



A “rough test” of a delinquent coping process model of general strain theory[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: We examine a coping-process model Agnew (2013) proposed in his recent extension of general strain theory (GST). We also test whether combining variables conducive to criminal coping increases the chance of detecting their conditioning the effects of strain and negative emotions on coping.

Methods: We applied structural equation modeling to analyze representative data from two waves of the Korean Youth Panel Survey, collected when respondents were eleventh and twelfth graders.

Results: Holding the respondent's prior deviance and sociodemographic and theoretical controls constant, we found the criminogenic effect of objective strain on delinquent coping to be fully mediated by the objective strain's cognitive appraisal (i.e., subjective strain) and the emotional outcomes of strain. In addition, anger was found to increase internalizing (drug use) as well as externalizing coping (non-drug delinquency), whereas depression/anxiety was not related to drug use, though it decreased non-drug delinquency. However, we found little evidence that combining variables conducive to criminal coping is likely to help detect their conditioning effects than using the variables individually.

Conclusions: This study provides empirical support for the coping-process model of extended GST, including the conceptual distinction between objective and subjective strain, except the suggested combinational method to detect a conditioning effect.

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Introduction

Agnew's (1992) seminal work on general strain theory (GST) almost instantly provided a foundation for the strain perspective in criminology to reclaim its unique contribution to the social psychological explanation of crime and delinquency. Micro-criminology had been dominated by control and social learning theories (Akers, 1985; Hirschi, 1969) for about two decades since classic strain theory went out of favor because of its limited scope and poor explanatory ability. Following up with his characterization of the theory as being “not ... fully developed” (Agnew, 1992: 75), Agnew (2001, 2006) not only regularly updated the current state of GST research but also continued to elaborate and extend the theory. In general, the theory's broad conceptualization of strain and the proposed mediation of negative emotions between strain and crime generally received empirical support from an ever-increasing number of GST studies (Agnew, 2006).

However, previous findings for the proposition of conditioning factors have been mixed. In response, Agnew (2006) recommended an analytic strategy that would increase the chance of detecting conditioning effects with survey data, suggesting that the factors should be considered in combination (i.e., combined into a composite measure) rather than individually. Reiterating the strategy in a recent extension of GST, Agnew (2013) argued that criminogenic strains should be examined in the same way. Furthermore, in a proposed model of this coping process he elaborated GST by specifying a causal relationship between objective and subjective strains that were conceptually distinguished earlier (Agnew, 2001). Finally, he called for further research on how the nature of negative emotions prompted by strain may affect the type of criminal coping. While currently available survey data are not quite adequate to properly test his core arguments made in the extension of GST, what Agnew (2013, p. 666) called a “rough test” is still possible with existing data.

This study intends to conduct such a preliminary test by examining three of his core arguments: (1) the mediation of subjective strain as well as negative emotions between objective strain and criminal coping, (2) the conditioning effects of a criminal-propensity index of individual characteristics that increase the likelihood of criminal coping, and (3) differential associations between externalizing versus internalizing negative emotions (anger vs. depression/anxiety) and criminal coping behaviors (violent/property offending vs. drug use). To empirically

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examine these relationships, we analyzed two waves of panel data collected from a representative sample of South Korean adolescents by estimating structural equation models. Before describing our data, measurement, and models, we first summarize Agnew's (2013) extension of GST, focusing on what we intend to examine in this paper. We then provide an overview of GST research using non-American samples since we employ data collected in an Asian country, which is followed by the presentation of results and discussion of their implications for the extension of GST and its future research.

A coping process model: an extension of GST

GST posits that certain strains result in one or more of a range of negative emotional states, which in turn increase the probability of criminal coping behaviors (Agnew, 1992). Criminogenic strains tend to be seen as unjust and high in magnitude, associated with low social control, and sources of pressure or incentive to engage in criminal coping (Agnew, 2001). While all types of negative emotional reaction to strain are theoretically relevant, anger is the most critical for GST because it is more likely than other emotions to lead to crime, particularly, violence. At the same time, Agnew (1992, 2006) recognizes how non-angry negative emotions help explain non-violent forms of illegal behaviors of coping.

First, the empirical validity of Agnew's (1992) broad conceptualization of strain was generally confirmed by previous studies that reported all three major types of strain (i.e., the failure to achieve positively valued goals, the removal of positively valued stimuli, and the presentation of negative stimuli) were positively related to crime (e.g., Broidy, 2001). As posited, the strain–crime relationship tended to be mediated in part by negative emotions, though previous tests mostly relied on trait rather than state measures of emotional reaction to strain with some exceptions (e.g., Broidy, 2001; Jang & Johnson, 2003). Agnew (1992) initially focused on emotional states (i.e., the actual experience of an emotion), but later incorporated emotional traits (i.e., a general tendency to experience certain emotion) into GST. For example, “people high in trait anger tend to get angry a lot, although they are not necessarily angry at any given time” (Agnew, 2006, p. 30), which a previous study found empirical evidence for (Mazerolle, Piquero, & Capowich, 2003). The strain–crime relationship was also found to be partly indirect via control and social learning variables, while negative emotions' mediation was taken into account simultaneously (Brezina, 1998; Jang & Rhodes, 2012).

Second, while a variety of negative emotions were positively related to strain and criminal coping (Brezina, 1996), researchers mostly studied anger and, to a lesser extent, depression and anxiety due mainly to data constraints (Agnew, 2006). Anger was found to be associated with both internalizing and, to a greater extent, externalizing behaviors (Aseltine, Gore, & Gordon, 2000; Piquero & Sealock, 2000). Depression and anxiety were either unrelated to coping behaviors or, when related, positively to legitimate coping as well as illegitimate internalizing behaviors and negatively to externalizing ones (Broidy, 2001; Capowich, Mazerolle, & Piquero, 2001; Jang & Johnson, 2003; Jang, 2007).

On the other hand, the proposition of conditioning factors, intended to explain why not all strained individuals turn to criminal coping, has not been consistently supported. Some studies found significant conditioning effects and others did not, whereas some factors (e.g., delinquent peer association) tended to be significant more often than others (e.g., self-esteem). Pointing out the inherent difficulty of detecting conditioning effects with survey data that most previous tests were based on, Agnew (2006) suggested that experimental design or alternative data collection methods, like vignette or observational studies, be used, while recognizing that searching for new conditioning factors was a worthy endeavor (e.g., Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen, 2002; Jang & Johnson, 2003). In addition, he recommended that researchers use multiple conditioning factors in combination rather than individually.

Agnew (2013, p. 660, *emphasis in original*) elaborated the recommendation in his recent extension of GST, citing a meta-analysis of stress research (Grant et al., 2006): “The likelihood of finding

conditioning effects ... was frequently higher when researchers refined their analyses, considering particular types of stressors (e.g., exposure to violence versus poverty), different outcome measures (e.g., externalizing versus internalizing behaviors), and combinations of conditioning variables.” That is, refined analysis to detect conditioning effects would examine criminogenic strains (Agnew, 2001, 2006), and expect different results between externalizing and internalizing coping behaviors, as well as enhance the measurement of conditioning effects by combining factors that are more likely to interact with strain than others. We would expect such analyses to yield differential findings for externalizing and internalizing emotions given their systematic relationships with different types of strain and coping behaviors (Jang, 2007).

In his extension, Agnew (2013) also proposed a coping model of GST, where he specified an indirect relationship between objective strain and emotional reaction to strain via subjective evaluation of the strain or, in short, subjective strain. By definition, objective strains are assumed to be equally negative to different individuals in that they are events or conditions disliked by all of them, whereas individuals vary in their subjective evaluation of strains because they cognitively appraise them differently (Agnew, 2001). Thus, objective strain should be considered exogenous and directly related to subjective strain, which is in turn positively associated with criminal coping via negative emotional reaction to subjective strain. As a result, relatively weak relationships are expected (1) between objective strain and negative emotional reaction as well as criminal coping and (2) between subjective strain and criminal coping to the extent that the mediators do not fully intervene between the variables.¹

Finally, Agnew's extension (2013, p. 657) included a discussion of systematic relationships between different types of negative emotional reaction and different forms of criminal coping: “anger may be especially conducive to violence, frustration to theft, fear to escape attempts such as running away, and depression to drug use.” The differential relationships were initially alluded to when GST was introduced (Agnew, 1992), and have received some support (e.g., Aseltine et al., 2000; Broidy, 2001; Capowich et al., 2001; Jang, 2007; Jang & Johnson, 2003). However, research on these relationships tends to remain scant not only in number but also types of emotions and coping behaviors examined. In Agnew's (2013, p. 657) words, “These are promising lines of argument, in need of further development and research.”²

Prior research: generality of GST

While GST was first examined using data collected in the United States for about a decade after its introduction, it has been increasingly tested based on data from other countries since 2001 (Maxwell, 2001). Data for non-U.S. studies came from Canada (Baron, 2004), European nations of Bulgaria, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine (Botchkovar & Broidy, 2013; Botchkovar, Tittle, & Antonaccio, 2013; Botchkovar, Tittle, & Antonaccio, 2009; Froggio & Agnew, 2007; Sigfusdottir, Farkas, & Silver, 2004; Sigfusdottir, Kristjansson, & Agnew, 2012), and Asian countries of China, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Tibet (see Agnew, 2015).³

Findings from the studies of Western data tend to be consistent with the propositions of GST. For example, analyzing data from a convenience sample of 400 street youths in Vancouver, Canada, Baron (2004) found all three major types of strain (Agnew, 1992) to be positively related to an index of violent and property offenses with the strain–crime relationship being partly mediated by anger and conditioned by several factors including deviant peers. Botchkovar and Broidy's (2013) study of a random sample of 340 Russian adults reported positive associations between accumulated strain and situational anger and internalizing emotions (including depression) and between the negative emotions (i.e., situational anger and internalizing emotions) and theft, though not violence. Sigfusdottir et al.'s (2012) comparative study of a representative sample of 12,682 adolescents in five cities across Europe also provided “strong support” for GST.

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