

Merton's five modes of adaptation to strain



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Criminologists are one in believing that strain results to deviant behavior. They claim that this resulting deviant behavior could either be criminal or delinquent in nature. Some say that “ the level of constraints and negative emotionality” of individuals dictate whether they would react to strain in a criminal way, such as robbing people, or react to strain in only a delinquent way like snubbing their neighbors. (Agnew et al, 2002 as cited in Nash & Anderson, 2002)

They, however, could not agree as to what causes strain. Durkheim, for example, pointed to abrupt changes in society as the main causes of strain. According to his theory, when a person's needs are not satisfied, he/she would be under continuous strain. To place the individual who is suffering from such a strain under control, society must act as a regulator. However, when society is experiencing from sudden changes or finds itself in crisis, it becomes incapable of regulating the behavior of the individual. This gives rise to incidents of crime or deviant behavior.(Agnew, 2006)

Merton, however, sees it differently. According to him, sudden changes in society do not cause strain. He proposed that the way society is structured, that is to say, influencing or casting people to aspire for the same or similar objectives but not giving everybody equal access to the means of achieving the objective, is what results to these deviant behavior that could either be criminal or delinquent in nature. For instance, society encourages people to be successful (with good-paying jobs, happy family, with an assured future). When the means needed to realize these objectives are not available to every member of society (good education, available jobs, even a healthy attitude towards work), strain results. (Merton's Strain Theory, n. d.)

The strain theory advanced by Merton identified “ five modes of adapting to strain.” These are: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. Conformity, according to Merton, is the usual manner of strain adaptation. Under this mode, the members of society accept both the goals emphasized by society and the recommended means of achieving them. People are considered conformists if they subscribe to the goals set for them by society and do their best to achieve them utilizing only the means prescribed by society. In other words, these people do not resort to illegal means just to attain their goals. Under the innovation mode, individuals also agree to what society considers as desirable goals. Unfortunately for some people, the approved or legitimate means are not available to them.

What they do is look for other, extra-legal means, so that they can realize the goals set for them by society. They resort, for instance, to robbery, theft, embezzling, and swindling. Ritualism, on the other hand, refers to those who have ceased to believe in the goals emphasized by society. In other words, they have decided to turn their backs on society and its mores and have chosen to live their lives the way they have always wanted to. However, these ritualistic individuals do not go against the law. Retreatism essentially means giving up. People who adapt this mode have altogether given up on the goals set for them by society as well as the means prescribed to achieve them. Examples of these people are the drug addicts and the alcoholics. Merton refers to these people as those who have “ escape[d] into a non-productive, non-striving lifestyle.” Rebellion, on the other hand, results when people finally reject both the goals and the means prescribed for achieving them and have substituted them with their own goals and means of

achieving them. Revolutionaries fall under this category. (Merton's Strain Theory, n. d.)

I had once known of a person who fully agreed with what society considers as desirable goals. Widowed at the age of 30, she worked hard in order to satisfy the needs of her two daughters - a beautiful house, good education, fancy car, lovely dresses. However, because she was a single mom with no substantial means at her disposal, she supplemented the income she derived from doing office work by selling illegal substances like marijuana and heroin. Unfortunately, the long arms of the law caught up with her. She ended up in prison, leaving her two very young daughters at the care of the social welfare people. That woman was an innovator.