"Anomie Theory and Gang Delinquency"
by
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Abstract
In this paper, anomie theory is considered as an explanation of gang delinquency. After briefly discussing the influence of Durkheim and Merton on anomie theory, a review of more recent versions of the theory is presented. The general strain theory of Agnew, as well as Konty's concept of microanomie, and Messner and Rosenfeld's institutional anomie theory are reviewed. An empirical assessment of anomie theory (focusing on educational and occupational expectations) is conducted. We find that educational expectations is a significant correlate of delinquency, though measures based on social control theory and social learning theory are stronger predictors.

Hackler (2012:323) points out that anomie theory can be classified as a consensus perspective, that assumes agreement on values and norms. This agreement or consensus is reinforced by all of the major institutions of society -- the family, schools, businesses, government, media, and religion. The functions of these various institutions ordinarily serve to provide social regulation through clearly understood values and norms. Durkheim defined the concept of "anomie" to describe the absence of social regulation or clear rules for individuals to follow. Individualism displaces cohesive communities and a collective conscience, and this anomie leads to higher rates of both suicide and crime.

In his classic and influential article on social structure and anomie, Merton (1938) outlined the logic of the strain theory of crime. Merton distinguished the goals of society from the legitimate means or rules guiding the pursuit of these goals. Based on the consensus perspective, he argued that the culturally defined goals or aspirations are held up for all members of society. In western societies, aspirations for success are supposedly universal and a constant. The means of achieving such economic success are not universally available to all, and it is this variation in the means to achieve success that causes crime. Both educational and occupational opportunities for success are key to achieving the universal goal.

Those who have few prospects or low expectations of success -- either in terms

of education or occupation -- are the most likely to turn to crime and involvement in gangs, regardless of their current aspirations or desires for success. Prior research (Hirschi, 1969; Farnworth and Leiber, 1989) has measured strain or status frustration by the disjunction between aspirations and expectations for success.   Those who seek higher status jobs but who realistically expect little chance for such success were defined as experiencing strain or status frustration. This seems to be a plausible method to measure strain, but relatively few people maintain high aspirations for success in the face of low expectations of such achievement. Indeed, we find in our data set that fewer than one in ten respondents (7.8%) desire more education than they expect to achieve. Dividing aspirations and expectations between college graduation and no college expected, Hirschi (1969:172) also finds only five percent of his sample desire more education than they expect to achieve. Since there is insufficient variation in this measure of "anomie," it cannot possibly account for more than a small amount of the variation in delinquency, according to Hirschi.

Farnworth and Leiber (1989) argue that measuring the gap between educational aspirations and expectations (or between occupational aspirations and expectations) is not an accurate indicator of strain or status frustration. Instead, they propose that the disjunction between financial goals (specifically, the desire to make a great deal of money) and educational expectations provides a better measure of the strain described by Merton's theory. Farnworth and Leiber report that the gap between financial goals and educational expectations is a better predictor of delinquency than economic aspirations alone. However, the best predictor of delinquency in their analysis were educational aspirations alone, regardless of level of educational expectations. Further, Burton et al (1994) found that Farnworth and Leiber's measure of the gap between economic aspirations and educational expectations does not significantly affect self-reported crime. Burton et al. also find that controlling for social control theory measures (such as family attachment) and social learning theory measures (such as definitions and differential association) eliminates any significant effect of these anomie theory indicators.

It may be more reasonable to define strain in terms of low expectations for success. The culture uniformly endorses success in education and occupational status for all; those people who believe they cannot attain the desired goals of society will experience strain or status frustration , even if they attempt to realistically adjust to a lower level of expectations for success.

In this paper, the means to achieve success -- through educational or occupational attainment -- are emphasized as the measure of "strain" or status frustration. The cultural goals for success do not vary substantially enough to provide an explanation of involvement in gangs and crime. Based on a consensus perspective, anomie theorists believe that nearly all people share the same goals for educational and economic success. The key variable for anomie theorists such as Merton is the differential level of access to the means to succeed.   An assessment of the

individual`s actual expectations for educational and occupational attainment is therefore the appropriate indicator of strain, not the aspirations of the individual, according to this argument. Hence, goals or aspirations for success are conceived as a characteristic of society or the culture as a whole, not as an individual characteristic. The culture sets desired goals or aspirations for individuals.

Revisions of Merton's Version of Anomie Theory
    In one of the most cited revisions of Merton's anomie theory, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) added the concept of access to illegitimate opportunities for success or economic attainment. They believed that there was considerable variation in opportunities for profitable crime, such as gambling or organized crime. Cloward and Ohlin described three distinct types of deviant subcultures or gangs: criminal, conflict, and retreatist gangs. Retreatist subcultures fostered alcoholism and drug addiction, and conflict subcultures or gangs focused on fighting or maintaining turf and territoriality. Only in the criminal subcultures were illegal and profitable activities fostered, such as extortion, gambling, and various forms of fraud such as identity theft. The evidence on such patterns of offence-specialization does not seem to support Cloward and Ohlin's typology of subcultures, however. Those who engage in violence are also likely to be involved in profitable crimes such as gambling and to engage in drug use (Miller, Maxson, and Klein, 2001). It is uncommon for offenders to specialize in a single type of crime.
    There have been a few other more recent and influential attempts to modify strain theory, such as by Agnew (1992), Konty (2005), and Messner and Rosenfeld (2007). In Agnew's general strain theory, emotions of frustration and anger are emphasized with a focus on social learning processes of reinforcement and punishment. Negative experiences such as failure in school or lack of educational opportunity, rejection in peer competition for status, or even defeats in athletic contests can foster the anger and frustration that may lead to crime.
    While Merton focused on structural causes of crime, Agnew has emphasized micro-level or individual processes in his social-psychological version of anomie theory. Agnew links crime to the response of individuals to stress, in an effort to make the theory more widely applicable or "general." Deviance and crime are adaptations to a variety of forms of stress or strain. In Agnew's general strain theory, three major types of stress are :emphasized. First, similar to Merton, Agnew focuses on failure to achieve positively valued goals; however, Agnew includes more immediate goals than the long term goals described by Merton. For example, Anew includes individual deficiencies in skills and abilities as well as the gap between expectations and achievements. The disjunction between actual outcomes and what is perceived as a fair or just outcome is also defined as a source of stress. If people perceive that the effort they have exerted is not rewarded as well for themselves as for others, this could be a source of strain or stress.

A second major type of stress identified by Agnew in his general strain theory is the removal of positively valued stimuli, such as the loss of something or someone of great value. The loss of a parent due to death or divorce and separation, or the loss of a girlfriend or boyfriend can lead to stress. Being expelled or suspended from school can also cause distress; even changing schools can result in anomie for the individual.

The third major type of stress described by Agnew is the presence of negative stimuli, such as child abuse, criminal victimization, and adverse school experiences. Both the presence of negative stimuli and the removal of positively valued stimuli are types of stressors that are consistent with the social learning theory perspective and its focus on rewards and punishment. Agnew observes that adolescents are legally bound to family and school, so that there is little they can do to escape adverse stimuli. This leads individuals to pursue crime and delinquency as ways to cope with stress. Escapism from unpleasant situations through drug and alcohol use may be a typical way to deal with stress. Anger that results in violence and participation in gangs is also described as a common reaction to stress. However, Agnew -- like prior strain theorists such as Merton -- does not state that deviance is an inevitable response to stress. Instead, conformity or deviance depends on a variety of factors such as opportunity (eg, available gang membership) and social constraints on the individual, including peer relationships, family support, and self-control of each person.

Agnew emphasizes in his general strain theory the negative stimuli -- such as child abuse and adverse school experiences -- that lead to deviance, and he argues that this clearly distinguishes his theory from social learning and social control theories. However, both learning theorists and social control theorists have identified the same variables (including victimization, poor family and academic backgrounds). Researchers (Brezina, 1996) have not found support for the hypothesis that delinquent behavior reduces the feelings of anger and resentment created by stress in the family or school. Furthermore, Albert Cohen's theory that conceived of delinquency and gang membership as a solution to problems has not received much empirical support.

Mark Konty (2005) developed a revision of strain theory that he terms "microanomie." Konty argues that anomie creates a cognitive state of microanomie wherein "self-enhancing" values take priority over "self-transcending" values. The traditional focus in strain theory has been upon the affective states of frustration, fear, and anger, while social learning theorists and social control theorists have emphasized cognitive conditions as explanations of crime and deviance. Konty observed that Messner and Rosenfeld (2007) had implied that values developed by various social institutions are causally linked to crime. These values are asserted by Konty to be cognitive (rather than emotional or affective-based).

Konty observes that criminologists do not assume that conventional or "moral" values will deter crime. Although some theorists recognize the role of values (such as "definitions unfavorable to law violation" in differential association theory), many point out that even convicted felons and the most chronic offenders will endorse conventional or moral values. Sykes and Matza (1957) theorized that this is precisely why offenders use "techniques of neutralization" to justify violations of rules that they themselves endorse. Konty also points to the relative nature of morality, observing that moral values are products of a social construction process that may vary across time and cultures. According to Konty, even theories that recognize the importance of values for crime often fail to precisely define what a moral value is or how to operationalize such values.

Konty (2005: 108) defines "microanomie" as the predominance of self-enhancing values over self-transcending values. Based on Durkheim's original conception of anomie as lack of regulation, this state of anomie exists when individual behavior is guided by values stressing self-interest rather than collective or social well-being. In contrast to Agnew's focus on the impact of anomie upon affective states such as frustration or anger, Konty emphasizes the cognitive changes induced by anomie. Both Durkheim and Merton are not interpreted as social psychological theorists analyzing emotions, but instead they described the effects of the social structure on cognitive adaptations, wherein individuals calculate that they cannot obtain culturally desired goals through available legitimate means. Anomie is a social condition describing deregulation in which self-interest takes precedence over social interests.

Konty criticizes prior research assessing the effect of values using attitude measures to infer values held by individuals. He notes that measurement strategies regarding values have evolved recently to incorporate cognitive theory that links values to behavior through specific mechanisms of evaluation, intention, and opportunity. Choices of behavior are ranked or evaluated on the basis of which action is most desirable; such choices or evaluations are the basis for intentions or motivations to act in certain ways. The desired choices and intentions cannot be realized, however, if there are barriers or a lack of opportunity to act in a certain way. Values are described by Konty as affecting behavior but not determining behavior; there should be, however, a substantial correlation between values and behavior.

Citing cross-national surveys conducted by Schwartz et al (2001), Konty describes a continuum of values ranging from self-enhancing to self-transcendent. Self-transcendent values focus on cooperation, concern for others, equality, and justice. Self-enhancing values focus on status, power over others, materialism, and competition. Although these two value orientations seem to be opposites and mutually exclusive, Konty describes individual value orientations as existing on a continuum with the majority of people being eclectic or pluralistic in the type of values they hold.

Konty (2005) asked respondents in a 2002 survey to rank the importance of values or principles in their own lives. Ten items of self-enhancement values -- including ambition, aggression, competitiveness, materialism, and social power -- were found to have a high degree of reliability in a factor analysis. Similarly, six items of self-transcendent values -- including equality, honesty, and social justice -- had a high degree of reliability in the latent variable analysis. A single scale of microanomie was computed based on the self-enhancement and self-transcendent measures. As expected, male respondents rated higher on the microanomie scale than did female respondents. Further, microanomie was found to be a significant predictor of deviant behavior (measured by involvement in theft, vandalism, violence, and drug use, etc), holding gender constant. Indeed, the effect of gender is reduced to non-significance by including the microanomie measure in the regression analysis.

Messner and Rosenfeld (1007) describe structural and cultural factors that can lead to deregulation or anomie. Institutions may promote either collective values or values based on self-interest. Economic institutions in particular are noted for emphasizing competitions, material gain, and self-interest, in contrast to civil institutions such as the family, schools, or religion.

In contrast to Konty, Messner and Rosenfeld (2007) focus on structural and institutional factors that generate deviance, rather than assessing values of individuals. Merton described anomie as a characteristic of societies rather than as a social-psychological or individual level trait. A society that accords prestige to monetary success but does not provide equal emphasis on regulation of behavior or legitimacy of success will have higher crime rates, according to Merton.

Messner and Rosenfeld (2007) argue that the overemphasis on the pursuit of wealth by individuals is generated in large part by the dominance of economic institutions over all other institutions. Constraints of legitimacy and regulation of behavior are promoted by the family, schools, and religious institutions, but these institutions have less influence in societies characterized by anomie. Even civil institutions such as the family are themselves governed more and more by economic principles or concerns; the principal wage-earner in a family, for example, is often the person with the most influence or power within that family.

Based on this review of anomie theory and more recent modifications or revisions of the theory, we focus in this analysis on the available legitimate means for success for individuals. Both educational and occupational expectations are used to measure anomie, with the assumption that goals for success are universal or a constant. Similar to Merton and to Cloward and Ohlin, we argue that opportunity for success is the most important factor in affecting gang membership and delinquency.

Data and Measures
The data set used for our analyses is based on a 2008 survey conducted in a large

metropolitan area in Canada. The specific neighborhoods selected for the sample have been identified for several years by local police as areas characterized by a high level of crime and gang activity. Previous studies based on random samples of neighborhoods and individuals have provided relatively few active gang members. For respondents under the age of 18, signed consent forms were required from parents or guardians to allow participation in the study. Over five hundred (N = 521) respondents completed the questionnaires and provided signed consent forms. The demographic profile of the sample in terms of age and gender was very similar to data available from local school boards regarding age and gender composition.

Our measure of gang membership is based on a self-reported item, "Do you belong to what some people might call a youth gang?" This measure on gang involvement replicates the item used by Hindelang et al. (1981) in the Seattle Youth Study. The item is similar or identical to measures of gang membership used in several previous studies (eg, Esbensen and Winfree, 1998; Brownfield, 2010).

We developed an index of relatively serious self-reported offences based on items assessing involvement in weapons related offences, property crimes such as auto theft, and drug use such as cocaine and heroin. The following six items were used to construct the self-reported delinquency scale: (1) "Have you ever taken things of large value (worth over $50) that did not belong to you?"; (2) "Have you ever taken a car belonging to someone you didn't know for a ride without the owner's permission?"; (3) ``Have you ever used a club, knife, or gun to get something from someone?"; (4) ``Have you ever pulled a knife, a gun, or some other weapon on someone just to let them know you meant business?"; (5) "Have you ever used heroin?"; and, (6) "Have you ever used cocaine?"

Latent class analysis (McCutcheon, 1987) was conducted to determine if these six observed measures of self-reported offences form a single scale. A latent class model does provide a very good fit (chi-square = 18.23, df = 24, p > .10) to these items, indicating that the observed measures may be combined into a single scale of delinquency.

To measure opportunities for success emphasized by anomie theorists, we analyzed educational and occupational expectations of the respondents. Subjects were asked, "How much schooling do you actually expect to get eventually?" Responses ranged from less than high school graduation to trade or vocational school to college graduation. To assess occupational opportunities, the respondents were asked "Do you think that you will eventually get a good paying and secure job?" Responses ranged from "yes" to "probably" and "no."

We include in the analysis measures based on competing theoretical perspectives, in particular both social learning theory and social control theory. Several studies on gangs and delinquency have documented significant effects of variables such as peer delinquency, deviant definitions, and attachment to parents. Based on social learning theory, we include in the analysis a measure of peer

delinquency ("Have any of your friends ever been picked up by the police?"), as well as three items assessing deviant "definitions": (1) "It's all right to get around the law if you can get away with it" (AROUND); (2) "Some people deserve to be taken advantage of" (ADVANTAGE); and, (3) "To get ahead, you have to do some things that are not right" (GETAHED).

Based on social control theory, we include in the analysis measures based on the concepts of attachment and commitment. School grades are used as an indicator of the individual's investment in conformity or "commitment" (GRADES). Paternal attachment is assessed by a measure of identification with the father ("Would you like to be the kind of person your father is?" (IDDAD)). Maternal attachment is measured by two items: (1) "Do you share your thoughts and feelings with your mother?" (SHARTHOT), and (2) "Do you talk about future plans with your mother?" (SHARPLAN).

Findings

In Table 1, bivariate correlations for gang membership and delinquency by the various independent variables are presented. We find that gang membership is significantly correlated with delinquency (r = .19), with more than twice as many gang members (70.1%) self-reporting a serious property, drug or violent offence than non-gang members (30.7%). Gender is also a significant predictor of both gang membership (r = -.14) and delinquency (r = -.22). Female respondents self-report two or more serious offences (11.7%) at about half the rate reported by male respondents (23.2%).

In terms of assessing anomie theory, the correlations between delinquency and occupational as well as educational expectations are assessed. We find that occupational expectations are not significantly correlated with our measure of delinquency (r = .02). This finding may have been anticipated because relatively few of the respondents have significant experience with the labor market, with a large proportion being relatively young (under the age of 16), and few (if any) having worked at full-time jobs. The labor market experience of adolescents is typically limited to low paying jobs in the service sector (such as delivery work, yard maintenance, and fast food restaurant positions). Occupational stress probably seems more distant to adolescents than to adults in their twenties or early thirties.

In contrast, we find that educational expectations are significantly correlated with delinquency (r = -.17). Those with higher educational expectations have lower rates of delinquency than those with relatively low educational expectations. For example, among those who expect to graduate from university or college, less than a third (31.8%) self-report two or more serious offences, compared with almost half (46.5%) of those who do not expect to graduate from high school. Educational expectations are apparently more directly relevant to the lives of young respondents than are conceptions of occupational expectations.

Table 1. Correlation Coefficients (Pearson's r) Between Gang Membership, Delinquency, and Independent Variables

	Gang Membership	Delinquency
Gang Membership	1.00	.19
Delinquency	.19	1.00
Gender	-.14	-.22
GRADES	-.10	-.23
AROUND	-.16	-.22
GETAHED	-.11	-.15
ADVANTAGE	-.17	-.17
Peer Delinquency	.15	.34
Educational Expectations	-.12	-.17
Occupational Expectations	-.01**	.02**
Paternal Attachment (IDDAD)	.09	.14
Share Plans (SHARPLAN)	.09	.08
Share Thoughts (SHARHOT)	.12	.10

** -- not significant at .05 level

We do find stronger or more substantial support for measures based on both social learning theory and social control theory than this single measure based on anomie theory. For example, we find that peer delinquency is the strongest single predictor of self-reported delinquency $(r = .34)$ among the variables analyzed. Other social learning theory variables, such as measures of deviant "definitions" are also significant predictors of self-reported delinquency. Among those who strongly agree that "It's all right to get around the law if you can get away with it," over forty percent (40.6%) self-report two or more serious offences compared with just ten percent (10.5%) who strongly disagree with this statement. Similarly, those who agreed to other measures of deviant definitions ("To get ahead, you have to do some things that are not right"; and, "Some people deserve to be taken advantage of") are more likely to self-report serious offences than those who do not subscribe to such a manipulative ethic.

These measures of deviant "definitions" based on social learning theory are also consistent with the social control theory concept of "belief"; indeed, Hirschi (1969) uses such measures to operationalize the level of faith in conventional institutions or laws. We find that social control theory measures of commitment (such as school grades) and parental attachment are also significant correlates of delinquency. School grades $(r = -.23)$ are inversely correlated with delinquency, with those with a

"B or higher" grade average self-reporting a serious offence (19.1%) at less than half the rate of those with grade averages of ``D or lower`(45.8%).

Parental attachment is also significantly and negatively correlated with delinquency. Those who identify "in most ways" with their fathers (IDDAD) are less likely to self-report two or more serious offences (12.2%) than those who identify 'not at all" (29.3%) with fathers. Those who "often" share thoughts and feelings with their mothers are less likely to self- report two or more serious offences (12.9%) than those who "never" (25.5%) share thoughts and feelings with mothers. Respondents who say they "often" discuss future plans with their mothers are somewhat less likely to elf-report two or more serious offences (17.8%) than are those who "never" share future plans with mothers (28.4%).

In Table 2, the multivariate analyses of the effects of the variables based on the three theories of delinquency is presented. Note that peer delinquency continues to have the strongest effect (Exp (B) = 3.15) on self-reported delinquency, followed by gang membership (Exp (B) = 1.80). Two of the deviant definitions measures (GETAHED and ADVANTAGE) are not significant in the multivariate analysis, probably due to high intercorrelation with the third measure (AROUND) of definitions. Paternal attachment (IDDAD) also becomes insignificant in the multivariate analysis.

However, the anomie theory indicator of educational expectation remains a significant predictor of delinquency in the multivariate analysis. Several of the social control theory measures (such as school grades and maternal attachment) also remain significant predictors of delinquency in the multivariate analysis. Thus we find some empirical support for measures drawn from each of the three theories -- social learning, social control, and anomie. Consistent with previous research (see, eg, Burton et al, 1994), stronger empirical support is found for both social learning theory and social control theory than for anomie theory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Table 2. Logistic Regression of Delinquency on Anomie, Learning Theory, and Social Control Theory Variables

	B	SE	p	Exp(B)
Gang Membership	.59	.22	.01	1.80
Gender	-1.04	.20	.001	.35
GRADES	.13	.04	.001	1.14
AROUND	-.17	.07	.001	.76
GETAHED	-.06	.07	.39	.94
ADVANTAGE	-.02	.06	.79	.98
Peer Delinquency	1.14	.15	.001	3.15
Educational Expectations	-.12	.02	.01	.89
Paternal Attachment (IDDAD)	.05	.10	.60	1.08
Share Thoughts	.10	.03	.01	1.70
Share Plans	.11	.04	.01	1.72

Model Chi-square = 229.28, df = 11, p < .01

Constant = -1.27 (SE = .54, p -= .05)

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