ANOMIE THEORY
From "Dictionary of Youth Justice"

Anomie refers to a breakdown of social norms or a lack of moral regulation. An important concept in the classical writings of Emile Durkheim, it is Robert K. Merton’s later formulation that has had a major influence in the study of crime, delinquency and deviance.

Merton’s theory of anomie was first published in 1938 and later expanded in 1957 and 1968. Now often depicted as the main example of strain-type theories, his general argument was that particular sociocultural conditions can produce a pressure or strain on members of certain sections of a society to behave in a non-conforming or deviant fashion just as other conditions can induce conforming behaviour.

The particular sociocultural conditions that Merton is concerned with are where the culture and the social structure are in conflict. This can occur when the ‘culturally defined goals’ of a society and the ‘institutional means’ for achieving them have become dissociated. Where a society has a disproportionate accent on goals with little or no moral constraints on the means of achieving them, a situation of anomie exists. Merton argued that this situation was characteristic of American society, where the accumulation of wealth was held out as the goal to be achieved above all else. Moreover, this was the goal to which everyone should aspire, and no one was barred from the possibility of success. In reality, Merton pointed out, the legitimate means by which to achieve material success were actually limited and differentially available, depending on a person’s location in the social structure.

In response to this state of anomie, Merton proposed that there were four deviant ‘modes of adaptation’. The one that has been seen as most relevant to the study of youth crime and delinquency has been that of ‘innovation’, which Merton sees as the characteristic mode of adaptation of those at the bottom of American society. In this section of society the emphasis on material success has been absorbed, but the access to the legitimate means of achieving such success is severely limited. The goal is pursued using whatever appears likely to be most effective, irrespective of its legitimacy.

Much of criminology from the mid-twentieth century onwards focused on explaining the delinquency of young men. One of the criticisms that was levelled at Merton was that he overlooked the most obvious feature of such behaviour – namely, its group character. The attempts of Albert Cohen and others to revise and extend Merton’s ideas to take this into account provided the basis for the development of subcultural theory. Merton was also criticized for accepting the picture of the class distribution of crime shown by official statistics and thereby over-predicting lower-class crime and underestimating white-collar crime. With the rise of feminism in criminology, Merton’s theory was found to be wanting in its inability to address the most obvious aspect of crime and delinquency: its gendered distribution.

Despite these criticisms, anomie theory remains ‘one of the most plausible attempts’ (Downes and Rock 2007: 121) to explain the high levels of crime and delinquency found in affluent, mass-consumption societies with high levels of inequality.

Related entries

Left realism; Subcultural theory.

Key texts and sources


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