

Applying material from item B and your knowledge, evaluate the contribution of strain theories to our understanding of crime and deviance.

Strain theories focus on the ways in which people may resort to crime or deviance when they are unable to achieve socially approved goals by legitimate means. For example, Merton argues that American culture emphasises achieving success but an unequal structure limits some individuals' opportunity to do so legitimately. This may result in frustration to the individuals affected.

Strain Theory, developed by Merton in the 1930s which suggests that people commit crime because they become disillusioned by society and its approved set goals which they cannot achieve through legitimate means, so they turn to illegitimate means. There are five different forms of behaviour that Merton pointed out was a strain between goals and means, conformity, where people adhere to both goals and means, innovation, where the goals are accepted but a different way is used to achieve them, ritualism, where the means are used but the goals are lost, retreatism, where both the goals and means are rejected, and finally rebellion, where different goals and means are substituted for societies approved ones. However, Merton was criticised by sociologists such as Valler for his stress on the existence of common goals in society. Valler argues that there are a variety of goals that people strive to attain at one time. In contemporary society, the realisation of Britain's multicultural society has meant that it is impossible to suggest one set of common goals that people subscribe to as there are too many cultures in society to have one common set.

Strain theory was cited as a major impact on the writings of Cloward and Ohlin who argued that there was a parallel opportunity structure to the legitimate one, called the illegitimate opportunity structure. By this they meant that for some subcultures in society, a regular illegal career was available. For example, Dick Hobbs' after interviewing many successful professional criminals and demonstrated how it was possible to have a career in crime given the right connections and qualities. Cloward and Ohlin described the three subcultures present in the illegal opportunity structure, criminal which is where young offenders work their way up the hierarchy, conflict where groups are brought up and turn to violence in this environment, and retreatist where the individual has no opportunity to engage in either of the other two. However, Cloward and Ohlin are criticised similarly to the criticisms of Merton due to it being difficult to place the criminals in to one of the three distinct categories, as well as the ignoring of women.

Also to draw upon Merton's writings was Albert Cohen (1955) who was interested in the fact that much of the offending behaviour was not economically motivated, but simply done for the thrill of the act which is backed up by the evidence that 18% of crimes in Britain today are vandalism. Cohen suggested that lower class boys aimed to emulate middle class values and aspirations, but lacked the means to attain success. This led to status frustration, a sense of personal failure and inadequacy, and in an attempt to gain status; they invert traditional middle class values by behaving badly and engaging in a variety of antisocial behaviours. However, Cohen was also criticised often due to it being suggested that lower class children wouldn't know what middle class values were, let alone know how to invert them, as well as failing to prove that school was the key place to achieve success and failure is demonstrated.

One critique of the strain theory is that it overemphasises the role of social class in crime and deviance. Strain theory applies best to lower classes as they struggle most with the lack of resources to reconcile their goals. However, if we examine the wide spectrum of