

Criminology essays - merton anomie durkheim



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Merton Anomie Durkheim

How does Merton's theory of anomie differ from that of Durkheim?

Durkheim usefully conceptualised the phenomenon of anomie, and I consider the context in which this occurred. I look at Durkheim's examples of crime and deviance and his discussion of social solidarity to clarify how his terms are understood. I discuss how, for Durkheim, anomie was a product of social change, resulting in loss of social cohesion and I go on to examine why, for Merton, the concept needed reconsideration.

I examine Merton's view that society is in constant flux and his distinction between anomie and strain toward anomie, between social structure and individual responses, discussing briefly his five 'modes of adaptation, loosely divided into conformity and deviance. Finally, I identify key points of difference between their two theories of anomie.

Emile Durkheim conceptualised the term *anomie* in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893). In this treatise he discusses in detail the subject of social solidarity. Durkheim holds that all members within society are a product of society, bound together by societal bonds.

Durkheim used the term anomie to describe lack of social cohesion or relative normlessness, where bonds break down or are undefined. (p. 212) According to Durkheim this blurring of societal bonds causes members of society to become detached from societal regulatory constraints that govern and control their behaviour and aspirations, leaving them with no set guidelines within which to act or to aspire, resulting in anomie.

Durkheim was a positivist; he was not interested in the study of individuals' subjective meanings but aimed to identify and study different social facts. Many forces contributing to anomie can be measured only by their visible effects as some forces are invisible, like gravity. Durkheim studied the observable effects of invisible social forces.

Anomie can be observed through effects such as societal disorganization and deregulation, leading to criminal and deviant behaviour but also social facts as personal as suicide (discussed below). Durkheim suggests that an anomic state is more likely to be present during periods of social unrest, perhaps caused by social changes like increases and decreases of economic prosperity, due to the disruption of traditional values (p. 201)

Durkheim believed that crime and deviance were socially constructed. Durkheim saw acts of crime and deviance as an integral part of society's temporal transition; he suggested that a certain amount of crime and deviance is an essential component of the healthy functioning of society, and he suggested it reinforces society's moral code and causes social solidarity, change and innovation. Although crime and deviance could threaten the stability of society, Durkheim suggests that a society without crime would also produce an anomic state. (p. 226)

In Durkheim's treatise *Division of Labour in Society* (1893) he differentiated between two types of societies, characterised by their degree of social cohesion: mechanical solidarity, which has strong social cohesion, and organic solidarity, which has weak social cohesion. Durkheim suggested that

society has evolved from a mechanical society, based on similarity, to an organic society, based on difference. (p. 226)

Mechanical societies describe the solidarity found in traditional societies; these societies existed before the modern industrial era. In mechanical societies communities were smaller, societal bonds were stronger; people shared collective norms and values which Durkheim described as collective consciousness. These societal bonds were reinforced by people's shared religious beliefs. People in this society performed similar tasks and worked to achieve collective goals which benefited the whole group.

In this type of society individuals were not as dependent on each other as later, organic, societies. In mechanical societies everyone was doing similar work and did not rely on others for their needs; they did, however, rely on society to function adequately as a whole: " In societies where this type of solidarity [mechanical] is highly developed, the individual is not his own master.... Solidarity is, literally something which the society possesses." (Durkheim, ed Giddens, 1972 , p. 139)

Durkheim suggests that anomie was less likely to exist in mechanical societies because of society's strong cohesion. He states "... The state of *anomie* is impossible whenever interdependent organs are sufficiently in contact and sufficiently extensive. If they are close to each other, they are readily aware, in every situation, of the need which they have of one-another, and consequently they have an active and permanent feeling of mutual dependence." (Durkheim, 1893, p. 184)

The second type of solidarity, *organic solidarity*, Durkheim linked to complex modern industrial societies, suggesting that they "are constituted, not by a repetition of similar, homogeneous segments, but by a system of different organs each of which has a special role, and which are themselves formed of differentiated parts." (p. 181) In organic societies the division of labour increases and work tasks become more complex, specialised and individualised.

The labour force is divided; therefore individuals are no longer working on similar tasks but segregated to individualised tasks. Members of organic societies are highly dependent on each other to produce what they need. Durkheim suggests that this functioning is similar to the functioning of the human body, all different parts working on specialized tasks to sustain the organism as a whole. However if the organ fails to function it causes the other parts of the organism that are reliant on that part to fail as well. This dependence is significant to the survival of society; healthy functioning of the society is based on the reliance of others. (Durkheim, 1893, p. 226)

Organic societies differ from mechanical societies as they are based on differences in individual functions, rather than similarity. These differences can cause members to become detached from society which in turn causes misidentification with society. The breakdown of interpersonal bonds (without which individuals lack guidance and feel detached from society) thus produces anomie.

Durkheim noted that "Man is the more vulnerable to self-destruction the more he is detached from any collectively, that is to say, the more he lives

as an egoist." (Durkheim, ed Giddens, 1972, p. 113) This organic form of society, he suggested, was the cause of the decline of social cohesion and integration, and the creation of anomie (p. 200). This is demonstrated by Taylor, in his publication *Durkheim and the Study of Suicide* (1982) Taylor's interpretation of Durkheim suggests that suicide is present in modern organic societies because of the decline of social cohesion:

Durkheim held that in modern society there were two principle causes of high (and rising) suicide rates: (egotistic) suicide was higher where individuals were not well integrated into collective social life; and (anomic) suicide was higher when society's norms and values were too weak to regulate individual desires and drives... The relationship between levels of social integration and regulation and suicide rates demonstrated that society exerted an independent influence over the individual. In Durkheim's terms, society was external to the individual, so much so that even such a supremely individual act as suicide had its roots in society. (p. 21)

Durkheim suggested that when social conditions change, the traditional norms and values needed for public consciousness no longer remain the same. An anomic detachment from societal restraints frees members of society from limits to their aspirations causing anomic suicide. (Durkheim, 1893, p. 203) Durkheim writes in *S uicide* (1897) that, " The limits are unknown between the possible and the impossible, what is just and what is unjust, legitimate claims and hopes and those which are immoderate. Consequently, there is no restraint upon aspirations." (p. 253)

Robert Merton elaborated on Durkheim's work on anomie; however, he did not always agree with Durkheim's theory. Merton adapted the theory of anomie to a general sociological approach to crime and deviance. He considered that deviance was not caused by sudden social change, as suggested by Durkheim, but was, rather, a symptom of a constantly changing social structure. Merton was writing in America at a time when there was inequality between ethnic groups. Merton observed that not all individuals within society have an equal chance of success; he believed that inequality in society blocked people from attaining the means needed to achieve their goals. Many Americans were aiming to achieve "the American dream" and he was interested in how they pursued their goals, and whether or not dreams were equally attainable to everyone. (Merton, 1957, p. 121)

Like Durkheim, Merton held that crime and deviance were caused by society: "the functional analyst... considers socially deviant behaviour just as much a product of social structure as conformist behaviour..." (p. 121) but Merton's view of deviance is different to Durkheim's. While Durkheim believed that identifying deviance is a demonstration of society's norms, and a barometer of cohesion and change, Merton held that crime does not generate social solidarity or social progress and that crime and deviance demonstrate poor societal organization. Merton suggested that society does not evolve from mechanical to organic, but that society is constantly changing and generating new goals - if not necessarily the means by which to achieve these goals. (p. 121)

Merton's theory of anomie is not easily conceptualized in his writings, as he spoke about both *anomie* and *strain towards anomie*, which can be hard to

distinguish. For clarity, I have discussed these as if they were two different concepts. Firstly, when Merton talked about anomie, his theory does not refer to the normless societal state identified by Durkheim. Merton suggested “ no society lacks norms governing conduct.

But societies do differ in degree to which [such] institutional controls are effectively integrated with the goals which stand high in the hierarchy of cultural values” (p. 121) Merton’s theory suggests that there is no decline or undefined presence of societal norms governing behaviour but a disjunction “ between valued cultural ends and legitimate societal means to those ends” (Akers, 2000, p. 143). Merton’s anomie theory, like Durkheim’s, can be used as an explanation of deviant and criminal behaviour.

Merton held that individual goals and aspirations are regulated by societal restraints - unlike Durkheim, who suggested that the anomic state causes no limitation to members' aspirations. Merton suggested these societal restraints put pressure on members of society to conform to societal norms. He held that an anomic state is caused by a de-institutionalization of societal norms. This occurs when society emphasizes culturally preferred goals and their achievement but does not emphasize the culturally approved means to achieve these goals: “ any cultural goals which receive extreme and only negligibly qualified emphasis in the culture of a group will serve to attenuate the emphasis on institutionalized practices and make for anomie.” (Merton, 1968, p. 235) This disjunction, Merton suggested, is the cause of macro-structural anomie. Merton's structural anomie theory is similar and compatible with what Durkheim suggested as both theories can be used to explain macro-level implications of anomie, but the development of the <https://assignbuster.com/criminology-essays-merton-anomie-durkheim/>

concept of 'strain' allows the application of the concept of anomie to individual experience of society. (p. 189)

This micro-individual level of anomie, Merton suggested, is caused by strain, and an anomic societal state is needed for strain to occur. In turn, the strain experienced by individuals fosters anomie. Merton's strain theory can also be used as an explanation of deviant behaviour: "cultural (or idiosyncratic) exaggeration of the success-goal leads men to withdraw emotional support from the rules" (p. 190). Individuals are more likely to pursue illegitimate means to attaining culturally prescribed goals when they are blocked from accessing the institutionalized means to these goals:

The social structure... produces a strain toward anomie and deviant behaviour. The pressure of such a social order is outdoing one's competitors. So long as the sentiments supporting this competitive system... are not confined to the final result of "success", the choice of means will remain largely within... social control. When, however, the cultural emphasis shifts from satisfaction deriving from competition itself to almost exclusive concern with the outcome, the resultant stress makes for the breakdown of the regulatory structure. (Merton, 1957, p157)

Merton also suggested that "some individuals are subjected more than others to the strains arising from the discrepancy between cultural goals and effective access to their realization. They are consequently more vulnerable to deviant behaviour." (p. 235) Merton described those who are restricted by inequality. This can be used as an explanation of the suffragette movement:

women prevented from achieving their goals were provoked into deviant acts of protest.

Merton identified five types of response to societal pressure: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion. (p. 136) The first two modes accept, and the last three modes reject societal rules. Firstly, Merton described conformity which he considered the most common response to strain. It describes the process by which people strive to succeed using the most socially acceptable means they have available to them.

This conformity to social values is cohesive of society according to both Merton and Durkheim. The second mode, ritualism, describes individuals who accept they have no opportunity to achieve their goals. These individuals maintain what they have but are discouraged from doing more: they don't believe they can become more than what they are. In effect, they join the conformists. (p. 200)

However, not all people conform. The third mode is rebellion; this describes individuals who have rejected the idea that everyone can achieve success. These individuals have rebelled against the system and rejected socially acceptable means to achieve their goals. The fourth mode is retreatism which occurs when individuals choose to drop out of society, give up on their goals and make no effort to achieve because they see it as impossible. Merton suggested this response is associated with drug addicts and alcoholics. (p. 267)

The fifth mode is what Merton called innovation: innovation describes the process through which people conform to atypical forms of acquiring means;

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however, they also seek success that would be unachievable without taking advantage of illegal goals available to them. (p. 267) Each of these modes of adaptation demonstrates the individual's response to societal strain arising from anomie; modes that accept societal pressures are not as likely to pursue illegitimate means.

In conclusion, Durkheim suggested that anomie is caused by the undefined presence of social bonds. This undefined presence causes a decline of social cohesion therefore individuals become detached from society and recognise no limits to their behaviour.

Durkheim also suggested that anomie is caused by the decline of social cohesion representative of today's organic societies, and that mechanical societies found in pre-modern societies had a stronger degree of social integration, reducing the occurrence of anomie. However this view was not shared by Merton; he considered that there has been no time when society lacks norms. He held that the presence of societal norms and their pressure on society and individuals causes anomie and strain towards anomie.

Durkheim and Merton also differ on when anomie occurs. Durkheim suggested that anomie is present during periods of social change due to the disruption of traditional bonds. However, Merton disagrees as he believes that anomie can be found in relatively stable societies. For Merton transition was not from one specific type of social structure to another but a constant state of flux, with changing goals.

Both Durkheim and Merton agree that crime and deviance are consequences of anomie. However, they differed on whether crime has value to society

Durkheim held that some crime and deviance is a product of a normal functioning society, reinforcing solidarity and encouraging social progress, while Merton suggested that crime and deviance demonstrates societal disorganisation.

Durkheim and Merton's theories differ most strongly on what constitutes the causes of anomie. Durkheim looks at anomie from a structural perspective, whereas Merton looks at the causes of anomie from both a macro and micro level, giving the theory a more detailed explanation. Merton looks in detail at the individual's response to societal strain - not discussed intensively in Durkheim, as his positivist ontology did not consider individuals' internal motives and drives unless they had objective effects.

For Durkheim anomie is the effect of the breakdown of societal bonds; for Merton, strain is a mechanism of anomie and can occur during anomic societal states: strain towards anomie describes the individual's battle to obtain the necessary means needed to achieve their goals. Durkheim suggested that during an anomic state individual aspirations are not limited because of the undefined presence of societal norms; without these norms, he suggested, members of society are deluded as to what is realistically achievable (Durkheim, 1897, p. 253). Merton's theory, on the other hand, offers an explanation for why social forces influence some people to commit deviant and criminal acts and why some individuals conform to societal pressures and why some do not.

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