

# Functionalism and Crime – Merton's Strain Theory

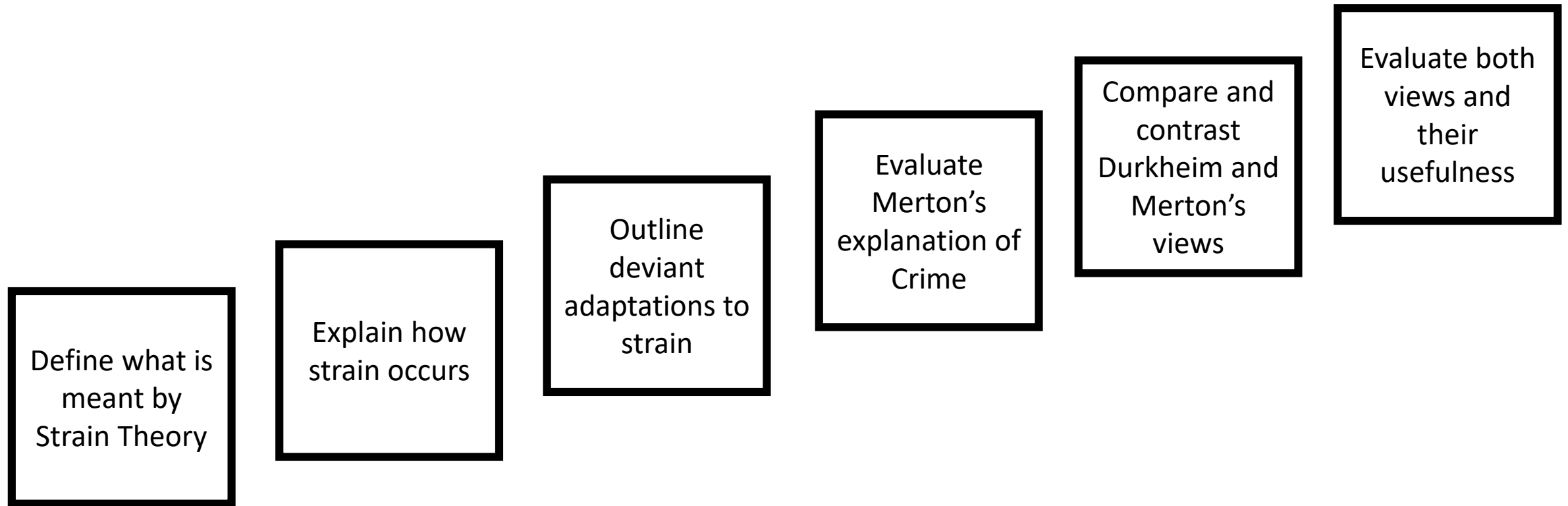
A Level Sociology

# 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



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# 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

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Structural factors – society's  
unequal opportunity structure

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Cultural factors – emphasis on  
achieving goals, less emphasis on  
legitimate means to achieve them

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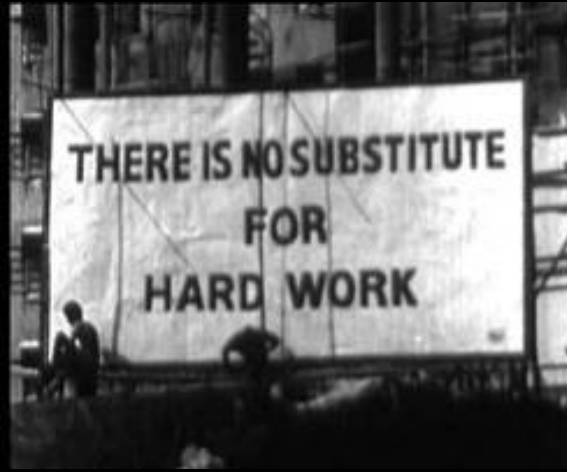
## Merton – Strain Theory

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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

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Merton argued that in the USA the pursuit of the American Dream leads to deviant and criminal behaviour



What is the American Dream?

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## Ideology of American Dream

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American culture values 'money success' – individual wealth and high status

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

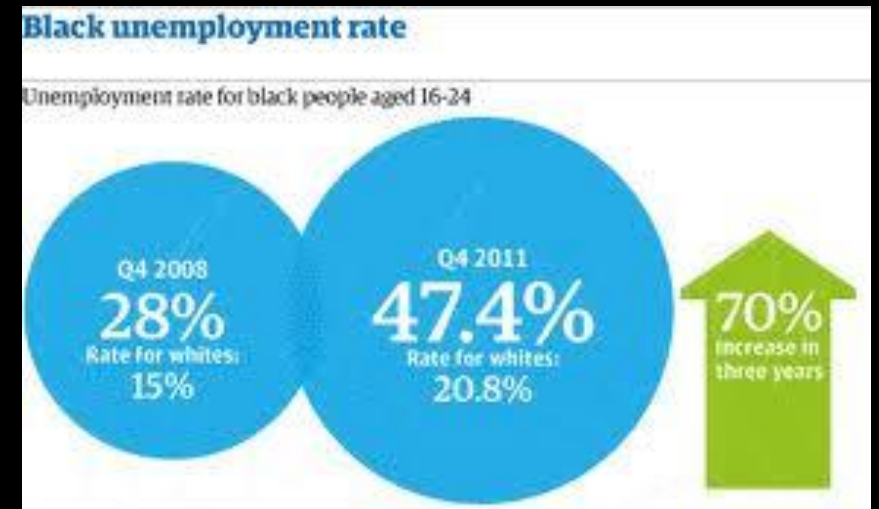
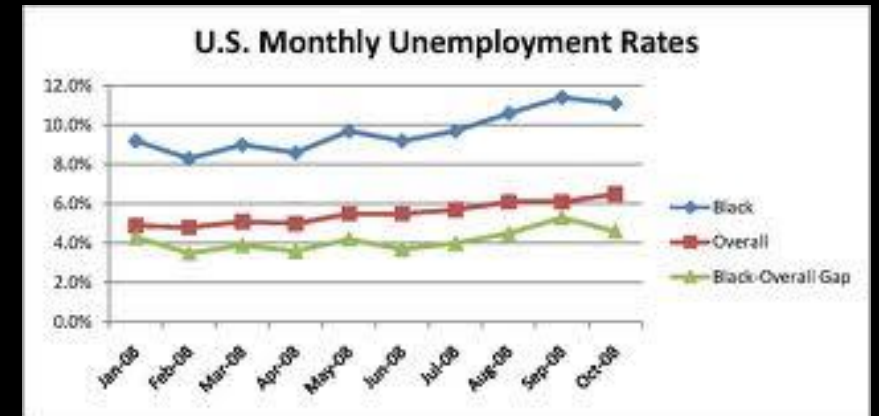
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Opportunities for all – meritocratic

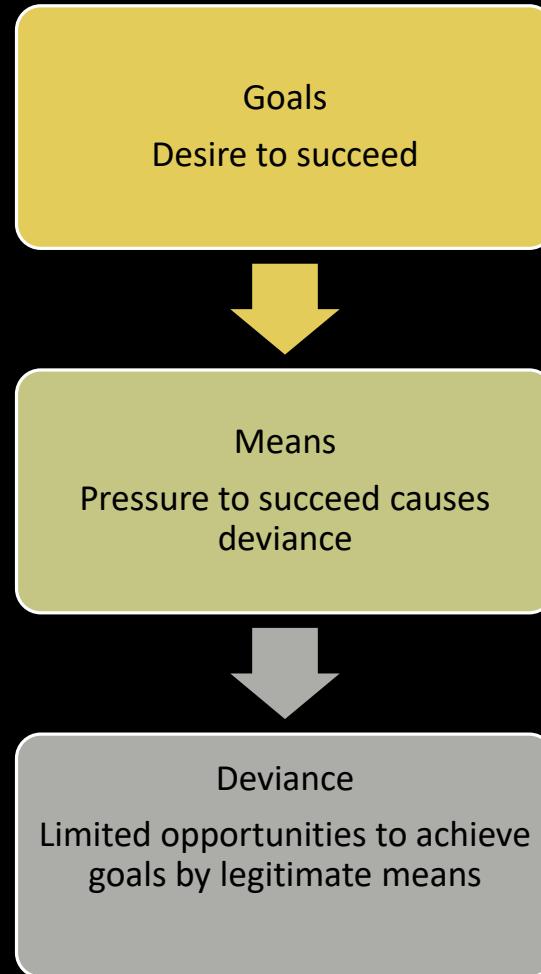


# Reality of American Dream

- 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



# Deviant adaptations to strain

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

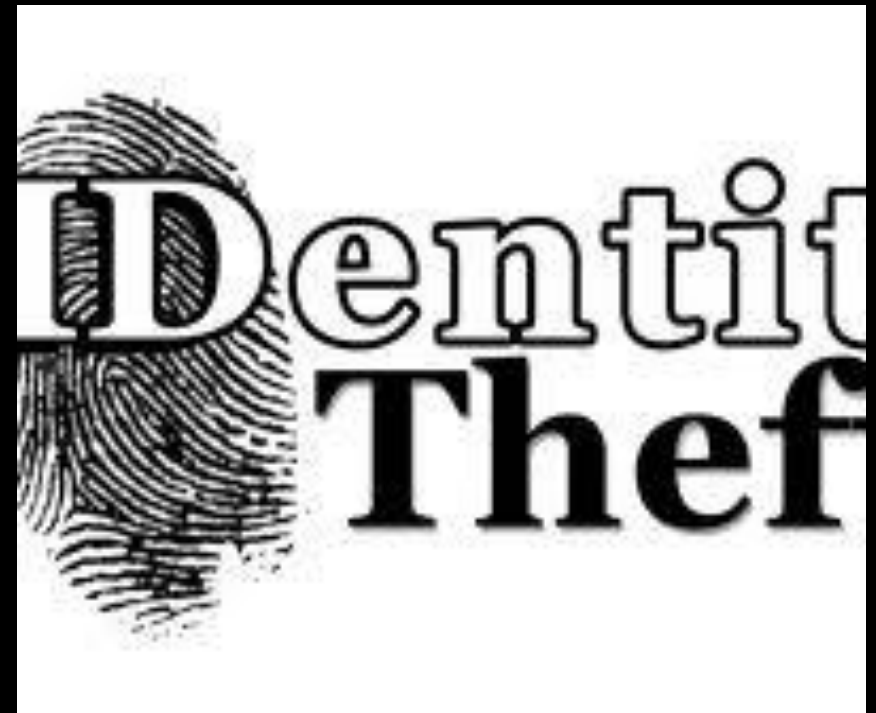


# Conformity

- 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

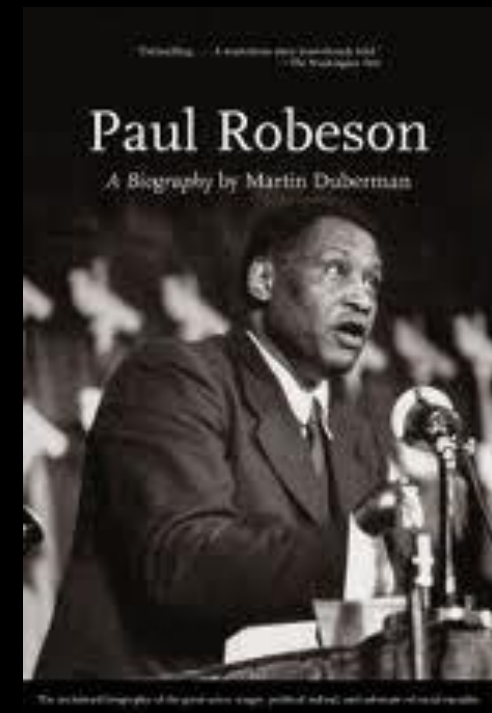
# Retreatism

- 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





<b>TYPE</b>	<b>Goal of Success</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>Type</b>
Conformity (Normal)	Accepts	Legitimate	Most people
Innovation (Criminal)	Accepts	Illegitimate	Gangsters (Tony Montana)
Ritualism (Deviant)	Rejects	Legitimate	People in dead end jobs.
Retreatism (Deviant)	Rejects	Illegitimate	Habitual drug user or drunk
Rebellion (Deviant)	Rejects for alternative	Illegitimate	Karl Marx, Martin Luther King,

### 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

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

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Lower class crimes rates  
higher – more strain?  
More opportunity?

## Evaluation of Merton

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Crime statistics not interpreted – face value

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Marxists argue that Merton ignores the role of ruling classes who make rules and enforce them

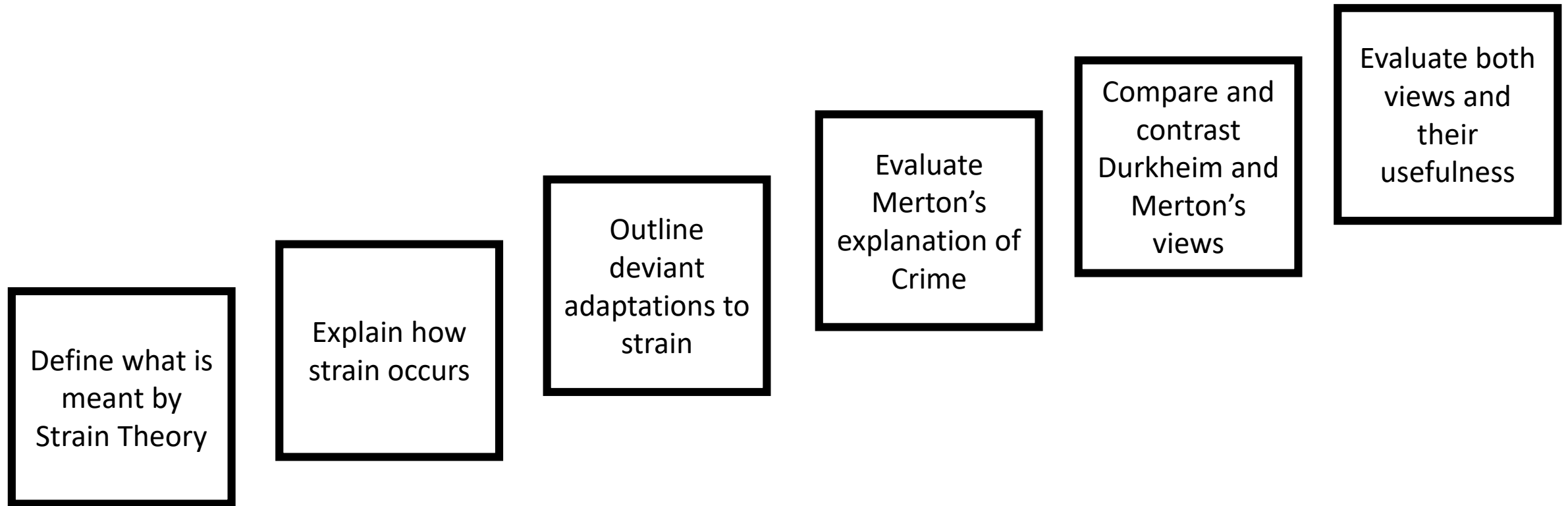
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Assumption of a value consensus – does everyone strive for monetary success

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Only accounts for utilitarian crimes – i.e. Those connected to money

# The Big Question: Evaluate the usefulness of Merton's explanations to our understanding of crime and deviance



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