

Examine the role of  
access to opportunity  
structures in causing  
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Examine the role of access to opportunity structures in causing crime and deviance. Opportunity structures can be described as a factor, situation or pathway which can lead towards or away from deviant or criminal behaviour, for example if someone does not gain access to the legitimate opportunity structure of education to achieve goals they may look to other, illegitimate opportunities and which can lead to them committing crime or engaging in deviant behaviour.

One theory that supports the role of access to opportunity structures in causing crime and deviance is, arguing that unequal access to legitimate opportunity structures is the cause of this behaviour is Merton's Strain Theory. Merton's 'Strain theory and anomie' argues that deviance arises from the structure of society. He has developed the functionalist theory of deviance to attempt to explain why deviance occurs in the first place.

He argues that people engage in deviant behaviour because they are unable to achieve socially approved goals by legitimate means. Most people share goals – for example, financial success, having their own home and possessing consumer goods – and most conform to the approved means of achieving them, like working in paid employment. However, in an unequal society, Merton argues that not all individuals have the same opportunity of realising these goals by approved means.

This means they face a sense of strain and anomie (normlessness), as the dominant rules about how to achieve success don't meet their needs, and therefore deviance results from unequal access to legitimate opportunities (such as education and careers which can be seen as opportunity

structures). Merton argues that there are different 'modes of adaptation', or responses to situations, that range from conformity that most people to display, to one of four forms of deviance, which he calls Innovation, Ritualism, Retreatism and Rebellion.

A non-deviant, non-criminal conformist citizen would take the conformity mode of adaptation where they accept the means and goals of society. The first form of deviance, known as the Innovation mode of adaptation, typically occurs when factors like poor education qualifications or unemployment mean that some people can't achieve goals by approved means or opportunity structures, so they turn to crime as an alternative. The second mode of adaptation, known as Ritualism, typically occurs when someone gives up on achieving goals, but they stick to the means of society.

For example, a teacher may give up caring about student success or office workers who abandon hopes of promotion. They no longer realise the positive opportunity structures that are available to them and may engage in deviant behaviour. The third mode of adaptation of deviant behaviour, known as Retreatism, is where individuals in society no longer accept the means or goals of society. They see no access to opportunity structures and are often drug addicts, drop outs or tramps, who have given up all together and turned towards deviant and criminal behaviour.

The fourth and final form of deviant behaviour is the Rebellion mode of adaptation. They reject existing social goals and means, ignoring their access to opportunity structures within this society and substitute new ones to create a new society, or subcultures. These could be revolutionaries of

members of religious sects. Therefore, Merton's strain theory would argue that the access to opportunity structures plays a vital part in causing crime and deviance, and the limited access to these structures can lead individuals within a society to turn to deviant and criminal behaviour as an alternative.

However, Merton's strain theory can be criticised because it focuses on individual responses to limited access to opportunity structures or access to illegitimate opportunity structures and doesn't recognise that there is a social pattern of crime and deviance affecting whole groups of people, linked to social class, age, gender, ethnicity and locality, and not all of these people are subjected to the same opportunity structures.

Strain theory also fails to explain why some people who are exposed to illegitimate opportunity structures do not take advantage of them and turn towards crime and deviant behaviour, or why people who have access to positive opportunity structures within a society and appear to be apparently conforming people in society can actually be 'innovators' in illegal activities, such as white-collar and corporate crime.

Subcultural theories, such as the status frustration theory proposed by Cohen (1971) focus on the position of groups and their opportunity structures rather than just on individuals, and how these groups adapt in different ways to the strain facing them in achieving social goals. Cohen argues that working-class youth believe in the success goals of mainstream culture, but their experiences of failure in education, living in deprived areas and having the worst chances in the job market all mean they have little access to legitimate opportunity structures to attain these goals by approved

means. They feel they are denied status in mainstream society, and experience status frustration. They therefore react to this situation by developing an alternative distinctive set of values – a delinquent subculture. Within this subculture, individuals have access to illegitimate opportunity structures to gain the goals of mainstream society but ignoring the means, leading towards deviant and criminal behaviour.

For example, stealing replaces hard work, vandalism replaces respect for property and imitation and threats replace respect for others. This gives working-class youth the opportunity to achieve some status within their subculture, something they feel they are denied by mainstream society. These subcultures provide illegitimate opportunity structures for individuals within this culture, leading towards deviant and criminal behaviours.

Cohen's theory therefore also supports the idea that denied access to legitimate opportunity structures can lead towards deviant and criminal behaviour and the status frustration theory places a larger emphasis on the behaviours being a group response for working-class delinquency rather than a focus being on individuals that Merton's strain theory places emphasis on. However, Cohen makes an assumption that young working-class delinquents accept the mainstream values as superior and desirable, and develop delinquent values only as a reaction to what they can't achieve.

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) argue that Cohen's theory doesn't allow for the diversity of responses found among working-class youth who find the approved means for achieving societies goals blocked. They suggest that the varied social circumstances in which working-class youth live give rise to

three types of delinquent subculture: Criminal subcultures are characterized by utilitarian (useful) crimes, such as theft. They develop in more stable working-class areas where there is an established pattern of adult crime.

This provides a learning career opportunity, so an illegitimate opportunity structure, for aspiring young criminals, and an alternative to the legitimate job market as a means of achieving financial rewards. Adult criminals exercise social control over the youth to stop them carrying out non-utilitarian delinquent acts – such as vandalism – which might attract the attention of the police. Conflict subcultures emerge in socially disorganised areas where there is a high rate of population turnover and a consequent lack of social cohesion. These prevent the formation of a stable adult criminal subculture. Conflict subcultures are characterised by violence, gang warfare, ‘mugging’ and other street crime. Both approved and illegal means of achieving mainstream goals are blocked or limited and young people express their frustration at this situation through violence or street crime, and at least obtain status through success in subcultural peer-group values, such as those that Cohen’s status frustration theory recognises.

Retreatist subcultures emerge among those lower-class youth who are ‘double failures’ = they have failed to succeed both through the mainstream legitimate opportunity structures and in the crime and gang illegitimate opportunity structures. The response is a retreat into drug addiction and alcoholism, paid for by petty theft, shoplifting and prostitution. This theory therefore shows how even in illegitimate opportunity structures, unequal opportunities arise which causes the 3 different types of subcultures.

These theories all provide evidence for the role of opportunity structures in causing crime and deviance, being the unequal access to legitimate structures and the access of illegitimate structures leading towards criminal and deviant behaviour. However, it can be argued that access to opportunity structures do not fully explain causes for all deviant behaviours and cannot be seen to play the full role in deviant and criminal behaviour.

These theories do not provide reasoning for individuals who are exposed only to legitimate opportunity structures yet still engage in deviant and criminal behaviour. Therefore, there must be other factors also contributing to the role of these behaviours, but the role of opportunity structures can be seen to contribute largely to causing criminal and deviant behaviour.