

# Robert merton anomie theory essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Meyer R. Scholnick also known as Robert King Merton was born on the 4th of July 1904 in Philadelphia in a Jewish family from Russia that immigrated to the United States of America. He took advantage of the culture riches surrounding him by frequenting nearby cultural and educational venues when he was in High School. Merton's numerous childhood encounters composed a basis for his theory of social structure. The field of criminology and criminal justice has employed many of Merton's prominent concepts such as anomie, strain, manifest and latent functions, self-fulfilling prophecy, deviant, and the theory of reference groups. His theories are usually concentrated on the understanding of deviant cultures. This essay would seek to evaluate some of Merton's theories, its contribution to criminology, its criticisms and its applicability in modern times.

### Merton's Contribution to Criminology

One of Merton's popular contributions in the field of criminology was probably the essay he wrote in 1938 titled Social Structure and Anomie. In his essay, Merton starts out his work by challenging some biological based theory that was popular at that time by arguing that crimes derives from societal conditions instead of biological traits. Emile Durkheim, a prominent sociologist defined anomie is as an individual's feeling of isolation from society and normlessness related to deviant behaviour, or suicide.

Merton expanded Durkheim's ideas by developing a similar explanation for deviant behaviour when he viewed anomie as " a breakdown in the cultural norms and goals and the social structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them." 1 Merton expounded on the phrase " The

American Dream” by defining it as the cultural goal whereby acquisition of material wealth in the USA is illustrated as not just another aspiration but is associated with personal value and social status. The reason Merton came up with this theory is because he was living in the midst of “ The American Dream” where it was alleged that working hard and entrepreneurship could bring endless rewards and progression from childhood poverty.

As American society views failure as a sign of personal rather than social weakness, it is said that the failure would transcend to guilt causing substantial overwhelming pressure to individuals that have unequal access to the permissible means to deviate and achieve the said goal illegitimately. It would result in success being preferably achieved through legitimate means such as education, honesty, hard work or in certain cases illegitimate means that causes violation to the social norms when he wrote about how “ The culture makes incompatible demands... In this setting, a cardinal American virtue, ‘ ambition’ promotes a cardinal American vice, ‘ deviant behaviour’” 2. Merton held that to meet the challenge of cultural goals, people could adapt in five different ways by looking at the strength of the individual’s commitment to the challenge and the availability of institutionalised means to pursue it determine the adaptation. The five adaptations put forth by Merton is best described by looking at the table he drew on the Typology of Modes of Individual Adaptation shown in Fig. 13 below.

Merton was of the view that conformity was the most common adaptation because society is stable. He concluded that the functioning of societies are dependent on the majority of its members adopting a broadly conformist

approach which he saw as common reaction among Americans and thus accounted for their average crime rate. " The conformist is the one whose experience in society leads to the acceptance of culturally prescribed goals and socially legitimate means for reaching those goals" 4. His view might be considered by some as irrelevant to modern day criminology as on going research and studies have proved that crimes are carried out by a wider range of population instead of the numbers that are portrayed in crime statistics.

The first adaptation put forth by Merton is Innovation that describes a group of people within a society acknowledging the cultural goals their society sets out however, rejects the cultural legitimate means of attaining those goals. When the person feels that the importance of success outweighs the means of achieving it, strain is experienced resulting in " Innovation". When innovators decide to achieve the culturally approved goals through illegitimate means, deviance occurs.

Ritualism is an adaptation that involves individuals to over concentrate on the means of achieving " the end"(material wealth). Ritualism as suggested by Merton is common among the middle class who have little chance to acquire those socially constructed goals, yet is scared of risking what they have already owned if the resort to innovation. By giving up their goal of success, the individual is considered deviant.

Retreatism is an adaptation that Merton describes as individuals due to their own conscience or internal pressure rejects both the ultimate goal and the ways to attain those goals. Merton categorizes psychotics, vagrants,

psychoneurotic, pariahs and addicts as retreatists whereby they are often described to be in a society but are not part of it and the crimes they commit would likely be for the reason of self-preservation.

Rebellions oppose conformity and it is the least common adaptation in society. Similar to retreatism, rebellions rejects cultural goals and institutional means by substituting them with new means that can be described by the  $\pm$  sign in Fig 1. They would seek to execute the new means through promoting unconventional religious groups or through political revolutions.

In 1948, Merton wrote an essay that focused on manifest and latent functions and highlighted their differences by distinguishing between “conscious motivations for social behaviour, and its object consequences” 5. Merton defines manifest functions as “those objective consequences contributing to adjustments or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognized by participants in the system” 6. On the other hand, he defines latent functions as “those which are neither intended nor recognized” 7. A good example to demonstrate these functions could come in the form of transportation whereby its manifest function is intended to do something, status symbol could be its other function due to the saying that the fancier the car the more status one would hold in society.

The latent function of transportation could be the personal autonomy one has by allowing people to avoid public transportation. Merton’s ideas demonstrated that crime has a function in society whether intended or not. He drew on the idea that the function of crime could come in many aspects

of society by setting standards for what society has to follow to be considered as conformative behaviour. A manifest function of crime would come in the form of establishing a status quo for society of what is wrong or right. On the contrary, the latent function of crime is the creation of employment for the criminal justice system.

Merton developed self-fulfilling prophecy theory as outlined in his 1957 essay. "The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true" 8. An example of this is when an individual always receives negative comments from people they respect leading them to adhere to those perceptions. They essentially fulfil the label that was maliciously placed on them making the label true and more vulnerable to deviant behaviour. Merton spent a considerable amount of his time trying to understand deviant behaviour and the reasons why individuals commit crime because it represents a social problem.

In his 1957 book *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Merton classified two classes of deviant behaviour. Deviant behavior relates to an individual behaving in a way that deviates from the norms of society. The two types of deviant behaviour Merton discusses in his book are nonconforming and aberrant behavior. Individuals challenging the legitimacy of social norms are described as Nonconforming behaviour and by contrast individuals that acknowledges the legitimacy of the norms but yet he violates it are described as aberrant behavior.