

Strain Theory- Robert Merton

Universal goals exist, but with a lack of universal means for achieving these goals, there will be strain produced.

Merton argues that cultural goals, such as the American Dream (economic stability and material wealth as a symbol of success), and lack of legitimate means of achieving this cultural goal, produces strain, such as anger or frustration, which results in higher rates of crime.

Merton argues that American society is built on the universal emphasis of conspicuous consumption, which is a cultural requirement for success, and there is an assumption that everyone has equal opportunities for this consumption. Merton argues that society is structured in disparate ways, which ensures that certain groups of people have less access to obtain the cultural goals of economic mobility. Further, Merton argues that the universal cultural goal is unobtainable for *everyone*, because the goal is not wealth, but is economic *mobility*, where wealth will never be enough, and it is the process of increasing economic standing that is the goal.

Merton 5 Responses to Strain

- I. **Conformist**: strives to achieve goals, and does so through legitimate means
- II. **Ritualist**: has given up on the cultural goal of upward mobility, yet continues to follow the legitimized means for financial success even though they don't have high expectations for achieving this success
- III. **Innovator**: holds onto the goals, but comes up with new means for achieving the cultural goals. Merton argues that most kinds of crime occur in this way- individuals who don't have access to legitimate means for success find new ways (ex: selling drugs, theft & robbery, scams)
- IV. **Retreatist**: gives up on the goals and give up on the means, most likely turning to drugs or alcohol, vagrants
- V. **Rebellionist**: have given up on societies values and goals, but attempts to replace them with new goals that are more accessible – Marxist revolutionaries

Comparing Anomie (Durkheim) and Strain (Merton) Theories

- I. Motivation for delinquency rests on the nature of people
- II. Determined versus agency: social structures produce certain conditions where we will engage in crime (even if the act previously wasn't defined as criminal) (anomie), but agency exists in the 5 adoptions to strain (Merton)
- III. Macro (unequal opportunities) v. micro (disintegrating social norms)
- IV. Origin of anomie/strain (social change versus social structure)- Merton does not describe the manner in which change influences crime