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Adapting to Prison Life: A Qualitative Examination of the Coping Process among Incarcerated Offenders

*Lindsay Leban, Stephanie M. Cardwell,
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Research on general strain theory has demonstrated the impact of strain on decisions to engage in crime and delinquency. However, people differ in their responses to strain and only *some* resort to crime or delinquency. There remain gaps in our knowledge of when, and under what conditions, individuals will react to strain with offending behavior. We rely on interviews with 40 incarcerated men to understand how they cope with specific prison strains, and why they make such coping choices. We find considerable variation in inmates' coping responses. They use a variety of coping strategies—behavioral, cognitive, and emotional—and only some of these strategies involve offending. Our findings indicate that responses to prison strain are partly a function of past experience with strains, including prior experimentation with coping techniques. Results highlight the unfolding nature of

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the coping process and expose factors that deserve further attention in tests of GST.

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According to Agnew's (1992, 2006) general strain theory (GST), the experience of adversity or negative treatment (i.e. strain) is a contributing factor in the development of criminal and delinquent behavior. Strain tends to induce negative emotions, which in turn generate pressures for corrective action. Crime is said to be one possible form of corrective action because offending behavior may allow the individual to avoid or alleviate strain or the negative emotions that accompany it. Since the formulation of GST, a sizable number of studies have examined the relationships between strain, negative emotions, and criminal and delinquent behavior (e.g. Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen, 2002; Broidy, 2001; Hoffman & Miller, 1998; Jang, 2007; Mazerolle, Piquero, & Capowich, 2003; Moon, Morash, McCluskey, & Hwang, 2009; Piquero & Sealock, 2000). In general, these tests of GST have produced positive results, providing support for the theory's core propositions. As predicted by the theory, the experience of strain is positively associated with criminal and delinquent behavior (especially aggression) even after controlling for variables from rival crime theories (e.g. Agnew et al., 2002; Broidy, 2001; Hoffman & Miller, 1998; Jang, 2007).

Despite these promising results, there is still a need for further research on the relationship between strain and offending. As recognized by GST, people differ in their response to strain and only *some* strained individuals resort to crime or delinquency. In fact, individuals rely on legal, pro-social coping strategies most of the time (Agnew, 2013). The likelihood of a criminal response to strain is shaped or conditioned by the individual's coping skills and resources, available social support, association with criminal/delinquent peers, social control, beliefs about crime, and possession of certain traits (most notably self-control). As Agnew (2013) observes, however, research on the conditioning effects of these factors has produced mixed results. Some studies find that certain variables affect the likelihood of a criminal response to strain, while other studies fail to observe the predicted conditioning effects (for a review, see Agnew, 2006).

These mixed results expose potential gaps in our knowledge of when, and under what conditions, individuals will react to strain with offending behavior. Agnew (2013) sought to explain the mixed results by highlighting the complexity of coping processes. In the initial formulation of GST, he argued that particular variables condition the likelihood of a criminal response to strain. Consequently, tests of GST—almost all of them based on the analyses of survey data—have examined the conditioning properties of select variables in isolation, such as association with delinquent peers or self-control (e.g. Agnew & White, 1992;

Hoffmann & Miller, 1998; Turanovic & Pratt, 2013). Further, such quantitative tests are typically based on samples that draw from a broad segment of the population, with most of the individuals in these samples having a low propensity to engage in criminal coping. In hindsight, it is not surprising that these tests have produced mixed results. As Agnew (2013, p. 660) observed:

[T]he proper examination of the coping process is difficult. There are hundreds of coping strategies; individuals often employ several strategies, contemporaneously and over time; the strategies they employ often vary, depending on the stressors they experience and other factors. ... The choice of a coping strategy such as crime is likely influenced by the convergence of several factors, including the characteristics of the individual, the characteristics of the stressor, the appraisal of the stressor, and the circumstances surrounding the stressor.

In this study, we seek to shed additional light on the coping process, especially the factors that shape the choice of one coping strategy over another. Given that quantitative studies may be poorly equipped to examine the complex and unfolding nature of the coping process (see Agnew, 2013), we use qualitative data to examine: (1) individuals' subjective evaluation of potential stressors, and (2) their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional responses to particular strains. In particular, we draw on semi-structured interviews with men housed in a maximum-security state prison. We focus special attention on the factors that may help account for differential responses to interpersonal strain experienced behind prison walls; namely, interpersonal affronts involving theft of personal property and assaults.

Qualitative methods can help to reveal the cognitive processes that mediate the relationship between key variables such as strain and behavior—processes that are typically inferred in quantitative studies. Qualitative data can also reveal the meanings that offenders attach to particular events and situations, and thereby inform our understanding of the subjective evaluation of potential stressors. Moreover, such investigations can provide a rich understanding of the context in which individuals experience and respond to strain (a key point made by Agnew (2013) is that the context of strain matters). In addition, qualitative methods “can be helpful in assessing the credibility” of causal mechanisms posited by theorists (Ragin, Nagel, & White, 2004, p. 15).

Qualitative methods have been successfully applied in several previous studies of GST, yielding rich insights on the relationship between strain and offending (e.g. Arter, 2008; Garcia & Lane, 2012; Klein, Tolson, & Collins, 2014; Polizzi, 2011; Slocum, Rengifo, & Carbone-Lopez, 2012; Stack & Wasserman, 2007). Whereas existing qualitative studies tend to focus on the larger relevance of strain to offending, we focus more specifically on the manner in which individuals interpret potential stressors, and how they attempt to cope with stressors they interpret as noxious or intolerable.

While we focus on coping in response to a particular type of strain (interpersonal affronts experienced behind bars), we believe our findings advance our understanding of the strain-offending relationship more broadly and can help to account for differential responses to strain. In particular, the findings help to explain why the experience of strain often has varied effects on behavior—even among individuals who have a high propensity for criminal coping. We believe the findings can also guide future tests of GST, including quantitative studies, and should allow future researchers to conduct more accurate assessments of the theory.

Research on Strain, Coping, and Offending

GST identifies three types of strain as being relevant to crime and delinquency, including (1) the failure to achieve positively valued goals, (2) the presentation of noxious or negatively valued stimuli, and (3) the loss of positively valued stimuli. Numerous potential strains can fall into one or more of these broad categories, but within GST, not all strains are created equal. The strains said to be most relevant to crime are those that are high in magnitude (severe, frequent, long lasting, central to the goals, or values of the individual), seen as unfair or unjust, associated with low social control, and can be resolved through crime. Strains that meet one or more of these conditions and that have been associated with crime in past research include parental rejection, child abuse, harsh or excessive punishment, abusive peer relations, criminal victimization, and racial discrimination (Agnew, 2001, 2006).

Strain theorists posit that these strains increase the likelihood that individuals will experience negative emotions, including anger, resentment, anxiety, or depression. Negative emotions, in turn, generate pressures for corrective action, with crime being one possible response. The emotion of anger is thought to be especially relevant and conducive to crime and violence because anger reduces one's tolerance for injury or insult, lowers inhibitions, energizes the individual to action, and creates desires for retaliation and revenge. Several studies indicate that anger partly mediates the effect of strain on crime, especially violent crime (e.g. Agnew, 1985; Brezina, 1998; Broidy, 2001; Hay & Evans, 2006; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1997; Mazerolle et al., 2003).

Coping with Strain

According to GST, individuals resort to crime because it allows them to cope with the negative emotions generated by strain or because crime allows them to address the source of strain directly. Strained individuals, for example, may strike back at the source of strain to satisfy desires for retaliation or revenge (although such aggression may increase problems in the long run). They may overcome monetary strain, such as a desperate desire for fast cash, by robbing

others or selling drugs. Or, they may resort to drug use to ward off feelings of depression and despair. Yet, only *some* strained individuals use criminal coping. Initial formulations of GST (Agnew, 1992, 2006) maintained that criminal coping was more likely when one or more of the following conditions are present: poor coping skills and resources, low levels of social support, limited opportunities for legal coping, ample opportunities for criminal coping, low social control, and a strong predisposition for crime (as indexed, for example, by low self-control, beliefs favorable to crime, association with delinquent peers, or prior behavior).

As stated earlier, research on GST has produced mixed results in this area. According to some studies, delinquent peer associations, moral beliefs, and other factors condition the effects of strain on delinquent outcomes (e.g. Agnew & White, 1992; Keith, 2014; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000). Yet, in other studies, researchers find no evidence of such conditioning effects (e.g. Hoffman & Miller, 1998; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1997; for a review of the relevant literature, see Agnew 2006). Faced with these mixed results, Agnew has since elaborated on the conditions that increase the likelihood of criminal coping. Specifically, he highlights the complex nature of the coping process (Agnew, 2013). Given variation across individuals in the subjective interpretation of potential strains, and the numerous ways that individuals can cope with particular strains, it is no longer plausible to assume that the likelihood of criminal coping will be shaped in a significant manner by the presence or absence of a single variable. Rather, Agnew now argues that criminal responses to strain are likely *when multiple factors converge*.

In particular, criminal coping is most likely when the strains that are most conducive to crime are experienced by *certain* individuals in *certain* circumstances; namely by individuals who have a strong overall propensity to commit crime and who are in circumstances or situations in which the opportunities for legal coping are limited (Agnew, 2013). Examples provided by Agnew (2013, p. 665) include individuals who are very low in social and self-control, strongly committed to the code of the street, belong to gangs, or live on the street. Ethnographic research on violent offenders provides indirect support for such claims (Jacobs, Topalli, & Wright, 2000; Topalli, Wright, & Fornango, 2002).

In hindsight, the mixed results of previous studies may not be surprising. When examining factors that increase the likelihood of criminal coping, previous studies have typically focused on single variables in isolation. To index the individual's predisposition for crime, for example, studies have measured association with delinquent peers rather than measuring the individuals' *overall* standing on relevant variables (association with delinquent peers but also social control, self-control, beliefs about crime, and prior behavior). Moreover, studies in this area are typically based on broad samples of the population. These samples are comprised mostly of individuals with a low overall propensity for crime—individuals who are not likely to resort to criminal coping regardless of their standing on particular variables.

These observations can help to guide future research on GST and criminal coping. As suggested by Agnew (2013), future quantitative studies should make an effort to sample populations that include a sizable number of individuals with a strong propensity for criminal coping, such as gang members or individuals who have a strong commitment to the code of the street. In addition, researchers should make an effort to measure the *overall* standing of individuals on dimensions related to coping, such as overall availability of coping resources, level of opportunity for legal coping, and propensity for crime (e.g. a composite measure that indexes joint variation in these dimensions). These steps provide a starting point for future quantitative research on strain, coping, and crime. Beyond these steps, however, Agnew (2013) indicates that qualitative research is also needed to further our understanding of criminal and delinquent coping, as qualitative studies are uniquely suited to examine the complex and unfolding nature of the coping process.

Strain, Coping, and Incarceration

A qualitative examination of the coping process among prison inmates provides a key opportunity to deepen our understanding of why only *some* strained individuals resort to criminal or deviant adaptations. The men in our sample are exposed to key sources of strain and, given their criminal histories, have a strong propensity for criminal coping. Yet, they vary considerably in their response to the stresses and strains of prison life—some use violence while others rely on more mature coping (Johnson, 1996). It is important to recognize that, even among groups prone to criminal coping (e.g. gang members, persistent street offenders), behaviors may vary greatly across individual group members. Despite conditions that favor criminal coping, individuals “do *not* commit crime all of the time” (Agnew, 2013, p. 663, emphasis in original). Likewise, the inmates in our sample responded to strain in a variety of ways, only some of which involved offending behavior. But what accounts for variation in their coping responses? An in-depth, qualitative examination may prove to be particularly illuminating.

It is important, first of all, to understand the context of their surroundings. As men who are currently incarcerated in a state prison, the members of our sample face many potential strains on a regular basis. Researchers have described the prison experience as an “assault upon the senses” (Bowker, 1980, p. 30) and as Blevins, Listwan, Cullen, and Jonson (2010, pp. 149–150) observe, GST “identifies categories of strain that are likely to impinge on the lives of many inmates. ... The prison experience on the surface is a stressful or strain-inducing situation for most individuals.” Research on prison misconduct supports the claim that strain leads to various infractions. Further, the type of strain experienced and characteristics of the inmates (e.g. the length of time served and past victimization history) largely determine the nature of the infraction (McGrath, Marcum, & Copes, 2012; Morris, Carriaga, Diamond,

Piquero, & Piquero, 2012; Sharp, Peck, & Hartsfield, 2012). Most notably, prison inmates face the threat of criminal victimization by their fellow inmates and the expectation to retaliate with violence in such events. And criminal victimization is among the strains that, according to Agnew (2001), are especially conducive to crime (for a review of the many additional strains experienced by prison inmates, see Blevins et al., 2010). Thus, in the research described below, we focus on coping responses to theft and assault (personal affronts) in the prison environment.

Second, most of the men in our sample have extensive criminal records and were incarcerated for serious crimes. Unlike the individuals who are typically the focus of quantitative studies on GST, these men have demonstrated a strong propensity for crime. Third, the prison environment restricts the range of coping opportunities available to the individual, especially in comparison to the non-incarcerated population. According to Blevins et al. (2010, p. 154):

The inherent nature of prisons makes it nearly impossible to escape from the noxious stimuli [the inmates] face on a daily basis. Unlike their counterparts outside prison, they must face and confront these stimuli constantly with little or no chance of relief. If inmates are unable to adapt or cope with the negative stimuli, they will be more likely to respond with violence or other rule violations.

Finally, the culture of the prison itself tends to increase the costs of using certain legitimate coping strategies. For example, prison researchers highlight the existence of an inmate code that discourages prisoners from cooperating with prison administrators, seeking protection from prison administrators, or snitching on fellow inmates—all of which are legal means of coping. Inmates who violate the code risk violence from fellow inmates. Despite the dubiousness of such claims (Crewe, 2009), inmates may believe that they have no choice but to rely on themselves or fellow inmates for protection, thereby increasing the likelihood of illegal coping (Blevins et al., 2010).

In short, the men in our sample appear to meet the conditions under which criminal coping is said to be most likely (Agnew, 2013). They have demonstrated a strong propensity for crime, are in circumstances that limit opportunities for legal or conventional coping, and many of the strains they face are highly conducive to crime. Yet, despite the characteristics of the men in our sample, the types of strain they faced, and their residence in a prison environment, we find considerable variation in their subjective evaluation of potential prison stressors. We also find evidence of a wide variety of adaptations to personal affronts, and only some of these adaptations involve offending behaviors (crime, violence, or rule violations).

It is important to note that the purpose of the current qualitative study is to examine and explore the coping process in depth—not to conduct a formal test of hypotheses derived from GST. Although the results of qualitative investigations can speak to the credibility of theoretical claims, they are not well-suited for the testing of theoretical propositions per se. Nonetheless, we

believe our qualitative approach provides unique insight into the coping process, aids the process of theory development, and can guide future quantitative research. The inmate interviews, for example, can expose factors that are in need of further attention in the research literature on GST and can help us to build a more complete picture of the coping process. The consideration of certain neglected factors may allow us to further specify the conditions under which criminal coping is more or less likely and should provide further guidance for future research on strain, coping, and offending.

Methods

We base our findings on the accounts of 40 male inmates that we gathered in semi-structured interviews. All participants were incarcerated at a maximum-security prison at the time of the interviews. The participants were incarcerated for various offense types (e.g. robbery, rape, homicide, and drug distribution) and for various sentence lengths. We randomly sampled inmates by using an alpha roster (which lists all inmates in the prison) as the sampling frame. Inmates who were on the alpha roster and who were still housed in the prison at the time of the interviews were eligible participants. To encourage participation, we offered inmates a nominal payment, which was deposited in their prison accounts. Only one person we approached declined to participate.

The age range for participants was 24–61 (mean age was 38.5). Twenty-eight (70%) were Black, the remainder were White. Thirteen (32.5%) had served under two years, 13 served two to five years, and 14 (35%) served more than five years. Most of the respondents had extensive criminal records and stated that they had been incarcerated in more than one prison. Twenty-two (55%) of the respondents were sentenced to life or life without parole. The sample characteristics reflected the larger prison population from which the sample was drawn. One potential limitation of prison interviews is that we may over-rely on those prone to use pro-social coping strategies. We believe that this potential risk is minimized by random sampling and the high response rate. The sample reflected the prison's population in terms of age and race indicating that there was minimal sampling bias.

We relied on semi-structured interviews to explore the subject matter and to allow inmates the freedom to expand on topics and to introduce new themes to the research. The goal of the research was to examine inmates' thoughts about disrespect in prison (as they defined it) and the various ways that they coped with disrespect from other inmates. Overwhelmingly, the situations the men found most stressful were theft and physical and verbal assaults, which is why we focus on their coping to these strains. We structured the interviews to explore how the participants interpreted the general concept of respect and how they coped with these strains in prison. Interviews began with a general discussion of their experiences in prison and then transitioned into asking participants to define what they considered disrespect in prison.

We then asked them to describe how they coped with these situations in general. This produced abstract descriptions of coping, therefore, we also asked them to describe the most recent time they experienced these strains and how they coped with that particular situation. In addition, we asked them if they had been victims of other potentially straining events that they did not mention initially. We did this to determine how they reacted to other behaviors that could be defined as strain.

The interviews, which lasted from 30 to 90 min, were conducted by a female interviewer in semi-private areas of the prison. She digitally recorded the interviews, with the permission of the warden and participants, and transcribed them. During transcription, all identifying remarks were removed and all names were replaced with pseudonyms.

When analyzing the data, all authors independently read and coded the interviews for themes pertaining to prison-based strains and the ways they coped with these strains. We employed both deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding involved looking for the three broad coping strategies (i.e. behavioral, cognitive, and emotional) as described by Agnew (1992). In addition, we engaged in inductive coding to determine if new coping strategies emerged and to look for nuances within the broader coping strategies.

We began by each coding the first 10 interviews independently and then coming together to discuss our coding. We did this to ensure inter-coder reliability. We discussed any differences in coding, came to agreement of how to proceed, and then recoded the previous interviews and the next five. We repeated this process until we were confident that we had consistency in coding. Once we reached agreement on the dominant themes related to coping with strain, and consistency in our coding, we coded all statements consistent with these strains. After this initial coding, we refined the concepts to create the axial codes that make up the results of the current analysis. Such style of coding is consistent with standards of qualitative research techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Reactive Coping among Inmates

Decades of research have detailed the various pains of imprisonment and their effect on inmates (Johnson & Toch, 1988; Sykes, 1958; Ugelvik, 2014). Supporting such claims, the inmates we spoke with recounted facing a variety of stressors in their daily lives. While they did discuss the general pains of imprisonment, here we focus on more situational strains. Specifically, we focus on inmates' modes of adaptation to thefts and violations of personal space (i.e. having their belongings stolen, being physically assaulted, and having their honor insulted) with the larger goal of determining the specific coping

techniques and strategies they relied on and reasons for variation in their coping responses to these events.¹ Here, we describe the various reactive adaptations to strains these inmates recounted, which fell into Agnew's taxonomy of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional coping. We present them in the order that participants used most frequently.

Behavioral Coping

When faced with thefts or disrespect from other inmates, those we interviewed frequently relied on one or more behavioral coping techniques: 77.5% of respondents discussed using this strategy at one time or another.² That is, they frequently sought revenge through direct physical retaliation or to eliminate the source of the strain by escaping or seeking help. These behavioral coping strategies allowed inmates to act directly on the immediate strains to resolve them.

Retaliation

One of the most common coping strategies, used by 73% of the men, was to physically retaliate against the aggressor (or alleged aggressor). This coping strategy was especially common when strains triggered anger in the inmates, at least early in their sentences (see also Capowich, Mazerolle, & Piquero, 2001; Mazerolle, Burton, Cullen, Evans, & Payne, 2000). They believed that it was often necessary to handle problems through violence or threats of violence. Michael described a situation where he was "playing basketball and dude made a call I ain't like. He thought he bad and I wasn't just fixing to go for anything, so he spit on me. When he spit on me I felt like I was the lowest thing on earth, right, so I just picked something up and I busted him in his head 'cause I felt like I was disrespected and it lead to violence." Leo described his emotions and reactions after having his locker box broken into:

I went crazy. I ran around the block saying, "Whoever broke in my shit I'm gonna kill you when I find out." All that shit and I ain't find out who did it. I thought I knew who did it and I got into it with the dude. I ended beating dude up about it.

1. The styles of coping described here are in direct response to our focus on specific types of strain. It is likely that, had we focused on the straining conditions of prisons life, a different set of coping strategies would have emerged (e.g. use of drugs for coping).

2. We have included the percentage of participants who used each coping strategy. However, our sample size does not allow for us to make hard claims about the relative prevalence of each strategy. We argue that we have captured the full range of coping strategies but withhold from making claims about prevalence.

Theft of property, cutting in line, insults, and other disrespectful behavior evoked anger in some inmates to the degree that many sought revenge on the culprit.

Escape

The frequent use of physical aggression in response to strain is not surprising given the characteristics of our sample (high propensity for crime/violence), the types of strain they face, and the unique nature of the prison environment (see Agnew, 2013). Yet, when faced with strain, not all chose to cope by assaulting others. Ten percent tried to escape the situation by physically leaving. In the outside world, escapes can take the form of deviant actions (e.g. children skipping school to avoid bullying or perceived strain from teachers), but such options were unavailable to inmates. In the prison environment, escape meant simply leaving the immediate area or walking out on an altercation. Sean recounted, "He tried swinging on me. ... I said, 'Alright cool, I just ain't gonna deal with you no more.'" Rather than fighting or continuing the argument, he removed himself from the situation. Similarly, when discussing how he handled a time where another inmate disrespected him, Curtis said that he decided to "be the bigger man and move away [from the situation]." For Sean and Curtis, physically leaving the situation was sufficient to alleviate the source of strain.

Seek help

Twenty-eight percent chose to seek help from prison authorities (such as shift officers or other correctional personnel) or from other inmates when confronted with strain. Lucas described such logic: "Well, when I get disrespected and I feel like I can't do nothin' about it, I go to the warden. Just see if I can get the warden to straighten out my problem." Lucas believed that he had little control over some of the strains he faced regularly so he turned to those who he thought could remove the source of strain. William described a similar situation:

The guy kept going on with other little comments, nagging, trying to build up something. Trying to build up a conflict when there shouldn't be no conflict at all. I said, "I know how I'm going to handle this. I'm gonna tell the shift officer." I told the shift officer I'm having problems with an inmate. And they moved me to another cell. Thank God.

The accounts of Lucas, William, and other inmates in the sample question the widely held assumption that inmates always refrain from soliciting help from or speaking with correctional officers (Crewe, 2009). Indeed, authorities could be a resource for relieving straining conditions.

Cognitive Coping

Inmates explained that it was not always possible to fight over every transgression; accordingly, 60% used various cognitive coping strategies. Whereas behavioral coping was directed toward the source of strain, cognitive coping was directed internally. The cognitive coping strategies entailed cognitively reinterpreting or rationalizing a situation so the strain was no longer perceived as meaningful (Agnew, 1992). For the inmates we interviewed, cognitive coping took the form of minimizing the importance of a strain, ignoring its existence, accepting responsibility for the strain, or empathizing with the individual deemed responsible.

Minimize Importance or Ignore Strain

Minimizing the importance of strain was used by 48% of the participants. In these cases, inmates acknowledged a strain, but made sense of it by noting its relative or absolute insignificance in relation to one's larger life goals (Agnew, 1992). By doing so they could alleviate their negative emotions without using violence. Bruce recalled his thoughts after having his personal property stolen:

Ain't none of that that important to me in here. You know my goal is to get out of this place. Family, friends, you know, my kids, that's what's important to me. Ain't none of this important to me, you know, I'm just trying to get home, that's it.

For some, getting out of prison was their larger goal and anything preventing or delaying this was seen as trivial. Thus, Bruce chose to focus on its unimportance relative to the rest of his life. When presented with a strain, other inmates maintained perspective by keeping a conscious and intentional focus on future goals and loved ones outside of prison. It was clear from the inmates' narratives that an important benefit of minimization (and of cognitive coping as a whole) was avoiding situations or responses that could extend their stay in prison.

A similar, but distinct, cognitive approach the inmates used was to simply ignore the strain. This method entailed denying the existence of a negative event all together. That is, they sought to raise their threshold for negative stimuli (Agnew, 1992). David commented on how he coped with stressors: "You can try dealing with the people, but like I say, that doesn't get you anyplace. ... You just have to ignore it. You just have to block it out and pretend it's not there." Those using this strategy spoke of "letting go" of a stressful event they faced. Roy detailed an experience of having some of his belongings stolen:

I knew who did it. He all but told on himself. He was a gang member when he was in prison. My bunk partner was a Crip, but he wasn't that type of person.

He didn't respect that type of thing [stealing]. So he told me who it was. ... I chose to let it go. If it's at all possible, it's the best thing to do. Swallow it and go about your business.

Another inmate commented on a similar approach to the experience of having his locker box broken into: "I chose not to act on it. I didn't really want to do anything to really make my problem worse. So I let it go. ... This is prison and you just gotta ignore."

Empathy

Thirteen percent chose to focus on the motives of the individual responsible for a strain by putting themselves in the shoes of the aggressor to better understand the thoughts, feelings, and events that had led to a given incident. Consequently, this allowed them to cope with their negative emotions. Christopher recalled a time when a group of inmates started a fight with him:

What was going through my mind was this isn't a good time to lash out at these guys right now because I don't have any win right here. Only thing I can do is try to look into their eyes and see if they're sincere about what we were talking about. What we were talking about, what they were talkin' about was nothin' for real. So after I realize that, so then I had to continue to evaluate, well what else could this be? So I came to the conclusion they was just bored, need someone to pick on, which was me. This is my time either stand tall or fall weak and probably taken it out though. As we say, probably got beat up real bad 'cause these guys young, you know what I'm sayin'. One of them is older and whatever and fight, he ain't whooped nobody, so I heard later so maybe this was his chance to get a win, easy win in my case.

Similarly, Nicholas sought to understand the actions of his attacker, "I go to wondering, did he just get a phone call from home? Did their wife leave them? Did they have a child in a wreck that died or their mother died? And I'll let it ride, pretty soon I'll forget about it." Overall, the theme of forgiveness was common among the empathy narratives. By considering the vantage point of others, inmates cognitively reinterpreted situations not as wrongdoings aimed at themselves personally, but as events influenced by external circumstances. Even if others may have had ill-intentions, many inmates chose to think otherwise.

Accept Responsibility

When faced with strain, 10% chose to cope by focusing on their own role in the negative event or why they deserved it (Agnew, 1992). They might recall that they had provoked the aggressor, for instance. This allowed them to reinterpret an adversity as less unjust, and make peace with the incident. Ross described this approach: "I can see things and I look more for my wrong in a

situation. And okay, I could have helped it, you know. I could have done that situation different.” He went on to recall a specific incident where he had accepted responsibility for the situation:

Got a radio stolen, like a Walkman radio one time. But I rationalized it with myself and said, “Well if you hadn’t left it out.” You gotta realize where you’re at. You left it laying there for somebody to get it.

This process of taking blame allowed Ross, as well as other inmates, to interpret potential strains in such a way that made it easier to come to terms with them. Likewise, another inmate recalled accepting responsibility for his role in a fight:

I had a chance to confront him about that and let him know that, “You caused this, you were an instigator of some mess and this was the result of it.” But I had to look at my own. At the same time, I didn’t have to let this guy annoy me. I could have got up and went somewhere else and not even argued with this idiot. And so much as looking at what he did, I had to look at what I did. Look where I went wrong. Because I knew better. Like I said, when you’re thinking, and when you think, most of the time you’ll make a lot better decision instead of just being spontaneous.

In short, they opted to concentrate on their own faults in the incident and not view the strain as unjust wrong doing on the part of the instigator.

Emotional Coping

The least common coping strategy, used by 10% of the inmates, was emotional coping, which entails confronting one’s emotions directly. Emotional coping strategies were distinguished from cognitive and behavioral styles, as these methods entailed the men acting directly on the emotions that resulted from a negative event (Agnew, 1992). Strategies for emotional coping took the form of seeking alone time for reading, writing, drawing, or meditating, as well as physical activities for releasing frustration and anger. Michael described how he dealt with stressful events in prison, “I stay reading and play a lot of sports.” More common than physical activity, however, were solitary activities. Spending time alone allowed inmates to escape from stressors and refocus their emotions. Vincent commented on taking such an approach:

Trying to maintain, you know, a level of consciousness that is not involved with doing time. I can’t let time beat me. I gotta beat time. I’m trying to use that time positively, so the way I do that is through a lot of writing, you know. I read a lot of things.

Similarly, when asked how he coped with stressful events, Wesley explained, “I write a letter, I do little thing with pencil or pen, I do stuff like that.”

For some, emotional coping was described as keeping busy and distracting oneself from the stressors of prison life. They thought this was an effective way to transfer focus away from a strain-producing incident. David took to absorb himself in his work:

I work because I couldn't imagine sitting in that dorm all day long. I've worked ever since I've been in in industry. Plus I like to stay busy anyway. And then I stay out in the hobby craft department as much as I can. ... Then when I do get to the dorm, I'll read a book to a book and a half a night. That's all. You just go to bed and try to block everything else out. ... I could not have made it this long without reading, being able to take a book and go in the corner and get out of here [mentally].

For people like David, their strategy to cope with strain was to focus on work, reading, and sleeping, and try to block out thoughts of the strains they faced, allowing them to eliminate negative emotions through distraction.

Experience and Coping

The inmates' narratives suggest that coping is not solely an immediate, reflexive response to experienced strains. Rather, through experience living in prison, obtaining a better understanding of those around them, and witnessing the success or failure of various coping strategies, they learned to refine their approaches for coping with strain. They also developed proactive strategies to reduce the occurrence of anticipated strains. These observations suggest that, with time and experience, there is a tendency among the inmates to adopt coping strategies that contain the seeds of "mature coping," which Johnson (1996) defines as a way to "[deal] with life's problems like a responsive and responsible human being, one who seeks autonomy without violating the rights of others, security without resort to deception or violence, and relatedness to others as the finest or fullest expression of identity" (Johnson, 1996, p. 98). Evidence from male prisoners serving life sentences has shown that many adapted to prison life "in active and reasonably effective ways" (Johnson & Dobrzanska, 2005, p. 36) and that maladaptive coping decreases over time as inmates age and serve out their sentence (Toch, Adams, & Grant, 1989). Our interviews support such claims. Indeed, experience (personal and vicarious) shaped the way inmates coped with interpersonal affronts. Specifically, they learned to: (1) find the most effective strategies for responding to strain based on available options, preferences, and the success or failure of previous coping strategies; (2) preemptively cope with these strains; and (3) alter the amount of significance they attached to these events or situations (allowing them to more easily reinterpret or redefine these situations).

Finding the Best Reactive Approach

Behavioral coping was the most common reaction to the immediate experience of personal affronts. The majority (77.5%) of the participants described, at one point, coping with these strains by retaliating, escaping, or seeking help. However, they did not always continue to use these techniques as their sole means of coping. As their time in prison increased, they began using other styles more frequently, believing that there were times when behavioral coping styles could be ineffectual or even harmful. Inmates commented on the self-destructive nature of retaliation, as it often had the consequence of prolonging the strain. Even those taking more passive behavioral strategies encountered problems. Seeking out help from prison authorities was frowned on and regarded as a snitching, which could lead to further altercations with other inmates (Crewe, 2005). Escaping a confrontation, too, was considered by some to be dishonorable. The men spoke to the complexity of the prison world and resulting difficulty they faced when coping with personal affronts.

With time, experience, and growing awareness of the limitations of behavioral coping strategies, the participants turned to cognitive and emotional coping strategies—more mature coping. Cognitive and emotional styles were perceived as more sophisticated approaches and were developed and honed over time. Coping was a process that continuously unfolded based on individualized preferences, available resources, and experiences in the prison environment. For instance, where autonomy is restricted, emotional coping was desirable but opportunities for it are limited. Alone time and personal space are disturbed by fellow inmates coming and going. Michael explained that he desired emotional coping because:

You can be anywhere and just go into your own mind, but you don't do it often because in here you got to be constantly aware of your surrounding and everything at all times. So me just sitting there and meditate and be in my own mind, somebody gonna mess with me, they ain't gonna just let me be alone for a while unless I be in a confined area.

As a consequence of having limited opportunities for alone time, emotional coping was the coping style least frequently mentioned by participants (used by 10% of participants). When inmates attempted to use emotional coping strategies, they often tried and failed and eventually used more aggressive coping styles. Michael elaborated on the importance of reading and alone time when dealing with negative emotions resulting from a strain, and the process of adapting by using other styles:

It's something what I can do and get away from all this madness [alone time and reading] and I feel like if they take that away from me, then I ain't got nothing left but to be hostile. That one little thing that I can do on my own without having somebody else to help me do. So I feel like when you take that

from me you kinda disrespect me and push me to a point where I ain't got no other choice but to be hostile and violent.

Michael highlights the unfolding nature of the coping process. Rather than being a singular or isolated act, coping was an ongoing process that was directed and influenced by feedback from the social environment and by the success or failure of previous coping attempts. Despite their preferences, they learned that some coping styles simply were not feasible in prison.

Preemptive Coping Strategies

Through exposure to strain, the inmates developed strategies on how to position themselves in the prison social world in such a way that they could minimize future strain. They learned which types of people to avoid and with whom they should align. Such coping strategies mirror the reactive ones in many ways (i.e. they include behavioral, cognitive, and emotional strategies); however, these approaches differ in the sense that they are designed to ward off anticipated strains rather than being reactive responses to direct strains.

With time and experience, 55% of participants had come to believe that many problems could be avoided by being wary of and staying clear of people likely to produce it. They believed that having the requisite knowledge to recognize potential strain and who to avoid were important skills for navigating the prison environment. Often, avoidance meant staying away from certain areas in the prison where people were likely to get into fights and disagreements. David described areas that were particularly volatile:

I don't go to the TV area or anything like that because there's always arguments over that. That's one of the big causes of problems in prison is the TV set, believe it or not. And in our dorm, it's a little more stressful because we have one TV. ... so everything has to be voted on. A lot of arguing over that, constantly.

For David, a logical strategy to minimize strain was to avoid these areas. Ross took similar precautions: "I have certain things I do, like I can see things. I can avoid 'cause I can see what's going on. I know they're over there doing their drugs, so ... I'm not gonna be in that area." He elaborated, "I kinda go through daily life in here like everybody's drunk but me on the highway. So in order to avoid a wreck I steer around them, so I really don't get myself in high-risk situations."

Others believed that staying away from certain types of people was even more important than avoiding types of places. According to Lawrence: "If I just see a dude that look like he trouble, I don't even try to conversate with him." He, like many other inmates, gradually became more vigilant about those with whom he interacted. Similarly, Lucas described being cautious about other inmates, "I try to stay away from the officers and very few friends

I have. I trust no man. Period. ... I don't trust no man. Man put me in here, I trust no man." Lucas later described how being wary of other inmates was a protective means of avoiding strain or the need to retaliate. According to him, others had the potential to elicit strain so avoiding them was best.

While some inmates opted to remove themselves from social contact to avoid strains, 45% chose the opposite strategy and sought to form allies with those they called "partners," "associates," or "homeboys." They formed these friendships at least partly for the support and security they provided. They initially sought out these alliances to garner protection in a turbulent environment where they routinely navigated threats of victimization. Dennis described the safety he felt with partners who would retaliate on his behalf:

If anyone mess with me, they gotta mess with them. But ain't nobody gonna mess with me. The other day I was going to eat and a dude cut into me. Hit me hard. Big, big ole dude. Man, they [partners] called up, "Wait a minute! Man you know what you just did!" They bumpin' and poppin' him. The dude's "Man! Oh, I'm sorry!" They slapped him around.

Dennis recalled this incident with laughter, and indicated that he was comfortable in his daily life knowing that he had associates who would watch out for him. Participants described experiencing less anxiety and fear of strain as a result of having formed friendships with others, which supports previous research detailing the importance of social support on reducing strain.

They likened their groups to family members who could offer emotional support during times of distress. Herman recounted an experience of having his locker box broken into:

So I find out who this is, and I'm really thinking about doing some damage to this guy because I didn't like him anyway, all the time he was being petty. He broke into my box, he stole my stuff, a lot of that I needed. Stuff that I was like, "Hey that was mine." But fortunately for me one of my close associates was able to talk me out of it, basically talk some sense into me. Because a lot of times you come to a point that if you do some damage to some of these guys, you are really just hurting yourself.

Herman's story depicts the emotional stability provided by his associates. Not only did his friends have his back, but they also kept him from responding negatively to strain. In this effort, they enabled him to realize that responding to strain might lead to even more strain in the future.

The social bonds the men formed with other inmates served to quell anxiety over anticipated strain. Forming allies functioned as a preemptive strategy for coping with personal affronts and subdued the inmates' perceptions of it. It may be the case that while more victimization is experienced with a group, these experiences were less emotionally distressing than when faced alone, and as a result the men perceived less strain. Quantitative research on GST provides support for this interpretation (Capowich et al., 2001).

Reinterpreting and Reframing

Our interviews suggested that, through experience, the inmates learned how to develop a mindset that minimized the experience of strain. Seventy-eight percent (and all those who were incarcerated for five or more years) described how they had learned to reinterpret events or reframe situations in ways that reduced the likelihood of negative emotions. As a result, strains that were initially perceived to be intolerable, and that initially prompted violence or other offending, were later seen as manageable, if not trivial.

When discussing these new mindsets or perspectives, the men emphasized their ability to emotionally distance themselves from the situation at hand. This distancing allowed them to consider their aggressor's perspective, contemplate various modes of action, and their consequences, and most importantly, moderate their emotions so that they would not respond to stressors in ways that would induce future strain. David described forming such a mindset:

It was a process, I'd say a regular process. Just really maturing and growing older and starting to get all my values and everything right. ... Now I take time to think through a situation before I act on it. Just weigh it out. What mean more to me right here, my freedom or what you think about me? ... Somebody might get advantage and it's like, man if I was you I'd do something to his ass. Ain't no way I'd let him [do that]. But you got to be able to think, "Hey what's more important right here? What he thinks of me or my wife or my son or my daughter or my grandma, you know somebody that loves you?" My thinking's different. ... [In the past] I thought but I didn't think it through. Now I'm older, more mature and I think, "Hey it ain't worth all this right here, you know."

Through his time in prison, David gained a perspective that permitted him to distance himself from a stressful situation so that he could weigh the consequences of different ways to handle it. He mentioned having a mindset where he would entertain vengeful thoughts, but have the self-control to prevent him from acting on them. William elaborated on learning how to moderate his emotions, "As years pass by I learned to control anger. It's important to have self-control. You know, people make you angry. But it's important not to lose self-control and get angry."

Those with a changed perspective believed that they enhanced their level of control over the prison environment. Their newfound self-control came with the ability to let things go, a skill that the inmates described as having been very difficult when they had first entered prison. Samuel commented on his transformation: "I'll pretty much let go of anything now. ... I learned over the years that whatever this man saying about me you know it ain't true, who cares. My real friends in here know the truth about me." Samuel learned to regulate his need to react physically to perceived disrespect. They came to realize that letting things go would reduce strain in the long run. Tom recounted his success in letting things go and exercising self-control:

I have a 50 year sentence, I been locked up for 9 years there's guys in here who have less time than me and who's done less time than me, but I'm in a better position than them because I swallowed my pride. When someone bumped me, or called me a bitch or fuck boy, I said, "Alright."

When the inmates articulated changed perspectives, their narratives underscored how these perspectives allowed them to minimize the occurrence of future situations that could induce strain. However, they also described these new perspectives as enabling them to redefine situations and interactions. Such conceptualization allowed them to permanently change the way that they viewed potential strains so that they could change the way they experienced it. That is, they cognitively reduced the perceived significance of potential strains, so that a stressful experience could be avoided or minimized. Tom illustrated this process:

Over the years, I don't really look at it as respect or disrespect no more, because even to look at that is to set yourself up for failure. ... I don't even look at it as disrespect. Say a dude bump up into me, before he can even say excuse me, I'm like "My bad, man" I'm not going to allow it to even go there. But you gotta make that absolute. He's an inmate, you know what I'm sayin'. You gotta view him as an inmate right now and he can be the same dude that bumped into him and says, "Damn motherfucker, you can't say excuse me?!" and now you dig the hole deeper. Now you got all these folks around you and it's just like who goin' jump first. He loud, this dude loud, and I'm just the dude that's just gonna say "My bad, man." And I'm lookin' y'all have just made my day, y'all have entertained me for the day, y'all my source of entertainment, but they lookin' at it as a source of respect and disrespect, and there really is no such thing.

For Tom and other inmates who permanently altered their conceptions of strain, what was once frustrating was now benign. Throughout their prison term, some learned to unravel their prior subcultural belief systems, which had encouraged them to define certain acts as serious stressors or strains. Tom discussed the transition he went through, "When I came here, you bump up into me, I was gonna say 'Hey, wake up!' But now I can see it for what it really is. There ain't no such thing as respect and disrespect." Herbert expressed similar feelings when discussing how his changed mindset enabled him to change his interpretation of instances he would have previously seen as disrespectful, "Everything ain't disrespect. A lot of things be hidden, if it ain't directed to you or if they just talking to you, it ain't directed to you. Man don't let them [make you feel disrespected]. That's the key." This type of narrative was common among men who described embracing more mature forms of coping. Through this change in their self-concept, these men strove to transcend the experience of strain.

While learning mature coping was common, it did not occur for all inmates. Whether some were incapable or unwilling to change cannot be determined with certainty. We did find that all of those who served more than five years

used one or more forms of mature coping—even if this was not their modal response. In addition, all inmates expressed more than one form of coping when dealing with interpersonal affronts. Yet, even those who were transitioning to more mature coping styles still relied on illegal forms (e.g. physical retaliation) at times.

Discussion and Conclusion

A key problem plaguing strain theorists is that only *some* strained individuals resort to crime or delinquency. Agnew (1992) addressed this issue by listing a number of conditioning variables that were said to influence the likelihood of a deviant coping response, such as social support and association with delinquent peers. Yet, as acknowledged by Agnew (2006, 2013), quantitative tests of GST have produced mixed results in this area, indicating that our understanding of the coping process remains underdeveloped.

Strain theorists have turned to the larger stress and coping literature to gain further insight and, as a result, they have developed a greater appreciation for the complexity of the coping process. In the most recent revision or reformulation of GST, Agnew (2013) highlights at least two major reasons for this complexity. First, while certain stressors may qualify as “objective” strains (e.g. physical pain, hunger, homelessness), the experience of strain typically has a subjective component. Whether or not a given event is subjectively defined as a serious strain is dependent on the meaning that the individual attaches to the event, which in turn is dependent on the individual’s values, beliefs, and larger life situation (see Polizzi, 2011).

A second major reason for the complexity is that “there are literally hundreds” of ways to cope with a given strain (Agnew, 2013, p. 657). Further, in response to a given strain, individuals may experiment with a variety of coping techniques—contemporaneously and over time—and only some of the possible techniques involve crime or delinquency. One reason provided for the mixed results of past research is that quantitative studies have not managed to capture this complexity (Agnew, 2013).

To gain further insight into the coping process and to better understand the factors that may account for differential responses to strain, we adopted a qualitative approach based on a sample of prison inmates. As Agnew (2013) would predict, within such a sample there was a strong tendency of individuals to respond to strain involving personal affronts with deviant coping strategies. Indeed, when victimized by theft or when facing disrespect from fellow inmates, one of the most common responses was aggression. Yet, none of the inmates responded in this manner in every situation and some never did. Our findings point to considerable variation among inmates in the types of coping strategies they adopt in response to prison strain (including non-deviant adaptations), despite the fact that these men would be described as having a very strong propensity for crime or violence given their past histories. Our findings

reveal that the inmates used a variety of strategies to cope when confronted with personal affronts (see Toch, 1975, 1977 for other examples). Behavioral coping strategies are not limited to physical retaliation. They also include such non-deviant responses as physically removing oneself from an aggravating situation or seeking help from prison authorities or other inmates. Respondents also used various cognitive coping strategies. For example, respondents minimized the importance of the events, ignored strain, or accepted responsibility for it.

Inmates also showed that they are not merely passive victims of these prison strains. They are aware of the people and places that are likely sources of stress and they sidestep situations that have a high potential for strain. Or, they adopt techniques designed to minimize the negative emotions that would otherwise accompany these strains. In particular, the inmates rely on several main preemptive coping strategies: (1) avoiding people or situations that tend to generate these strains, (2) making allies with fellow inmates who are able to provide protection or support, (3) maintaining perspective by viewing the strains in light of larger life goals, and (4) redefining these strains as trivial or insignificant.

Our findings build on Agnew's (2013) theoretical development in which he notes that coping should be seen as a process. Individuals do not merely react to a strain using a single coping strategy. While the men had preferred coping strategies, they also used other approaches. We found that it was not uncommon for them to go through a series of coping strategies until finding one that worked. They may have preferences for coping styles, but lack of resources or opportunities prevented such strategies from being effective. As such, we should view coping as a process where people adapt to the situation as best as they can.

The results also suggest that the situation and context of the strain have an effect on the nature of coping. In some situations, it may not be possible to escape from the source of the strain, to physically lash out in revenge, or to have time and opportunity to emotionally deal with the negative emotions. Even if one's preferred strategy is to meditate and work through the negative emotions, such opportunities for alone time may be hard to come by. For instance, in dormitory prisons, inmates have limited opportunities to be alone. The din of prison, the constant movement, and the lack of space make private time difficult to obtain. This suggests that future research should consider the availability of coping strategies to participants. Providing a pen and paper questionnaire to inmates about coping may reveal that emotional coping is rare. This could lead to the faulty assumption that inmates do not desire to use this kind of coping, rather than lacking opportunities to do so despite desire.

Beyond this, we believe that our findings help to shed light on a key problem that has long vexed strain theorists, mentioned above. To explain why only *some* of the inmates in our sample responded to particular strains with crime, violence, or other deviant coping strategies, it seems necessary to consider

the role of prior experience. The inmates discussed how, over time, they had learned to deal more effectively with the seemingly constant stressors of prison life. Most striking in this regard was their ability to develop preemptive coping strategies to ward off personal affronts. It was clear from the discussions on preemptive coping that much of the variation in coping is dependent on length of time in prison. Specifically, preemptive coping was used more often among the older inmates who had faced and witnessed many personal affronts. Consequently, their coping evolved (see Johnson, 1996; Toch et al., 1989 for other examples of this process).

Prisoners (especially those who are serving lengthy sentences) typically mature in their coping strategies over time (Johnson, 1996). As was seen here, as respondents' time served increased, so did their ability to recognize and predict patterns of disrespect and victimization, which led them to devise mature approaches for coping with these situations. Rather than simply reacting to personal affronts in the moment and in the most expedient manner possible (as the younger inmates had a propensity to do), the older and more experienced inmates described how they had learned how to employ relatively sophisticated and effective coping strategies in response to personal affronts (e.g. strategies that had less potential of creating new or additional problems for themselves). Experience also taught them how to interpret or redefine problematic events and interactions in ways that minimized subjective strain (see Johnson & Toch, 1982).

To our knowledge, no previous study of GST has examined the role of prior experience in the coping process, although it is now beginning to receive some attention in the stress literature. The limited research in this area focuses on the psychological impact of adverse events and indicates that the experience of adversity may itself "promote the development of subsequent resilience" (Seery, Holman, & Cohen, 2010, p. 1037). Having some past experience with adversity appears to be important in developing coping capabilities and "psychological toughness," assuming the initial adversity was not too traumatic or overwhelming. For example, "experiencing past adversity could teach effective coping skills ... create a sense of mastery over past adversity, [and] foster beliefs in the ability to cope successfully in the future" (Seery et al., 2010, p. 1037). Consequently, individuals who have had an opportunity to develop their coping capabilities in response to a previous stressor are more likely to appraise the same stressor, when experienced again, as more manageable (Seery et al., 2010, p. 1026). For example, data indicate that "prior experience with natural disasters may mitigate negative outcomes when the individual is exposed to the same type of natural disaster," such as floods or earthquakes (Seery et al., 2010, p. 1037).

Although Seery et al. (2010) did not examine the adversity of prison life, their findings parallel our own. If prior experience with strain is a key factor shaping responses to current strain, as our findings suggest, then this fact has important implications for future research on GST. Given that stressors "are not experienced in a vacuum but, rather, in the context of the individual's

adversity history” (Seery et al., 2010, p. 1036), it may be important for quantitative studies that assess the effect of strain on crime to control for prior experience. As our own findings suggest, prior experience is likely to affect the perceived magnitude of the strain (at least of certain strains) as well as the likelihood of resorting to criminal or violent coping. And if prior experience is an important factor, we would expect to find the following pattern of results: criminal coping should be most likely when the strain being experienced is novel to the individual (and the individual meets the other conditions thought to lead to criminal coping such as strong overall propensity for crime). All else equal, criminal coping should be less likely when the individual has had some past experience with the strain in question. There may be limits, however. While exposure to moderate levels of strain/adversity has the potential to promote future resilience, exposure to very high levels of chronic strain may simply overwhelm the individual’s coping abilities and reduce rather than promote resilience (see Seery et al., 2010).

It is conceivable that past experience with moderate levels of strain may be an additional factor that could help to account for the age–crime curve. Young people may have a relatively strong propensity to respond to strain (e.g. family conflict, peer rejection, bullying) with crime or delinquency because many of these strains are novel to them, they have limited life experience upon which to draw, and, by virtue of their age, they have had limited opportunity to experiment with different coping strategies. Older individuals, on the other hand, may be less prone to criminal coping because, through experience, they are more likely to have developed a diverse repertoire of effective coping techniques, including the ability to maintain perspective and redefine potential stressors as trivial or insignificant in relation to larger life goals. This could be a fruitful avenue of inquiry for future research.

Our findings also contribute to the literature on desistance by illuminating mechanisms that may facilitate individuals to give up some forms of crime. Prison life is burdened with stressors that can contribute to inmates’ misconduct. Research on prison misconduct shows that the nature of strain experienced and the characteristics of the inmates experiencing strain shape the frequency and nature of prison infractions (Morris et al., 2012; Sharp et al., 2012). Age and length of time served appear to reduce the likelihood that an inmate will respond to strains by violating prison rules. Our findings suggest that one possible reason for this is that with age and experience inmates learn more mature forms of coping. They transition from physical retaliation and seek out more pro-social forms of coping, forms that are consistent with prison guidelines. This finding is especially important from a life-course perspective, as it suggests that the cultivation of mature coping techniques may function as a critical turning point that facilitates desistance from violent and deviant behaviors. Moreover, it is important to note that we find mature coping to lead to desistance within the prison environment, a context where deviant behavior is prevalent. Studies focusing on desistance might explore the role of mature coping and similar cognitive states as turning points, which may lead to desistance in other contexts.

If future studies confirm the importance of past experience, then it may be necessary to incorporate additional elements of social learning into GST, beyond the role of delinquent peer associations. Presumably, experience with strain and coping allows individuals to experiment with a variety of coping techniques. Techniques that prove efficacious are likely to be reinforced, replacing techniques that prove ineffective or that provide less relief from strain (Brezina, 2000). The incorporation of additional social learning elements should not pose a problem for GST, given its evolving nature and given the fact that, in existing statements of the theory, it freely draws on other theories to help explain why only some strained individuals resort to deviant coping (see Agnew, 2013).

Our findings shed light on the coping strategies of individuals who have a strong propensity to respond to strain with illegitimate means; namely, prison inmates. Thus, caution should be taken when generalizing to populations who are predisposed to legitimate coping. Nonetheless, we believe the results of the current study help to build a more complete picture of the coping process and expose factors that are in need of further attention in the literature on GST. The consideration of certain neglected factors, such as past experience, may allow us to further specify the conditions under which criminal coping is more or less likely, and may lead to new directions for future research on strain, coping, and offending.

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