**General Strain Theory, Key Strains, and Deviance**

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**Summary**

The purpose of the study is to test Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory (GST), specifically, examining the effects of key strains, negative emotions, and conditioning factors on various types of deviance. Most previous research has suffered from limitations including the failure to measure strain properly, examining the cumulative effect of strain on deviance rather than the relative effect, and not measuring the strains believed to be most likely to lead to deviance. However, the current study addresses these limitations by measuring eight different types of strains (i.e., racism, gender discrimination, and teachers’ emotional punishment, most of which were identified as important strains leading to deviance. From this, the author hypothesizes that each of the eight key strains are positively related to deviance.

**Methods**

The data analyzed in the study was based on 294 completed questionnaires administered to college students registered in freshmen-level courses at a state university in the western United States from 2005-2006. The questions involved explored various strains such as social, family, and student-teacher interactions over a five-year period that corresponds with the high school years of a stereotypical college freshman. The independent variables included eight types of strain which were measured in relation to involvement in deviant behavior, like fighting, joining a gang, stealing, and using illicit drugs. The strains measured are as follows:

* Desired goal blockage, family conflict, parental punishment, teachers’ emotional punishment, gender discrimination, race discrimination, criminal victimization, and negative community environment

**Results**

The results of the study indicated that only three of the eight strains were significantly related to general deviance, violent deviance, or nonviolent deviance. According to the findings, students who experience desired goal blockage, teachers’ emotional punishment, or racial discrimination were more likely to participate in deviant behavior. Additionally, anger contributed to deviance when combined with each of the other strains. However, contrary to Agnew’s predictions, family related strains (family conflict and parental punishment) and gender discrimination were not significantly related to any types of deviance.

**Implications**

The current research contributes to the empirical development of general strain theory by measuring an extensive list of strains most likely to lead to deviance. While largely ignored by previous empirical studies on GST, as predicted by Agnew, teachers’ emotional punishment and racial discrimination are significantly related to deviance. The reasoning behind this finding could be because oftentimes victims perceive this behavior as intentional, aggressive, undeserved, and an unfair assault which could threaten their self-esteem and identity. However, considering the significant effect of teachers’ emotional punishment on deviance among college students, future research needs to replicate these findings in the context of general strain theory, especially by sampling United States adolescents.

Moon, B., Hays, K., & Blurton, D. (2009). General strain theory, key strains, and deviance. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 37*(1), 98-106. doi:

10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2008.12.011