Functionalism and Crime – Merton’s Strain Theory

A Level Sociology
Starter

Think of goals that you want to achieve

How are you going to achieve those goals?
The Big Question: Evaluate the usefulness of Merton’s explanations to our understanding of crime and deviance

Define what is meant by Strain Theory

Explain how strain occurs

Outline deviant adaptations to strain

Evaluate Merton’s explanation of Crime

Compare and contrast Durkheim and Merton’s views

Evaluate both views and their usefulness
What is a strain theory?

• Argue that people engage in deviant behaviour when they cannot achieve goals by appropriate means

• Robert K Merton developed the first strain theory in 1938 – it have two key elements:
  • Structural factors
  • Cultural factors
Merton – Strain Theory

Structural factors – society’s unequal opportunity structure

Cultural factors – emphasis on achieving goals, less emphasis on legitimate means to achieve them
For Merton deviance is the result of a strain between the goals that a culture encourages and how the structure of society allows them to achieve these things legitimately.

Merton argued that in the USA the pursuit of the American Dream leads to deviant and criminal behaviour.
What is the American Dream?
Ideology of American Dream

American culture values ‘money success’ – individual wealth and high status

Americans are expected to pursue this through hard-work, self-discipline, educational qualifications

Opportunities for all – meritocratic
Reality of American Dream

• Disadvantaged groups denied opportunities – ethnic groups disproportionate in poverty and unemployment

• Resulting strain between goals and means creates pressure to resort to illegitimate means – the strain to anomie
Merton’s Strain Theory

Goals
Desire to succeed

Means
Pressure to succeed causes deviance

Deviance
Limited opportunities to achieve goals by legitimate means
Merton used strain theory to explain patterns of deviance in society.

Argued that individual will adapt to strain in one of five ways:

- Conformity
- Innovation
- Ritualism
- Retreatism
- Rebellion
Conformity

- Individuals accept the culturally approved goals and strive to achieve them legitimately

- Merton saw this as typical response of most Americans
Innovation

- Individuals accept the goals of monetary success but use ‘new’ illegitimate means to achieve it

- Lower end of class structure under most pressure to innovate
Ritualism

• Individuals give up on achieving societal goals but continue to follow rules

• Most commonly found in lower middle classes; office workers, dead-end jobs
Retreatism

• Individuals reject the goals and legitimate means of society and ‘drop-out’

• Merton included ‘psychotics, outcasts, vagrants, tramps, chronic drunkards and drug addicts’ as examples
Rebellion

• Individuals reject existing societies goals and means but replace them with new ones in order to bring about social change

• E.g. Political radicals, counter-cultures
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>Goal of Success</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conformity (Normal)</td>
<td>Accepts</td>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>Most people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation (Criminal)</td>
<td>Accepts</td>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
<td>Gangsters (Tony Montana)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritualism (Deviant)</td>
<td>Rejects</td>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>People in dead end jobs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retreatism (Deviant)</td>
<td>Rejects</td>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
<td>Habitual drug user or drunk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rebellion (Deviant)</td>
<td>Rejects for alternative</td>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
<td>Karl Marx, Martin Luther King,</td>
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**Criticisms**

➢ Why don’t all lower class people turn to crime?

➢ Can only account for utilitarian crime (money) what about gang violence, rape and Graffiti?

➢ What about other factors like class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality?
Evaluation of Merton

Most crime in US is property crime – material wealth highly regarded

Lower class crimes rates higher – more strain? More opportunity?
Evaluation of Merton

- Crime statistics not interpreted – face value
- Marxists argue that Merton ignores the role of ruling classes who make rules and enforce them
- Assumption of a value consensus – does everyone strive for monetary success
- Only accounts for utilitarian crimes – i.e. Those connected to money
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- Explain how strain occurs
- Outline deviant adaptations to strain
- Evaluate Merton’s explanation of Crime
- Compare and contrast Durkheim and Merton’s views
- Evaluate both views and their usefulness