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## Merton, Robert K.: Social Structure and Anomie

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Robert K. Merton was one of the most distinguished and influential sociologists of the 20th century. Throughout his career, he was a leading figure in the sociology of science, and he made substantial contributions to general sociological theory by developing the paradigm of structural analysis. In the field of criminology, Merton is best known for advancing and popularizing the *anomie perspective* on crime. This perspective highlights the ways in which the normal features of the social organization of American society ironically contribute to high levels of crime and other forms of deviant behavior by producing anomie, a breakdown in the culture. This anomie or cultural breakdown is characterized by a very strong emphasis on the importance of success goals (especially monetary success) and a comparatively weak emphasis on the importance of using the normatively approved means to achieve these goals. Merton further argues that such a strain toward anomie arises when the culture encourages virtually everyone to aspire to lofty goals, while those located at the lower ends of the class hierarchy have limited access to the legitimate means for success. People in such circumstances experience pressures to “innovate”—that is, to substitute technically expedient but often illegal means in the pursuit of their goals.

Merton introduced his initial formulation of the anomie perspective in a brief article titled “Social Structure and Anomie,” which was published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1938. He was a little-known instructor at Harvard University at the time, and his article did not create much of a stir at first. This would change dramatically. Over the course of subsequent decades, Merton's arguments as introduced in the initial article and as subsequently elaborated, most significantly in his book *Social Theory and Social Structure*, have inspired an extraordinary volume of empirical studies on crime and deviance, as well as numerous theoretical extensions, exegeses, and critiques. Recently Robert Agnew has attempted to build on Merton's work by explicating more fully the ways in which social psychological experiences of “strain” link adverse social conditions with crime and delinquency, while Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld have highlighted the role of imbalances among major social institutions (economy, family, the polity) in generating anomie. In addition, Merton's ideas about the sociological causes of crime and delinquency have had a profound influence well beyond the academic community. His ideas have informed major policy initiatives that seek to prevent crime by enhancing job opportunities and by

providing social services, such as those associated with the Great Society in the 1960s. Moreover, much contemporary discourse about the role inequality of opportunity as a cause of crime continues to be rooted in insights that are traceable to “Social Structure and Anomie.”

## Social Structure and Anomie and Sociological Theory

Merton's paradigm of social structure and anomie—commonly referred to by Merton and scholars generally by its acronym, SS&A—has a deceptive simplicity surrounding it. As the information scientist Eugene Garfield has observed, much of Merton's work seems “so transparently true that one can't imagine why no one else has bothered to point it out” (quoted in Kaufman, 2003). This quality of Merton's scholarship is attributable in large measure to his mastery of the English language. Merton had the ability to write clear, engaging prose, free of “opaque,” “confusing,” and “pompous jargon” (Holton, 2004, p. 515). As a result, core elements of his theorizing are easily discerned by the general reader, and they can be summarized quite succinctly, as presented above. However, SS&A can be read at multiple levels. At one level, Merton offers a concise, incisive description of American culture and suggests a few rather straightforward propositions about the relationship between social class position and crime. At a deeper level, SS&A represents an attempt to apply “general theorizing in sociology” to the “specialized theorizing in criminology” (Merton, 1997, p. 518). Indeed, the various themes developed in SS&A cohere into a highly sophisticated sociological analysis of the interconnections between the social organization of society and levels of crime and other forms of deviant behavior, and of the [p. 613 ↓ ] ways individuals make choices among socially structured alternatives.

To appreciate Merton's arguments, it is useful to locate his work in intellectual context. SS&A falls within the more general tradition associated with a founding figure in sociology—Émile Durkheim—who introduced the concept of “anomie” to the sociological community, most prominently in his analyses of suicide. Durkheim assumed that humans have no natural limits on their desires. As a result, people cannot possibly be satisfied in the absence of some type of external restraint. Social norms provide this

external restraint by circumscribing the goals that can be legitimately aspired to. Levels of suicide are likely to increase when norms weaken and fail to fulfill this critical function, a condition which Durkheim referred to as anomie. Merton appropriates Durkheim's concept of anomie, reinterprets its meaning somewhat, and places it prominently in the title of his essay.

Merton also shares an overarching objective that motivated much of Durkheim's theorizing. Merton intends to develop a distinctively *sociological* explanation for crime and deviance to serve as an alternative to psychological, and particularly Freudian, explanations that emphasize instinctual impulses and that were popular at the time. In so doing, Merton is essentially making the case for sociology as a scientific discipline that offers a unique perspective on human behavior. The questions addressed in SS&A are thus quintessentially sociological in nature. In Merton's words,

For whatever the role of biological impulses, there still remains the further question of why it is that the frequency of deviant behavior varies within different social structures and how it happens that the deviations have different shapes and patterns in different social structures.... Our perspective is sociological. We look at variations in the rates of deviant behavior, not at its incidence. (1968, pp. 185–186)

Given the nature of the questions under examination, Merton quite naturally turns to sociological concepts to look for the answers. He adopts the general approach in sociology referred to as structural/functionalism and conceptualizes society in terms of a social system. According to this approach, any social system can be described with reference to two fundamental properties: its culture (or culture structure) and its social structure.

Merton does not provide rigorous definitions of either culture structure or social structure in SS&A, but he clarifies their meaning while formulating his explanation for deviant behavior. The key elements of the culture structure are the prescribed goals (or ends) of action and the normatively approved (or institutionalized) means for realizing these goals. The other component of social organization—social structure—refers to patterned social relationships. To illustrate the application of these basic conceptual tools of sociology to the explanation of deviant behavior, Merton focuses his analytic

lens on one particular social system—the social system prevalent in the United States in the 1930s. The distinguishing feature of this social system, according to Merton, is *malintegration*—intrinsic tensions between core features of the system. Such malintegration is manifested in two ways: (1) between the main components of the culture and (2) between the culture and the social structure. With respect to the culture, the priority awarded to goals and means is out of balance. The cultural emphasis on the pursuit of goals is exceptionally strong, especially the emphasis on the goal of monetary success. Comparatively less emphasis is placed on the importance of using the institutionalized means to realize these goals. Instead, societal members tend to be governed mainly by “efficiency” norms in the selection of means. People are prone to use whatever means are technically expedient in striving to reach their goals, regardless of whether these means are socially approved of or not. These twin features of culture—the strong emphasis on monetary success goals and the weak emphasis on normative means—are part of the dominant cultural ethos of the society; they are at the heart of the American Dream. Moreover, for Merton (1964, p. 226), the breakdown in the culture associated with the American Dream constitutes the essence of anomie or normlessness: “when a high degree of anomie has set in, the rules once governing conduct have lost their savor and their force.”

The second sense in which the social system in the United States exhibits malintegration involves the interrelationships between culture and social structure. Merton underscores the extent to which the cultural goals in American society are universalistic; [p. 614 ↓ ] they apply to everyone. However, social structure distributes access to the normatively approved means differentially. This is where social class comes into the picture. Opportunities to reach the cultural success goals through legitimate means vary by class position. Specifically, those in the lower classes are not awarded the same chances as those in the higher classes to pursue success in the acceptable ways. It is precisely this disjuncture between features of social structure (inequality of opportunity rooted in the class system) and elements of culture (universal success goals) that undermines the integrity of the culture and leads to anomie. To quote Merton,

the social structure strains the cultural values, making action in accord with them readily possible for those occupying certain statuses within the society and difficult or impossible for others. The social structure

acts as a barrier or as an open door to the acting out of cultural mandates. When the cultural and the social structure are malintegrated, the first calling for behavior and attitudes which the second precludes, there is a strain toward the breakdown of norms, toward normlessness. (1968, pp. 216–217)

Having laid out his analysis of how features of the organization of society can create strains toward anomie, Merton proceeds to consider the ways in which individual actors might respond to their social environment. He sets forth the logical possibilities in the form of a typology of modes of individual adaptation. The respective types are determined by the actor's acceptance of (signified by +) or rejection of (signified by #) the cultural goals and institutionalized means. His types include conformity (+ +), innovation (+ #), ritualism (# +), retreatism (# #), and rebellion (+/# +/#).

The most common mode of adaptation is that of conformity. The actor accepts both the cultural goals and the institutionalized means for pursuing these goals despite any malintegration of the society. Merton maintains that this type of adaptation is actually quite common. If it were not, society would cease to exist in any meaningful sense. The second mode of adaptation is innovation. The innovator aspires to the culturally prescribed goals, especially the goal of accumulating wealth, but is willing to use whatever means are expedient to realize these goals. The applicability of this mode of adaptation to criminal behavior is readily apparent, given that illegal means (e.g., robbery, theft, drug dealing) may be highly expedient. In the third mode of adaptation, ritualism, the actor abandons the cultural goals but nevertheless continues to adhere to the institutionalized means, essentially “going through the motions.” An example would be the low-level bureaucrat who has given up on any chance to rise through the ranks but who nevertheless compulsively follows the rules of the workplace. The retreatist mode of adaptation, in contrast, entails the rejection of both the goals and the institutionalized means. The person adapting in this fashion essentially drops out of society. Drug abuse, alcoholism, and vagrancy are examples of retreatism. Finally, the adaptation of rebellion involves not only rejecting the goals and means of the existing social order but also replacing them with a new set of goals and means. Rebellion constitutes an effort to change the cultural and social structures of society rather than to accommodate to them.

Merton indicates that the likelihood that someone will adapt in a designated way is socially structured, although his account of the linkages is not always very clear. His most explicit and plausible arguments, and those that have generated the most interest in criminology, pertain to innovation. Given that members of the lower classes are confronted most directly with the harsh realities of inequality of opportunity, it is reasonable to anticipate that they will be especially prone to turn to illegitimate means (i.e., to innovate) as they pursue the common cultural goal of monetary success and accompanying high social status. These arguments further imply that rates of criminal behavior should tend to vary inversely with social class position.

In sum, Merton uses the conceptual building blocks of general sociological theory to formulate an original and provocative explanation for the social structuring of crime and other forms of deviant behavior. His explanation is radically sociological in the sense that it is cast in terms of the basic properties of social systems and their interconnections rather than individual propensities. High rates of deviant behavior can be traced to anomie, a cultural imbalance in the emphasis on goals versus means. This cultural imbalance is itself generated by a system disjuncture—an intrinsic incompatibility between goals that are universalistic and inequality in the opportunity to realize [p. 615 ↓ ] these goals. In addition, Merton develops the sociological insight that while people are capable of adapting in varying ways to the social environment, they do so by choosing among socially structured alternatives. Criminal behavior understood as innovation is thus a perfectly understandable (if undesirable) response for those who occupy positions in the social structure where the opportunities to use the legitimate means are limited. The rates of crime should accordingly be comparatively high among the disadvantaged social classes.

## Subcultural Extensions

SS&A explains how normal features of the social structure can exert pressures toward crime and other forms of deviant behavior, and the accompanying typology of the modes of individual adaptation sets forth a logically coherent and concise schema for describing possible responses. However, as scholars such as Ian Taylor, Paul Walton, and Jock Young have noted, SS&A does not offer a clear or compelling account of the determinants of *specific* adaptations. For example, assuming comparable



exposure to a strain toward anomie, why might people choose the retreatist rather than the ritualist adaptation? There is also a curious sense in which the adaptation to structural pressures is depicted in highly individualistic terms in SS&A, despite Merton's commitment to advancing a sociological explanation for deviant behavior. As Marshall Clinard has observed, it is almost as if each individual confronts and responds to structural pressures in isolation.

Two particularly noteworthy efforts to overcome this limitation of SS&A appeared in the mid-1950s and in 1960—Albert Cohen's *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*, and Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin's *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs*. Both works synthesize elements of Merton's anomie perspective with insights about subcultural dynamics. In addition, both scholarly developments grew out of personal contacts with Merton, reflecting what Merton (1997) called their shared “cognitive microenvironments.” Cohen had been exposed to lectures on SS&A when he was an undergraduate at Harvard in a course taught by Merton. Cloward wrote his doctoral dissertation under Merton's direction at Columbia.

As indicated in the title of his work, Cohen's primary analytic focus is on explaining juvenile delinquency. He begins with a basic “psychogenic” assumption about motivation, namely, that “all human action—not delinquency alone—is an ongoing series of efforts to solve problems” (p. 50). Cohen further reasons that problems are not distributed randomly. Instead, persons similarly located in the social class system find themselves confronting similar problems. When such persons have effective interaction with others, they tend to develop subcultures as solutions to their shared problems.

Cohen proposes that members of the working class, and especially working-class boys, confront a basic status problem in American society. The dominant values in the culture are those of the middle class, and these are the values that govern the prevailing standards for achievement. In Cohen's words, all youths are judged according to middle-class “measuring rods.” Yet working-class boys tend not to fare very well when these measuring rods are applied to them. Following in the spirit of SS&A, Cohen accepts the basic premise that class position determines opportunities. The middle-class home is simply better equipped to train the child to compete for status according to the prevailing standards (p. 94).

Cohen outlines several possible subcultural solutions, but the most important one for understanding juvenile delinquency is the delinquent subculture. The delinquent subculture solves the status problem that is experienced by working-class boys when they are judged by middle-class measuring rods by “providing criteria of status which these children *can* meet” (p. 121, emphasis in the original). These standards of status in the delinquent subculture bear an ironic relationship to middle-class standards—they essentially represent an inversion of middle-class values. “The delinquent conduct is right, by the standards of [the] subculture, precisely *because* it is wrong by the norms of the larger culture” (p. 28, emphasis in the original).

Drawing loosely on psychoanalytic theory, Cohen suggests that the delinquent subculture can thus be understood as a collective reaction formation on the part of working-class boys. These youths have been socialized into middle-class values, and yet they seek to escape the status problems that would result were they to acknowledge [p. 616 ↓ ] the legitimacy of these values by embracing a value system that seems to affirm the opposite. These complex socio-psychological and subcultural dynamics help makes sense out of the peculiar quality of much delinquent activity which, according to Cohen, is “non-utilitarian, malicious, and negativistic” in character rather than rational and goal directed (p. 25).

The other classic subcultural extension of SS&A is Cloward and Ohlin's differential opportunity theory, which is also directed toward explaining juvenile delinquency. Following in the spirit of Cohen, the authors take as their point of departure the premise that delinquency is best understood as a collective, subcultural solution to shared problems. They also remain faithful to the general logic of SS&A by accepting the basic assumption that in American society, members of the lower classes are confronted with structural barriers to achieving the cultural goals of success. The pressures for delinquent behavior can ultimately be traced to problems of adjustment resulting from these unequal opportunities associated with social class position.

Cloward and Ohlin's most distinctive contribution is to expand the conceptualization of opportunity structures by incorporating and building on insights associated with the classic Chicago School in criminology. Whereas Merton directs attention to lack of access to opportunities for achievement in the realm of legitimate activities, Cloward and Ohlin observe that the performance of illegitimate acts also depends on

opportunities. They propose that “each individual occupies a position in both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures” (p. 150). The collective, subcultural responses to problems of adjustment will accordingly reflect the illegitimate opportunities that are available in the social environment.

Cloward and Ohlin identify three common types of delinquent subcultures that are likely to emerge in disadvantaged areas of large cities: a criminal subculture, a conflict subculture, and a retreatist subculture. The criminal subculture is oriented toward criminal values and the pursuit of material gain through illegal means. The conflict subculture regards the use of violence as the currency of respect and status. The retreatist subculture is characterized by withdrawal from society through the consumption of drugs. The likelihood that the respective subcultures will emerge and persist depends on the available learning and performance structures in the social environment—that is, on the illegitimate as well as the legitimate opportunity structures.

## Empirical Assessments and Critiques

The anomie perspective as represented in SS&A and in the subcultural extensions stimulated a large volume of research in the middle decades of the 20th century. The perspective was applied to a variety of forms of deviant behavior, including not only crime and delinquency but also mental disorders, drug addiction, and alcoholism. Some researchers attempted to develop measures of anomie based on indicators of social structural conditions, whereas others directed their efforts to measuring the subjective experience of being in environments with high levels of anomie (this subjective condition was often referred to as anomia). The results of this research failed to support anomie theory in many instances which, combined with theoretical critiques, led to its gradual decline in influence through the 1970s and early 1980s. The perspective has subsequently enjoyed a reversal in fortunes, as scholars have responded to and challenged earlier criticisms.

With respect to theoretical concerns, critics raised questions about the adequacy of Merton's basic conceptual framework and the plausibility of underlying assumptions. Some, such as Edwin Lemert, expressed skepticism that a clear line can be drawn between cultural and social structure in concrete analyses of social phenomena, while

others, such as Ruth Rosner Kornhauser, questioned the view that there is in fact a value consensus in American society about the importance of the goal of monetary success. Scholars sympathetic to Merton's approach responded to the latter of these criticisms of SS&A by arguing that the critique is based on an oversimplified rendering of its thesis. Merton does not propose that monetary success is the only success goal. Rather, the proposition at the heart of SS&A is that monetary success enjoys a position of special prominence in the hierarchy of goals in the United States.

With respect to empirical critiques, a good deal of research focused on the commonly derived prediction of an inverse relationship between social [p. 617 ↓] class and crime. Interestingly, Merton himself rejected the notion that the validity of his theory depended on an inverse relationship between social class and crime, as he reported in a personal interview with Francis Cullen and Steven Messner. Merton observed that the paradigm of SS&A could explain fraud among scientists who, blocked from much-cherished professional status, sought to innovate by publishing fabricated data. Still, because of his emphasis on differential access to success goals across the class structure, Merton's theory was seen as predicting high rates of crime and deviance among the disadvantaged.

In this regard, an association between neighborhood levels of disadvantage and officially recorded rates of crime and delinquency had been well documented in the early decades of the 20th century by researchers in the Chicago School. The validity of this relationship, however, was questioned in the 1950s as criminologists began to move away from the use of official crime data in favor of the newly developed self-report methodology. In self-report studies, samples of respondents, usually juveniles, are presented with questionnaire items asking about involvement in various forms of criminal and delinquent behavior. Analyses based on self-reported offending typically detected little or no relationship with social class. This led Charles Tittle et al. to conclude in an influential study that the widely held view that crime and delinquency are concentrated in the lower classes is a "myth."

Other researchers urged caution in dismissing a class/crime relationship on conceptual and methodological grounds. One of the limitations of self-report studies is that they typically measure relatively minor forms of offending, especially self-report studies that are focused on juvenile delinquency. The domain of behavior in these studies thus

differs from that represented in the official crime statistics, which record very serious offenses (along with some relatively minor offenses). Research that encompassed the more serious forms of illegal behavior in the measurement of self-reported offending tended to find relationships between social class and crime that were more similar to those reported in studies based on official data. A second issue involved the nature of the relationship between social class and crime. Some researchers proposed that high levels of offending are likely to be observed only among those at the very bottom of the social class hierarchy, and if so, standard socioeconomic status measures that cover the entire range of social classes might fail to detect much of an association because they do not focus on the strategic population. Studies using measures that differentiate the highly disadvantaged from others revealed evidence consistent with the expected association between class and offending.

As noted by J. Robert Lilly et al., critics of the efforts to extend SS&A by incorporating subcultural dynamics have questioned the adequacy of the description of delinquent subcultures. Cohen's claim that the delinquent subculture is oriented toward "non-utilitarian, malicious, and negativistic" activities was criticized as being an exaggerated portrayal. While some delinquent activity reflects these qualities, much delinquency is in fact utilitarian and goal directed. Similarly, Cloward and Ohlin's typology of criminal, conflict, and retreatist subcultures was faulted for implying a degree of specialization that is at odds with reality. Delinquents are typically much more versatile, engaging in activities that cut across the respective subcultural types. As a result of these criticisms, few contemporary criminologists regard the typologies of Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin as faithful descriptions of most delinquent gangs, although there is still considerable appreciation for their accounts of the social processes underlying the formation and persistence of youth subcultures.

A considerable body of literature also accumulated on a social psychological implication derived from SS&A. Researchers formulated an analytic framework to assess strain theory, which was considered to be the individual-level analogue to the social structural arguments advanced by Merton. The principal hypothesis examined was that a perceived discrepancy between aspirations and expectations should be related to levels of offending. More specifically, individuals who aspire to lofty goals but who expect that actual achievements will fall short of these goals should experience strain and exhibit a high degree of criminal and delinquent involvement. Numerous studies implemented

this analytic strategy, with results that were often interpreted as being non-supportive of strain theory. However, other researchers identified methodological limitations of these studies and offered more favorable assessments of the accumulated evidence.

[p. 618 ↓ ]

## Legacy

The renewed interest in the anomie perspective in the late 1980s and early 1990s has led to concerted efforts to refine and elaborate key insights originally put forth in SS&A. At the social psychological level, Robert Agnew has formulated a general strain theory, which enumerates the wide range of sources of strain and identifies conditions that affect the expression of strain in criminal or noncriminal ways. At the macro-level, Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld have proposed an institutional-anomie theory, which postulates that anomie and high rates of crime are likely when the institutional structure of society is out of balance, specifically, when the economy tends to take priority over noneconomic institutions. These theories are still relatively young and their impact on criminology remains to be determined, but they have stimulated a growing body of empirical research and commentary. In addition, recent efforts to conduct rigorous assessments of Merton's "classic" version of anomie have provided some suggestive support.

Reflecting on the legacy of SS&A in the field of criminology, one cannot help but be impressed by its adaptability and resiliency. Merton often referred to the "evolving" character of SS&A, and the perspective has indeed evolved appreciably over time. Merton himself continued to revise and refine his arguments in response to critical commentary. Others sympathetic to his approach to understanding crime and to sociological theorizing more generally have picked up the baton as well. To be sure, SS&A has been subjected to intense scrutiny and legitimate criticism over the years. Moreover, many contemporary criminologists disagree with specific arguments put forth by Merton. It is nevertheless fair to say that the core insights of SS&A have inspired the sociological imagination of generations of scholars, and this distinctive approach to explaining crime and other forms of deviant behavior continues to enjoy a "living presence" in the discipline at the onset of the 21st century.

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*See also*

- [Agnew, Robert: General Strain Theory](#)
- [Cloward, Richard A.: The Theory of Illegitimate Means](#)
- [Cloward, Richard A., and Lloyd E. Ohlin: Delinquency and Opportunity](#)
- [Cohen, Albert K.: Delinquent Boys](#)
- [Durkheim, Émile: Anomie and Suicide](#)
- [Messner, Steven F., and Richard Rosenfeld: Institutional-Anomie Theory](#)

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