samples of adolescents, while the third was conducted on a sample of college undergraduates. Each test found that individuals who experienced some or all of the indicated strains were more likely to engage in crime. When examining this list of strains, ask yourself whether you can think of any additional strains that were *not* examined. Also, ask yourself whether some types of strains may be more likely to lead to crime than others (see Chapter 3). For example, which type of strain do you think is most likely to lead to crime, experiencing health problems or being criminally victimized?

**Table 1.1 The Types of Strains Examined in Several Tests of General Strain Theory (GST)**

**A. From Paternoster and Mazerolle's (1994) Test of GST (with a sample of adolescents).**

- Negative life events: Respondents report that they have experienced a number of stressful life events in the last year, such as the divorce/separation of parents, death or serious injury to a family member, parental unemployment, or changing schools.
- Neighborhood problems: Respondents report that they live in neighborhoods where vandalism, winos and junkies, traffic, abandoned houses, burglaries and thefts, and assaults and muggings are serious problems.

**Table 1.1 The Types of Strain Examined in Several Tests of General Strain Theory (GST)—*continued***

- Negative relations with adults: Respondents report that they have poor relations with their parents and teachers. They state, for example, that their parents and teachers think they are “bad kids,” that teachers do not call on them, and that they feel like outsiders within their families.
- School/peer hassles: Respondents state that they feel lonely and rejected by peers.
- Goal blockage: Respondents state that there is little chance they will be able to get a college degree or the type of job they would like.

**B. From Mazerolle and Piquero’s (1998) Test of GST (with a sample of college undergraduates).**

- Failure to achieve positively valued goals: Respondents state that getting a college degree is important, but their chances for getting a degree are not high. Also, respondents state that during the last year they have received a lower grade than they deserved or a grade that was “unfair compared to the grade received by others in the course.”
- Presentation of noxious stimuli: Respondents state that vandalism, winos and junkies, abandoned houses, burglaries and thefts, run-down and poorly kept buildings, and assaults and muggings are serious problems in their neighborhoods. Also, respondents state that the following events occurred in their homes in the past year: divorce, separation, or “father move in/out.”
- Removal of positive stimuli: Respondents state that in the last year a “significant other” such as a boyfriend or girlfriend has broken up with them and that a “friend has broken off their friendship with [them].”

**Table 1.1 The Types of Strain Examined in Several Tests of General Strain Theory (GST)—*continued***

**C. From Aseltine et al.'s (2000) Test of GST (with an adolescent sample).**

- **Life stresses:** Respondents report that they have experienced a number of stressful life events in the last year, including school problems, money problems, job difficulties, rape or criminal victimization, pregnancy, leaving home, health problems, parent or sibling health problems, parent or sibling legal problems, parental separation or remarriage, relationship problems between parents, parent job difficulties, or parental death.
- **Family conflict:** Respondents report that they frequently argue with their mothers and fathers and family members frequently argue with one another.
- **Peer conflict:** Respondents report that their peers criticize them, make too many demands on them, and “create tensions or arguments” while they are around them.

**The Strains Examined in Other Versions of Strain Theory**

General strain theory was not created “out of thin air.” GST draws quite heavily on the work of others, especially the work of other strain theorists. If you are taking a criminology course, you may have examined other versions of strain theory. Each of these versions focuses on one or a few strains, with these strains usually involving the inability of individuals to achieve their goals.

Robert Merton (1938), Albert Cohen (1955), and Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960) pioneered the development of strain theory in criminology. They focus on that type of strain involving the inability to achieve the goal of monetary success or, in the case of Cohen, the somewhat broader goal of middle-class status. They argue that everyone in the United States—poor as well as rich—is encouraged to pursue the goal of monetary success or middle-class status. They are encouraged by family members, teachers, friends, politicians, the mass media, and others. But at the same time, signif-

icant segments of the population are prevented from achieving those goals through legal channels, like getting a good education and then a good job. This is especially true of the lower class. Lower-class families are often unable to provide their children with the skills and resources necessary to do well in school. Such families also lack the money and connections to set their children up in business. And lower-class individuals often live in communities with poor schools and a lack of decent jobs. As a consequence, lower-class individuals often find that they are unable to achieve monetary success or middle-class status through legal channels. Some of these individuals respond with crime; for example, they attempt to achieve their monetary goals through theft, prostitution, or drug selling.

Greenberg (1977) focuses on the inability of some adolescents to (a) get the money they need to finance their social activities, and (b) achieve the freedom or autonomy they desire, especially from school authorities (also see Moffitt, 1993; Tittle, 1995). Such adolescents may cope with these strains by committing income-generating crimes like theft, and by skipping school, flouting school rules, and vandalizing school property. Elliott and Voss (1974), Quicker (1974), and Agnew (1984) argue that adolescents often pursue a broad range of goals, including academic achievement, popularity with peers, athletic success, and getting along with parents. Some adolescents, however, have trouble achieving these goals through legitimate channels and may turn to crime as a result.

Messerschmidt (1993) and others focus on the inability of some males to “accomplish masculinity,” or act in a “manly manner” in particular settings. Different groups have somewhat different views about what it means to be a “man,” but most such views emphasize characteristics like “work in the paid-labor market, the subordination of women, heterosexism, control, competitive individualism, independence, and aggressiveness” (Messerschmidt, 1993:82). When males have trouble “acting manly” in a particular setting, they may attempt to “accomplish masculinity” through crime. So, for example, they may respond to subordination experienced at school by engaging in a range of disruptive behaviors like vandalism and fighting—behaviors designed to demonstrate masculine traits like independence and control (also see Anderson, 1999; Billson, 1996; Greenberg, 1977; Mullins et al., 2004).

Finally, Colvin (2000) focuses on that type of strain involving coercion, where people are compelled to act in a certain way through force or the threat of unpleasant consequences. Those types of coercion that are related to crime include harsh, excessive, and erratic discipline by parents; demeaning treatment by teachers; physical and verbal abuse by peers; and abusive treatment at work, including threats of dismissal. Such coercion may lead to crime for several reasons, including the anger it provokes.

General strain theory examines all of these types of strain and more. Furthermore, GST draws heavily on stress research in psychology and sociology (see Thoits, 1995 for an overview). While most strain theorists focus on that type of strain involving the inability to achieve your goals, stress researchers focus on the loss of those things we value and negative or aversive treatment by others. The fact that GST examines such a broad range of strains is the primary reason for the term *general* in general strain theory.

### Objective and Subjective Strains

Some events and conditions are disliked by *most* people, or at least by most people in a given group. For example, most people dislike being physically assaulted or deprived of adequate food and shelter. And it has been argued that most males dislike having their masculine status called into question (Messerschmidt, 1993). I refer to these events and conditions as *objective strains*, because they are generally disliked. It is possible to measure the objective strains for a group of people in several ways (see Agnew, 2001). Perhaps the best method is to interview a carefully selected sample of group members or people familiar with the group. We can ask these people how much they (or the group members) would dislike a range of events and conditions (see Turner, Wheaton, and Lloyd 1995).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that people sometimes differ in their subjective evaluation of the same events and conditions—even those events and conditions classified as objective strains. So a given objective strain, like a death in the family, may be strongly disliked by one person, but only mildly disliked by another. This is because the subjective evaluation of objective strains is influenced by a range of factors, including people's personality traits, goals and values, and prior experiences (see Dohrenwend, 1998; Kaplan, 1996; Lazarus, 1999). Wheaton (1990), for example, found that there was some variation in how people evaluated their

divorces. Among other things, the quality of their prior marriages strongly influenced their evaluations, with people in bad marriages evaluating their divorces in positive terms. I therefore make a distinction between objective and *subjective strains*. While an objective strain refers to an event or condition that is disliked by most people or most people in a given group, a subjective strain refers to an event or condition that is disliked by the particular person or persons being examined (see Agnew, 2001). As just suggested, there is only partial overlap between objective and subjective strains.

Most of the research on strain theory focuses on objective strains. Researchers ask respondents whether they have experienced events and conditions that are assumed to be disliked. For example, they ask respondents whether they have received failing grades at school. No attempt is made to measure the respondents' subjective evaluation of these events and conditions (although see Agnew and White, 1992; Landau, 1997; Sharp et al., 2001). This may cause researchers to underestimate the effect of strains on crime, because objective strains are *not* always disliked by the individuals being examined. Some people, for example, may not be particularly bothered by the fact that they have received failing grades. It is therefore desirable for criminologists to measure *both* the individual's exposure to objective strains and the individual's *subjective evaluation* of those strains (e.g., ask individuals whether they have received failing grades *and*, if so, how much they dislike such grades).<sup>1</sup>

### **Experienced, Vicarious, and Anticipated Strains**

Strain theory focuses on individuals' *personal experiences with strains*; that is, did they personally experience disliked events or conditions? For example, were they physically assaulted? Personal experiences with strains should bear the strongest relationship to crime. However, it is sometimes important to consider the individual's vicarious and anticipated experiences with strains as well (see Agnew, 2002; Eitle and Turner, 2003).

*Vicarious strains* refer to the strains experienced by others around individuals, especially close others like family members and friends. For example, were any of their family members or friends physically assaulted? Vicarious strains can also upset individuals and lead to criminal coping. Agnew (2002), for example, found that individuals were more likely to engage in crime if they

reported that their family members and friends had been victims of serious assaults (also see Eitle and Turner, 2002; Maxwell, 2001; Mullins et al., 2004). This held true even after Agnew took into account other factors, like individuals' own victimization experiences and prior criminal history. Agnew argued that vicarious strains may have increased the likelihood of crime for several reasons. For example, perhaps individuals were seeking revenge against those who had victimized their families and friends, or perhaps they were seeking to prevent the perpetrators from causing further harm.

Two examples of the effect of vicarious strains on crime are reported below.

If a [gang] member becomes a victim, revenge [by the other gang members] is necessary. And this revenge is schismogenic, resulting in an increasing cycle of retaliation and revenge. (From Decker and Van Winkle's [1996:179–80] study of gangs)

John understood full well the risks of venturing into the enemy territory that was Audrey's neighborhood. He had been involved with her for about six months. At that point Audrey was being harassed by some of the boys and girls in her neighborhood. For several days they had been bothering her, sitting and standing outside her house, teasing her and calling her names. This had been happening repeatedly over the past months, at times for no apparent reason. Upset, she would call John and complain, and he would feel, as a man, compelled to respond. [John ends up fighting with the young men in Audrey's neighborhood on several occasions, and on one occasion is arrested for carrying a gun.] (From Anderson's [1999:239] account of life in a poor inner-city community)

Not all vicarious strains are likely to cause crime. For example, consider the following two cases. In the first, a distant relative in another city has a minor illness that is successfully treated. In the second, a fellow gang member is deliberately shot by members of a rival gang. The second type of vicarious strain is much more likely to lead to crime, for several reasons. The second strain is more serious, it involves someone that the individual cares about and has as-

sumed responsibility for protecting, it poses a threat to the individual—who may be subject to similar violence—and it involves unjust treatment by another person, which angers the individual (see Agnew, 2002 for a fuller discussion).

It is also sometimes important to consider anticipated experiences with strains. *Anticipated strains* refer to individuals' expectations that their current strains will continue into the future or that new strains will be experienced. For example, individuals may anticipate that they will be the victims of physical assault. Like vicarious strains, anticipated strains may upset individuals and lead to criminal coping. Individuals may engage in crime to prevent anticipated strains from occurring, to seek revenge against those who might inflict such strains, or to alleviate negative emotions. To illustrate, many adolescents, particularly in high-crime communities, anticipate that they will be the victims of violence. They often (illegally) carry weapons as a result, and may even engage in violence against others in an effort to reduce their own likelihood of victimization. In this area, Anderson (1999) argues that the young men in very poor, high-crime communities often try to reduce the likelihood they will be victimized by adopting a tough demeanor and responding to even minor shows of disrespect with violence. As Anderson (1999:92) states, they do this to "discourage strangers from even thinking about testing their manhood. . . . [One] builds a reputation that works to prevent future challenges" (also see Baron et al., 2001).

To give an example of the research in this area, Agnew (2002) examined a sample of adolescents from a nationwide study of high school sophomores and juniors. A small percentage of these adolescents stated that it was likely that they would be "shot with a gun," "stabbed with a knife," or "no longer be alive" by the time they were 25 years old. These individuals, then, anticipated that they would be the victims of serious violence. And they were somewhat more likely to engage in crime, even after taking account of a range of other factors, such as their prior victimization experiences and prior crime. It is important to note, however, that not all anticipated strains result in crime. Among other things, anticipated strains are most likely to result in crime when individuals believe they have a high probability of occurring in the near future, they are serious in nature, and they involve unjust treatment by others (see Agnew, 2002).

## Summary

Strains involve events and conditions that are disliked by individuals. Individuals may lose something they value, be treated in a negative or aversive manner by others, or be unable to achieve their goals. It is important to distinguish between objective strains, which are disliked by most people in a given group, and subjective strains, which are disliked by the individuals being examined. And while the personal experience of strains is most likely to result in crime, vicarious and anticipated experiences with strains may sometimes result in crime as well.

## Why Do Strains Increase the Likelihood of Crime?

Strains, by definition, are disliked events and conditions. Not surprisingly, then, the experience of strains often makes people *feel bad*. That is, strains contribute to one or more negative emotions, like anger, frustration, depression, or hopelessness. These negative emotions create pressure for corrective action. Individuals feel bad and they want to do something about it. As indicated above, *crime is one way to cope with strains*.

## Crime May Allow Individuals to Reduce or Escape From Their Strains, at Least Temporarily

In particular, crime may allow individuals to protect or retrieve those things that they value. For example, individuals may assault those who try to take their possessions, or they may threaten romantic partners in an effort to prevent them from leaving. Crime may allow individuals to reduce or escape from negative treatment. For example, individuals may assault the peers who harass them or run away from the parents who abuse them. Crime may also allow individuals to achieve their goals. For example, individuals may engage in theft, drug-selling, or prostitution to achieve monetary goals. Crime is not always a successful strategy for reducing strains, and some evidence suggests that crime may create more problems than it solves *in the long run* (see Agnew, 2005b:90–93). For example, crime often leads to poor relations with parents and teachers, rejection by conventional peers, and problems with employers. But many individuals, especially those prone to crime, do not consider the long-term consequences of their behavior. They are merely looking for some way to alleviate their strain, even if only temporarily. A

heroin-addicted offender illustrates this point when he explains why he committed a carjacking:

I didn't have no money and I was sick and due some heroin so I knew I had to do something. . . . I just had to kill this sickness. . . . One way or another, I was going to get me some money to take me off this sickness. I just seen him and I got it [the car]. (Topalli and Wright, 2004:74)

### **Crime Allows Individuals to Obtain Revenge Against Those Who Have Wronged Them or, if This Is Not Possible, Against More Vulnerable Targets**

Individuals may believe that certain of their strains are the result of accidents or "bad luck" (e.g., losing a paycheck, place of employment going out of business). They may believe that they are to blame for other of their strains (e.g., receiving a low grade as a result of failing to study, being punished for misbehavior). But they often believe that some of their strains are the result of unjust treatment by others. For example, they may believe that someone has insulted or assaulted them for no good reason. This unjust treatment usually makes them angry and creates a desire for revenge. They want to right the wrong that has been done to them, even if doing so does little or nothing to reduce their strains (see Carey, 2004; Mullins et al., 2004; Neergaard, 2004). And crime is often a good vehicle for revenge. Individuals can do such things as directly threaten or assault the person who wronged them, damage the person's property or related targets, or steal from the person.

A particularly horrendous instance of revenge is described in Miller's (2001) study of gangs. A female who was dating the member of one gang provided information to a rival gang; as a result, a member of the first gang was attacked and severely beaten. Members from the first gang later saw the female walking down the street. They kidnapped her and took her to a house used by the gang. The female was then badly beaten by several other females and gang raped by the male gang members:

They really hurt her . . . grab her by the hair, stickin' their dick in her mouth, makin' her suck their dick, makin' her, punchin her . . . she's screamin . . . me and a group of us had already done beat her up, we had already beat her up so she was all beat up plus they were beatin' on her, callin' her

names . . . fuckin' her every which way. . . Then we just drug her out, put her in a trunk and dropped her off [at a local park]. (Miller, 2001:139–140)

Angered individuals, however, may sometimes be reluctant to seek revenge against the source of their strain. This source may be a powerful person who can punish them. A student who is mistreated by a teacher, for example, may be afraid to retaliate directly. The same may be true of an employee who is mistreated by an employer. In such cases, studies suggest that angered individuals may behave aggressively against other, more vulnerable targets (De Coster and Kort-Butler, 2004). Mistreated employees, for example, may sometimes “take out” their anger on their spouses and children.

### **Crime May Allow Individuals to Alleviate Their Negative Emotions**

Individuals may not be able to reduce or escape from their strains, and they may not be able to obtain revenge against those who have wronged them. But they may still be able to reduce the negative emotions that result from their strains. One way to do this is through crime, especially illegal alcohol and drug use. Individuals often drink excessively and use illegal drugs in an effort to seek relief from the strains they are experiencing (e.g., Aseltine and Gore, 2000; Cerbone and Larison, 2000; Hoffmann, 2000; Hoffmann et al., 2000). This point is illustrated in the following quote from a drug abuser:

I would get the same crap from every fucking teacher. “What’s wrong with you?” “Don’t you care about your future?” “Why don’t you study?” “Why don’t you listen—are you high on something?” Maybe getting high is what I should do, I said to myself. And when I did get high, the fucking teachers still gave me the same crap over and over again, but at least bein’ high they didn’t bother me. (Inciardi et al., 1993:147)

### **Is General Strain Theory Able to Explain All Types of Crime?**

Most of the examples presented above refer to what are called “street crimes.” Such crimes include homicide, assault, rape, robbery, burglary, larceny-theft, vandalism, and drug use. Certain of these examples also deal with “status offenses,” or acts which are il-

legal for juveniles but not adults. Status offenses include running away from home, drinking alcohol, and truancy. The research on GST has focused on street crimes and status offenses, as has the research on most other theories of crime. GST, however, has the potential to help explain a wide range of crimes, including organized crime, white-collar crime, and terrorism (Bryant, 2001; Miethe and McCorkle, 2001).

GST can help explain any act which is condemned by most others in the society or that carries more than a trivial risk of punishment—including but not limited to punishment by the state. Almost all crimes meet these criteria. Most individuals refrain from engaging in such crimes unless they are under some pressure to do so. Strains provide the pressure to engage in these crimes, with the crimes providing some relief from the strains or negative emotions associated with the strains. GST, then, can help explain a broad range of criminal acts. Take, for example, a white-collar crime like embezzlement, where employees steal from their employers. This crime is often committed by employees who have serious financial problems that cannot be resolved through legal channels (Weisburd and Waring, 2001). So embezzlement is often used to cope with monetary strains. To give another example, terrorist acts are frequently used to cope with strains—as reflected in this journalistic account about the violence in Iraq:

Moneer Munthir is ready to kill Americans. For months he has been struggling to control an explosion of miserable feelings: humiliation, fear, anger, depression. “But in the last two weeks these feelings blow up inside me,” said Munthir, a 35-year-old laborer. “The Americans are attacking Shiite and Sunni at the same time. They have crossed a line. I had to get a gun.” (Gettleman, 2004:A14)

Saying that a wide range of crimes are committed in response to strains is not, of course, to justify or excuse such crimes. Rather, it is an effort to better understand the causes of such crimes in the hope that we can prevent them. Future research should attempt to broaden the scope of GST by applying it to crimes such as terrorist acts and white-collar crime. Among other things, researchers should examine whether particular types of strains are especially relevant to these types of crimes (for further discussion, see Agnew, 2004; Langton and Piquero, 2004).

## Summary

Strains, then, make people feel bad and create pressure for corrective action, and crime is one way in which people cope with strains. Crime may be a way of reducing or escaping from strains; obtaining revenge against those believed responsible for the strains or other, more vulnerable targets; and/or alleviating the negative emotions associated with strains. But not all people cope with strains through crime. Most people, in fact, cope in a legal manner. For example, they negotiate with the people who irritate or harass them, they file complaints against the people who wrong them, or they alleviate their negative emotions by exercising or listening to music. This raises a major question for strain theory, a question addressed in the next section.

### **Why Are Some People More Likely Than Others to Cope With Strains Through Crime?**

A number of factors influence how individuals cope with the strains and negative emotions they experience. Criminal coping is most likely under the following conditions.

#### **Individuals Lack the Ability to Cope With Strains in a Legal Manner**

Some individuals are less able to cope with strains in a legal manner than others. Their ability to cope in a legal manner is partly a function of their individual traits, like their intelligence, social and problem-solving skills, and personality traits. It is partly a function of the resources they possess, including financial resources. And it is partly a function of their level of conventional social support. Are there conventional others, such as parents and friends, to whom they can turn to for aid and comfort? As an illustration, consider the following individual, who is high in monetary strain but unable to get money in a legal manner.

A few months ago, the landlord was going to put us out, rent due, you know. Ask family and friends, you might try a few other ways of getting money, and as a last resort, I know I can go get some money [by committing an armed robbery].  
(Wright and Decker, 1997:43)

### **The Costs of Criminal Coping Are Low**

Many individuals avoid criminal coping because the costs of crime are high for them. There is a good chance that they will be sanctioned by others if they engage in crime, with such others including family members, friends, school officials, neighbors, and the criminal justice system. They also have a lot to lose if they engage in crime; they might get expelled from school, lose their jobs, or jeopardize relationships with people they care about. And engaging in crime will make them feel guilty, because they believe that crime is wrong—something they have been taught for much of their lives. For other individuals, however, the costs of criminal coping are low. They are in environments where the likelihood of sanction for crime is small. Perhaps they are poorly supervised by their parents, their friends do not care if they engage in crime, neighborhood residents seldom report crimes to the police, they do not have jobs to lose or close relationships with others that might be jeopardized by crime, or they do not believe that crime is wrong. Such individuals, then, are more likely to cope with strains through crime.

### **Individuals Are Disposed to Crime**

Some individuals are more disposed than others to respond to strains with crime. They may possess personality traits which increase their inclination to crime. Some individuals, for example, are easily upset, become very angry when upset, and have aggressive tendencies. Also, some individuals may believe that crime is an appropriate response to certain strains, like disrespectful treatment by others. Further, some individuals have been reinforced for crime in the past, which increases their disposition to respond with crime in the present.

In sum, individuals are most likely to cope with strains in a criminal manner when they lack the ability to engage in legal coping, their costs of crime are low, and they are disposed to crime.

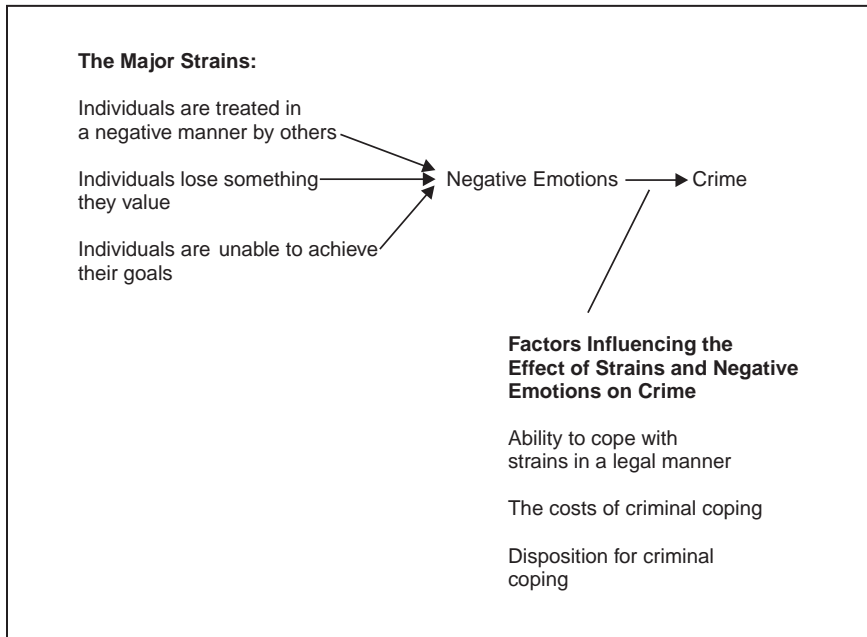
## **The Major Arguments of General Strain Theory**

I have now presented the major arguments of general strain theory (GST). Individuals who experience strains become upset, and they may try to cope with their strains and negative emotions through crime. Crime may allow them to reduce or escape from their strains, seek revenge against those who have mistreated them,

or alleviate their negative emotions (through illegal drug use). Some individuals, however, are more likely to cope with strains through crime than others.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the central propositions of GST presented up to this point. This figure, in particular, shows the three major types of strain; shows that strains affect crime primarily by increasing negative emotions; and shows that the effect of strains and negative emotions on crime is influenced by the individual's ability to cope in a legal manner, the costs of criminal coping, and the disposition for criminal coping.

**Figure 1.1 The Central Propositions of General Strain Theory**



### **How Does General Strain Theory Differ From Other Major Theories of Crime?**

GST is one of the leading theories of crime, but it is far from the only theory. There are literally scores of theories focusing on the causes of crime (see Cullen and Agnew, 2003, for an overview). Some of the other leading theories include biopsychological theo-

ries, social control theory, and social learning theory. I present brief overviews of these theories in this section and describe how they differ from and are related to GST (see Agnew, 1995b for a fuller discussion). I discuss the relationship between GST and still other theories of crime later in the book.

## **Biopsychological Theories**

GST is a sociological theory. That is, it focuses on the effect of the social environment on crime. In particular, most of the events and conditions examined by GST involve relationships with others: other people take individuals' valued possessions, treat them in an aversive manner, or prevent them from achieving their goals through legal channels. Biopsychological theories focus less on the social environment and more on the individuals' traits, especially personality traits. Such theories argue that certain individual traits are conducive to crime (see Agnew, 2005a; Cullen and Agnew, 2003). Two such traits that seem especially conducive to crime are low constraint and negative emotionality.

Low constraint and negative emotionality are major dimensions of the human personality. Individuals who are low in constraint are impulsive (tend to act without thinking), like to take risks, reject social norms or rules, and have little concern for the feelings or rights of others. In popular terms, such individuals might be described as "wild" or "out of control." Individuals who are high in negative emotionality are easily upset and quick to anger, tend to blame their problems on others, and have an aggressive or antagonistic interactional style. In popular terms, such individuals might be described as "mean," "nasty," or "having a short fuse" (see Agnew, 2005a, b; Agnew et al., 2002; Caspi et al., 1994; Miller and Lynam, 2001; Moffitt et al., 2001; Pratt and Cullen, 2000; Wright et al., 1999). (Note: these traits are closely related to the trait of "low self-control," described by Gottfredson and Hirschi [1990].) It is easy to understand how the traits of low constraint and negative emotionality may increase the likelihood of crime. Individuals with these traits care little about others; give little thought to the costs of crime; are attracted to the exciting, risky nature of crime; and are easily provoked by others. Biopsychological theories, then, differ from GST in that they focus on individual traits rather than the social environment.

Biopsychological theories also ask why some individuals possess traits like low constraint and negative emotionality. Such traits are said to be influenced by a range of biological factors. They are partly inherited from one's parents (that is, genetically transmitted), and they are partly the result of experiencing certain "biological harms," such as head injuries, birth complications, and exposure to toxic substances like lead. Several excellent sources discuss how genetic inheritance and biological harms may contribute to those traits conducive to crime (e.g., Fishbein, 2001; Raine, 1993, 2002; Rowe, 2002; Walsh, 2002). These traits, however, are also influenced by the social environment, especially the early family environment. Among other things, some evidence suggests that the experience of certain strains, like parental rejection and harsh parental discipline, may contribute to these traits (e.g., Agnew et al., 2002; Bernard, 1990; Colvin, 2000; Mazerolle et al., 2003). In particular, individuals who are subject to strains on an ongoing basis may eventually develop a low tolerance for strains and an aggressive disposition (negative emotionality). So while biopsychological theories and GST differ in important ways, they are also related. Strains may be one source of those traits conducive to crime.

Conversely, traits such as low constraint and negative emotionality may contribute to strains and the negative emotions associated with strains. Individuals with these traits are more likely to dislike certain events and conditions and experience intense emotional reactions to them. Individuals low in constraint, for example, are more likely to dislike the rules and regulations imposed by family members, schools, and employers. Further, individuals with these traits often antagonize and provoke negative reactions from others, both in specific situations and over the long term. For example, they often frustrate and overwhelm their parents, who sometimes respond with harsh discipline and rejection. Finally, individuals with these traits often select themselves into environments where they are treated badly. For example, they are rejected by conventional peers and end up associating with delinquent peers—who tend to mistreat one another. They do poorly in school and end up unemployed or in low-paying jobs with poor working conditions. Individuals with these traits, then, are more likely to experience strains and the negative emotions associated with strains (see Agnew et al., 2002; Caspi, 1998; Mazerolle et al., 2000; Piquero et al., 2004; Rutter et al., 1998; Walsh, 2000).

In addition, the traits of low constraint and negative emotionality increase the likelihood that individuals will respond to strains and negative emotions with crime. There are several reasons for this. Individuals with these traits are less able to cope with strains in a legal manner: they tend to act without thinking, are easily upset, and do not have good interpersonal skills. Further, the actual and perceived costs of crime are lower for such individuals. They have little concern for conventional norms and the feelings and rights of others, and they give little thought to the consequences of their behavior. Finally, such individuals are disposed toward aggressive behavior. Agnew et al. (2002) found some support for these arguments. Using data from a national sample of children aged 12 to 16, they found that children high in negative emotionality and low in constraint were more likely to respond to strains with crime.

In sum, biopsychological theories and general strain theory (GST) are very different from one another: biopsychological theories focus on those individual traits that produce crime, while GST focuses on the effect of the social environment on crime. But despite this fundamental difference, the theories are related to one another in important ways. Strains contribute to the development of traits like low constraint and negative emotionality. These traits, in turn, increase the likelihood that individuals will experience strains and react to such strains with crime.

### **Social Control Theories**

Social control theories do focus on the effect of the social environment on crime (see Agnew, 2005a; Cullen and Agnew, 2003; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Such theories, however, are distinguished from GST in two ways. First, *GST focuses on negative relationships with others*: relationships in which others take individuals' valued possessions, treat them in an aversive manner, or prevent them from achieving their goals. *Social control theories, by contrast, focus on the absence of positive relationships with conventional others and institutions*. In particular, crime is said to be more likely when *conventional others fail to exercise direct control* over individuals; that is, they fail to prohibit crime, monitor the individuals' behavior, and consistently sanction rule violations. Crime is more likely when *individuals have weak emotional bonds to conventional others*, such as family members and teachers. It is easier to engage in crime when bonds are weak, as the individuals do not have to worry about hurt-

ing close others or jeopardizing relationships with them. Crime is also more likely when individuals have *little investment in conventional institutions*; that is, they are doing poorly at school, are unemployed or employed in “bad” jobs, and have little hope for the future. Individuals in such circumstances have little to lose through crime. And crime is more likely when individuals *have not been taught to condemn crime*.

Second, GST argues that people are *pressured into crime* by the negative emotions that result from strains. They feel bad and these bad feelings create some pressure to act, with crime being one possible response. Social control theories, by contrast, do not argue that people are pressured into crime. Rather, control theories argue that the absence of positive relationships with conventional others and institutions *frees people to engage in crime*. Individuals who are low in social control are free to satisfy their needs and desires in the most expedient way possible, which is often crime. So if they see something they want, they are free to steal it. If someone annoys them, they are free to assault him or her. Since they are low in social control, there is little chance that their crime will be sanctioned by others, will jeopardize their ties to conventional others or institutions, or will provoke feelings of guilt. So they are free to do what they want; nothing is holding them back from crime.

Social control theory and GST, then, differ from one another in terms of (a) their description of the *type* of environmental factors that lead to crime, and (b) their explanation of *why* environmental factors lead to crime. GST focuses on negative relationships with others, while social control theory focuses on the absence of positive relationships with conventional others. GST argues that individuals are pressured to engage in crime, while social control theory argues that they are freed to engage in crime. But despite these differences, the theories are related to one another in important ways. As will be argued later, there is reason to believe that strains may reduce one’s level of social control. For example, parental abuse may reduce one’s emotional bond to parents. Likewise, low social control may lead to strains. For example, parents who do not care about their children are more likely to mistreat them. Finally, individuals who are low in social control are more likely to respond to strains with crime, because the costs of crime are lower for them.

## Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory also focuses on the effect of the social environment on crime. However, while GST focuses on negative relationships with others, social learning theory tends to focus on *positive relationships with deviant others*. These others, most often friends, teach individuals to engage in crime. In particular, they reinforce individuals' crime, often with social approval. They model crime for individuals, which the individuals then imitate. And they teach individuals values and beliefs that are favorable to crime (e.g. Agnew, 2005a; Cullen and Agnew, 2003; Akers, 1998). For example, they teach individuals that they should respond with violence when treated in a disrespectful manner. Anderson's account of street life in a poor, inner-city community illustrates some of the principles of social learning theory.

These children of the street . . . are said to "come up hard." They often learn to fight at an early age, using short-tempered adults around them as models. The street-oriented home may be fraught with anger, verbal disputes, physical aggression, and even mayhem. The children observe these goings-on, learning that might makes right. . . . Even small children test one another, pushing and shoving, and are ready to hit other children over circumstances not to their liking . . . the child who is the toughest prevails. Thus the violent resolution of disputes, the hitting and cursing, gains social reinforcement. . . . Those street-oriented adults with whom children come in contact . . . [verbalize] the message they are getting through experience: "Watch your back." "Protect yourself." "Don't punk out." "If somebody messes with you, you got to pay them back." "If somebody disses you, you got to straighten them out." (Anderson, 1994:83, 86)

GST and social learning theory, then, tend to focus on different features of the social environment. Also, they offer different accounts of why the social environment leads to crime. While GST argues that strains pressure individuals to engage in crime, social learning theory argues that deviant others teach individuals to *view crime as a desirable or at least justifiable form of behavior in certain circumstances*. But as was the case with social control theory, GST and

social learning theory are also related to one another in important ways.

Strains may lead individuals to form or join deviant groups that reinforce crime, model crime, and teach beliefs favorable to crime. For example, individuals who cannot achieve goals like money through legal means may sometimes join gangs in an effort to achieve money through illegal means. I discuss this idea further in Chapter 2. At the same time, membership in deviant groups increases the likelihood that individuals will experience strains. Not surprisingly, individuals who belong to deviant groups are more likely to mistreat one another and elicit negative treatment from others. For example, gang members often get into conflicts with one another and with others such as teachers, police, and rival gang members (Colvin, 2000; Schreck et al., 2004; Shaffer, 2003). Finally, individuals who belong to deviant groups are more likely to respond to strains with crime, partly because they are more disposed to crime. This disposition is easy to understand, since their friends reinforce criminal responses to strains, model criminal responses, and teach beliefs that justify criminal responses.

In sum, GST is distinguished from social control and social learning theories in terms of (a) the features of the social environment that it examines, and (b) its explanation of why the social environment leads to crime. GST is the only theory to focus explicitly on negative relationships with others and to argue that these relationships pressure individuals to engage in crime. At the same time, these theories are related to one another in important ways. Strains may contribute to low social control and association with deviant others who teach crime. Conversely, low control and association with deviant others may contribute to strains. Further, strains are more likely to lead to crime among those who are low in control and associate with deviant others. I'll return to these relationships at several points in this book and, in the concluding chapter, I'll discuss the possibility of constructing a general explanation of crime that draws on all of these theories.

## Conclusion

Why do individuals engage in crime, according to GST? They experience strains or stressors, become upset as a result, and may cope with their strains and negative emotions through crime. Crim-

inal coping is especially likely if they lack the ability to cope in a legal manner, their costs of crime are low, and they are disposed to crime. Crime may allow them to reduce or escape from their strains, obtain revenge against those who have wronged them, or alleviate their negative emotions (through illegal drug use). GST presents a rather different explanation of crime than that offered by the other leading crime theories. One way to appreciate this difference is to consider the images of the offender presented by the different theories. Biopsychological theories view offenders as people who are “out of control” and “mean.” Social control theories view offenders as people who are “free to engage in crime” because of their weak ties to conventional others and institutions. Social learning theory sees offenders as people who view crime as a desirable or justifiable response in certain circumstances, reflecting the fact that they have been reinforced for crime, exposed to criminal models, and taught beliefs favorable to crime. GST, by contrast, views offenders as people who are *pressured into crime* as a result of the strains they have experienced.

### Note

1. The measurement of both objective and subjective strains also allows researchers to explore the factors that influence the subjective evaluation of objective strains. Such exploration will help us better understand the causes of crime and, as indicated in Chapter 8, may help us better control crime.

### Review and Discussion Questions

1. What are the central ideas of general strain theory?
2. What are strains? What are the three major types of strains? Can you give two examples of each of these types? Can you think of any strains or stressors that do *not* fall under one of these types?
3. What are the major strains experienced by college students? Do you think certain of these strains are more likely to result in crime than others? If so, why?

4. What are objective and subjective strains? How might a researcher measure each type of strain? Why do I state that subjective strains are more likely than objective strains to result in crime?
5. What are vicarious and anticipated strains? How might researchers measure these types of strains? What are the characteristics of those vicarious and anticipated strains most likely to lead to crime?
6. Give an example of each of the three major reasons why strains increase the likelihood of crime.
7. Why do I argue that GST can help explain all major types of crime?
8. What sorts of strains might be especially conducive to corporate crime? What sorts might be conducive to terrorism?
9. Why are some individuals more likely than others to cope with strains through crime? Describe the characteristics of someone who is quite likely to cope with strains through crime.
10. How do biopsychological theories, social control theory, and social learning theory explain crime? Draw a diagram depicting the central arguments of each of these theories, similar to the diagram in Figure 1.1.
11. How does GST differ from biopsychological, social control, and social learning theories? How is GST related to these theories?
12. Do you think it is possible to build a general or integrated theory of crime that draws on all of these theories? If so, what might such a theory look like (e.g., can you describe the key arguments of this theory or draw a diagram of the theory)?
13. Use GST to explain a criminal incident described in the mass media. ♦

