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A GENERAL STRAIN THEORY APPROACH TO FAMILIES AND DELINQUENCY

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INTRODUCTION

Criminologists typically explain the effect of family factors on delinquency in terms of control and social learning theories. Control theorists focus on the extent to which parents directly control juvenile behavior by sanctioning delinquency, indirectly control behavior by establishing a close emotional bond with their children, and teach their children to control their own behavior. Social learning theorists focus on the extent to which parents teach juveniles to engage in conventional versus delinquent behavior; with such instruction occurring through the reinforcements and punishments they provide, the beliefs they teach, and the behaviors they model. Strain theorists have not had much to say about the impact of family factors on delinquency, except to argue that child abuse and harsh discipline are major sources of strain that contribute to delinquency (e.g. Agnew, 1985, 1992; Agnew & White, 1992; Brezina, 1998, 1999).

This paper draws on Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory to more fully describe

the relationship between family factors and delinquency. Drawing on the family research, it is first argued that parental strain contributes to those parenting practices that increase the likelihood of juvenile delinquency. The most important of these practices are poor supervision (i.e., lax, inconsistent, and/or harsh discipline) and the failure to establish a close emotional bond with children. It is next argued that these parenting practices contribute to delinquency *partly* because they increase the juvenile's level of strain. Further, certain family factors increase the likelihood that juveniles will respond to strain with delinquency. The strain model that is presented helps integrate certain of the research on the family and delinquency, helps better explain why certain family factors impact delinquency, and draws attention to certain family factors that have been overlooked in the research on families and delinquency. This chapter does not present a formal test of the model, but supporting evidence is noted and two 'illustrative analyses' that provide tentative support for parts of the model are presented.

CONTROL AND SOCIAL LEARNING EXPLANATIONS OF THE FAMILY-DELINQUENCY LINK

While control theorists focus on a range of family factors, they attach special importance to the emotional bond between family members and the adequacy of parental supervision (e.g. Hirschi, 1969, 1995; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Delinquency is said to be less likely if there is a strong emotional bond between parents and the juvenile. This bond has a direct effect on delinquency since it provides juveniles with a 'stake in conformity.' In particular, juveniles who are bonded to their parents will be less likely to engage in delinquency for fear that their actions might hurt or jeopardize their ties to their parents. And this bond has an indirect effect on

delinquency, since it increases the likelihood that parents will attempt to supervise their children, increases the effectiveness of their supervision (e.g. parental sanctions are more effective when children are bonded to parents), and increases the likelihood that juveniles will internalize parental beliefs.

Effective supervision involves the statement of clear rules prohibiting delinquency and actions that might contribute to delinquency, the monitoring of juvenile behavior to ensure that these rules are obeyed, and the consistent sanctioning of rule violations. Such supervision has a direct effect on delinquency, since juveniles are more likely to refrain from actions that result in consistent punishment. And supervision has an indirect effect on delinquency, since it increases the likelihood that juveniles will internalize prohibitions against delinquency and develop self-control.

Control theorists argue that 'poor parenting' is more likely when parents are low in social and self-control. In particular, poor parenting is more likely when parents: (a) are not attached to their children; (b) are not well monitored by those who might sanction poor parenting, perhaps because the parents are socially isolated; (c) have little to lose by engaging in poor parenting, perhaps because the parents do not have good reputations in the community or good jobs that would be jeopardized by poor parenting; and (d) have not been taught beliefs that encourage good parenting. Further, poor parenting is more likely when parents possess traits that reduce their motivation and ability to engage in good parenting; traits like impulsivity, self-centeredness, and irritability - which are components of low self-control. These arguments help explain why poor parenting is more common among such people as criminal parents, economically disadvantaged parents, and teenage mothers. These people are lower in

social and/or self-control.

Social learning theorists also emphasize the importance of the bond between family members and effective supervision. These factors play a vital role in teaching juveniles to conform. They go on, however, to argue that parents sometimes teach their children to engage in delinquency. This instruction is seldom deliberate, but rather is usually the unintended result of parental actions like modeling aggressive behavior (e.g. spouse and child abuse), teaching beliefs conducive to delinquency (e.g. the importance of being tough), and inadvertently reinforcing aggressive/delinquent behavior. Patterson and his colleagues, for example, found that the following interactional pattern was common in families with antisocial or delinquent children: a parent would attempt to discipline their child, often through scolding and nagging; the child would react to these disciplinary attempts with aversive behaviors, like crying, yelling, and hitting; and the parent would often retreat or back down in response to such behaviors. The child's aversive behaviors, then, would be negatively reinforced. The parent, however, was usually unaware of the impact of his or her actions (Patterson et al., 1989, 1992).

Social learning theorists argue that parents learn to engage in poor parenting from others. Among other things, they were exposed to poor parenting as children and so model the behavior of their parents (e.g. Patterson et al., 1992); they learn values conducive to poor parenting at work (Kohn, 1977); and they develop interactional patterns with their children that result in the reinforcement of poor parenting (Patterson et al., 1992).

A STRAIN MODEL OF THE FAMILY-DELINQUENCY RELATIONSHIP

Strain theory has not had much to say about the effect of family factors on crime. The classic strain theories of Merton (1938), Cohen (1955), and Cloward & Ohlin (1960) argue that crime results from the inability to achieve monetary success/middle class status through legitimate channels. The frustration or strain that results from such goal blockage is said to increase the likelihood that individuals will strike out at others or attempt to achieve their goals through illegitimate channels like theft. Such theories state that the children of poor families are less able to achieve their goals through legitimate channels than the children of wealthier families. But beyond that, there is little discussion of family factors and delinquency. Such theories focus on the impact of class on delinquency, rather than the impact of family structure and processes.

General strain theory (GST), however, has broadened the scope of the classic strain theories (see Agnew, 1992, forthcoming - a). GST focuses on *three major types* of strain. First, strain occurs when people are unable to achieve their goals through legitimate channels. GST focuses on a broad range of goals, including monetary success, status goals - including masculine status, autonomy goals, and the desire to be treated in a just or fair manner. Second, strain occurs when people lose something they value - like material possessions and relationships with valued others. Third, strain occurs when people are presented with noxious or negative stimuli - like verbal insults and physical assaults. These types of strain make people feel bad: angry, frustrated, depressed, etc. These negative feelings create pressure for corrective action, and delinquency is one possible response. Delinquency may be a method for reducing strain; that is, for

achieving goals, for protecting or retrieving positive stimuli, or for terminating or escaping from negative stimuli. For example, juveniles may steal the money they desire, assault the peers who harass them, or run away from the parents who abuse them. Delinquency may also be a method for seeking revenge or taking anger out on others. And delinquency may occur as individuals try to alleviate their negative emotions through illicit drug use.

GST recognizes that only some strained individuals turn to delinquency, and the theory pays special attention to those factors that condition the effect of strain on delinquency. At the most general level, strain is most likely to lead to delinquency when individuals are unable to cope through legitimate channels, the costs of delinquency are low, and they are motivated to engage in delinquency. These conditions are most likely to hold when individuals possess traits like impulsivity and irritability, have limited coping skills and resources, are low in conventional social support, are low in social and self-control, blame their strain on the deliberate acts of others, and have been taught to respond to strain with crime (for a fuller discussion, see Agnew, 1992, forthcoming - a)."

OST is in a better position to examine the relationship between family factors and delinquency than the classic strain theories. A range of family factors may contribute to the types of strain described above. Also, family factors may condition the effect of strain on delinquency. As such, GST can shed additional light on the ways in which the family contributes to delinquency, supplementing the control and social learning approaches that now dominate the literature. Further, the types of strain described by GST may also contribute to poor parenting. In fact, GST is quite compatible with much of the research on the causes of poor parenting - as indicated below.

The discussion which follows examines: (a) the effect of *parental* strain on poor parenting, and (b) the effect of poor parenting - a major source of *juvenile strain* - on juvenile delinquency. Those factors that condition the effect of parental strain and of poor parenting are also discussed. Figure 1 illustrates the strain model that is presented.

PARENTAL STRAIN AS A SOURCE OF POOR PARENTING

Data suggest that many of the types of strain or stress identified in GST are a major source of those parenting practices that contribute to delinquency. While delinquency researchers have focused on a range of parenting practices, most research has focused on the emotional bond between family members and parental supervision. Data suggest that delinquency is more likely when: (a) there is a weak or negative emotional bond between parents and children, and (b) parental supervision is lax, overly strict, inconsistent, and/or harsh (i.e., excessive given the infraction, physically or verbally abusive). Data also suggest that delinquency is more likely when marital conflict is high, parents fail to teach good social and problem-solving skills, parents fail to provide adequate social support, and parents teach beliefs conducive to delinquency - like the 'code of the street' (see Anderson, 1999). Other family factors, like family structure (e.g. whether both natural parents are present, family size, age of mother) and parental criminality are said to affect delinquency primarily through their effect on these processes. (For overviews of this research, see Agnew, forthcoming b; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Patterson et al., 1992; Rankin & Wells, 1990; Rutter et al., 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Van Voorhis, 1988; Wright & Wright, 1995)

Researchers have recently begun to ask why some parents are more likely to

engage in the above types of 'poor parenting', While control and social learning theories are frequently mentioned, the dominant answer is that parental strain or stress fosters poor parenting. In brief, researchers argue that a range of stressors increase the likelihood that parents will experience negative affect like depression and irritability. This negative affect increases the likelihood of poor parenting. Depressed and angry parents are more likely to withdraw from their children, reject them, and treat them in a harsh manner. Whether stressed parents engage in poor parenting, however, is influenced by several factors with most research focusing on the parents' level of social support.

Most of the research on the causes of poor parenting, then, is quite compatible with OST. This is not surprising, because both this research and GST draw heavily on the stress literatures in sociology and psychology. GST, however, can contribute to this research by pointing to additional types of parental stress and additional factors that condition the impact of stress on poor parenting. Likewise, this family research can contribute to GST - as indicated below.

TYPES OF PARENTAL STRAIN

Most of the research on stress and poor parenting has focused on the impact of economic hardship (e.g. Belsky, 1990; Conger et al., 1992, 1994, 1995; Elder & Caspi, 1985; Elder et al., 1985; Larzelere & Patterson, 1990; Lempers et al., 1989; McLoyd et al., 1994; Simons et al., 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Voydanoff, 1990). This is not surprising, since much data indicate that economic hardship is a major stressor in itself and that it increases the likelihood of experiencing other stressors, including marital

conflict, divorce, and a range of stressful life events. Family researchers have been quite sophisticated in their conceptualization and measurement of economic hardship (e.g. Conger et al., 1992; Fox & Chancey, 1998; Voydanoff, 1990). Economic hardship is not simply measured in terms of low income or a two or three item index of socioeconomic status. Rather, researchers typically examine such things as: (1) family per capita income; (2) unstable work history, which includes changing to a worse job, demotions, and being fired or laid off; (3) debt-to-asset ratio; and (4) increases or decreases in family income in the past year. Further, researchers recognize that these types of economic hardship do not impact all families in the same way. So a more direct measure of 'economic strain' is sometimes employed as well. For example, parents are asked about the extent to which the family has enough money for clothing, food, medical care, and bills. And they are asked about the changes they have had to make to cope with economic hardship, like moving, taking an additional job, canceling medical insurance, and obtaining government assistance. While economic hardship is correlated with economic strain, the correlation is far from perfect. Researchers typically find that economic hardship has a substantial effect on poor parenting, with much or all of this effect being mediated by economic strain (e.g. Conger et al., 1992, 1994; Simons et al., 1992, 1993b; Voydanoff, 1990; also see Elder & Caspi, 1985; McLoyd et al., 1994). Strain researchers in criminology can profit from this work, since they often employ rather simple measures of economic hardship and seldom measure 'economic strain' (although see Agnew et al., 1996).

Researchers have also examined other types of parental stressors (see Belsky, 1984, 1990 for overviews). Certain of these stressors focus on family structure and

processes, like divorce/separation, large family size, teenage motherhood, and marital conflict (e.g. Biglan et al., 1990; Conger et al., 1984, 1992, 1993; Simons et al., 1993b, 1996). Other stressors focus on the characteristics of the child, including the antisocial or 'difficult' behavior of the child. Much data indicate that difficult children are a major source of strain for parents - with recent data also indicating that adolescent delinquency is a major source of strain as well (Ambert, 1999; Belsky, 1984, 1990; Biglan et al., 1990; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Elder & Caspi, 1985; Patterson & Forgatch, 1990; Rutter et al., 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Finally, researchers sometimes employ more general inventories of stressful life events and daily life hassles. These inventories measure things like whether the parents have recently been fired or laid off, moved, experienced the death of friend, had an unwanted pregnancy, gotten robbed, or had an auto accident (e.g. Conger et al., 1995; Patterson & Forgatch, 1990; Patterson et al., 1989, 1992; Simons et al., 1993b, 1996; Straus & Gelles, 1990). Data suggest that these additional stressors also contribute to poor parenting. These stressors are correlated with most forms of poor parenting, even in longitudinal studies that attempt to control for relevant third variables. And - more generally - data indicate that poor parenting is most likely on those days that parents report high levels of stress (Patterson & Forgatch, 1990; Patterson et al., 1992).

GST points to other potentially important types of parental strain. While family researchers have devoted much attention to the failure to achieve economic goals, they might also consider other types of goal blockage. Strain researchers have devoted much attention to the failure to achieve status goals, with much recent research focusing on the inability of certain males to achieve masculine status through conventional channels.

In this connection, certain accounts suggest that the failure to 'accomplish masculinity' through conventional channels may contribute to such problems as teenage motherhood, single parenthood, family violence, the neglect of parental responsibilities, and harsh parenting (see Anderson, 1999). In addition, researchers should examine the achievement of family related goals. Do parents feel that they are meeting their parental expectations or responsibilities. Likewise, do parents feel that their children are meeting their expectations. It has been suggested that the failure to satisfy such family-related expectations contributes to child abuse (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Finally, do parents feel that their partners and other family members are treating them in a just or fair manner. There has been some research on the factors that influence perceptions of fairness in the family, but little research on the impact of such perceptions on parenting practices. (see Barnett & Shen, 1997; Gager, 1998; Rosenbluth et al., 1998; Ross & Van Willigen, 1996; Sanchez & Kane, 1996). GST also points to several additional types of strain involving the loss of positive stimuli/presentation of negative stimuli, including work in the secondary labor market, residence in high poverty communities, and - at the family level - the demands associated with nurturing others (see Agnew, 1992; forthcoming (a), (b); Broidy and Agnew, 1997; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1988).

EFFECT OF STRAIN ON NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

GST would argue that the above types of strain lead to poor parenting because they increase negative affect. Strain makes parents feel bad, and these bad feelings create pressure for corrective action. Parents may cope in a variety of ways, with poor parenting being one possible response. In particular, parents may respond to their

depression and anger by withdrawing from their children-both emotionally and physically (Downey & Coyne, 1990). Effective parenting requires much time, effort, and patience; and these qualities are in short supply among parents who are worried and upset about the stressors in their life, like paying bills and spouse abuse. Withdrawal from parental responsibilities may be an attractive coping mechanism. As a result of such withdrawal, the emotional bond between parents and the child is weakened, parents do little to monitor or sanction misbehavior, and they engage in little 'positive parenting' - like providing instruction in social/problem solving skills. Parents may also respond to their depression and anger by treating their child in a hostile manner (see Conger et al., 1984, 1992, 1994; Downey & Coyne, 1990). Such parents are easily irritated and they often take out their anger on their children. As a consequence, parents may become excessively strict, their reaction to misbehavior may become excessive and harsh/abusive, there may be little effort to engage in effective problem-solving, and family conflict may increase. We might expect these reactions to be especially likely when the child is seen as a source of stress, as is the case with 'difficult' or antisocial children. It is easier to withdraw from or aggress against others when they are seen at fault. So GST argues that strain affects poor parenting by creating negative affect, with poor parenting being a response to or attempt to cope with such affect.

It is important to note, however, that the above types of 'strain' may lead to poor parenting for other reasons. For example, a control theorist might argue that economic hardship contributes to poor parenting because economically disadvantaged families are lower in control. They may be less likely to face sanctions if they engage in poor parenting, perhaps because they live in dis-organized communities where deviance is

more often ignored or tolerated.

They have a lower stake in conformity or less to lose by engaging in poor parenting (e.g. they are unemployed, they have low educational and occupational expectations for their children). And they may not hold beliefs that value good parenting. A social learning theorist might argue that economically disadvantaged people are more often taught to engage in poor parenting, like coercive discipline. Data, for example, indicate that blue-collar workers are more likely to hold values conducive to coercive discipline (see Conger et al., 1984; Kohn, 1977; Simons et al., 1993b). Control and social learning theorists might also argue that any association between the above strains and poor parenting is spurious: these strains and poor parenting may be associated because both are caused by low control or a learned disposition for crime/deviance. Low self-control, for example, may cause both economic hardship and poor parenting.

So it is important for a strain theorist to demonstrate that the above strains lead to poor parenting through their effect on negative emotions. Several studies have in fact tried to determine whether negative emotions mediate the effect of strain on poor parenting. Certain of these studies employ longitudinal data and attempt to control for relevant third variables. Most research has focused on the emotion of depression, although some studies also measure anger/irritability and anxiety. Data strongly suggest that measures of strain influence poor parenting at least partly through their effect on negative emotions. Stressors usually have a sizeable effect on negative emotions, and these emotions typically mediate some or all of the effect of stressors on poor parenting (Belsky, 1984; Conger et al., 1984, 1992, 1994, 1995; Elder & Caspi, 1985; Fox & Chancey, 1998; McLoyd et al., 1994; Patterson & Forgatch, 1990; Simons et al., 1993a, b,

1996; Voydanoff, 1990; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1998).

Once more, strain researchers in criminology can benefit from this work. GST, in particular, focuses on the negative emotions of anger and frustration. The family research, however, demonstrates that it may be important to consider depression as well. While depression may not energize the individual for action, many forms of deviance involve withdrawal. Drug use, running away, and truancy may be examples in some cases. At the same time, the work on GST suggests that family researchers would do well to accord more attention to the emotions of anger (only considered in some studies) and frustration. While depression and anger/frustration usually occur together, that is not always the case (Downey & Coyne, 1990; Patterson & Forgatch, 1990). A consideration of these different emotional reactions may help explain different patterns of poor parenting; with withdrawal/neglect being more likely when depression dominates, harsh/abusive parenting when anger dominates, and inconsistent parenting when depression and anger occur together.

CONDITIONING EFFECTS

GST argues that strain is more likely to lead to deviance in some cases than others. And family researchers have devoted some attention to the factors that influence the effect of stressors on poor parenting. Drawing on the larger stress literature, they have focused on the role of social support. Individuals may receive advice, emotional support, and assistance from others. This may reduce the impact of strain on negative affect and it may reduce the likelihood that parents respond to negative affect with poor parenting (see Belsky, 1981, 1984; Simons et al., 1993). Researchers have focused on

both support from one's spouse and support from others, such as friends, relatives, and neighbors. It is argued that support from one's spouse is most critical given the centrality of this relationship (Belsky, 1984; Simons et al., 1993). Although the data are somewhat mixed, they suggest that support - especially spouse support - does reduce the negative effects of strain on parenting practices (Belsky, 1990; Elder & Caspi, 1985; McLoyd et al., 1994; Patterson et al., 1992; Simons et al., 1992, 1993a; Voydanoff, 1990).

GST - as well as the larger stress literature - points to still other conditioning variables. At most general level, three sets of factors may be important. First, do parents have the *ability* to cope with stress in a non-deviant manner. In particular, do they have the skills, resources, and support necessary for effective coping. Individual characteristics - like psychological health, temperament, and problem-solving skills - are important here. Some data, for example, suggest that irritable parents are more likely to respond to stress with poor parenting (see Belsky, 1990; Elder & Caspi, 1988; Patterson & Forgatch, 1990). The parents' financial resources are also important, since money can mitigate the impact of many stressors. And the parents' level of conventional social support is of course important. Second, are the *costs of* poor parenting low? The costs are influenced by the parent's level of social and self-control (e.g. are they socially isolated, do they hold good jobs and have good reputations in the community, do they hold beliefs that condemn poor parenting, are they aware of and concerned about the consequences of poor parenting). Third, are the parents *motivated* to engage in poor parenting. Motivation is influenced by individual traits like impulsivity and irritability, which may create a predisposition for poor parenting. It is influenced by whether parents blame their child for their strain. And it is influenced by the parents' learning

history: were they taught to cope with strain by withdrawing from or striking out at others (see Straus & Gelles, 1990).

So parental strain is most likely to lead to poor parenting when the *ability* to cope with strain in a legitimate manner is low, the *costs* of poor parenting are low, and the *motivation* for poor parenting is high. Unfortunately, parents with the highest levels of strain are also the most likely to respond to strain with poor parenting. Strains like economic hardship reduce the ability to cope, the costs of poor parenting, and the motivation for good parenting (e.g. high levels of strain may emotionally overwhelm and physically exhaust parents, making it difficult to engage in good parenting). Likewise, these latter factors increase the likelihood of strain. Individuals with limited coping abilities, for example, often evoke negative reactions from others in particular situations and sort themselves into environments where negative treatment is likely - like bad marriages and bad jobs. Further, traits like irritability may be genetically based to some extent, so irritable parents are more likely to have irritable children (Moffitt, 1993).

SUMMARY

GST is quite compatible with the research on the causes of poor parenting. Much data suggest that parental strain contributes to negative emotions and that negative emotions at least partially mediate the effect of parental strain on poor parenting. The effect of parental strain, however, is conditioned by social support and certain other factors. GST, as indicated, can both contribute to and benefit from this research on the causes of poor parenting.

POOR PARENTING AS A SOURCE OF JUVENILE STRAIN

While strain/stress theory is commonly used to explain the causes of poor parenting, it is seldom used to explain the effect of poor parenting on delinquency - with the limited exception of harsh/abusive parenting. The effect of poor parenting on delinquency is typically explained in terms of control and social learning theories, as indicated above. This section argues that poor parenting is a major source of *juvenile* strain and that such strain is an important cause of both negative emotions and delinquency. Juveniles, in particular, may attempt to cope with poor parenting by escaping from their parents (e.g. running away, curfew violation, stealing to reduce financial dependence on parents), seeking revenge or rebelling against their parents (e.g. Brezina, 1999), taking out their anger on related targets, and/or managing their negative affect through illicit drug use. This argument applies not only to harsh/abusive parenting, but to the other dimensions of poor parenting as well - including poor supervision and weak/negative emotional bonding between parent and child

POOR PARENTAL SUPERVISION AS A SOURCE OF JUVENILE STRAIN

At a minimum, effective supervision involves setting clear rules, monitoring behavior, and consistently sanctioning rule violations in an appropriate manner. Such actions are strongly related to delinquency and this relationship is typically explained in terms of control theory. Effective supervision, however, is also related to delinquency because it substantially reduces juvenile strain. Parents supervise children for at least two reasons. The first - emphasized by control theorists - is to prevent misbehavior. The

second has not received much attention from criminologists, but it is perhaps more important than the first. As a quick visit to any playground or discussion with any parent will reveal, *parents want to protect their children from harm (i.e., strain)*. So the rules that parents set for their children not only forbid delinquent behavior, they also forbid behavior that might result in harm. Parents, for example, typically forbid their children from interacting with people who may harm them (e.g. strangers, delinquent peers), going to places where they might be harmed (e.g. certain sections of the city), and engaging in behaviors that might prove harmful (e.g. risky play activity). And one of the reasons that parents forbid delinquent behavior is because they fear that it might directly harm their child (e.g. drug use, fighting) or might provoke others into harming their child (e.g. peers who seek revenge, police who arrest).

Certain research has described the efforts of parents to protect their children from harm, including the extensive efforts sometimes employed by parents in high risk environments. Anderson (1999), for example, describes how a mother in a high-crime neighborhood frequently kept her daughter at home and enrolled her in a private school, despite the financial difficulties involved. This was done, in part, to protect the daughter from harm. Garbarino et al., (1992) describe how a grandmother established a neighborhood watch for her granddaughter, so she would be protected on the route home from school. Neighbors would notify the grandmother if the granddaughter did not pass by at the expected time and a search party would then be established. Such supervisory efforts seek to *prevent* harm. They are distinct from efforts to provide assistance *once harm has been experienced* (such efforts are typically referred to as social support).

Poor supervision, then, may increase the likelihood that juveniles experience a range of harms or strains. In particular, juveniles who are not effectively supervised may be more likely to interact with others who harm them, be in situations where the likelihood of harm is high, engage in behaviors that harm themselves, and act in ways that evoke negative or harmful reactions from others. Criminologists have not devoted much attention to this argument. But if it is correct, we would expect to find a negative association between measures of effective supervision and many measures of strain (some types of strain - like financial hardship and the death of family members - cannot be prevented through parental supervision). Further, we would expect the relationship between supervision and delinquency to be reduced when we control for strain. Ideally, we should conduct a longitudinal analysis since adolescent strain may influence parental supervision. We should also control for third variables that might affect both supervision and strain, such as economic hardship. And we should broaden our conception of supervision to include parental actions that seek to prevent *both* delinquency and juvenile harm.

Poor supervision may not only contribute to strain, but may also be a source of strain in and of itself. *Lax and inconsistent supervision* may promote feelings of normlessness; children may be uncertain how they should behave and how others will behave in certain settings. Research suggests that such uncertainty is a source of stress or strain, with children - particularly in high-risk environments - having a need for structure and control (see Garbarino et al., 1992). *Inconsistent discipline* may also be a source of strain because people like to be treated in a fair or just manner. Inconsistent discipline is quite likely to be experienced as unfair, since the same behavior may

sometimes result in punishment and sometimes be ignored. In this area, data indicate that inconsistent discipline contributes to both psychological distress (depression) and delinquency (Lempers et al., 1989). Related to this, data indicate that the non-contingent use of punishment or the application of aversive stimuli promotes negative affect and aggression. Further, discipline that is seen as unjust or unfair is associated with delinquency (Berkowitz, 1993; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Rohner et al., 1996). *Excessively strict* supervision may also be stressful, since it is likely to be seen as unfair and may interfere with the autonomy goals of many adolescents. Such discipline may involve rules that severely limit behavior, excessive monitoring, and sanctions that are excessive given the infraction. Limited data suggest that excessively strict discipline is associated with higher levels of delinquency (Rankin & Wells, 1990). It is difficult to explain this association in terms of control theory, but a strain explanation readily suggests itself. Future research should determine whether such discipline affects delinquency partly through its effect on negative emotions.

Finally, *harsh discipline (e.g. screaming, threatening, ridiculing, nagging, hitting), abusive behavior, and parental neglect* are important sources of strain. Most of the family research drawing on strain theory focuses on these types of behavior. This is understandable, since harsh discipline and abusive behavior clearly involve the presentation of negative stimuli. And parental neglect clearly involves the loss of positive stimuli and/or the inability to achieve positively-valued goals. Much data suggest that these types of parental behavior contribute to delinquency - with their effect on delinquency being partly mediated by negative emotions like anger (Agnew, 1985; Brezina, 1998; McLoyd et al., 1994; Straus & Yodanis, 1996; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996).

WEAK/NEGATIVE EMOTIONAL BONDS BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD AS A SOURCE OF JUVENILE STRAIN

Control theorists argue that a weak emotional bond between parent and child promotes delinquency for the reasons indicated above. A weak emotional bond may also be a source of strain, particularly for juveniles who desire good relations with parents. In this area, some data suggest that weak bonding is related to negative emotions like anger and depression and that these emotions partly mediate the relationship between weak bonding and delinquency (Agnew, 1993; Conger et al., 1992; Lempers et al., 1989). GST, however, would go on to argue that a negative emotional bond between parent and child contributes to delinquency over and above the effect of a weak bond. Juveniles who dislike or hate their parents probably do so because they believe their parents treat them in a negative manner. So a negative emotional bond indexes or reflects a range of negative parental treatment. But beyond that, it is stressful to live with someone you dislike or hate. If this argument is correct, we would expect 'juveniles who dislike or hate their parents to be higher *in* delinquency than those who are simply weakly attached to their parents - and this relationship should hold even after other measures of poor parenting are controlled.

Surprisingly, few studies have examined this argument (although see Nye, 1958, 71). Most measures of emotional bonding simply determine whether juveniles *do or do not like their* parents; they do not distinguish the absence of positive affect from negative affect. That is, they do not distinguish juveniles who say they *do not like their parents* from those who say they *dislike or hate their parents*. And the few studies that do contain measures making this distinction typically do not compare juveniles with weak parental

bonds to juveniles with negative bonds. This failure to distinguish the absence of positive affect from negative affect likely reflects the influence of control theory. Drawing on control theory, it should not make a difference whether a juvenile is weakly bonded or negatively bonded to parents. In either case, the juvenile has little to lose by engaging in delinquency. Strain theory, however, predicts that juveniles who dislike or hate their parents will be more delinquent than those who simply do not like or care about their parents. While both groups are low in control, the juveniles who dislike/hate their parents are also high in strain. This argument is explored in the 'illustrative' analysis below.

ILLUSTRATIVE ANALYSIS: THE EFFECT OF NEGATIVE BONDING ON DELINQUENCY

The 1994 Monitoring the Future survey is one of the few data sets that allows us to distinguish weak parental bonds from negative parental bonds. We use data from the 'Form I' subsample, which consists of a nationally representative sample of 2,691 high school seniors (see Bachman et al., 1994 for complete information on the survey). The survey contains a single-item measure of parental bonding - with respondents being asked "how satisfied are you with how you get along with your parents?" Response categories are: completely dissatisfied, quite dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, neutral, somewhat satisfied, quite satisfied, and completely satisfied. For the purposes of analysis, respondents were divided into three groups: dissatisfied with parents (16%), neutral (16%), and satisfied with parents (68%). The survey also contains measures of drug and alcohol use; no measures of other types of delinquency are available in the subsample we used. We measured the past-year frequency of marijuana/hashish use, other illicit drug

use (cocaine, amphetamines, LSD, other psychedelics, heroin, other narcotics, barbiturates, tranquilizers, and Quaaludes), and drunkenness. Response categories for each measure are: 0, 1-2, 3-5, 6-9, 10-19, 20-29, 30-39, and 40+. We also examine the respondent's *anticipated* frequency of marijuana/hashish use in the next five years (response categories range from "I will definitely not" use to "I definitely will" use).

Each measure of drug and alcohol use was regressed on the measure of parental satisfaction. Parental satisfaction was treated as a dummy variable, with the group being 'neutral' on the satisfaction measure taken as the reference category. This allows us to determine whether dissatisfied respondents are higher in drug/alcohol use than neutral respondents. We controlled for race (white=0; black= 1), sex (female=0, male= 1), and parents' education. This analysis is not designed to provide a comprehensive test of the above argument regarding negative bonding. It is done largely for illustrative purposes: that is, to suggest how one might go about testing this argument and to explore whether such a test is worth pursuing. A complete test would employ better measures of bonding and delinquency, would control for more variables - including measures of parental supervision and abuse/neglect, would examine a broader sample of juveniles, and would employ longitudinal data. Unfortunately, no data sets allowing for such a test are publicly available.

Regression results are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the dissatisfaction measure is significantly related to all drug measures at the 0.05 level or better. It is related to the drunkenness measure at the 0.10 level. Seniors who report that they are dissatisfied with their parents are more likely to use drugs and (possibly) get drunk than seniors who report their relations with parents are 'neutral.' These data - although very

tentative - suggest that negative bonding may contribute to delinquency (at least drug/alcohol use) over and above weak or neutral bonding.

OTHER FAMILY FACTORS AS A SOURCE OF JUVENILE STRAIN

The above discussion has focused on supervision and bonding given their central role in explanations of delinquency. Other family factors, however, are also related to delinquency and this relationship can be explained partly in terms of strain theory. Marital conflict is related to delinquency in many studies, especially when the conflict involves screaming, insulting, threatening, expressions of contempt, and hitting (e.g. Buehler et al., 1998; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). Data suggest that such conflict can be a potent source of stress for juveniles (see McNeal & Amato, 1998), and it is reasonable to suppose that such conflict affects delinquency partly for reasons related to strain theory. There is some evidence that delinquency is more likely when parents *fail to teach effective social and problem-solving skills* (Agnew, forthcoming - b). This too can be partly explained in terms of strain theory. Individuals who lack such skills are more likely to experience strain; they evoke negative reactions from others in particular situations and they sort themselves into environments where the likelihood of negative treatment is high - like delinquent peer's groups (Patterson, 1986; Patterson et al., 1989). Still other family factors can be mentioned, although many have not been the subject of much research. Most notably, there has not been any research on whether the failure of children to satisfy parental expectations is an important source of *juvenile* strain and delinquency. Finally, other family factors - like parental divorce, teenage motherhood, and parental criminality - affect juvenile strain through their impact on the

family processes listed above.

THE EFFECT OF FAMILY FACTORS ON THE REACTION TO STRAIN

A range of family factors influence whether juveniles cope with strain in a legitimate or delinquent manner. In particular, parents have a major influence on the ability of juveniles to cope in a legitimate manner, the costs of delinquent coping, and the motivation for conventional versus delinquent coping. Regarding ability, most attention has focused on the extent to which parents provide their children with social support. Parents can cope on behalf of their children or provide them with assistance in coping. Cullen (1994) provides an excellent overview of the key role that social support plays in preventing crime. And certain accounts discuss the different ways in which parents help their children cope with stressful events (e.g. Fox et al., 1996; Garbarino et al., 1992). Limited data suggest that parental social support can reduce the effect of stressors on adolescent distress and delinquency - although more research is needed here (Bowen & Chapman, 1996; Harris & Marmer, 1996; also see Turner & Finkelhor, 1996).

In addition to social support, parents can equip their children with the skills and knowledge to cope on their own behalf. They may provide direct instruction in legitimate coping, model legitimate coping, reinforce legitimate coping, and foster the development of those traits that enhance legitimate coping (e.g. self-efficacy, intelligence). Unfortunately, there has not been much research on the extent to which such parental behaviors condition the impact of juvenile strain on delinquency.

Parents can also affect the juvenile's reaction to strain by influencing the costs of delinquent coping. In this area, we would expect the effect of juvenile strain on

delinquency to be conditioned by the juvenile's attachment to parents and level of supervision (although very strict supervision may function as a source of strain, as indicated earlier). There has not been much research in this area, although Luster & Small (1997) found that sexual abuse was less likely to lead to problem behaviors in adolescents who had high levels of parental monitoring and support. And the illustrative analysis below examines whether parental attachment conditions the effect of a particularly severe type of juvenile strain - criminal victimization - on juvenile delinquency.

Finally, parents can influence the juvenile's motivation for conventional versus delinquent coping through their effect on the juvenile's traits (e.g. irritability, impulsivity, beliefs) and through the models they present and the reinforcements/ punishments they provide. In this area, Anderson (1999) and others argue that parents in high risk environments like poor inner-city communities sometimes teach their children to respond to strain with violence. In particular, some parents instruct their children in the 'code of the street', - which states that one should respond to certain insults and provocations with force. Individuals who do not respond with force may be victimized on a regular basis by others. These parents, then, are trying to protect their children from harm in an environment where victimization is common and the police cannot be relied upon for protection. The parents may not embrace or like the code of the street, but they believe that it is sometimes necessary to live by it.

ILLUSTRATIVE ANALYSIS: DOES PARENTAL ATTACHMENT CONDITION THE EFFECT OF STRAIN ON DELINQUENCY?

The 1976 National Youth Survey contains 1 725 juveniles who appear to be representative of the total 11- through 17-year-old youth population in the United States (Elliott et al., 1985: 92). We use this survey to examine whether parental attachment conditions the effect of criminal victimization on juvenile delinquency. We would expect such a conditioning effect since juveniles high in attachment have more to lose by engaging in delinquency. Further, it is reasonable to expect that such juveniles receive more social support from their parents and are more likely to internalize parental prohibitions against delinquency. As such, they should be less likely to respond to strain with delinquency.

Parental attachment is measured by a four-item scale, with high scorers stating that (a) they get along with their parents, (b) they engage in many activities with their parents, (c) they can count on their parents for comfort during difficult times, and (d) they can talk openly with their parents. Juvenile victimization is measured with a nine-item scale, with respondents reporting the number of times they have had things directly taken from them, had a car or bike stolen from them, had things taken from their car, had their property damaged by others, had things stolen from them in public places, been abused by a parent, been sexually assaulted, been attacked with a weapon, and been beaten up by others in the prior year. Delinquency is measured by a ten-item scale focusing on violence, since criminal victimization is most strongly related to this type of delinquency. Respondents report the number of times they have carried hidden weapons, attacked someone, been in gang fights, hit teachers, hit parents, hit other students, sexually assaulted someone, used force on a teacher to get something, used force on a student, and used force on someone else in the prior year.

Violence was first regressed on parental attachment, juvenile victimization, and three control measures: sex, race, and social class as measured by the Hollingshead Index. Regression results are shown in column 1 of Table 2. As expected, parental attachment has a negative effect on violence and juvenile victimization has a positive effect. We then created a product term between parental attachment and juvenile victimization. This product or interaction term allows us to determine whether the effect of juvenile victimization on violence varies by level of parental attachment. In order to reduce multicollinearity, all variables were standardized before creating the product term (see Aiken & West, 1991, for a full description of this procedure; diagnostic analyses suggest multicollinearity was not a problem). Violence was then regressed on the product term and the standardized values of the other variables. Regression results are shown in column 2 of Table 2. These results are roughly equivalent to standardized regression results given our standardization procedure. We find that the interaction term between parental attachment and juvenile victimization is significant at the 0.05 level. As predicted, the effect of victimization on violence becomes *smaller* as parental attachment increases. So parental attachment appears to reduce the impact of at least this type of strain on violence. These results, however, should also be viewed as tentative. Among other things, the cross-sectional nature of the data is a problem. An ideal analysis should use longitudinal data to examine the effect of prior victimization on subsequent delinquency or to examine the contemporaneous effects of victimization and delinquency on one another.

CONCLUSION

General Strain Theory, then, has much to say about the relationship between family factors and crime. As indicated in Figure 1, parental strain may lead to negative affect and poor parenting - although family factors and other variables condition the impact of parental strain on negative affect/poor parenting. Poor parenting, in turn, is a major source of juvenile strain. Poor parenting, in particular, increases the likelihood of negative affect and juvenile delinquency. Poor parenting includes not only harsh and abusive parenting, but poor discipline and weak/negative emotional bonding between parent and child. The effect of poor parenting on negative affect and delinquency is conditioned by a range of family factors and other variables.

Certain of these arguments have much support, particularly those regarding the effect of parental strain on negative affect and poor parenting. Some data also suggest that harsh/abusive parenting increases negative affect and delinquency. Other arguments, however, have not been the subject of much investigation. In particular, we have little idea whether the supervision and bonding variables listed above are sources of strain/negative emotions, and whether strain/negative emotions partly mediate their effect on delinquency. Also, there has been little research on those family-related factors that may condition the effect of strain on delinquency.

It should be noted that the above discussion has focused on the direct effect of juvenile strain on delinquency. But juvenile strain may also affect delinquency indirectly by reducing social control and fostering the social learning of crime. Most notably, juveniles who experience the types of family strain described above may reduce their attachment to parents, spend less time with parents (making effective supervision more difficult), become less responsive to parental sanctions, and become less likely to

internalize parental beliefs. They may also become more likely to adopt beliefs favoring delinquency and to associate with delinquent peers (see Agnew, 1995). Paternoster & Mazerolle (1994) find empirical support for certain of these arguments.

It should also be noted that the above discussion is at a rather general level. There is some evidence that there are gender, age, and race/ethnic differences in the types of strain experienced and in the reaction to strain. For example, it is commonly argued that economic stressors have a greater effect on males and relational stressors (e.g. family conflict) have a greater effect on females. It is also argued that males are more likely to respond to stressors with externalizing behaviors like aggression, while females are more likely to respond with internalizing behaviors. The data are somewhat mixed regarding gender, age, and race/ethnic differences in these areas, but the further exploration of such differences will likely be a major area of research in the future (e.g. Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Fox & Chancey, 1998; Ross and Van Willigen, 1996; Voydanoff, 1990). In sum, GST has much to say about the relationship between family factors and delinquency, and provides a useful supplement to the control and social learning explanations that now dominate the research on the family determinants of delinquency.

Figure 1: A General Strain Theory Model of the Family-Delinquency Relationship

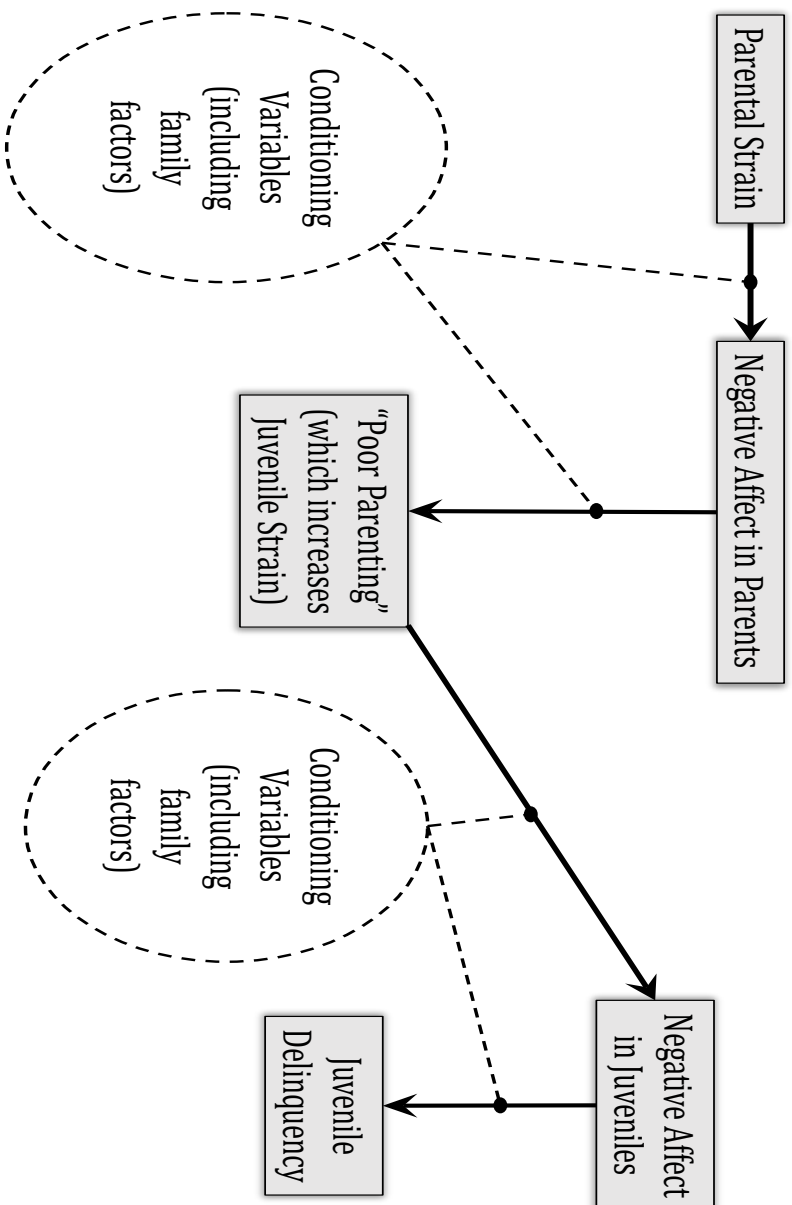


Table 1. Juvenile Alcohol and Drug Use Regressed on Satisfaction with Parents and Control Variables (Standardized Coefficients Shown with Unstandardized Coefficients in Parentheses)

	Endogenous Variables			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Marijuana/ Hashish	Other Illicit Drugs	Drunkenness	Anticipated Drug Use
Sex (Male) ^a	0.111** (0.232)	-0.004 n.s. (-0.002)	0.078** (0.493)	0.090** (0.142)
Race (Black) ^b	-0.031 n.s. (-0.096)	-0.074** (-0.055)	-0.140** (-0.715)	-0.020 n.s. (0.046)
Social Class	0.048** (0.045)	-0.044* (-0.009)	-0.016 n.s. (0.025)	0.024 n.s. (0.017)
Dissatisfied ^c	0.090** (0.256)	0.052* (0.035)	0.048* (0.225)	0.058* (0.125)
Satisfied ^c	-0.043 n.s. (-0.097)	-0.078* (-0.042)	-0.069* (-0.259)	-0.081 ** (-0.139)
Constant	(0.299)**	(0.136)**	(2.255)**	(1.392)**
R ²	0.027	0.018	0.052	0.022

* $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; (one-tailed)

^a Female is the reference category.

^b White/Caucasian is the reference category.

^c 'Neutral' relationship with parents is the reference category.

Table 2. Juvenile Violence Regressed on Parent-Child Attachment, Victimization, Attachment/Victimization Interaction, and Controls (Unstandardized Coefficients Shown in Parentheses)

Endogenous Variables		
	(1) Violence Score	(2) Violence Z-scored ^c
Sex (Male) ^a	0.175** (0.818)	0.162**
Race (Black) ^b	0.022 (0.154)	0.024
Race (Hispanic) ^b	-0.003 (-0.041)	-0.002
Social Class	0.082** (0.012)	0.076**
Parental-Child Attachment	-0.128** (-0.091)	-0.123**
Child Victimization	0.396** (0.133)	0.672**
Attachment * Victimization		-0.074
Constant	11.386	-0.003
<i>R</i> ²	0.248	0.250
* <i>p</i> < 0.05; * <i>p</i> < 0.01; (one-tailed)		
^a Female is the reference category.		
^b Caucasian/Other is the reference category.		
^c Additive Predictors Standardized prior to Analysis		

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