RETHINKING STRAIN THEORY: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF ITS APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

[1]Makanjuola Seyi Joseph, [2]Bankole Sunday Adelowo, [3]Ogunbiyi Oluwadare Deji, Ph. D. and [3]Ogedengbe Ayotunde

E-mail: makanjuolaseyi@gmail.com / bankoleadelowo23@gmail.com / oluwadarebest@gmail.com / ayotundeogedengbe@gmail.com

Abstract

This review critically examines strain theory, a prominent sociological framework for understanding deviance and violence. We discussed an overview of strain theory and defined school violence. The theoretical framework section explains strain theory, its application to school violence, and the factors contributing to strain in schools. The impact of strain theory on school violence is examined in the following section, which discusses the link between strain and aggressive behavior, the role of strain in the development of violent tendencies, and the effects of strain on academic performance and social relationships. This section also includes case studies illustrating the connection between strain and school violence. Finally, the article concludes with prevention and intervention strategies, emphasizing the importance of early identification and intervention, the implementation of supportive programs and resources, collaboration between schools, families, and communities for prevention, and evaluating prevention strategies and their effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Schools are created as secure and nurturing environments where students can study, grow, and prosper. However, incidences of school violence undermine this ideal, impacting not only the immediate victims but also the entire school climate and academic performance. Violence in schools is a critical issue that has garnered significant attention in educational settings around the world. It is a pressing concern that significantly affects the learning environment and the well-being of students, teachers, and staff in educational settings. School violence encompasses various behaviors, including bullying, victimization, and physical altercations. The prevalence of school violence raises concerns for educators, students, parents, and communities at large. The consequences of

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[1] Ayede Grammar School. Ayede-Ekiti, Nigeria

[2] Federal Government Girl's College, Efon-Alaye, Ekiti, Nigeria

[3] Department of Educational Leadership Studies, School of Graduate Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

school violence can be severe, leading to physical and psychological harm to both students and educators and hindering the educational process. To completely address this issue, exploring the causes and mechanisms of school violence is essential. This literature review will examine the application of strain theory to better understand the underpinnings of school violence.

Creating secure and supportive learning environments in schools is primarily the responsibility of educators. School violence has numerous adverse consequences, including physical and emotional harm to students, academic performance decline, and overall deterioration of the learning environment. To address and prevent school violence, educators must comprehend the root causes and risk factors associated with these behaviors. They can develop strategies, interventions, and policies to effectively address school violence and create a safer educational space. This literature review focuses on applying strain theory to understand the underlying causes and mechanisms of school violence. Strain theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how various stressors, challenges, and strains in students' lives may contribute to violence within educational institutions. By exploring this connection, this review sheds light on the dynamics of school violence and provide educators with insights into potential preventive and intervention strategies.

Strain Theory

Strain theory was initially developed by Robert K. Merton and later expanded upon by Robert Agnew, provides a useful framework for comprehending the reasons behind violence in schools. It posits that individuals experience strain or stress when they perceive a disjunction between their societal goals and the means available to achieve them. Strain theory posits that societal expectations and pressures can lead to deviation and violence. Although influential, the theory has faced critique and requires reevaluation in the context of school violence. This strain, in turn, can lead to negative emotions and deviant behaviors. In the context of school violence, strain theory can be used to understand the fundamental causes of different violent and aggressive behaviors among students. Strain theory is formulated based on foundational concepts that help us understand its core principles, which are as follows:

1.   **Anomie and Strain:** At the heart of strain theory lies the concept of anomie, which describes a state of normlessness. In this context, individuals must be more consistent in their aspirations, culturally accepted goals, and the legitimate means available to achieve them. When applied to school violence, this disconnection becomes evident when students encounter obstacles hindering their academic success, like economic disparities, limited access to educational resources, or discrimination (Agnew, 1992).

2.   **Negative Emotions:** Strain theory underscores that individuals who experience disconnection and strain are prone to develop negative emotions. These emotions encompass a spectrum of anger, frustration, and resentment. These negative feelings motivate individuals to seek alternative ways to alleviate their strain. This can result in deviant behaviors, such as school violence (James et al., 2014).

3.   **Strains Leading to Delinquency:** Strain theory further posits that individuals enduring prolonged or intense strains may turn to delinquent or criminal activities to cope with their negative emotions. In the context of school, students under strain may resort to violence, bullying, or other forms of aggressive behavior as a means of releasing their pent-up frustration or asserting themselves (Higgins et al., 2010).

Strain theory offers a valuable framework for comprehending the complexities of school violence, with its core components shedding light on the phenomenon. This theory's heart is perceived injustice, where individuals experience a profound sense of unfair treatment or mistreatment. When applied to the context of school violence, this finding implies that students may perceive various forms of unfairness in the school environment. This perception of injustice is a source of strain that significantly contributes to the emergence of violent behaviors.

James et al. (2014) delves into this critical link, exploring how perceived injustice has become enmeshed in school violence.

Another pivotal aspect is the role of negative emotions. Strain theory underscores "\res that individuals grappling with strain tend to experience various negative emotions, including anger, frustration, and resentment. In the context of school violence, these negative emotions can serve as triggers that motivate individuals to engage in aggressive or violent behaviors. Moon et al. (2010) on "General Strain Theory and School Bullying" underscores the crucial role that negative emotions play in school bullying, which is a notable form of school violence.

Finally, strain theory posits that individuals may resort to delinquent or criminal activities when confronted with prolonged or intense strains as a coping mechanism. Within the school setting, these strains manifest as behaviors such as bullying, physical violence, and other forms of school violence. Higgins et al. (2010) explored the intricate relationship between strain, peer rejection, and delinquent behaviors, all of which are closely associated with school violence. Strain theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding school violence's root causes and dynamics. The foundational concepts of strain theory, which include perceived injustices, negative emotions, and strains leading to delinquency, offer insights into the motivations and factors contributing to school violence. Applying strain theory to school violence provides a deeper understanding of this complex issue. This provides a basis for developing effective strategies and interventions to prevent and address school violence.

School Violence

The term "school violence" describes acts of violence that occur in schools. This includes acts of violence on school grounds, during school-related outings and excursions, and while traveling to and from school. Although it can be committed by professors, staff members, or other students, student-on-student violence is the most frequent type. In other words, anything that contains a direct or indirect threat qualifies as school violence; it can be verbal, sexual, physical, or both, and it can be committed with or without the use of weapons. School violence occurs when someone intentionally hurts someone or behaves in a way that makes someone feel threatened.

The types of School Violence

Based on existing international surveys on violence at schools, UNESCO (2020) defined the following types of school violence:

1. Physical violence is defined as any type of aggressive behavior intended to cause harm committed by classmates, teachers, or school staff.

2. Psychological violence is defined as verbal and emotional abuse that includes isolating, rejecting, ignoring, insulting, spreading rumors, fabricating lies, name-calling, ridiculing, humiliation, and threats, as well as psychological punishment.

3. Sexual violence includes sexual intimidation, sexual harassment, unwanted touching, sexual coercion, and rape, and it is committed by a teacher, school personnel, or a student or classmate.

4. Bullying is characterized as a pattern rather than isolated episodes, with intentional and aggressive behavior directed at a victim regularly. It can occur in a variety of forms: physical bullying (beating, kicking, property destruction), psychological (teasing, insulting, threatening), or relational (rumor spreading and exclusion from a group).

5. Cyberbullying is defined as posting or transmitting messages, photographs, or videos with the intent of harassing, threatening, or targeting another person using a variety of media and social media platforms. Spreading rumors, posting false information, sending nasty messages, making embarrassing comments or images, or blocking someone from online networks or other forms of communication are all examples of cyberbullying.

Causes of School Violence

There is often no simple, straight forward reason why someone engages in school violence. A child may have been bullied or rejected by a peer, perhaps under much academic pressure, or perhaps enacting something they have seen at home, on TV, or in their neighborhood. These are a few risk factors that may increase a child's likelihood of engaging in violent behavior in schools, according to Ehiri et al. (2017).

➢ Inadequate academic achievement
➢ Violence in the past
➢ problems related to mental health
➢ experiencing or witnessing violence
➢ Use of tobacco, drugs, or alcohol dysfunctional lifestyles within the family
➢ Abuse or violence at home
➢ Possession of firearms by peers with criminal records
➢ The community's high crime rate or poverty.

The trauma of school violence can lead to significant psychological anguish. Adults may also find it difficult to deal with trauma; however, if a person whose brain is still developing experiences trauma, particularly if it occurs over an extended period, their brain may go into survival mode, which may have an impact on their long-term health, attention, and emotional regulation. It can therefore be said that anybody affected by school violence, especially children, may experience trauma. When children watch or experience classroom violence, they may experience long-term adverse effects on their physical and mental health, making prevention efforts crucial.

2. Empirical Evidence of Strain Theory and School Violence

Understanding and addressing school violence requires a comprehensive examination of various factors, including opportunities for victimization and the school's role as a potential "hot spot" for criminal activities. While initially developed as a framework for comprehending criminal behavior, strain theory has proven instrumental in shedding light on school-based violence, including traditional bullying, cyberbullying, and other forms of aggressive behavior among students.

Moon et al. **(2010)** explored the application of strain theory to school bullying in South Korea. The researchers found that students experiencing strain, such as academic pressure and perceived injustice, were more likely to engage in bullying behaviors. This study highlights the role of negative emotions and perceived unfairness in the context of school violence, emphasizing that strain can lead to bullying as a coping mechanism.

Patchin and Hinduja (2011) examined traditional and cyberbullying through the lens of strain theory. The study revealed that strains such as peer rejection and academic pressure were linked to various forms of bullying among youth. The findings underscore the importance of considering strain factors when understanding school violence, including new forms of bullying facilitated by technology.

Higgins et al. **(2010)** explored the connection between peer rejection and delinquent or criminal behavior, emphasizing the role of strain theory in understanding the factors contributing to delinquency and crime, which are often intertwined with school violence. The findings suggest that peer rejection can be a significant source of strain, leading to various delinquent behaviors, including school violence.

James et al. **(2014)** examined the role of perceived injustice as a strain factor that contributes to school violence. The study found that perceived injustices, such as unfair treatment by teachers or peers, were associated with violent behaviors among students. The implications of this study highlight the importance of addressing perceived injustices to prevent school violence.

Paez (2016) extended the scope of strain theory to cyberbullying and revealed how strain experienced in online interactions can manifest as harmful behaviors. The study emphasized that strains in the digital realm, such as online harassment and cyberbullying, contribute to the overall landscape of school violence.

Yang et al. **(2019)** examined the role of strains, such as academic pressure and family problems, in generating negative emotions and bullying behaviors among school-aged children. The study emphasized that negative emotions resulting from strain were linked to aggressive behaviors, reinforcing the importance of addressing strain to prevent school violence.

Button (2019) conducted a qualitative study focused on LGB youth's experiences with victimization and risky behaviors through the lens of strain theory. The results show the notable impediments confronted by LGB youth, including strains related to discrimination and victimization that may lead to risky behaviors, including violence. These studies reveal several common themes and patterns. They consistently underscored the significance of perceived injustices as a central source of strain, with students experiencing academic pressure, peer rejection, and discriminatory treatment being more likely to engage in various forms of school violence. Negative emotions arising from this strain act as mediating factors that motivate aggressive behaviors. These negative emotions and perceived injustices together contribute to bullying, whether traditional or cyberbullying, as a coping mechanism. The impact of strain on peer relations is evident, as peer rejection emerges as a notable source of strain, leading to delinquent or violent behaviors often involving peers.

The studies also highlight the adaptability of strain theory to contemporary issues, emphasizing the role of digital strains in online harassment and cyberbullying. Additionally, marginalized groups, such as LGB youth, face unique challenges related to discrimination and victimization that may lead to risky behaviors and violence. These common themes collectively emphasize the importance of addressing perceived injustices, negative emotions, and strains to effectively prevent and mitigate school violence, incorporating both traditional and modern forms of aggression among students.

3. Critique and Gaps in Literature

These studies offer insightful information about the application of strain theory to school violence, shedding light on the role of perceived injustices, negative emotions, and strains in various forms of violence within educational settings. However, acknowledging some limitations and critiques within these studies is essential. They include: First, many studies in this collection rely on self-reported surveys or questionnaires to gather student data. This methodology may introduce response biases because students may under-report or over-report their experiences of strain, perceived injustices, and involvement in school violence due to social desirability or recall bias. Furthermore, some studies did not consider the broader ecological factors that influence school violence, such as community characteristics, school policies, and socioeconomic disparities. A more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of school violence would benefit from considering these broader contextual factors.

Another limitation to consider is the potential for omitted-variable bias. Although strain theory offers valuable insights, it does not account for all relevant variables contributing to school violence. Focusing on individual-level factors, like strains and perceived injustices, may overlook structural and systemic issues, including school culture, neighborhood violence, and family dynamics, which play substantial roles in shaping students' behaviors. Therefore, future research should adopt a more holistic approach by considering the broader factors that may interact with or mediate the relationship between strain and school violence.

Although the studies in this collection make valuable contributions to understanding school violence through the lens of strain theory, several gaps in the existing literature warrant further research. Many cross-sectional studies have provided a snapshot of the relationship between strain and school violence at a specific time. A longitudinal

analysis that tracks students over an extended period can offer insights into how strains and perceived injustices may accumulate and impact students' behavior over time. This will afford a better understanding of the temporal dynamics of school violence.

In addition, these studies often focus on individual strains and perceived injustices. However, they may not adequately address how various identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, intersect to create unique strain and school violence experiences. Future research should explore how these intersecting identities influence the relationship between strain and violence while acknowledging that different groups of students may face distinct challenges.

Further, the studies in the collection cover various cultural and regional contexts. Further research is required to explore how cultural and contextual factors influence the applicability of strain theory to school violence. The extent to which this theory holds in diverse cultural settings and the influence of cultural norms and values on students' strain experiences should be reviewed. Although these studies provide insights into the factors underlying school violence, there is a need for research that evaluates the effectiveness of preventive interventions informed by strain theory. Understanding which interventions can successfully reduce school violence is crucial for educators and policymakers seeking to create safer learning environments.

The reviewed studies encompass various school settings and cultural contexts, including South Korea, the United States, and other international settings. The applicability of strain theory to different environments is an essential consideration. The findings suggest that strain theory's core principles, including perceived injustices, negative emotions, and strains leading to delinquency, are relevant in various cultural contexts and school settings. However, the specific stressors and strains experienced by students may vary according to cultural and regional factors. For example, academic pressures in some Asian countries may be particularly pronounced, leading to unique strains that contribute to school violence. Cultural norms and values influence students' perceptions of injustices and react to strains. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the cultural context when applying strain theory to school violence. Educators and researchers should be attentive to students' challenges in different cultural settings and should tailor interventions accordingly.

4. Implications for School Violence

The insights gained from applying strain theory to school violence offer educators and school policies valuable guidance. Teachers can create more effective preventive and remedial measures for school violence by understanding the underlying causes and mechanisms of this problem. Early identification of at-risk students becomes possible when educators recognize signs of strain and perceived injustices, enabling timely interventions that address the root causes of potentially violent behaviors. Additionally, schools can foster supportive and inclusive environments by implementing anti-bullying programs and promoting positive peer relationships to reduce strains and perceived injustices. By developing targeted interventions and teaching students healthy coping mechanisms, educators empower students to manage their emotions constructively and avoid resorting to violence as a means of release.

Furthermore, promoting inclusivity and equity ensures that all students have equal access to resources and are treated fairly, addressing strains related to discrimination, bullying and academic pressure. By understanding how strains can lead to cyberbullying, schools can implement comprehensive prevention programs to address such strains. Tailoring strategies to the cultural context recognizes the influence of cultural norms and values on students' experiences, thus leading to more effective approaches in diverse settings. Collaboration with parents and communities in prevention and intervention efforts maximizes the impact of these strategies, and regular assessment of the effectiveness of interventions ensures ongoing improvements. Equipping educators with

professional development opportunities enhances their ability to apply strain theory and effectively address strains and perceived injustices in educational settings, ultimately creating safer and more conducive learning environments and benefiting all student's well-being and academic success.

5. Conclusion

Strain theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of school violence. This study highlights the role of strain in eliciting negative emotions and deviant behaviors among students and sheds light on the underlying causes of such violence. Educators and administrators can leverage this understanding to proactively develop safer and more supportive learning environments. By applying the principles of strain theory, evidence-based strategies for preventing and managing school violence can be developed. This has the potential to enhance student outcomes and foster a more conducive learning atmosphere.

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