

# CMY3701 summary/essay of Merton\'s theory of anomie for 30 marks

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## Merton – Anomie (30 Marks)

This is a summary of Richard Merton's theory of anomie, including my own examples, I used these as my own exam preparation and managed to obtain a distinction. Please do not submit this essay as an assignment, there are direct quotes from the study guide. Use these for exam revision ONLY .

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## Merton – Anomie (30 Marks)

### 1. Introduction

Anomie was first used by the 19<sup>th</sup> century sociologist Emile Durkheim, Robert Merton used Durkheim's concept of anomie to develop his theory of anomie in 1938. Merton's theory was broader in orientation and more specific in application. In order to remain true to his belief that criminal behaviour was concentrated among the disadvantaged, Merton had to move away from Durkheim's definition of anomie: that anomie applied to society as a whole. Merton associated anomie with a lack of equality of opportunities. At a time when crime was assuming serious proportions in America, Merton set out to clarify the problem. According to Merton, social conditions bring uneven pressure to bear on people of different classes, which will cause some people to commit crime. It is the relationship between desires and the means of achieving those desires that is fundamental. Everybody is under pressure to succeed, but those who cannot or who are least likely to succeed lawfully are under strain to use illegal opportunities for advancement.

### 2. Definition of a key concept

#### 2.1 Anomie

Anomie that was developed by Robert Merton claims that individuals use alternative means – including criminal activities – to gain access to socially created needs that they cannot obtain through legal behaviour/means.

### 3. Assumptions of Merton's theory

According to Merton, an integrated society maintains a balance between the social structure (approved social means) and culture (approved goals). This statement contains two main elements:

- i. A society has cultural goals that are generally regarded as being worthwhile. *For example, someone might want to become a doctor, because of the wealth and status that comes with it.*
- ii. A society has institutionalised means or approved methods whereby these objectives may be realised, such as educational qualifications (*going to a university/college*) and steady employment. People should, therefore be prepared to start at the bottom and to succeed through hard work. *For example, before becoming a doctor a qualification should be obtained. One also starts at the bottom as a resident and then works hard in order to come out on top as a doctor.*

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Wealth and success is the central focus, how one goes about acquiring these seems to be of less importance for some people and it is this imbalance that results in anomie. Because wealth and success are seen as being of such great importance it is passed on from generation to generation and the pressure of upholding these expectations usually means that it is done at any cost, even by using illegal means to obtain it *for example by stealing it*

### 4. Crime as a lower-class phenomenon

Merton turned his attention to patterns of crime and delinquency. According to official statistics, most offences were committed by lower class people. Merton explained the higher incidence of crime among the lower classes as follows:

- Those in the lower class want to achieve wealth and financial success just as much as the people from the middle and upper classes.
- People from the lower classes do not have access to the legal institutionalised means to realise their ambitions.
- The resulting anomie leads to strain and pressurises these groups into using any means to obtain an income, including illegal means.

*For example, someone from a lower class may not have the opportunity to obtain any kind of education, which in turn will limit their job opportunities, because they won't be able to obtain a high status job with a high income, they will then seek illegal means to obtain a bigger income (Fraud)*

### 5. Reactions to anomie

When society finds itself in a state of anomie, a number of reactions of adaption are possible. Each of these adaptations is a way of coping with the balance (or imbalance) between goals and means

#### 5.1 Conformity (Goals: + and means: +) seen as conformists

Conformity is the most common reaction, even in societies characterised by anomie. This means that both the cultural goals and the institutionalised means of achieving them are accepted. People simply accept the status quo and continue their pursuit of success within the constraints of the accepted means available. Social stability therefore, is generally maintained. *A conformist may for example want a nice car, so he/she will work hard, save up the money and then buy the car.*

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### 5.2 Innovation (Goals: + and means: -) seen as innovators

Innovation is the most common deviant reaction. Innovation occurs when people of society accept the culturally defined goals, but finds that the means of achieving them are so restrictive that they have to turn to illegal means. Innovators tend to rely on illegal means in an attempt to achieve financial success. It is interesting to note that, as far as the potential offender is concerned, innovation may be a more effective means of achieving success than conformity. Instead of saving money, for example, robbing a bank is much quicker. An innovator may for example need money to buy a new car, but instead of saving the money for a new car they will find means to steal the money to go buy a car.

### 5.3 Ritualism (Goals: - and means: +) seen as ritualists

Ritualism involves the acceptance of institutionalised means, but rejection of cultural goals of society (*for example financial rewards*). Ritualists are usually not regarded as deviant. Ritualists work hard, but do not attempt to achieve higher financial positions, most likely due to abandoned dreams. Their jobs are their security and they do not use their jobs to improve their positions, they have no interest in getting ahead in life. A ritualist will for example live life from day to day and accept the amount they are being payed, with no interest in earning more money, they basically just live to survive.

### 5.4 Retreatism (Goals: - and means: -) seen as retreatsists

Retreatism is an escape reaction. Here, both the cultural goal of progress and approved means are rejected. Merton felt that these people did not really belong to the society in which they lived, that's why they withdraw or retreat from society. Retreatsists might also include racial or religious minorities. They commit crimes to fund their drug habit or while they are under the influence of drugs/alcohol. For example, some drug addicts might decide to steal from their own family members to support their addiction.

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### 5.5 Rebellion (Goals: +/- and means: +/-) seen as rebels

Rebellion involves the rejection of the system as such. Both the goals and the means are rejected and replaced by new ones. Rebels may want something unusual and will do anything to achieve it. For example people who form cults conform to their own new laws/rules in order to obtain what they want

## 6. Evaluation of Merton's theory

### 6.1 Pro's

- The theory of anomie explains the concentration of crime, not only in the lower-class urban areas, but also among the lower-classes and minority groups in general.
- Although Merton's theory focuses on explaining crime in an American society, it is also relevant in other societies.
- The theory of anomie sets the scene for clear policy implications
- Merton's theory of anomie is a broad explanation in that it can be applied to a wide range of deviant and criminal activities

### 6.2 Con's

- Merton's theory does not clearly address the reasons why a specific individual commits an offence
- Merton's theory fails to explain why it is that legal means of advancement are unevenly distributed in society
- His theory doesn't really explain the origins of people's motivation to commit crime
- The scope of the theory is limited mainly to property crimes committed by the lower classes.

## 7. Conclusion

Please provide own conclusion. Remember to indicate that this is your opinion, for example "this student is of the opinion that..." This is what you think about the theory. This is not a summary of you essay.