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A General Strain Theory of Racial Differences in Criminal Offending

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Since 1992, General Strain Theory (GST) has earned strong empirical support and has been applied to several key correlates of crime (e.g., age, sex, community), but researchers have yet to fully consider how GST may aid in explaining racial differences in offending. While most explanations focus on macro level and macro–micro control processes, we argue that GST complements these explanations by highlighting the emotional and motivational social psychological processes that underlie criminal behaviour, thereby filling an important theoretical gap. In particular, we argue that African–Americans are likely to experience more and qualitatively unique types of strain compared to Whites, and that these strains in turn lead to higher levels of negative emotions among African–Americans. Further, we argue that the unique social conditions in which many African–Americans live may disproportionately lead them to cope with strain and negative emotions through crime. We believe these theoretical insights can guide future empirical research to create a fuller understanding of racial differences in offending.

Since the publication of Agnew's (1992) foundational paper on General Strain Theory (GST), GST has garnered much empirical support (see Agnew, 2006 for review). Scholars have further built on Agnew's foundation by applying GST's insights to several key correlates of crime including age, sex, community, school and the family (e.g., see Agnew, 2006, for review). Although a few recent empirical pieces have highlighted how greater exposure to certain types of serious strains may aid in explaining racial differences in criminal offending (Eitle & Turner, 2003; Kaufman, 2005; Simons, Chen, Stewart, & Brody, 2003), researchers have yet to fully extend GST to examine these differences.

While race is a social construct (Duster, 2003; Hawkins, 1996), scholars have long recognised its impact in various areas including poverty (DeNavas-Walt,

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Proctor, & Smith, 2007), discrimination (Feagin, 1991), mental health (Massey, 2004; Willie, Kramer, & Brown, 1974), educational attainment (Epps, 1995), family structure (Cherlin, 1992) and interpersonal victimisation (US Department of Justice, 2006). Criminologists, however, have constructed relatively little theory to explain racial differences in crime, and the major theories that address this topic are at the macro level. Although some recent researchers have explored contextual and multi-level models to empirically explain racial differences in offending (McNulty & Bellair, 2003a, 2003b; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005), these models have been driven by macro theorising with consideration of social capital and social control oriented processes at the individual level. We believe that individual level motivational processes contribute to a fuller explanation of the race–crime relationship and require explicit theorising.

In this article, we first assess racial differences in offending in the United States by reviewing the primary criminological data sources. Although our focus is on the United States, we believe that these ideas have implications for group differences in other contexts with racially diverse and indigenous populations, such as Australia and New Zealand. Because existing literature concerning racial differences in offending in the United States focuses almost exclusively on African–Americans, we similarly limit our own focus. Second, we briefly discuss prior accounts of the race–crime relationship and how GST complements these theories. Third, we argue that African–Americans experience more and qualitatively different types of strain than Whites, particularly those types of strain most conducive to crime, and that African–Americans are more likely to cope with strain through crime.

Are There Racial Differences in Offending?

Three primary data sources in the US provide information on race and crime: arrest, victimisation and self-report data. African–Americans have been disproportionately represented among arrestees in the US criminal justice system since the mid-19th century (Du Bois, 1899, 1904; Hawkins, 1995). Comprising close to 13% of the US population in 2006, African–Americans accounted for 28% of all offence arrests and 39.3% of violent crime arrests, including 50.9% of homicide arrests and 56.3% of robbery arrests (US Department of Justice, 2007). Though discrimination may account for a portion of African–American arrest statistics (see Walker, Spohn, & Delone, 2000), criminologists generally argue that racial differences in arrests cannot be explained solely by discrimination (e.g., Hawkins, Laub, & Lauritsen, 1998; Hindelang, 1978; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1997).

The most recent National Crime Victimization Survey data indicate that victims perceived 25.3% of single offenders and 33.9% of offenders in multiple offender victimisations to be African–American (US Department of Justice, 2006). Similar to arrest statistics, the percentage varied depending upon the crime, with offenders perceived as black in 47.7% of the robberies and 22% of the assaults (US Department of Justice, 2006). Although victims of crime may be incorrect in the assessment of race due to the stressful circumstances of the incident and the common stereotypes of offenders as people of colour, victimisation data parallel arrest data with African–Americans being disproportionately represented as offenders.

While early self-report surveys did not reveal a significant relationship between race and crime (e.g., Elliott & Voss, 1974; Williams & Gold, 1972), more recent self-report studies demonstrate that African-American and Hispanic youths are disproportionately prone to engage in serious violence (Kelley, Huizinga, Thornberry, & Loeber, 1997; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Given these three key data sources, criminologists should not ignore the evidence of racial differences in offending in the United States, particularly for crimes of interpersonal violence (Hawkins et al., 1998). There is also evidence of a similar relationship of disproportionate offending and victimisation among Black and indigenous populations in many advanced democracies such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Broadhurst, 1997; Doone, 2000; Tonry, 1997). This recognition does not negate the existence of discrimination at all levels of the criminal justice system, but it does support the utility of exploring theoretical explanations for racial disparities in offending.

How Have Prior Theories Explained Racial Differences?

Prior attempts to explain racial differences in offending have been primarily at the macro level and typically involve variants of either social disorganisation theory or subcultural violence theories. Social disorganisation research focuses on how structural barriers (e.g., poverty, residential mobility, single-parent households) impede social networks and the social control of crime, suggesting that African-Americans engage in more crime than Whites because they are more likely to live in neighbourhoods with those characteristics (Sampson & Wilson, 1995). Recent researchers have expanded on this theory to consider contextual and multi-level processes whereby structural community measures and individual-level measures (demographic, social capital, social control) affect levels of individual violence (McNulty & Bellair, 2003a, 2003b; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005). While social disorganisation theory and the recent multi-level modelling strategies account for a significant portion of the racial differences in offending, they do not offer a complete explanation.

According to subcultural violence theories (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967), many urban Americans have embraced a system of values conducive to violence under certain circumstances, particularly overt challenges to individuals' reputations. Thus, the race-crime relationship stems from African-Americans' disproportionate exposure to beliefs and values that condone violence in the pursuit of status maintenance. The evidence concerning subcultural theories is mixed (e.g., Cao, Adams, & Jensen, 1997; Felson, Liska, South, & McNulty, 1994). Recent researchers have considered how the structure of communities (from social disorganisation theory) may impact neighbourhood cultural processes that influence violence (see Anderson, 1999; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

While we recognise the merits of the above theoretical research traditions, two factors may render them incomplete explanations of racial differences in offending. First, social disorganisation theory (and multi-level variants) does not provide adequate discussion of those motivational processes that may increase crime. Following Agnew (1999), we believe that complete explanations of crime in general, and of the race-crime relationship in particular, require a treatment of both those forces that serve to control *and* promote crime. Second, dominant explana-

tions of racial differences in offending have only begun to link macro-level considerations to the individual level of analysis and have focused primarily on social control processes (e.g., McNulty & Bellair, 2003a, 2003b; Sampson et al., 2005). We believe, however, that the full influence of community-level variables can be best understood by explicitly examining their effects on multiple aspects of the lives of a community's individual residents (see Kaufman, 2005). Below, we discuss the ways in which GST may be able to address the above issues.

Can GST Help Explain Racial Differences in Offending?

GENERAL STRAIN THEORY

GST is most clearly distinguished from competing crime theories by its assertion that negative experiences and relationships motivate and promote criminal behaviour. While control theorists would argue that African-Americans are more prone to engage in violent crime because their bond to society is weaker than Whites (e.g., Hirschi, 1969), learning theorists would argue that African-Americans are disproportionately prone to form positive relationships with violent peers (e.g., Akers, 1998). A GST explanation of racial differences in offending instead implies that African-Americans experience disproportionate strain in the social environment and/or have fewer resources for coping with strain in conventional ways.

Agnew (1992) argues that crime may result from a broad range of strains: those resulting from an actual or anticipated (1) failure to achieve positively valued outcomes, (2) removal of positively valued outcomes and (3) imposition of negative or noxious stimuli. Agnew contends that each of these strains may result in negative emotions that trigger criminal behaviour aimed at lowering or eliminating strain. Strain, however, does not inevitably result in crime. Rather, the impact of strain is conditioned by a number of variables, including whether the strain is attributed to others, the extent of an individual's legitimate coping resources, the level of conventional social support and an individual's predisposition toward crime. Specifically, Agnew argues that individuals who attribute their strain to others are more likely to experience anger and react with crime. Likewise, those who possess significant cognitive, emotional and social coping resources may be better able to cope with strain in a noncriminal manner. Agnew further argues that individuals who are restrained by a high degree of social control (see Hirschi, 1969) or who do not associate with delinquent peers (see Akers, 1998) will be less prone to cope with strain through crime.

While preliminary tests indicate that many of the types of strain listed by Agnew are related to crime, more recent empirical tests highlight the fact that strain and anger have a strong impact on violence (see Agnew, 2006; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1997; Mazerolle, Burton, Cullen, Evans, & Payne, 2000). Given the promise of recent empirical research concerning GST, we believe GST merits investigation as an account of racial differences in offending.

DO AFRICAN-AMERICANS EXPERIENCE MORE/DIFFERENT STRAINS?

Two major ways in which GST would explain higher levels of violence among African-Americans is by arguing that African-Americans experience more and qualitatively different types of strains than Whites, particularly those types of strain

most conducive to crime. Agnew (2001) recently clarified GST by pointing out that strains are most conducive to crime when they are perceived as unjust (e.g., discrimination), seen as high in magnitude (e.g., excessive discipline, criminal victimisation), associated with low social control (e.g., erratic parental supervision of children) and create incentive or pressure to engage in criminal coping (e.g., work in the secondary labour market). We thus focus on areas of strains that reflect those four characteristics and are relevant to the study of race and crime: economic strain, family strain, educational strain, criminal victimisation, discrimination and community strain.

Economic Strain

African-Americans are more likely than Whites to be poor, unemployed and employed in jobs in the secondary labour market (Conley, 2001; DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2007; Gittleman & Wolff, 2004; Sullivan, 1989; US Department of Labor, 2008). While the relationship between economic strain and crime is complex (see Cernkovich, Giordano, & Rudolph, 2000; Tittle & Meier, 1990), some evidence suggests that severe poverty and chronic unemployment contribute to crime (Colvin, 2000; Massey, 1990). The same is true of work in the secondary labour market, with such work being characterised by low pay, few benefits, unsteady employment and poor working conditions, including low autonomy, high demands and coercive forms of control (Bausman & Goe, 2004; Colvin, 2000; Crutchfield, 1989). The greater economic strain experienced by African-Americans may increase the likelihood of striking out at others or engaging in income-generating crime like robbery, the crime with the highest levels of disproportionate offending by African-Americans (US Department of Justice, 2006, 2007).

It is important to note, however, that economic strain may be more likely to lead to crime in some conditions than others. Drawing on Agnew (1999), economic strain may be most conducive to crime when individuals are surrounded by advantaged others who are visible and perceived as similar. This is more likely under certain conditions, such as when high levels of inequality exist between and within neighbourhoods, and when economic returns to education vary greatly across individuals and groups (see Agnew, 1999, p. 135). Economic strain is more likely to be seen as unjust under such conditions and is therefore more likely to generate crime.

In addition, a GST account of racial differences in offending suggests that criminologists follow the lead of family researchers, who employ more sophisticated measures of economic strain than do most criminologists. In particular, while most criminological research measures economic strain using one- or two-item scales tapping primarily a family's overall income at one time point, family researchers employ more precise and dynamic measures of economic hardship including per capita family income, debt-to-asset ratio, demotion and job changes over the course of a given period (see Agnew, 2001; Conley, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). Such measures may more precisely gauge those economic hardships most associated with dissatisfaction.

Family Strain

Though the family context is generally associated with control theories, GST has much to say about the family's impact on crime. Many types of parental strain (e.g., residence in high-poverty communities, economic hardship, work in the secondary labour market, divorce) increase the likelihood of poor parenting practices, such as harsh and inconsistent discipline (Agnew et al., 2000; Patterson & Forgatch, 1990; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). These parenting practices, in turn, contribute to strain in children. Such strain leads directly to juvenile crime, or indirectly leads to crime by weakening the bonds between parents and children (Agnew et al., 2000; McLoyd, 1990; Patterson, 1982).

There is some evidence that African-American parents display lower levels of warmth and use more inconsistent discipline with their children than White families (Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001). However, once researchers control for the neighbourhood context (levels of poverty, residential stability, public services, social networks and levels of danger), these racial differences in parenting practices disappear (Pinderhughes et al., 2001). This research demonstrates that what many researchers have assumed to be racial differences between family practices are really neighbourhood context differences. Since African-Americans are much more likely to live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Sampson & Wilson, 1995), they are differentially exposed to various strains that may produce poorer parenting styles. While the extended family networks of many African-American families may ameliorate some of these problems, these networks may also impede these families climbing out of poverty and leaving bad neighbourhoods (Cherlin, 1992). Thus, a GST explanation of racial differences in offending suggests that African-American parents experience disproportionate strain that may impact their parenting. Such strained parents are likely to increase the probability of children experiencing various forms of strain, thus increasing the chances of delinquency.

Educational Strain

The educational context is another key area for examining African-Americans' greater exposure to strain and qualitatively distinct types of strain. In the US schooling system, African-Americans may experience a variety of problems including poor grades, unfair discipline, negative relations with teachers and interpersonal problems with other students. In mixed race schools, race may serve as a characteristic that determines whether an individual will be placed in a high or low educational track independent of the individual's academic ability (Irvine & York, 1993). Numerous scholars suggest that low tracks often provide qualitatively inferior curricula to students of disadvantaged or minority backgrounds (Epps, 1995; Oakes, 1985). If African-American students perceive that their placement in lower tracks is unjust, that experience itself will likely serve as a strain (Agnew, 2001). Further, the often poorer quality education in those lower tracks mixed with teachers' lower expectations may additionally strain these students. Some teachers expect African-American and lower class students to perform worse academically (Cooper & Moore, 1995) and teachers of a different race are significantly more likely than African-American teachers to rate African-American students as exhibiting problem behaviours (Zimmerman, Khoury, Vega, Gil, & Warheit, 1995). These

teacher expectations likely impact interactions with African-American students and contribute to further negative relations with both teachers and peers that may increase in magnitude over time.

African-Americans are also more likely than Whites to attend racially segregated schools, especially in central cities and rural areas (Bankston III & Caldas, 1996; Kozol, 1991). Ample research demonstrates that schools with a large percentage of minority students have lower levels of achievement (Bankston III & Caldas, 1996), fewer resources for academics and therefore fewer quality teachers (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1991). In fact, Whites in primarily minority schools also do worse than their counterparts in majority White schools (Bankston III & Caldas, 1996). Thus, African-Americans appear to experience more educational strain than their White counterparts and different types of educational strain that Whites never have the misfortune to experience. While these higher levels of educational strain are partly due to lower socioeconomic status, the experiences of educational strain and bad schools further engender the continuation of lower socioeconomic status among African-Americans including work in the secondary labour market and the other economic strains outlined above.

Criminal Victimization

In addition to economic, family and educational strains, African-Americans are more likely than Whites to experience noxious stimuli like criminal victimisation. African-Americans are victimised at a rate 37.3% higher than Whites for violent crimes (US Department of Justice, 2006) and account for 49.5% of murder and non-negligent manslaughter victims (US Department of Justice, 2007). In particular, African-American youths between the ages of 12–19 are among the most vulnerable to serious violent crime (e.g., murder, rape, robbery etc.) with a victimisation rate 48% higher than White youth aged 12–19 (US Department of Justice, 2006), and 58% of African-American murder victims are below the age of 30 (US Department of Justice, 2007). African-American households are burglarised at a rate 22.4% higher than White households (US Department of Justice, 2006). These high levels of African-American victimisation occur in both the nation's inner cities and in suburbia (Logan & Stults, 1999). Moreover, aside from experiencing more personal victimisation than Whites, African-Americans are also more likely to experience vicarious strain via the victimisation of close friends and relatives. Youths who witness violence, particularly violence perpetrated against their friends or family, are at higher risk of victimising others (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994).

Since victimisation is among the most serious type of negative experience, it is highly likely to induce strain (Agnew, 2001; Brezina, 1998). It is also one of the types of strain most likely to engender a desire for retaliation and revenge, which offenders commonly report as the leading reasons for their own acts of violence (Agnew, 1990; Dawkins, 1997). While other research supports the strong association between victimisation and crime (e.g., Esbensen & Huizinga, 1991; Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991), GST suggests that high rates of victimisation among African-Americans can explain a portion of their disproportionate representation among violent offenders. Eitle and Turner (2003) and Kaufman (2005), using

regional and national self-report data (respectively), provide evidence in support of this argument.

Discrimination

In addition to experiencing quantitatively more strain than Whites, African-Americans may experience qualitatively unique forms of strain. While 36% of Whites reported experiencing at least one discriminatory event in their lifetime, 70% of African-Americans reported such an experience (Forman, Williams, & Jackson, 1997). However, African-Americans are not only more likely to experience discrimination, but are likely to experience it across a wide variety of situations including walking down the street, buying a house or car, seeking a job, eating at a restaurant, attending university and navigating many other everyday situations (Ayres & Siegelman, 1995; Farrell & Jones, 1988; Feagin, 1991; Forman et. al., 1997; Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; Yinger, 1995). Often, these forms of discriminatory behaviour begin with children as young as age 3 (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996) and persist long after achieving middle-class status (Feagin, 1991). Agnew (2001) suggests that prejudice and discrimination may be among those strains most conducive to crime-provoking negative emotions, and research has linked aggregate discrimination at the macro level to homicide rates (Messner, 1989) and racial segregation to high rates of Black-on-Black crime (Messner & South, 1986; Shihadeh & Flynn, 1996). At the micro level, Simons et al. (2003) found that experiences of discrimination are positively associated with delinquency among African-American youth.

African-Americans also experience discrimination on the part of police officers and other law enforcement officials who are charged with protecting the social order (Miller, 1996). Parker, Onyekwuluje, and Murty (1995) found that African-Americans living in high crime neighbourhoods in large cities have frequent contact with police but also have less favourable impressions of the police. African-American college students often believe that police officers arbitrarily and disproportionately stop them on campus (Anderson, 1990). In addition, African-Americans are more likely to be arrested if the victim of a given crime is White and case evidence is weak (Petersilia, 1983). Even African-American children of prominent middle-class doctors and lawyers are disproportionately subject to police detention or arrest, net of delinquent behaviour (Miller, 1996). Further, African-Americans are shot and killed by police much more frequently than Whites (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2000).

Community Strain

Aside from their greater probability of experiencing strain at the individual level, African-Americans are disproportionately prone to live in urban neighbourhoods characterised by high concentrations of economic disadvantage and high rates of violence (e.g., Krivo & Peterson, 1996; Massey, 1990; Shihadeh & Flynn, 1996). At present, the social disorganisation perspective dominates explanations of the relationships among urbanisation, concentrated economic disadvantage and community crime rates (e.g., Sampson & Wilson, 1995). However, recent empirical research suggests that indicators of social disorganisation (low participation in infor-

mal organisations and weak social network structures) do not explain the entire relationship between urbanisation and community crime rates (Veysey & Messner, 1999). GST may therefore offer several important insights that can supplement social disorganisation theory to better explain racial differences in offending at the macro level.

For example, GST suggests that urbanisation and concentrated disadvantage may be associated with a number of strains above and beyond those that result from economic strain at the individual level of analysis, such as strain resulting from the interaction of individuals who may already be angry as a result of their own personal economic and social situations. When two individuals already have a 'short-fuse' as a result of individual-level strains, Agnew (1999) suggests that their interaction is likely to serve as a further strain for both parties, thereby amplifying the probability that even the slightest conflict will escalate. Luckenbill (1977), in fact, suggests that violence is often not the result of one motivated perpetrator's behaviour so much as it is the result of a motivated perpetrator interacting with a determined 'victim' whose resistance yields an escalation of conflict. To the degree that strain is responsible for the escalation of such conflict, GST predicts that African-Americans, who are disproportionately prone to live in areas of concentrated disadvantage, will be disproportionately prone to engage in interpersonal violence.

In addition, GST suggests that concentrated populations of African-Americans may evoke greater discriminatory treatment than do individual African-Americans. Such treatment, particularly when attributed to specific others who act with intent, increases collective strain. Massey (1990) suggests that this may occur for African-Americans more than for other ethnic groups in a self-fulfilling cycle of prejudice. Specifically, while Whites may benefit economically from discriminatory residential segregation, the resulting concentrations of African-American poverty may serve to reinforce White beliefs about racial pathology among minority groups, in turn promoting further prejudice and discrimination (Massey 1990). Moreover, research suggests that income inequality is associated with violent crime, particularly when the inequality is linked to race (e.g., Blau & Blau 1982). GST provides a coherent framework in which these findings can be integrated, and suggests that future research test the degree to which negative emotions mediate the association between urban inequality and violent crime at the macro level.

Though less work has examined the effects of discriminatory community strain on African-Americans in nonurban contexts, GST suggests that they too may experience disproportionate strain at the community level. In particular, African-Americans may feel unwelcome in certain suburban neighbourhoods or may experience overt discrimination that prevents them from moving into certain neighbourhoods (Massey & Denton, 1988). Those African-Americans who are able to move to the suburbs still experience higher levels of residential segregation than other ethnic groups (Massey & Denton, 1988). Researchers have yet to examine directly the implications of such findings for crime among suburban African-Americans. Thus, in addition to supplementing a social disorganisation account of the race-crime relationship in inner cities, GST suggests avenues of research concerning race and crime in other geographic regions.

Are There Racial Differences in Reactions to Strain?

While the above discussion delineated the manner in which African-Americans may experience disproportionate amounts of strain in the social environment, GST makes further predictions concerning racial differences in offending. GST argues that African-Americans are more likely to react to a given strain with crime than Whites because they are more likely to experience such strain as stressful or upsetting and are more likely to view it as unjust.

Currently, only limited research examines emotional experience and expression among African-Americans. To cite one example, Armstead, Lawler, Gorden, Cross, and Gibbons (1989) measured the blood pressure, anger experience and anger expression of African-American college students after viewing videos showing anger-provoking nonracist situations, racist situations involving African-Americans and neutral situations. Although respondents reported significant anger experience for both the nonracist anger-provoking situation and the racist situation, respondents' blood pressure increased significantly only after viewing the portrayals of racism.

Research also suggests that African-Americans experience a greater sense of overall alienation than do other racial/ethnic groups in the United States even when they experience personal economic success (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Cose, 1993). Bobo and Hutchings (1996), in fact, find that African-Americans' alienation *increases* as their socioeconomic status increases and that African-Americans feel more threatened than other racial/ethnic groups by interracial competition for socioeconomic resources. While increases in socioeconomic status are likely to protect Whites from many negative experiences, African-Americans often do not see those benefits, such that well-off African-Americans still experience discrimination and are at higher risk of victimisation than comparable Whites (Feagin, 1991; Logan & Stults, 1999). Such experiences and the resultant negative emotions may be exacerbated when young African-Americans perceive a given instance of deprivation to be based on discriminatory, prejudiced or otherwise unjust circumstances (Brown, 1998). In sum, limited research suggests that African-Americans, perhaps by virtue of their traditional marginalisation, experience more *subjective* strain than members of other groups when confronted with the same objective stimuli, and may be more likely to react with anger.

Cognitive Attributions

Agnew (1992) suggests that the link between strain and crime depends, in part, on how an individual chooses to interpret strain. If a young male loses a job and believes the loss to be the just result of his own behaviour, such strain may not contribute to a criminal response. However, if he believes the lost job to be the unjust result of racial discrimination, he may become *more* motivated to cheat a system or society that he perceives to be inequitable. In addition, an individual's cognitive attributions may direct the valence of general emotional arousal such that the same generalised arousal could produce either anger or amusement, depending on the behaviour of a subject's peers (Schachter & Singer, 1962). Similarly, Bernard (1990) suggests that the unique position of disadvantaged inner city African-Americans promotes arousal that they will likely attribute to aggressive anger (also see Anderson, 1999). Thus, GST predicts

that African-Americans, more often than Whites, attribute failures and negative life experiences to unjust situational factors.

Coping Resources and Social Support

Agnew (1992) also claims that social support and coping resources, such as problem-solving skills, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, condition the impact of strain on crime. According to GST, criminal behaviour results from a high ratio of strain to coping resources, rather than from strain alone. While African-Americans report higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy than their White peers (Tashakkori & Thompson, 1991), the disadvantaged status of many African-Americans may provide them with fewer resources for coping with strain in legitimate ways. For example, research suggests that parents of low socioeconomic status are less likely to promote self-directed problem-solving ability in their children (see Gecas, 1979), and that individuals of low education and income are less likely to possess good stress management skills (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Thus, while African-American youth are strengthened by higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, they may be hindered by insufficient problem-solving and stress management skills.

In addition to experiencing fewer personal resources for handling strain, African-Americans may experience less social support in their families. For example, though 58% of African-American youths lived in two-parent homes in 1970, a mere 38% lived in two-parent homes by 1990 (O'Hare, Pollard, Mann, & Kent, 1991). While African-Americans have traditionally relied on extended families for social support to a greater degree than Whites (Cherlin, 1992), even those networks have been strained by the changing economic conditions in many cities in the United States from the 1970s onward that have produced pockets of concentrated, disadvantaged African-Americans with little access to jobs and services and with higher rates of female-headed households (Massey, 1990; Wilson, 1978, 1987). To the degree that urban African-American youth grow up in single-parent families (see Sampson, 1987) or lack extended family in the inner city (see Wilson, 1987), they may experience diminished social support networks with which to handle strain via noncriminal means.

Beliefs and Values Conducive to Crime

GST suggests that strain is most likely to promote crime/violence among groups that hold values conducive to crime and violence, such as those embodied in the 'code of the street' (Anderson, 1999). Likewise, GST suggests that strain at the macro level may account for the origin of these values. Several researchers, for example, argue that many African-American males find it difficult to achieve a masculine identity through legitimate channels. This is especially true of males in poor, inner-city communities where decent work is exceedingly scarce. As a consequence, such males may attempt to achieve a masculine identity through illegitimate channels, like aggression (Anderson, 1999; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Staples, 1982; Wilson, 1996). Following Agnew (1992), we suggest that strain is particularly conducive to crime among individuals who value physical toughness and associate with others who reinforce such values.

Conclusions

Racial differences in offending have been widely documented but seldom explained. While most explanations focus on social control processes at the macro level (e.g. Sampson & Wilson, 1995) and have begun to link the macro and micro contexts (e.g., Sampson et al., 2005), empirical research has yet to find that such theories account for the entire race–crime relationship. GST, however, suggests an additional and complementary explanation that highlights the importance of emotional and motivational social psychological processes. GST argues that African–Americans experience more and qualitatively unique types of strain than Whites, thus engendering more negative emotions. Further, it suggests that African–Americans are especially prone to cope with those emotions through crime under certain conditions.

In particular, we argue that African–Americans may experience a variety of disproportionate economic strains, but that only certain of these strains are likely to be associated with crime. We suggest that economic strain may impede consistent and effective parenting, and that family problems not only decrease social control but also increase juvenile strain. In addition, we suggest that African–Americans are more likely than Whites to have negative educational experiences, experience criminal victimisation, experience discrimination and suffer from community strain. Finally, we propose that African–Americans may not only experience greater objective strain than Whites, but also react to the same objective strain with greater negative emotion. In particular, we point to conditions (low social support, inadequate problem-solving skills) under which African–Americans might be disproportionately prone to cope with strain via criminal behaviour. We argue that GST has much to say about racial differences in offending and fills an important theoretical gap in the current literature. Finally, each of these contributions can guide future empirical research concerning racial differences in offending.

While this article offers important theoretical insight into explaining racial differences in offending, our focus has been limited to African–American and White comparisons in the US context (similar to most literature on race and crime in the United States). Other scholars, however, have considered some of these issues for other races and ethnicity in the US context (see Kaufman, 2005; McNulty & Bellair, 2003a, 2003b), and this is an important area for future theoretical development and empirical research. There is also good reason to believe that many of these insights may be extended to racial differences in offending in other countries. Researchers have noted that some minority groups, especially Black and indigenous peoples, are overrepresented as crime victims and offenders in the criminal justice systems of many advanced democracies including Canada, England, France, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand (Broadhurst, 1997; Doone, 2000; Tonry, 1997). In particular, these issues are likely relevant for studies of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia and the Maori of New Zealand. Future research should explore extending the application of strain to racial differences in offending in other countries and contexts with a sensitivity toward important historical, cultural, and governmental differences.

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