

Strain theories

According to Durkheim anomie is a breakdown in the ability of society to regulate the natural appetites of individuals

Robert K. Merton

He argued that many of the appetites of individuals are not natural but rather defined by society. Each culture and society defines certain goals it considers 'worth striving for'.

In America and most of the Western world, the most prominent goal is to acquire wealth, and, through wealth, material possessions. The Western cultures, far from limiting desires actually encourage everyone to seek absolute wealth. Everyone is told that further enrichment is possible and that they should all strive towards it. If they do not, they are considered lazy and less worth

In Western cultures the means of achieving wealth are supposed to be through hard and honest toil, not through theft and fraud. However, the latter means may well be more efficient.

If society is to remain healthy,
therefore, it is important that
participating in the accepted
means carries some reward

Conformity

If society laid sufficient emphasis on conformity, it would remain healthy.

The philosophy behind this would be:

“It’s not whether you win that matters, it’s how you play the game”.

If the emphasis is on reaching certain goals with no control of the way in which that is achieved, then society would be anomic

Merton argues that this unhealthy attitude is prevalent in America.

It's winning that matters, not how you play the game

Statistics showed that there was more crime committed by the lower classes than any other sector of society. Consequently Merton argued that only part of American Society was anomic. Criminality arose, not necessarily because of the discrepancies between the goals and the approved means of achieving those goals, but because all the members of that society were led to believe that there was equality of opportunity.

The consequent feelings of unfairness could lead to criminality. Since the lower classes suffered most from educational and occupational discrimination, they were least likely to attain the American Dream

Reactions by individuals to
the society in which they live

Conformity

In this reactive state individuals accept both societal goals and society's means of achieving those goals, even when they cannot or clearly will not achieve them

Innovation

It comprises the individuals who accept social goals but reject the legitimate means of achieving them in favour of more effective but officially proscribed means.

Ritualism

In this category the goals are abandoned but the means are almost compulsively adhered to. This encompasses many lower middle-class Americans who abandoned any dreams of bettering their lot in life but still stick rigidly to the rules of society

Retreatism

An individual rejects both goals and the means of achieving them.

Merton included in this category the vagrant or tramp, alcoholics and drug addicts. It might also include racial or religious minorities, particularly if they are severely disadvantaged

Rebellion

In this category both goals and means of achieving them are rejected, but rebellion also includes a desire to substitute new goals in place of the conventional ones