

CRIM316 - Week 4: Merton's Strain Theory (The American Dream)

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Terms in this set (19)

What did Robert Merton add to Durkheim's theory?	<p>Merton builds upon Durkheim's aspects on crime as normal and necessary, and the rapid social changes that increases crime to abnormal levels (anomie/social breakdown). This was an update to Durkheim just like the Chicago school's update with social disorganisation.</p> <p>Merton redefines this to the following: When social cohesion breaks down due to too much inequality, this leads to the increase of crime.</p>
What is Merton's Theory of Anomie?	<p>The form of social incoherence that occurs when there is a significant detachment between the valued cultural goals (The Dream) and the institutionalised legitimate societal means to achieve those goals (the conventional pathways).</p>
What is strain?	<p>Strain is the sense of ability for an individual to keep on the legitimate pathway to achieve their goals.</p> <p>Ladder metaphor: An individual must climb to the top of the ladder to achieve their goals. Strain is the ability for the individual to hold onto the ladder. The stop of the ladder is their dream/goal.</p>
What were the social contexts behind Merton's theory?	<p>1930s Great Depression in the US Severe deprivation Lots of change Mass international and domestic migration Lots of individuals arrive in hopes of the "American Dream" Inequality was observed - particularly economic inequality. Adherence to the dream caused crime and deviance.</p>
What is the American Dream?	<p>There is an equality for opportunity for every American to attain success and wealth through hard work. Key idea of egalitarianism - everyone should have equal opportunities for success.</p> <p>The success of the American Dream leads to extreme wealth.</p>
Central elements of Strain Theory	<p>1. Culturally defined goals - Having lots of money 2. Institutionalised means to achieve these goals - Education, training, experience, etc.</p>
How does strain connect to anomie?	<p>If people can't achieve their goals by legitimate means and pathways, strain is developed in society and anomie occurs (anomic conditions become present). Cultural goals and the institutionalised legitimate means to achieve them are</p>

Key structures in Strain Theory	<p>1. Cultural Structure</p> <p>We are surrounded by perceptions and definitions of success. This is reinforced through institutions, family, peers, and the media. The dominant ideal of working hard leads to success.</p> <p>2. Social Structure</p> <p>In a social context, we have perceptions of what success looks like. Examples are prestigious schools/university, connections, family name, etc.</p> <p>We are more likely to be able to climb the ladder faster if we have these perceived traits of success.</p>
<p>NZ graph of number of offences between the late 80s to late 90s application of Merton's Strain Theory.</p> <p>x axis - increasing time in years from 1870/80s.</p> <p>y axis - amount of crimes per 1000 people.</p> <p>Steady plateau line?</p> <p>Significant rising spike?</p>	<p>Steady plateau from the late 1880s may suggest that there are strong cultural goals and the institutionalised and legitimate means to achieve those goals.</p> <p>Significant rising spike from the mid 1950s may suggest that there is an imbalance between goals and the means to achieve them.</p>
Strain theory and impacts on social classes and status	<p>Often many social classes and status are unable to climb the ladder through the legitimate means.</p> <p>In the US, this is perceived to be an individual problem, that the individual is at fault and to blame. There is no blame at the social systems and structures in place. Every American have the same equal opportunity to success.</p> <p>Predetermined factors such as class and privilege can also escalate the velocity of climbing the ladder compared to the disadvantaged.</p>
Merton's Modes of Adaptation	<p>How people adapt to anomic conditions when strain is present, in achieving their goals with the legitimate and institutionalised means to achieve those goals.</p> <p>The greater the anomic conditions, the crime level increases abnormally across mods that accept criminality.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conformity 2. Innovation 3. Ritualism 4. Retreatism 5. Rebellion
Conformity	<p>Most individuals will conform and accept the cultural goals and the institutionalised and legitimate pathways and means to achieve those.</p> <p>Accept goals</p> <p>Accept means</p> <p>Reject criminality</p>

Innovators	<p>Individuals who accept the goals but refuse the legitimate means to achieve those. Likely to engage in economic-driven crime such as fraud, black markets, etc.</p> <p>Accept goals Reject means Accept criminality</p>
Retreatists	<p>Individuals not interested in the goals or the means to achieve them either way. They are described as given up on participating in the social structures and may engage in crime such as illicit drugs or be in religious groups or cults.</p> <p>Reject goals Reject means Accept criminality</p>
Ritualists	<p>Individuals who aren't interested in goals but accept the means. They are described to be in contempt with their current state and avoiding risk (no ambition). They are not interested in reaching the top and are just chilling on the ladder.</p> <p>Reject goals Accept means Reject criminality</p>
Rebellists	<p>Individuals who select or reject aspects of their goals, means, or even replace them completely with their own arrangements. They are described to join gangs, religious groups, or political groups.</p> <p>Goals are rejected or replaced Means are rejected or replaced Accept criminality</p>
How does conformity to the American Dream lead to crime?	<p>The journey to the top of the ladder may be halted by blocked opportunities - the means or the goals cannot be achieved. Examples of blocked opportunities can be economic deprivation, marginalisation, racism, alienation, etc.</p> <p>Self-fulfilling prophecy - When opportunities for an individual are constantly blocked, they fall into a pattern of a self-fulfilling prophecy where they accept that they will never achieve their goals through the legitimate means.</p> <p>When opportunities are blocked, individuals undergo strain and either fall off the ladder or find another way up - to achieve their goals through an illicit, non legitimate pathway, possibly engaging in criminal activities.</p>
Merton and Racism	<p>Merton mainly focused on economic factors and ignores the disadvantages of being discriminated - racism in the cultural and social structures.</p> <p>Racism is a big factor in inequality. It drips down to the criminal justice system where in the US, African-american individuals are targeted by social agents and may be subjected through the CJS. In NZ, this is mirrored by the over-representation of individuals of Maori descent in prison populations.</p>

Critiques of Merton

Crime is once again explained as the product of the poor - individuals with blocked opportunities are more likely to resort to crime.

Only focuses on economic factors - does not address the impact of racism, victimisation, etc.

Does not provide a comprehensive explanation for crimes that are not economically motivated.

Poverty and unemployment does not necessarily increase crime and lots of employment does not necessarily decrease crime (in the context of a depression).