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**Submission date:** 05-May-2021 05:50AM (UTC-0500)

**Submission ID:** 1578586394

**File name:** Applying\_Strain\_Theory\_to\_Explain\_the\_Over.edited.docx (21.34K)

**Word count:** 1899

**Character count:** 11044

**Strain Theory**

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### **Strain Theory**

Presently, criminologists are perplexed with the same societal problems of disparate minority imprisonment, especially African-Americans both in the criminal justice and juvenile systems. Are African-Americans wired to commit crimes than other ethnic groups? Do they commit more crimes than others? These are some of the questions that the different criminology theories try to address. The Strain theory, also called Anomie Theory, constitutes numerous notions that explain the different elements in a sociological structure that lead to engaging in criminal activities. Strain theory is premised on the reasoning that someone or something in a person's life causes a strain that forces them to commit a crime intended to alleviate the strain (Brezina, 2017). Whether the unjust occurrence is due to their action or systematic, an individual who engages in crime can rationalize their acts by considering that they are also victims of mistreatment. This paper aims to apply the Strain theory in explaining the over-involvement of African-Americans in criminal undertakings and the justice system.

Merton advanced the Strain Theory in 1938, when the Great Depression was significant. The Great Depression was an unfortunate occurrence in the history of the United States and it influenced social interactions and altered the societal structure. Merton observed the interaction of people and how the Great Depression affected them. Brezina (2017) argues that the rudimental basis of Strain Theory is societal constructs. The type of societal structure, human relations, and the quality of these relationships influence the conduct of individuals. The theory can also be understood via the definition of the strains resulting from a rigid social structure. For instance, in America, the American dream is entrenched. The goals of every American are to finish their studies, get a job, earn enough money to raise a family, buy a car and a house. Strain manifests itself when people are unable to cope with the demands of the American dream.

Specifically, financial challenges are a source of strain that affects family relationships until such a strain drives a person to engage in criminal undertakings.

In the United States, African-Americans are low-income earners. Also, the American Psychological Association (APA) argues that African-American youngsters are three times in the offing to live in low-income settings than those from white families. At the same time, 55% of African-Americans have high mortgage rates than the 18% of whites, whereas unemployment among African-Americans is higher than that of Caucasians (American Psychological Association, n.d). The above-mentioned societal constructs pressurize African-Americans, thereby resulting in their engagement in criminal activities.

Poverty affects many African-American households, but unemployment is worse because it exacerbates the condition. African-Americans are more exposed to poor living conditions and they reside in poor neighborhoods. According to the Strain Theory, poor living conditions and high unemployment rates lead to racial discrepancies that create a conducive environment that pushes African-Americans into criminal activities to get rid of the strain (My.ilstu.edu, n.d.). Since most African-Americans live in poor neighborhoods, they are likely to engage in crime to take care of the needs of their family. In such an instance, strain occurs because married persons fight over the lack of money and such conflict can tear apart families. Furthermore, in such circumstances, members of the family will engage in thievery due to the financial strains at home since they cannot have regular sources of income.

Apart from the social constructs, the American education system leads to strain and deviant conduct witnessed among African-Americans. Poverty and socio-economic challenges are not only affecting households. Since many African-American peoples live in insufficiency, they lack adequate resources to take their children to the best institutions. These households are

also unable to fund the higher education of their family members. This points to a wider American problem that is unequal education opportunities that hugely affect African-Americans.

Structural setbacks like the inability to access quality education to the university level and prejudice in occupation have resulted in a limited number of African American men gaining meaningful employment. Consequently, the lack of opportunities has led to some African-Americans believing that they cannot get a job in the country. A lack of access to quality education and unemployment of African-American individuals leads to deviant while disorganizing and unbalancing the society. Whereas privileged Americans of decent white go to some of the most prestigious schools, earn a degree and get high-paying jobs leading to the attainment of life goals, African Americans without the resources to seek education are left with limited options but to take up low-wage employment. This inequity upsets African Americans and drives them into a life of crime. Devoid of a sense of purpose and much-needed guidance from academicians, these individuals resort to criminal dealings to get by. Both adolescents and adults of African American descent join prohibited activities like drug dealings. Moreover, they join gangs and other outlawed groups that promote illegal conduct because they want to feel a sense of belonging if they cannot achieve the same by attending college.

Social gaps and racism are also some of the strain in society. Social-economic challenges, unequal opportunities for personal and professional growth highlight some of the strains on African-Americans. From the lack of opportunities, Lau (2020) concludes that African-Americans were engaging in crime results from the consequences of failing to engage in such criminal actions. For instance, robbing a person seems like a low-level crime that has no lasting effect on a person. However, without the money that a robber takes from the robbery exercise, their families will not eat, their homes and family cars can be repossessed, and they lose the

ability to take care of their children, who might end up in the government support programs. Besides, many African-Americans engage in criminal acts because of elements of low social control. The lack of job opportunities is beyond the control of African-Americans. This factor leads them to engage in crime to get the money they can use to pay for essential commodities like food, shelter, and clothing.

The Strain theory also talks about the incentive to engage in crime to cope. African-Americans are likely to engage in criminal conduct to respond to the societal conflicts involving the law enforcement agencies. In such instances, law enforcement personnel may lack the ability to assist African-Americans in solving disputes via legitimate channels and African-Americans take the law into their hands. For African-Americans, criminal coping offers an avenue for dealing with problems (Lau, 2020). In this regard, African-Americans engage in criminality to resolve issues to do with their mistreatment by violently attacking and killing others. That is why there are incidences of gang-related violence that are retaliatory. Also, the Strain theory avers that poverty pushes individuals into desperation, which desperation breeds violence.

The news and especially mainstream media shape public opinion. The news media cover African-Americans in the United States, for example, is overrepresented and emphasizes African-American involvement in a crime. In comparison, white Americans who engage in criminal acts do not receive extensive coverage because it focuses on the human aspects of an offender, even when the crime committed is worse than that committed by African-Americans. For starters, crime is a crime and should receive due coverage devoid of prejudices based on race, among other perceptions. In addition to that, Jones (2017) suggests that the widespread stereotyping of African-Americans could be a ploy to conceal the alarming crime rates committed by the white population.

In appreciation of the difficulties faced in dealing with matters touching on the African-American community and crime, which are complex, there also must be policy considerations that can make them access equal opportunity. For instance, African-Americans who have undergone the entire education process find job opportunities difficult to access. For that reason, in collaboration with employment agencies, the government should come up with policies that make it mandatory to have a mixed workforce, hence increasing the chances of African-Americans getting meaningful employment. At the same time, there must be partnerships and collaborations between faith-based entities, public entities like the law enforcement departments, academic institutions, and public health entities that work as a unit to help deal with issues touching on education, employment, and crime reduction in the African-American society.

Another factor to consider is the minimum wage in countries like America and Canada. In the United States, there have been efforts to increase the fundamental wage to \$15 an hour. In recent times, <sup>1</sup> the House of Representatives approved the Raise the Wage Act that will progressively raise the country's minimum salary to \$15 an hour by 2025 (Lenhart, 2019). Such moves will ensure that African-American working in similar settings like their white counterparts are accorded the same remuneration and some sense of equality. Improved minimum wage increases expand a variety of economic prospects for African-Americans who have been denied economic progress for long. Another policy that can lessen the misfortunes of African-Americans is the expansion of representation by eliminating structural barriers that make it hard for African-Americans to ascend to some of the political offices. There are inherent obstacles like the restriction of early voting passed by the state of North Carolina. However, this move was thwarted by the Supreme Court, which struck down the legislation that was regarded as intended to limit the participation of African-Americans in the electoral process. Better

representation via an election is essential to African-Americans because it lessens the hostility towards them while highlighting their pleas to the rest of the country and the world. In the end, it improves their economic and social fortunes.

In conclusion, Strain theory has been applied to understand the involvement of African-Americans in Criminality and the justice system. However, Strain Theory has limitations, one of them is that it assumes every entity values success within economic prosperity. The theory also fails to consider personal preferences when African-Americans decide to engage in criminal undertakings. The social structure can influence a certain group within the wider society, but some African-Americans decide to choose a life of crime despite the societal conditions. In addition to that, though every race and entity experience strain at some point in life, the outcome of strain is the same and manifests itself when people express anger, depression, and fear. Crime happens when a person cannot cope with the strain felt as described by the Strain Theory. In such instances, where the strains are protracted and large or unjust or uncontrollable, crime is likely to occur because it drives people to cope. Other individual elements like interpersonal skills, personal support networks, and general dispositions play a crucial role in how African-Americans respond to these strains. Expert warns that once African-Americans decide to use illegitimate mechanisms to cope with the strains experienced in life, it becomes problematic to alter the course and adopt legitimate strategies, which is why there is an incidence of crime in societies occupied by African-Americans.

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