EMOTIONAL INVALIDATION: A COMMENT ON AGNEW’S GENERAL STRAIN THEORY

Christopher R. Dennison
Associate Professor of Sociology
University at Buffalo, SUNY
crdennis@buffalo.edu

Under Review at Criminology
Version: 5/4/2024

ABSTRACT

This paper integrates the concept of emotional invalidation into Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory (GST). It first briefly discusses Agnew’s central argument in GST. It then describes what is meant by emotional invalidation and how GST already comes close to capturing the concept. Next, this paper explains how focusing on emotional invalidation can strengthen GST with little modification to the overall theoretical framework. This paper concludes with recommendations for operationalizing emotional invalidation, as well as some directions for future studies.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory (GST hereafter) has been a central guiding framework within Criminology, and it continues to be one of the most widely used perspectives in understanding the influence of human emotions on behavior (Agnew 1992, 2001). Perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of GST is its simplicity. Agnew’s argument is logical and straightforward, and we have plenty of options for operationalizing the key constructs – characteristics that make an attractive theory.

In its simplest form, Agnew’s GST argues that experiencing strains can lead to negative emotions. In turn, people may get involved with crime, substance use, or other behaviors to cope with their emotions. Some of the strains are obvious – for instance, the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job – other strains can be subjective. That is, if someone feels as though they experience a strain, then it is a strain. It is here where Agnew comes so close to capturing all sources of strain, which I believe is the overall goal.

One source of strain that has not been explicitly considered in GST is emotional invalidation. Litner and Carrico (2021) define emotional invalidation as the act of dismissing or rejecting someone’s thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. In other words, anytime someone makes you question whether your feelings are real, then it can make you feel irrational. It is irrational because of one simple fact: your feelings are real.

Agnew has provided such a strong foundation for understanding the link between strains, emotions, and crime, that GST got closer and closer to capturing emotional invalidations without
even recognizing it. Over the years, Agnew has pushed researchers to focus more on strains high in magnitude or those seen as unjust, and rightfully so. These are strains most likely to conceive negative emotions, and people want nothing more than to alleviate those negative feelings in any way they know how. This is notable because emotional invalidation has the same effect on people.

The difference, however, is that emotional invalidation is everywhere. It can even affect people without them knowing it because we are constantly reminded in many forms to not let our emotions show in various social settings. This is emotional invalidation. Anytime an individual must hide how they truly feel, then they are being forced to question their emotions. This is a strain. But it is a unique strain because everyone has been forced to question their emotions at some point, but not everyone engages in crime. I believe this is where future research will help with understanding how much emotional invalidation leads to feelings capable of seeking crime to cope.

The good thing is that emotional invalidation is easy to operationalize. A simple question is a great place to start: “Have you ever felt that your thoughts, feelings, or behaviors were ever dismissed by someone?” From there, researchers can use questions to assess temporal aspects – onset, duration, frequency, and most recent occurrence. This all resonates with Sampson and Laub’s (1993) life course perspective, which is central in conjunction with Agnew’s GST to fully assess the role of emotional invalidation.

Another approach – and one that will likely help people realize they have experienced emotional invalidation without even knowing it – would be to use a set of questions to capture the underlying construct. Here are some examples. “Has anyone ever told you that you are too sensitive?” “Have you ever felt like you were not able to speak about your feelings?”

Integrating emotional invalidation within GST is easy. Instead of focusing on strains used in past research, start focusing on incidents of emotional invalidation. Doing so not only captures the strains that have been missed thus far but also captures all the strains that we know matter. This is because all strains are forms of emotional invalidation. If people do not want something to happen – but then it does happen – then they have just been told that their feelings are invalid. And this can lead to the same negative emotions that Agnew has already shown influence involvement with crime.

People do not want to lose loved ones – that is a healthy, prosocial feeling that most can relate to – but the loss of a loved one invalidates our feelings, and nothing can change that fact. We felt like we did not want that to happen, but it did, and there is nothing that can be done. That is emotional invalidation.

Replacing our previous understanding of strains with the concept of emotional invalidation will push us forward in understanding how emotions matter for crime and other coping behaviors.
REFERENCES

