

ANOMIE THEORIES

Early Theories of social Structure: Early to mid-1800s

- The origin of social structures is traced to European researchers in the early to mid-1800 including Auguste Comte, Andre-Michel Guerry, and Adolphe Quetelet
- Due to the industrial revolution, societies were quickly transitioning from primarily agriculturally based economics to industrial-based economies. This transition inevitably brought people from rural farmlands to dense urban cities, with a resulting enormous increase in social problems.
- The problems associated with such fast urbanization, as well as the shift in economies, led to a drastic change in basic social structures in Europe, as well as the United States.
- The French and American revolutions inspired the Enlightenment movement, which together with the industrial revolution, affected intellectual theorizing on social structures as well as their impact on crime, throughout the 1800s.

Auguste Comte

- Comte is credited for coining the term sociology
- Comte distinguished the concepts of social statics and social dynamics
- **Social Statics** are aspects of society that relate to stability and social order; they allow societies to continue and endure
- **Social Dynamics** are aspects of social life that alter how societies are structured and pattern the development of societal institutions.
- Between 1851 and 1854, Comte published a four-volume work entitled *A system of Positive Polity* that encouraged the use of scientific methods to observe and measure societal factors
- Comte's work set the stage for the positivistic perspective, which emphasized social determinism and rejected the notion of free will and individual choice that was common up until that time.

Andre-Michel Guerry and Adolphe Quetelet

- After the first modern national crime statistics were published in France in the early 1800s, a French lawyer named Andre-Michel Guerry published a report that examined those statistics and concluded that property crime

were higher in wealthy areas, but violent crime was much higher in poor areas.

- Guerry concluded that the explanation was opportunity: The wealthy had more to steal and that is the primary cause of property crime.
- Adolphe Quetelet, through statistical analysis of the French data, showed that certain types of individuals were more likely to commit crime. Specifically, young, male poor, uneducated and unemployed individuals were more likely to commit crime than their counterparts.
- Quetelet asserted that greater inequality between wealth and poverty in the same place tends to excite temptations and passions. This is a concept referred as relative deprivation, a quite distinct condition from simple poverty.
- Quetelet also showed that areas with the most rapidly changing economic conditions also showed high crime rates. As such, crime is a result of societal structure and not the result of individual propensities or personal decision making

Emile Durkheim

- Emile Durkheim was the most influential theorist in the state of modern structural perspectives on criminality.
- Influenced by the American and French revolutions and the Industrial Revolution, Durkheim developed a general model of societal development largely based on the economic labor distribution, in which societies are seen as evolving from simplistic mechanical society toward a multilayered organic society in his dissertation entitled *The Division of Labor in Society*.
- In primitive, mechanical societies all members perform the same functions. Such similarities in work, as well as constant interaction with like members of the society, leads to a strong uniformity of values, which Durkheim called collective conscience. Collective conscience is the degree to which individuals of a society think alike (The totality of social likeness).
- The similar norms and values among people in these primitive mechanical societies creates "mechanical solidarity," a very simple-layered social structure with a very strong collective conscience
- In mechanical societies, law functions to enforce the conformity of the groups
- In organic societies in the industrial age, the distribution of labor becomes more highly specified

- “Organic Solidarity” exists when people tend to depend on other groups because of the highly specified division of labor, and laws have the primary function of regulating the interactions and maintaining solidarity among the groups
- Moving from a mechanical to an organic society very rapidly results in a breaking down on societal bonds creating a climate for antisocial behavior
- To Durkheim, crime is a normal, necessary part of society (structural functionalism). Durkheim thought that crime served several functions in society. First, it defines the moral boundaries of society (What is right and wrong; what are the rules of society). Second, the identification of rule-breakers creates a bond among the other members of the society.
- To Durkheim, mechanical societies could count on relative consensus about moral values and norms, and this sometimes led to too much control and a stagnation of creative thought. Durkheim thought that progress in society typically depends on deviating from established moral boundaries, especially if society is in the mechanical stage.
- Modern societies do not have such extreme restraint against deviations from established norms. As organic societies are multicultural and multiethnic in nature, a consensus about norms and values does not exist and law is necessary to regulate individual behaviors
- Durkheim emphasized that human beings have no internal mechanism to signal when their needs and desires are satiated. Therefore, the selfish desires of humankind are limitless; the more an individual has; the more he or she wants. Laws need to be promulgated to set limits on human tendencies as people are greedy by nature
- When society’s ability to serve as a regulatory mechanism breaks down, the selfish, greedy tendencies of individuals are uncontrolled causing a state of **Anomie**, or normlessness. Societies in such anomic states experience increases in many social problems, particularly criminal activity.

Merton’s Anomie Theory

- Robert K. Merton drew heavily in Durkheim’s idea of anomie to develop his own theory of structural strain. He combined Durkheim’s ideas and propositions with an emphasis on American culture.
- Merton was highly influenced by the Great Depression; how much the economic institutions affected almost all other social factors, particularly

crime. As the economic breakdown peaked, people got desperate and property and personal crime arose.

- Merton focused his theory specifically on the so-called “American Dream” in U.S. The American dream refers to the idea that hard work will result in the achievement of personal goals.
- Merton believed that the socialized image of the goal is material wealth, whereas the socialized concept of the means of achieving the goal is hard work (education, labor, etc).
- As Merton points out, a small percentage of people rise from the lower class to become materially successful. The American Dream does not turn out to be true for the majority of people causing high amounts of strain and frustrations among individuals
- Merton believes that most of the frustration and strain was not due to the failure to achieve conventional goals (i.e. wealth), but rather to the differential emphasis on material goals and the de-emphasis on the importance of conventional means
- Merton believed that American society emphasizes the goals far more than the means. Thus, according to Merton, the disequilibrium in emphasis between the goals or means of societies is what he called anomie
- Whereas Durkheim believed that anomie was primarily caused by a society transitioning too fast to maintain its regulatory control over its members, for Merton, anomie represented too much focus on the goals of wealth in the United States, at the expense of conventional means
- Merton believed that individuals, especially in the lower class, realize that the American Dream is a false illusion. Then, they commit crime to try to achieve the goals without going through the traditional means.
- Different individuals adapt to strain differently. There are five adaptations to strain according to Merton: Conformity, ritualism, innovation, retreatism, and rebellion.

Merton's Modes of Adaptation

- (1) *Conformity*: Conformity occurs when individuals accept the culturally defined goals and the socially legitimate means of achieving them. Merton suggests that most individuals, even those who do not have easy access to the means and goals, remain conformists.
- (2) *Innovation*: Innovation occurs when an individual accepts the goals of society, but rejects or lacks the socially legitimate means of achieving them. Innovation, the mode of adaptation most associated with criminal behavior, explains the high rate of crime committed by uneducated and poor individuals who do not have access to legitimate means of achieving the social goals of wealth and power.
- (3) *Ritualism*: The ritualist accepts a lifestyle of hard work, but rejects the cultural goal of monetary rewards. This individual goes through the motions of getting an education and working hard, yet is not committed to the goal of accumulating wealth or power.
- (4) *Retreatism*: involves rejecting both the cultural goal of success and the socially legitimate means of achieving it. The retreatist withdraws or retreats from society and may become an alcoholic, drug addict, or vagrant.
- (5) *Rebellion* occurs when an individual rejects both culturally defined goals and means and substitutes new goals and means. For example, rebels may use social or political activism to replace the goal of personal wealth with the goal of social justice and equality

Quick Summary of Merton's Theory

1. Most members of society share (or are socialized into) a common system of values
2. This common value system teaches us both the things we should strive for (cultural goals) and the most appropriate ways (societal means) to achieve those goals
3. If the goals and the means to achieve them are not equally stressed, an anomie condition is created
4. In a disorganized society, different degrees of access to those goals and means exist. Thus, the means are not equally distributed within a disorganized society

5. Some societies, such as that of the United States, may place too much stress on success goals. In a disorganized society, this results in a striving toward those goals, but not enough access to the means to achieve them.
6. Without reasonable access to the socially approved means, members of society will attempt to find some way to resolve the pressure to achieve. These alternative solutions are called "modes of adaptation."
7. Modes of adaptation (please see above).