


10-2024

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Recommended Citation

Peabody, Caroline H. (2024) "From Theory to Screen: Strain in the Gallagher Experience," *OUR Journal: ODU Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 11, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25778/6sth-q006>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/ourj/vol11/iss1/9>

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From Theory to Screen: Strain in the Gallagher Experience

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Professor Sarah Gatten for teaching me criminological theories and for enabling me to watch television as my homework.

FROM THEORY TO SCREEN: STRAIN IN THE GALLAGHER EXPERIENCE

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Shameless (US) is a 2011-2020 Showtime dramedy based on a British series of the same name. The eleven-season series follows the six Gallagher children and their scheming part-time father Frank (William Macy) as they navigate life in Chicago's impoverished South Side neighborhood. Criminality and deviant behaviors are recurrent throughout the series. Even though the crime in the show often seems gratuitous and nonsensical, examining the show through a criminological lens sheds light on the motivations for these acts and how they contribute to the greater themes of the show. The following paper intends to examine the criminal and deviant actions of three characters during seasons four through six: Fiona (Emily Rossum), Phillip (Jeremy Allen White), and Deborah (Emma Kenney), using Robert Agnew's Strain Theory. Agnew's General Strain Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the deviant behaviors exhibited by these characters in *Shameless*.

Agnew's General Strain Theory postulates that deviance and criminality are the result of strain on a person in conjunction with a lack of healthy coping mechanisms. Robert Merton's strain theory originally inspired Agnew's Strain Theory. Merton defined strain as the discordance between someone's desire for The American Dream and their means of achieving it (Cary, 2021). Agnew expanded Merton's definition of strain by essentially deeming strain as any source of frustration or anger. He broke down strain into three categories: the removal of

positive stimuli, the presence of negative stimuli, and the failure to achieve one's goals (Agnew, 2013). Unlike Merton's original strain theory, Agnew's General Strain Theory can be applied to people of all classes; however, impoverished people, such as the Gallagher family, are still more likely to encounter previously mentioned forms of strain.

The matriarch of the Gallagher family is the kind and resilient, but troubled, Fiona. Fiona began caring for her younger siblings when she was just nine years old, a responsibility she both loathes and relishes. While Fiona is arguably the backbone of the Gallagher family for most of the series, she is hardly perfect. Fiona's major downward spiral takes place in season four. On top of her chronic negative stimuli of poverty and caretaking, she faces two interrelated major forms of strain in season four, episode five "There's the Rub." Having cheated on her boyfriend and boss with his brother, Fiona loses her boyfriend and threatens her stable corporate job. The potential loss of her job and her boyfriend would be classified as the threat of removal of positive stimuli because those are aspects of her life Fiona values (Cary, 2021). In addition, putting her job on the line for her selfish affair also represents her failure to achieve a goal as she can barely provide for herself or her family and live a traditional middle-class life away from crime (Agnew, 2013).

Following Fiona's break-up, the man she cheated with, Robbie, shows up at the Gallagher home with cocaine as an apology. Although Fiona chases him away, she later throws herself a birthday party, using cocaine in her home. When Fiona steps out for just a second, her toddler brother Liam ingests the cocaine, hospitalizing him. Fiona's drug use and subsequent child neglect are ways to cope with the guilt and, ironically, shame she experiences after she fails herself and her family for the sake of her own libido and reckless tendencies. This scene aligns with Agnew's assertion that people turn to crime and deviance as the result of painful emotions

resulting from strain (Agnew, 2013). After a short stint in county jail, Fiona attempts to regain her respect and authority in the Gallagher family only to receive pushback and resentment from her siblings. Throughout season four, Fiona's turbulent relationship with her family only exacerbates her guilt, showing how the presence of a negative stimulus can breed unhealthy emotions. Rather than making amends with her family, Fiona goes the opposite direction in episode ten "Liver, I Hardly Know Her" when she violates her probation and goes on a multi-day cocaine bender with her ex Robbie. Fiona's negative emotions from her initial semi-accidental crime only lead to more criminality and deviance later on, showing how a life of crime can be easy to start but difficult to stop without adequate intervention. This aligns with the 2021 study "A test of General Strain Theory using a sample of adult former prisoners," which links strain variables to recidivism rates (Liu et al., 2021). Fiona's criminal spiral in seasons four and five demonstrates the lasting psychological effect of her parentification and the addictive nature of deviance.

Phillip Gallagher, hereafter referred to as Lip, is the second oldest of the Gallagher siblings. Lip is portrayed as intelligent but unmotivated throughout the entire series, which reaches a head during his time at the Chicago Polytechnic Institute in seasons four through six. Although Lip's criminal activity hardly starts while in college, the excess strain of the college environment pushes him into criminality and deviance that tremendously impact his life and those around him. While not much research has been conducted through Agnew's lens on the relationship between the pressures of college and crime, one study has indicated a correlation between Agnew's strain types and deviant behavior in a college environment (Smith et al., 2013), indicating that Lip's uptick in criminal activities could be related to the stressors of academia. In addition, Lip's main form of negative stimuli during college is his financial stress.

Lip must work through college because the Gallaghers are a low-income family with no traditional college savings. At the beginning of his college experience, Lip works at an on-campus dining hall for a work-study scholarship. He finds it difficult to balance his work obligations with studying, ultimately resulting in him getting locked out of a midterm due to poor time management in season four's "Strangers on a Train." Lip's frustration over being financially disadvantaged and academically overwhelmed causes him to lash out in the same episode, cathartically smashing cars with a hammer and running away from the police. Agnew's General Strain Theory perfectly explains Lip's otherwise baffling criminal behavior. While logically, Lip should respond to financial frustration by committing a lucrative crime, Agnew's theory states that crime is a "means of coping, albeit illegitimately" (Carey, 2021, Page 3). Thus, Lip does not necessarily commit a crime as a means to an end. Rather, he resorts to crime when he can no longer cope with the intense negative stimuli, and he has no healthy coping mechanisms.

In season five, Lip faces serious financial stress again when he finds out his financial aid paperwork has not been completed for his sophomore year and he will either have to pay out of pocket or take the semester off. Having faced implicit pressure from his family to be successful for their sake, another negative stimulus, Lip decides to sell marijuana from his dorm room rather than drop out in Season Five's "Uncle Carl." While Lip's crime is profitable in this case, Agnew's theory still applies. Instead of getting a legitimate job or applying for a last-minute grant, Lip's reaction to strain is to rebel against the system causing him strain via criminal actions. Viewers may find it frustrating to watch Lip contribute to his own poor outcomes in college, but his experience is an accurate, albeit sensationalized, representation of the added negative stimuli that low-income, first-generation individuals face in college. According to

Agnew's General Strain Theory, Lip's actions are the inevitable result of navigating through a system not built for him.

While Lip's deviance in college underscores the strain variables low-income individuals face, Deborah Gallagher's storylines in seasons four through six showcase how General Strain Theory manifests in intimate relationships. One of only two girls in the main cast of Gallagher children, Deborah (Debbie) is a noteworthy character in the show. Debbie's nurturing personality toward her dysfunctional alcoholic father in season one foreshadows the desperate lengths Debbie will later go to for a sense of love and family. Season five sees a continuation of Debbie's arc in season four, in which she desperately tries to lose her virginity. Influenced by her overly sexual peers, fourteen-year-old Debbie views sex as an important and defining milestone that represents her self-worth and womanhood. Throughout season four, Debbie engages in a semi-platonic relationship with a 20-year-old named Matt Baker (James Allen McCune). Despite Matt's refusal to engage in sex with the underage Debbie, mutual attraction serves as the subtextual elephant in the room during all their scenes together. Following a house party in season five's "The Two Lisas," the couple retreats to bed together. Matt immediately passes out, extremely inebriated. Feeling frustrated with the symbolic burden of her virginity, Debbie decides to engage in intercourse with the unconscious Matt. In this scenario, Debbie's strain is her failure to achieve the goal of losing her virginity, which symbolizes her failure to be seen and treated as an adult. The act is a deviation from social norms and is criminal. Not only is Debbie engaging in a sex act with a man outside the socially accepted range, but she is also taking advantage of his unconscious state. Debbie's strain caused by an inability to achieve her goal directly causes this deviant sexual interaction, providing evidence for Agnew's Strain Theory. Unfortunately, Debbie's sex crimes do not end with her relationship with Matt. Later in

season five, Debbie begins a relationship with a boy her own age named Derek Delgado. Debbie, having lacked a stable relationship with anyone in her formative years, quickly becomes emotionally attached to Derek. Debbie fears Derek will leave her, which Agnew would consider the threat of removal of positive stimuli (Agnew, 2013). In response to this fear, Debbie plots to get pregnant, which she thinks will cause Derek to stay with her. The two forgo condoms during sexual intercourse while Derek is under the false impression that Debbie is on birth control. Although reproductive coercion is not a criminal offense in and of itself, one could argue it violates Derek's informed consent as he was told Debbie was on birth control. According to federal law, someone is incapable of consenting if they are "incapable of appraising the nature of the conduct at issue" (10 U.S. Code § 920 - Art. 120. Rape and Sexual Assault Generally, 2011). Because Derek was not aware of the risk he had of impregnating Debbie, he could not properly evaluate the conduct at hand. Assuming Derek was incapable of consent, Debbie would have been sexually assaulting him. In addition, teen pregnancy is deviant behavior that Debbie likely would not have been pushed to without the strain of potential abandonment. The strain Debbie faces and the deviant actions she takes, as a result, serve to demonstrate the profound impact of family trauma on adolescents. Moreover, the show utilizes Debbie to demonstrate the cyclical nature of abuse and poverty.

Examining the tumultuous lives of the Gallaghers through the lens of Agnew's General Strain theory provides insight into otherwise puzzling and frustrating criminal and deviant actions in the show. While it may be easy for a viewer at home to loathe the Gallaghers as they squander any chance at normality, considering the immense sources of strain they face as an impoverished, traumatized family allows a deeper understanding of why they cannot escape the South Side. Ultimately, applying General Strain Theory not only improves the depth and

entertainment of the show but also offers more privileged viewers the opportunity to consider how they would react to otherwise unthinkable strain. Finally, exploring Shameless using General Strain theory serves to highlight the urgency of addressing strain in underprivileged communities.

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