One criticism of Durkheim is that he argues that society requires a certain amount of deviance to function successfully, but he offers no way of knowing how much deviance is the right amount. Functionalism looks at what functions crime serves for society as a whole and ignores how it might affect different groups or individuals within society. Also, crime doesn’t always promote solidarity. It may have the opposite effect, leading to people becoming more isolated, for example forcing women to stay indoors for fear of attack. However, on the other hand, some crimes do reinforce collective sentiments, for example uniting the community in condemnation of a brutal attack.

Moreover, Strain theories argue that people engage in deviant behaviour when they are unable to achieve socially approved goals by legitimate means. The first strain theory was developed by Robert Merton who adapted Durkheim’s concept of anomie to explain deviance. Merton’s explanation combines 2 elements: structural factors (societies unequal opportunity structure), and cultural factors (strong emphasis on success goals and weaker emphasis on using legitimate means to achieve them. For Merton, deviance is the result of a strain between the goals that a culture encourages individuals to achieve and what the institutional structure of society allows them to achieve legitimately. An example is the American Dream, which Americans are expected to pursue this goal by legitimate means: self-discipline, study, educational qualifications and hard work in a career. The ideology of the ‘American Dream’ tells Americans that their society is a meritocratic one where anyone who makes the effort can get ahead. However, the reality is different: many disadvantaged groups are denied opportunities to achieve legitimately. The resulting strain between the cultural goal of money success and the lack of legitimate opportunities to achieve it produces frustration, and this in turn creates a pressure to resort to illegitimate means such as crime and devian. Merton calls this the pressure to deviate, the strain to anomie. According to Merton, the pressure to deviate is further increased by the fact that American culture places a strong emphasis on achieving success at any price than on doing so by legitimate means. This means that the goal creates a desire to succeed and lack of opportunity creates a pressure to adopt illegitimate means, while the norms are not strong enough to prevent some from succumbing to this temptation.

Merton uses the strain theory to explain some of the patterns of deviance found in society. He argues that an individual’s position in the social structure affects the way they adapt or respond to the strain on anomie. There are 5 different types of adaptation: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion. Conformity is when individuals accept the culturally approved goals and strive to achieve them legitimately; Merton sees this as the typical response of most Americans. Innovation is when individuals accept the goal of money success but use ‘new’, illegitimate means such as theft or fraud to achieve it; those at the lower end of the class structure are under the greatest pressure to innovate. Ritualism is when individuals give up on trying to achieve the goals, but have internalised the legitimate means and so they follow the rules for their own sake; this is typical of lower-middle class office workers. Retreatism is when individuals reject both the goals and the legitimate means and become dropouts, such as ‘psychotics, outcasts, tramps and drug addicts’. Lastly, rebellion is when individuals reject the existing society’s goals and means, but replace them with new ones in a desire to bring about revolutionary change and create a new kind of society.

Merton shows how both normal and deviant behaviour can arise from the same mainstream goals. He also explains the patterns shown in official crime statistics. He argues that most crime is property crime, because American society values material wealth so highly, and that lower-class crime rates are higher because they have least opportunity to obtain money legitimately. However, the theory is criticised as it takes official crime statistics at face value; these over represent working class crime, so Merton sees crime as a mainly working class phenomenon. It is also said to be too deterministic as the working class experience the most strain, yet they don’t all deviate. Marxists argue that Merton’s theory ignores the power of the