

Sociological Theories of Crime & Deviance (2)

Functionalist explanations: Robert Merton

The key functionalist thinker on crime was **Robert Merton**. His theory of crime attempted to explain the high levels of crime committed by those **at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy (i.e. the poor, the working class, African-Americans)** in the **USA** in the post-depression period of the 1930s. Merton argued that the source of crime lies in **the relationship between the culture and the social structure of American society**. (Note that Merton's emphasis on how societies are structured or organised makes him a **structuralist** sociologist).

Merton observed that the population of the USA share similar values (functionalists call this **value consensus**) in that they are encouraged by the **family, education and the mass media**, and especially **advertising**, to believe in the '**American Dream**'. This is a **package of aspirations and goals** based on the idea that the USA is an **open meritocratic society** in which **hard work** is rewarded in the form of **material success and consumer goods regardless of socio-economic and ethnic background**. The dominant cultural message in the USA, therefore, is if you are ambitious and driven, talented and work hard at school and in your job, **upward social mobility, high income and wealth will be your reward**. For example, it has been suggested that **Abraham Lincoln** and more recently **Barack Obama** are successful symbols of this American Dream.

However, Merton argued that the American Dream is a **cultural myth** because not everyone can access the **institutional means (i.e. the education and jobs)** that are needed to achieve it. The structural organisation of US society meant that **the resources, opportunities and the means needed to get on are not fairly distributed** and consequently it is difficult, if not impossible, for some groups **to compete equally with others** for material success. For example, **evidence suggests that the White-Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) elite enjoy more educational and economic advantages than poorer Whites, Blacks, Hispanics and Native-American Indians**.

In other words, Merton noted an **imbalance or strain between people's pursuit of cultural goals** and their access to the **legitimate institutional means of achieving those goals** because not everybody can be a success in education and many people end up in dead-end jobs or as unemployed. People therefore experience **blocked**

opportunities and consequently they experience feelings of '**anomie**' – they feel **alienated and frustrated** by their failure to achieve their aspirations and as a result become **morally confused**. Merton argued that **individuals at the bottom of society could respond to these blocked opportunities and this moral dilemma in a number of ways:**

- (1) **Conformity** – the majority of those who experience blocked opportunities cope with their disappointment by **accepting their lot. They continue to do their best and make the most of what society offers them.** In other words, they continue to dream about the goal of material success and **conform** to the accepted means of achieving that goal, i.e. **by working hard.**
- (2) **Innovation** – Some people who experience blocked opportunities **remain committed to the cultural goal of material success** but their **commitment to the legitimate means of achieving it**, e.g. education, employment etc **weakens.** They may decide that adopting **illegitimate, i.e. criminal means** is an easier and more effective way of achieving material success.
- (3) **Ritualism** – Some people who experience blocked opportunities **lose sight of the goal of material success** but plod on in **meaningless jobs**, working hard but never really thinking about what they are trying to achieve. These people often become **obsessed with the rituals and regulations** which underpin their jobs. In other words, **the means become more important than the goals to them.**
- (4) **Retreatism** – a small number of those who experience blocked opportunities simply **drop out of conventional society** and consequently **reject both the cultural goal of material success as well as means such as education and jobs.** These people often adopt behaviour which is disapproved of by society such as drug addiction, alcoholism, vagrancy and suicide.
- (5) **Rebellion** – some of those who experience blocked opportunities may **rebel** and seek to replace the cultural goal of material success with **anti-capitalist** goals, e.g. **socialist, Marxist or anarchist ideals.** Some of these revolutionaries may adopt **terrorist means** to achieve their aim of toppling the capitalist system and replacing it with one that reflects their goals and ideals.

In conclusion, then, Merton sees **crime committed by the poor and working-class as a reaction to the social organization of capitalist societies, i.e. the social structure.** He notes that **crime, a deviant and non-conformist activity, is actually caused by**

conformity to the dominant value system. Criminals are actually **very similar** to non-criminals in that they are **both shaped by the same desires and goals, i.e. to achieve material success.**

Evaluation of Merton

- (a) Merton has been criticised because he does not explain **why an individual chooses one particular form of deviant adaptation rather than another, e.g. why do some people react to blocked opportunities by committing crime but most people conform?**
- (b) Merton argues that there exists a **consensus** in modern societies about cultural goals such as material success. However, this consensus is debateable because surveys indicate that **the poor do not believe that they will achieve material success compared with other social groups.** Moreover, **not all members of society aspire to material success.** There are people whose first goal is **altruism** rather than material success – **their primary goal is to help others less fortunate than themselves, e.g. nurses, teachers, social workers etc are typical of workers who are not aiming for material success.**
- (c) **Valier (2001)** points out that it is rare that people strive for only one cultural goal. He argues that people tend to set themselves a variety of goals. For example, people might prioritize doing good or constructing a healthy work-leisure balance or making sure that they attain a happy family life over material success and power.
- (d) **Sarah Churchwell** points out that **the meaning of the 'American Dream' differs according to whichever social or ethnic group one belongs to in the USA.** She argues that there is **no universal agreement in the USA as to what it actually entails.** Merton's definition is one of many competing definitions.
- (e) Merton's theory **only explains a certain type of crime, i.e. those that result in a material or financial benefit but it does not explain crimes of violence such as rape, child abuse, domestic violence etc.**
- (f) Merton's theory fails to explain **collective forms of crime, especially the sorts of crimes committed by young people in gangs, e.g. vandalism, territorial gun and knife crime, tagging, joy-riding etc. These types of crime do not seem on the surface to be motivated by material goals.**

- (g) Merton explains why the poor or working-class commit crime but fails to explain why **corporate and white collar criminals** who have benefitted from the means (i.e. they are educationally successful and have access to professional and managerial careers) commit crime. These types of crime actually arise out of **access to opportunities rather than the blocking of them.**
- (h) As a functionalist, Merton assumes that the law treats everybody equally. However, Marxists such as Box point out that the law is not neutral because it is constructed by the capitalist class in order to protect their interests. Box claims that Merton's analysis is flawed because he fails to ask **who benefits from the organisation of the capitalist system and especially the laws that underpin it.**

Laurie Taylor contemptuously suggests Merton sees society as a **giant fruit machine.** The conformists kid themselves into thinking that the machine is fair and continue to stick their money in it hoping that one day it will pay out the jackpot. The innovators try to win the jackpot by cheating. The ritualists don't care whether they win or lose because they've been hypnotised by the pretty lights on the machine. The retreatists abandon playing the machine and go off to play on the alcohol or drugs machine instead. The rebels smash the machine up because they want to replace it with a fairer model.

However Taylor points out that **Merton never tells us who designed and put the machine there in the first place or who takes the profits out of it.** In other words, Merton rarely acknowledges that **society and the laws that underpin it are invented by the capitalist ruling class and it is they who benefit from its organisation at the expense of other social groups.**

The strengths of Merton

- (i) However, Merton's concept of '**anomie**' is an influential concept and has been extensively used in explanations that link **crime to deprivation and poverty.** The fact that **property crimes generally increase in number in periods of recession** also supports Merton's case. **Sumner** claims that Merton has uncovered the **main cause of crime** in modern societies, i.e. **the alienation caused by disillusion with the impossible goals set by capitalism.**

- (ii) **Cashmore** agrees with Sumner and using the ideas of **Merton** argues that **young African-Caribbeans** in Britain are encouraged like everybody else to pursue material success but **their opportunities are blocked by factors such as racism, failing inner city schools and unemployment**. Young blacks experience **anomie and alienation** – they are aware that **their situation arises from being black in a predominantly white society**. They therefore turn to **street crime** (i.e. **innovation**) and justify their criminal activities on the grounds that **white society has given them nothing, so why should they follow white laws?**
- (iii) Merton's analysis also inspired a number of other influential theories of crime and delinquency. Firstly, **Albert Cohen's subcultural theory attempts to remedy the criticism that Merton's theory does not really address youth crime** (juvenile delinquency). However, **Cohen claimed that Merton's idea that deviance is the product of a mismatch between society's goals and the means of achieving those goals can be applied to crimes committed by young people.**

Cohen argues that **young people are set a social goal – to gain status – and the means of achieving this is educational performance and the acquisition of qualifications**. However, some young people – usually those from working-class backgrounds – cannot achieve status in this way because **their parents have not equipped them with the right skills and because schools have relegated them to the bottom sets or streams**. These boys therefore experience 'anomie' – they are **frustrated** by the treatment they receive from teachers (Cohen calls this '**status frustration**').

By and large, most working-class boys accept this situation and **conform** but a minority will **innovate** by setting up **anti-school subcultures (or gangs) which reject the value system of the school and teachers**. **Moreover, these delinquent subcultures award status to their members for deviant anti-school activities therefore compensating for the school refusing them conventional status**. These deviant activities in school often become the impetus for delinquent anti-social and criminal behaviour **outside the school**. (We will return to Cohen's ideas when we examine **the relationship between crime and age**).

- (iv) Despite Merton's theory being over sixty years old, his ideas continue to be very influential on **modern day criminologists such as Robert Reiner (2007) and Jock Young (2010)**.

Robert Reiner

Reiner (2007) takes a **Mertonian** approach to crime and argues that **since the 1950s the acquisition of money has become the main source of status** and therefore, the **main aspirational goal of many people** in modern Britain. However, Reiner argues that society has failed to provide **the means – education and well-paid jobs – by which monetary success or wealth might become a reality for the majority**. He notes that this is **frustrating** for the majority because at the same time, they can see **massive inequality** because in the last thirty years, **the rich have got richer whilst the poor have got poorer**.

Reiner suggests that it was no coincidence that **the rise in crime began in the same year – 1955- that ITV first went on the air**. He suggests that the **game shows** that dominated this channel promoted a **'get rich quick'** mentality amongst the general population whilst television **advertising** encouraged the idea that **consumer goods and immediate financial rewards could be within the grasp of even the poorest sections of society**. Other sections of the mass media encouraged the view that **greed was good** and that status should only be conferred on those who were **celebrities** and/or on those who already had **material wealth**.

Reiner, like Merton, argues that this emphasis on money as a cultural goal has resulted in **anomie and criminal behaviour**. **Members of society who fail to achieve status and wealth through conventional routes such as education and jobs are increasingly turning to crime** in order to **compensate for their low social and economic position**. According to Reiner's analysis, the **riots and looting in London and Manchester in 2011** merely reflect a **growing breakdown** in law and order, moral codes and respect for the law caused by the **anomic pressures** that **value monetary success and consumer goods so highly**.

Jock Young

Reiner's analysis is generally supported by Jock Young. He argues that we are now living in **the age of late modernity** which is characterised by:

- Jobs which are **low paid and insecure, e.g. zero hour contracts** and which **offer little opportunity for creativity or satisfaction**.

- **Inequality in rewards** – a minority, e.g. celebrities and people working in the financial sector, are the recipients of extravagant and largely unmerited financial rewards.
- **Joyful consumption** – the mass media and consumer advertising strongly encourage all sectors of society to possess material goods and to judge others by their monetary success.

Young argues that these social conditions have produced a **strain** between the **culture** of society which encourages members of society to spend money and consume, and the **structure** of society which fails to provide the majority with the means to do this because there are not enough well-paid jobs to go around. Moreover, those who are disappointed can see the massive **inequalities** that characterise modern society and consequently experience feelings of unfairness and **deprivation**.

These negative feelings (that Merton calls **anomie**) are particularly felt by those at the very bottom of society who experience the **daily humiliation of poverty**. However, Young notes **the media is responsible for convincing all sections of society that consumerism and monetary success is theirs by right**. Consequently even the very poorest sections of society **seek compensation** for their humiliation in the **cult of consumerism** – Young suggests we should not be too surprised that the **children of the poor learn to value from an early age the trademark designer labels such as Nike, Gucci, Blackberry etc, and aim to acquire the clothing, trainers, mobile phones and jewellery that will mark them out as material successes**.

Unfortunately, Young also observes that the **quickest route for some sections of the poor to this consumer society is through criminality**. He suggests that such criminality is increasingly taking on a **violent** character because it is driven by the **stigma and humiliation of poverty**. **Crime is a way of hitting back at society in a way that literally hurts through violent property crimes such as mugging and the occasional riot**.

Conclusions

The work of Reiner and Young has rightly resurrected the importance of Robert Merton in 2012. Young has drawn our attention to the feelings of **deprivation** that may result from the **contradiction** between the **cultural goals of monetary success**

and excessive consumerism and the limited opportunities for self-improvement available in the employment market in the UK today.

Both sociologists highlight the **inevitability of a criminal response to the anomie caused by the organisation of contemporary UK society**. Both suggest that Merton's concept of **anomie** will be crucial to our understanding of the **crime explosion** that they believe will be the **inevitable consequence of the economic recession and austerity that the UK is currently experiencing**.