

Robert k merton
(1937): social
structure and anomie



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Robert Merton originated what has come to be termed the Strain Theory in Criminology.

He distinguishes between the institutionalised goals of a society and its cultural means which a “ social structure defines, regulates, and controls the acceptable modes of achieving these goals” (Merton, p68). He suggests that when there is a disparity between these two elements, and norms of acceptable behaviour fail to be regulated, it allows criminals and deviants free reign. 2. 1 Tensions or strains generated by society itself are highlighted as the underlying trigger of delinquent or criminal behaviour. The American culture promotes an emphasis on money and it’s symbolic associations with status. Individuals are encouraged to strive towards achieving this goal and to become successful in life.

However, for a large majority this leads them to experience pressure, due to the restrictive means of obtaining this. Therefore they seek alternative pathways, which do not follow acceptable practices, but will result in the desired end. 2. 2 Anomie occurs when norms governing social interaction breakdown. Norms impose boundaries, restricting the desires of members within society and what they can expect to achieve. Anomie refers to a lack of social order or harmony and can also apply when these norms are an inadequate reflection of the changing situation.

This it is proposed, consequently provides the foundations for an increase in criminal and deviant acts. 2. 3 What is prominent about the American culture is its “ disjunction between goals and means.” Everybody aspires to have a prosperous standard of living and improve their status, and it is promoted as

if this is accessible to all. Although this stress on 'The American Dream' cuts across class lines, its hierarchical structure proves this is unrealistic for many groups.

The working class population are claimed to experience the greatest extent of blocked opportunities, and tend to regard the community norms less rigidly than upper class folk. This makes them far more susceptible to crime, and what is most damaging is their view that this action is acceptable, causing an influx in such behaviour. 2. 4 When anomie or "cultural chaos" (Merton p77) occurs, the individual's survival drives, which can be selfishness, impulsiveness and a desire to succeed, are exposed. Individual characteristics and social situations together create a climate for deviance to flourish.

Merton emphasises this point through his five constructions of adaptation, explaining that depending on the particular strain, conformity, innovation, ritualism, rebellion or retreatism are adopted. The level of socialisation an individual has been exposed to also plays a part in determining the mode of adaptation they adopt, and explains why they select one form of deviance in preference to another. Deviant behaviour is encompassed within innovation, where aspirations are hindered and "frustration...leads to the search for avenues of escape from a culturally induced intolerable situation" (Merton p75).

2. 5 The 'end-justifies-the-means' doctrine encompasses the whole idea of the lack of emphasis placed on the means of obtaining the specific goal. It is an innate human characteristic that rewards act as reinforcers for behaviour

and if valued enough can be the drive behind their actions. Although citizens are expected to undertake sacrifices, they do so so they can be rewarded correspondingly: “ so organised that positive incentives for conformity to roles and adherence to status obligations are provided” (Merton p69).

Otherwise people regard following the correct and acceptable ways to gain success as meaningless. 2. 6 Poverty is not claimed to be the sole reason why people commit crimes. It is only when they are faced with “ poverty and associated factors” (Merton p76), such as low-income generating, unskilled labour work, that they foresee no progression occurring and feel disheartened, desperate and likely to follow illegitimate avenues. 2. 6 Merton has pointed to the limitations in his analysis.

He describes it as ‘ incomplete’, as it does not examine in depth a number of key assumptions in his theory. He proposes that his work should pave the way for subsequent researchers to examine more rigorously the responses and subsequent actions of rebellious groups. Not only this, but an analysis of actual elements of the social structure of a society, which provokes strain and predisposes people to behave in rebellious and retreatist forms. It has also been noted that no explanation has been provided for crime committed entirely for enjoyment, not so as to meet relevant goals.> Rebellion is the fourth technique of adaptation suggested by Robert Merton, where the individual rejects society’s emphasis on the goal as well as the means for which to achieve this.

They are then substituted with alternative goals and means of their own. Their actions are usually of a collective nature with the ultimate aim

consisting of identifying the source of concern and introducing reform to alter or eradicate it. An example of this maybe to become rebellious against the system in the form of anarchism.; Retreatism is the fifth, least commonly exercised mode. It again involves the abandonment of both the goals and means elements. This maybe the consequence of previous, unsuccessful attempts to abide by them and feeling disheartened.

They then respond by retreating within themselves or from society as an escape mechanism, representing non-conformity. Such individuals “ are in the society but not of it” and are “ usually characterised as outcasts, drunkards and drug users” (Merton, p72).; Utilitarianism (Merton, p71) is concerned with maximising a person’s own welfare and that of others (‘ utility’). It developed from the era of Enlightenment and was progressed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. They claimed that it was the quality, not simply the amount, of a pleasure that mattered.

The focus is usually on actions; what makes an action right is the degree to which it is total or average utility. Americans were strong promoters of righteousness. A common-sense judgement that drugs are wrong, evil and creates selfishness should prevent you taking them. Robert Merton’s Strain theory was a Functionalist viewpoint particularly significant in introducing the connection between the organisation of society and it’s norms and values.

It’s emphasis, focused around the unequal distribution of opportunities and how people interact with others in order to learn behaviour, was presented at a time when unemployment, poverty and levels of crime were on the

increase in America and had become a major concern. It proposes that deviance is concentrated among the deprived (lower classes), as they experience restricted employment and educational opportunities, and are unable to restrain their desires for materialistic goods. The inadequate regulation of norms aids the creation of the situation, but the impulsive and competitive feelings intrinsic within the individual results in crime. Merton suggests that through enhancing educational and employment opportunities and establishing reform within the government and law sectors, in effect will reduce the level of social strain he stresses as the predominant cause of crime. Therefore put simplistically, crime is the product of a deliberate, rational decision by the individual. This actively challenged prevailing Positivist assumptions through its sociological perspective of unstable structure systems, independent of people's wishes and actions, determining this choice.

As Gibbons (1979) described it: “‘ normal’ people in ‘ abnormal’ situations, rather than disturbed individuals acting out their pathology.” These Functionalist assumptions dominated the 1950s and 60s in the United States, and the general principles were picked out and elaborated by subsequent researchers, such as Cohen and Sutherland in their studies of youth delinquency and social learning. Theoretically both Wilson and Becker agree on Classicist policies of deterrence as a means to reduce the level of crime in our community. They see individuals as being governed by rewards and penalties in everyday life and crime is regarded as the result of a rational choice.

People will commit crime if allowed to do so, therefore the opportunity should be reduced, promoting the fact that it just isn't worth it. Contrastingly Merton supports this notion of crime as a natural, meaningful reaction to the social situation of normlessness, but suggests that to reduce crime, opportunities of progression and employment should be increased, especially for the working class and minority groups. Secondly Classicists and Constructivists conclude that Positivist ideologies of studying the criminal are ineffective in reducing crime. Situational factors should be given more consideration- it is more a case of goods attracting people to commit crime, rather than the biology of the individual determining their actions. What is different yet highly effective about the Strain theories' analysis is how it progresses from this through the application of a mix of sociological and biological perspectives; although the genetic drives people possess make them prone to criminal behaviour, if it was not for the ineffective method of regulating norms they would not be exposed.

All three propose varying responses to dissolve the problem of crime. Communities should take control of deviants through enforcing unconscious norms of acceptable behaviour as is argued by Wilson. Becker intends to introduce new punitive systems: locally based committees to privately resolve problems through negotiation, as was the case in the eighteenth century, and Merton believes reducing the level of disparity between institutionalised goals and cultural means will in effect decrease strain and keep biological desires at bay. Finally, there is criticism of the police force by Classicist and Labelling philosophers who regard as having a number of limitations. Because of a lack of officers and resources, a selective approach

is applied: they focus on promoting their authority and power, making arrests based on a person's demeanour and attitude and prioritising laws, rather than following up on all incidents or those which have 'hard' incriminating evidence. Merton's Functionalist views simply supports the general belief that law is the result of an impartial consensus of values and on a wider scale crime is the violation of this and community norms.

Becker contradicts this through his theory that state power to criminalize is only a reflection of the opinions of a minority, that of the powerful, therefore they should be abolished alongside prisons as a method of punishment (decarceration). He proposes that we should practice radical non-intervention (Schur, 1971), especially in youth 'victimless crimes' because labels are damaging to young people's identity, and make them vulnerable to the claws of the 'deviant career.' Concessions should be made so they are cautioned rather than imprisoned. Wilson disagrees emphasising the role of punishment as deterrence.

He even suggests the severity should be increased and enforced by police immediately. Becker goes on to stress that the solution is that we should prevent stigmatising, as this excludes them from society and only serves to influence their deviant acts, Wilson concentrating on enforcing control measures such as surveillance cameras, greater police visibility on the streets, as well as safety locks and burglar alarms in the home to prevent accessibility. However they differ in their view of criminals. In Wilson and Merton's case a small proportion of people are 'deviant,' but to Becker everybody is potentially seen as deviant by somebody due to the diversity of cultures and norms.

They are also different in their approaches to tackling the crime problem. Wilson disagrees emphasising the role of punishment as deterrence. He even suggests the severity should be increased and enforced by police immediately. Each contributed significantly to their relevant fields and focus of analysis. Merton attempted to offer a realistic explanation of why, even though the country was experiencing economic growth, crime rates continued to flourish. Applied to a number of countries today it is evident that people do look to crime as an opportunity to progress to higher status positions and obtain increased wealth, in response to unequal access to employment and educational services.

Becker approach opens up a range of new questions, in particular highlighting the 'controlology' factor: rule making and its consequences in Criminology (Ditton, 1979), and examining societal responses to crime. Wilson initiated the importance of police patrolling the streets in order to fulfil two functions; firstly to encourage and set the foundations upon which the community could take control through establishing and regulating norms and secondly ensuring the deviants knew their place and what they were forbidden to do. In terms of evidence, Merton relied heavily on Emile Durkheim's philosophies of anomie and social structure as his starting points. The use of sports game examples such as football, have the effect of illustrating the competitive nature of some societies and the notable emphasis on "winning the game, rather than winning through circumscribed modes of activity" (Merton p70). He then applied this to a contemporary real-life example, that of the United States.

Wilson draws on secondary studies by Philip Zimbardo as evidence to support his beliefs. It explains how even respectable citizens are capable of committing crimes of vandalism in what is seen as an affluent area.