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Present a detailed discussion on Merton's anomie theory (25)

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1 Introduction

Robert Merton's anomie theory has been much-admired as one of the most significant developments in the study of crime and deviance. Merton developed his theory in 1938. Merton equated anomie with a lack of equality for opportunity as his theory becomes the explanation for high rates of deviant behaviour. Merton also believed that social conditions are the cause of crime due to different classes, race and ethnicity.



The link between desires and means has led to a version of the strain theory, which portrays that everyone is under pressure to succeed and hence those who are least likely to be successful are then under pressure to commit crime and make use of illegal opportunities for progression.

In this assignment the student will briefly discuss Merton's anomie theory and discuss crime as a lower class phenomenon and list the negative and positive aspects of this theory.

2. Definition of key concept

2.1 Anomie

Anomie is a French word which literally means lawlessness. Durkheim used "anomie" to refer to a state of normlessness (absence of norms) (CMY 3701, 2014: 78).



Anomie therefore refers to a circumstance in the general public in which the norms are no longer efficient in amendable conduct or behaviour.

3. Assumptions of Merton's theory

Many people try to achieve success but fail. Merton affirms that an incorporated society maintains balance between the social structure (approved social means) and culture (approved goals).

A society has cultural goals such as wealth, material possessions and status and these are regarded as being worthwhile. A society has approved means whereby these objectives are realised such as educational qualifications and steady employment. It is imperative that people prepare themselves to start at the bottom and succeed through hard work. ↴

Members of the upper class have much greater access to education and contacts that can enhance their life opportunities whereas members of the lower class experience much stress or strain in their attempts to make money legitimately. ↴
Merton in Brown, Esbensen and Gies (2010: 241) postulates that that the attainment of wealth has become such an overriding concern that little satisfaction is derived from merely playing the game honestly. Merton therefore states that the imbalance between goals and means brings about anomie thus resulting in crime.

It therefore becomes critical that the value of success is passed on from one generation to the other, encouraging people to pursue success. ↴

3.1 Crime classified as a lower class phenomenon ↴

People in the lower class also want to achieve success and wealth like those in the upper class and middle class but because they do not have legal institutionalized means like education and career opportunities to realise their ambitions, it therefore leads to strain and use illegal means to achieve their success. ↴

3.1.1 Reactions to anomie ↴



According to ~~CMY 3701~~ (2014:82) when a society finds itself in a state of anomie, a number of reaction or modes of adaptation are possible". Merton identified five individual modes of adaptation as a way of coping with the balance (or imbalance) between goals and means. They are namely:

- Conformity
- Innovation
- Ritualism
- Retreatism
- Rebellion ↴



↴ Conformity: conformity involves acceptance of both the prevailing cultural goals as well as the approved means of achieving these goals. According to ~~CMY 3701~~ (2010:82) Merton states that in stable society's conformity is the most common reaction, even in societies characterized by anomie.

↴ Innovation: Brown et al (2010:242) indicates that innovation is probably the most common form of adaptation to structural stress induced by the inability to legitimately achieve cultural goals. Innovation occurs when an individual accepts cultural goals but takes on an alternative approach for accomplishing them. They utilise illegal means to attain them because they do not distinguish themselves as having legitimate opportunities. An individual who cannot afford to study for a Social Workers degree and pays another person for the degree illegally and utilise this degree to get themselves suitable employment. An individual who is involved in housebreaking in order to own a television set that he or she cannot afford. A student who cheats in an exam are just some of the examples of innovators.

Merton therefore identified innovation as particularly common among the lower classes: they are stigmatized anyway owing to their low skill levels, low pay and greater vulnerability to unemployment. They tend to get involved in property and organized crime (~~CMY 3701~~, 2014:83).

Ritualism: Brown et al (2010:243) says that ritualists can be thought of as the opposite of innovators as they abide by the rules but have abandoned pursuit of goals. Ritualism combines the abandonment of cultural goals and acceptance of institutionalised means. They are not regarded as deviant as they are not trying to get ahead but focus on obtaining what they already have by inflexibly following the rules and norms. They scale down their aspirations to a realistic level.

For example: An individual loses sight for reasons to do things like going to a particular social gathering that he or she has always enjoyed going to like church but continues the socially approved methods, thus making a method out of this ritual. The individual who lack this enthusiasm also exemplifies ritualism.


Retreatism: This is the fourth mode of adaptation. According to Reid (1994:184) retreatism is the least common of the five adaptations. Retreatism is known as an escapist reaction. It is dropping out which entails rejecting both cultural goals and approved means of attaining them. Their dropout status is enhanced by drug addiction, homelessness and transiency. This mode of adaptation is perceived as deviant because some of the behaviours are such as public drunkenness becomes criminalized. There are no victims involved other than themselves.

Rebellion: this is the last mode of adaptation identified by Merton which involves a rejection of the system. An individual rejects the goals and means of society and substitutes a new set of values and norms in replacement of the redundant ones. For example: an individual who employs violence and intimidation to get money instead of hard work and honesty to achieve a goal.

Merton proposes that these five modes of adaptation are ways in which people react to anomic circumstances.

4. The positive and negative aspects of Merton's theory

4.1 Positive aspects of Merton's theory

- Although Merton's theory focuses on explaining crime in American society, it is also relevant to other societies.
- The theory of anomie sets a scene for clear policy implications 
- It is a broad explanation in that it can be applied to a wide range of deviant and criminal activities.



4.2 Negative aspects of Merton's theory

- It does not clearly address the reasons why a specific individual commits an offence.
- It fails to explain why it is that legal means of advancement are unevenly distributed in society.
- It does not explain the origins of people's motivation to commit crime.
- White collar crime is ignored.
- Lawlessness is an exclusively lower –class problem.
- The theory is limited to property crimes committed by lower classes.
- The theory does not take into account social-psychological variables that might explain the adoption of one adaptation over another (Reid 1994:184).



5. Conclusion



Merton's theory proposes that the failure to achieve goals is blocked opportunities. The student also believes that the failure to realise desired goals due to individual inadequacies or weaknesses can also impact strain on individuals. Success should not be measured by material things but people need to be inspired to work hard to achieve their goals or success. It is true that



penicillin does not respond positively in all patients. By that, the student is saying anomie is not a matter of lower class individuals but it is also witnessed in the working class as there are white collar crimes. It is not all people of the lower class that respond to the same condition in the same manner. ↗

6. Bibliography ↗

Brown, SE, Esbensen, F & Geis, G. 2010. *Criminology. Explaining crime and its context*. 7th edition

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Reid. S.T 1994. *Crime and Criminology*. 7th edition. ↗

