3 Anomie Theory

The word anomie comes from *anomia*, the Greek word for lawless. In general English usage, it refers to a lack of moral standards among members of a group or on the part of an individual and, not surprisingly, over the centuries various writers have drawn on the concept (though not necessarily referring to the word 'anomie' explicitly) when discussing crime and criminals. However, the first systematic sociological use of the concept of anomie is associated with the French positivist sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). Since then, it has had a chequered though enduring history. Within the context of criminological theorizing, discussions of the concept of anomie have usually been referenced against the version of anomie theory developed by R.K. Merton, who was strongly influenced by Durkheim, later on in the middle of the last century (this is discussed below). Durkheim discusses anomie in *The Division of Labour in Society* ([1893] 1964) and *Suicide* ([1897] 1970). For Durkheim, anomie denoted a social, rather than a psychological, condition, though he acknowledged that there were psychological implications for those experiencing an anomic society, and this dimension was explored further in his study of suicide. Anomie describes a condition of normlessness, where the regulatory power of norms and values has been severely weakened. When this occurs, people are in effect freed from traditional or conventional constraints, thereby increasing the likelihood of deviant or criminal behaviour.

Along with other writers and thinkers in the late nineteenth century, Durkheim was especially concerned with the social implications of the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy in France and other European countries, in particular, the implications for social cohesion and solidarity. His work was aimed at developing an understanding of modernity, and its impact on social life. He argued that in pre-modern societies, social order derived from what he called 'mechanical solidarity'. Such societies lacked the complex social institutions of modernity and were held together by a largely homogeneous and stable collective conscience; that is, a shared agreement regarding norms and values. Although this moral force regulating people's behaviour was internalized through socialization processes, for Durkheim it existed as an independent, structural feature of society, as a 'social fact'.

> A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual, an influence or an external constraint;

> or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.
>
> (Durkheim 1982: 59)

His basic premise was that human desires are essentially unlimited. The general acceptance of conventional norms and values – a collective conscience resulting from socialization processes – in pre-industrial societies held these desires in check; it was the key mechanism of social control. In practice, of course, these 'desires' were never kept in check in any complete sense; crime (along with periodic insurrections on the part of the rural poor, for example) was a permanent feature of life in agrarian Europe, and as Durkheim acknowledges, social control also required a Draconian penal code. However, for Durkheim, a certain amount of rule-breaking, regardless of the nature of the society, is not only inevitable, it is also functionally necessary. Rule-breaking/crime is necessary, he said, because, first, it introduces new ideas, thereby preventing society from stagnating (an 'adaptive' function) and, second, reactions to it reaffirm notions of right and wrong among the populace (a 'boundary maintenance' function).

However, the rapid social change associated with industrialization altered irrevocably the traditional sources of social solidarity. Over a short period old norms and values were no longer appropriate for the developing modern society, and the social institutions responsible for the socialization of society's members were unable to adjust swiftly enough to these new conditions. In particular, industrialization brought with it rising aspirations – increasingly people set their sights on a significant improvement in their material standard of life. It also brought with it a shift towards what Durkheim called 'individuation': an increasing stress on individualism and a self-seeking egoism. For Durkheim, new and appropriate mechanisms of social control were required if society was to constrain the potentially limitless desires of its members, for modernism had freed people from the traditional normative constraints on these desires. He described this situation during the period of transition from agrarian to industrial society as one of anomie. Thus an anomic society is one that lacks regulatory power.

One crucial dimension to this, argued Durkheim, is an individual's subjective feelings regarding their lot in life. For him, a well-ordered society was one where people felt that what they had achieved or acquired was commensurate with what they deserved or could reasonably expect. They may not be thrilled by their situation and possessions, but if that is all that can be expected, given the circumstances as they see them, so be it. Clearly, because it is a subjective assessment on the part of an individual, it does not necessarily correspond with an 'objective' reading of the situation. People living in abject poverty in a grossly exploitative society may accept their

situation by rationalizing it in terms of, for instance, the natural order of things, or their own lack of talent or enterprise. The alternative situation, that is, one where people subjectively feel that they have less than they deserve is referred to as 'relative deprivation'. Although Durkheim did not use the term, it emerged later on in the twentieth century among some theorists (notably R.K. Merton) as a key concept in analyses of criminal and deviant behaviour, and has a continuing presence in criminological theorizing.

While the basis of social order in an agrarian society was organic solidarity, as described above, in an industrial society social order is based upon what Durkheim referred to as 'organic solidarity'. In other words, industrialization requires organic solidarity as the panacea for anomie. The term was used to describe a society where social integration and order derive from the establishment of functionally interdependent institutions. Of primary importance, as the title of his book suggests, is the division of labour – unlike pre-industrial society, modern, industrial society is characterized by an increasingly specialized set of work tasks. At the same time, as already mentioned, there was an increasing stress on individualism, rather than the all-encompassing collectivism associated with agrarian society. The eradication of anomie was, for Durkheim, predicated upon the establishment of a fully integrated network of social institutions (e.g. educational institutions), in effect supporting the division of labour, by providing appropriate modes of socialization, coupled with a 'natural' or 'spontaneous' division of labour. Durkheim described a society where this did not occur as 'unhealthy' or 'pathological'. A natural division of labour is one based upon meritocratic principles; that is, where work tasks are allocated on the basis of ability and equal opportunities. Although Durkheim warned of the dangers of unfettered individualism, he welcomed the increasing individualism associated with modernity, providing that socialization processes functioned appropriately. Thus a collective conscience was still necessary within a modern, industrial society. However, unlike in a pre-industrial society, this collective conscience, while clustering around certain core norms and values, would allow people a degree of leeway, which would provide spaces for diversity and the development of individual identities.

Durkheim returned to the concept of anomie in his study of suicide, though here he spends more time than he did in *The Division of Labour in Society* addressing the social psychological implications of an 'unhealthy' society. However, even this study illustrates how he endeavours to utilize the concepts and methods of sociology, by analysing suicide as a social, rather than a psychological phenomenon. Thus instead of restricting his study to the level of the individual and, say, their personal problems, he focused on a comparison of suicide *rates* among different societies and among different groups (e.g. according to religious affiliation) within the same society. In this

way people were dealt with as aggregates, not individuals. A key argument in his analysis is that while the people involved obviously changed over time, the respective suicide rates remained more or less constant; in this formulation the source of suicide, as manifested in differential suicides rates, lies in a social reality external to the individual.

In fact, he identified four different types of suicide, though each results from a different type of 'pathological' society. *Altruistic* suicide results when social integration is too strong, and the individual is 'lost' within a wider collective. An example would be individuals who take their own lives because of some shameful episode. *Fatalistic* suicide occurs when social regulation is too strong; for example, in the case of a suicide bomber. *Egoistic* suicide occurs when social integration is too weak; that is, a commitment to the group has been replaced by self-seeking individualism, and the individual lacks the normative support such a group would provide in a healthy society. This extends the discussion of 'individuation' introduced earlier. Likewise, *anomic* suicide extends the discussion of the concept of anomie. Durkheim argued that anomic suicide manifests itself during periods of economic crises, when forces regulating people's behaviour become severely weakened; that is, normlessness ensues. This idea is clearly congruent with his discussion of anomie in *The Division of Labour in Society*, and his argument that the deregulation brought about by economic crises removes the constraints on people's desires, which, as discussed earlier, he views as unlimited, unless normatively controlled.

Anomie has had remarkable longevity as a theoretical concept within criminology. Some have embraced what they see as its continuing explanatory power, while modifying or reworking its meaning and implications; others have rejected it in a blaze of intense criticism. As mentioned earlier, more recent analyses of anomie have revisited not just Durkheim, but also, and notably, the work of the American sociologist R.K. Merton. To make matters more complicated, these analyses have stimulated intense debate regarding both how Merton defined and used anomie, and its usefulness in terms of explaining criminal and deviant behaviour. In particular, as we shall see, that his analysis seems to operate on two levels: a macro level involving cultural and social structures and their impact on members of society viewed as aggregates (in a similar fashion to Durkheim), and a micro level, in the sense of addressing the impact of disjunctions in these structures on individual members of society.

Merton was not a criminologist *per se;* rather, he was a grand theorist of the functionalist school, whose writings in general had a huge influence on American sociology in the middle years of the twentieth century. He turned his attention to crime and deviance specifically in an article – 'Social structure and anomie' – first published in 1938 in his book *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Modified versions – clarifications rather than substantial

revisions – subsequently appeared in 1949, 1957, 1964 and 1968. The article has been widely cited within criminology and some suggest that it is the most commonly cited work in the literature of criminology.

Along with Durkheim, Merton rejects the idea that deviant and criminal behaviour can be explained in terms of individual psychology or biology. For him, the causes of crime and deviance lie in the nature of American society itself, a society built upon the promise of equality of opportunity, where citizens are socialized into believing that, providing they work hard and have the right attitudes, everyone can achieve success. As a number of commentators have pointed out (e.g. Stinchcombe 1975), the irony is that the roots of deviance lie in the ideology of the American Dream.

Merton's theory is based upon the relationship between social structure and culture (the latter being internalized through processes of socialization). The social structure contains various institutions, such as the education system, that provide the legitimate means – the institutionalized means – for achieving cultural goals. Certain goals are seen as highly desirable; in particular, and the one that Merton concentrates on, the goal of material success. The promise of equal opportunities raises people's expectations regarding the achievement of this goal. The problem, says Merton, is that a disjunction exists between culture and social structure, a lack of fit between, on the one hand, the heavily stressed goal of material success and, on the other, the legitimate means available for achieving this goal. Thus Merton paints a picture of a society where there is an extremely heavy emphasis on the goal of pecuniary success, inherent limitations on the achievement of the goal and, none the less, an ideology that stresses opportunities for all. For Merton, this is a source of anomie and attendant deviant behaviour. As Cullen and Messner put it:

> In this situation, there is structural strain on the institutional norms, which lose their legitimacy and regulatory power. When this attenuation of normative regulation transpires, 'anomie' is said to occur.
>
> (Cullen and Messner 2007: 11)

However, according to Merton, different individuals respond or adapt in different ways. He illustrates this by using Table 3.1 based upon 'ideal type' categories, four of which are forms of deviance. The pluses and minuses represent, respectively, acceptance or rejection of the cultural goal (of material success) and the institutionalized (i.e. legitimate) means available for achieving this goal. A plus and a minus represent rejection of institutionalized goals/means, and their replacement with new goals/means.

Table 3.1 A typology of modes of individual adaptation

	Modes of adaptation	Cultural goals	Institutionalized means
I.	Conformity	+	+
II.	Innovation	+	–
III.	Ritualism	–	+
IV.	Retreatism	–	–
V.	Rebellion	–/+	–/+

'Conformists' are individuals who, regardless of their own level of achievement, accept the goals and, the means and therefore, are in a non-deviant category; all the rest are examples of deviance. 'Innovators' are individuals who have internalized and accepted the desirability of material success, but because of blocked opportunities reject the institutionalized means and resort to alternative, illegitimate means. According to this formulation, innovators are associated with property crime. 'Ritualists' have abandoned the goal of material success (and hence for Merton are deviant), yet accept the means, and in a ritualistic manner simply go through the motions. Merton gives as an example a lowly clerical worker who has given up on promotion, but none the less continues to dutifully abide by the rules. 'Retreatists' reject both the goal and the means and thus 'retreat' from normal society. Merton points to hobos and drug addicts as examples. 'Rebels' are political revolutionaries. The plus *and* a minus in each column signifies a rejection of both the cultural goals and the institutionalized means while at the same time substituting their own alternative goals and means.

Various commentators on his work have taken a leaf out of Merton's original article and, in order to illustrate his argument, have drawn an analogy between American society and playing some sort of game. Taking one of Merton's examples (and embellishing it slightly), it is as if people in the United States are all participating in a game of poker, where the enormous stress on winning (a product of *normal* socialization) is not accompanied by a universal commitment to playing by the rules. In addition, and to make matters worse, there is an unequal distribution of chips when the game begins, giving some players a powerful advantage. Conformists adhere to the rules and make the best of a bad job. Innovators are card sharps who cheat to win. Ritualists play on according to the rules, but have no interest in actually winning. And, finally, rebels argue for an alternative game with different rules. Thus both Merton and Durkheim see anomie as a condition where the power of societal norms to regulate behaviour is significantly weakened. In Merton's formulation it derives from the excessive emphasis placed on winning, combined with relative deprivation (as defined

earlier) arising from a lack of equal opportunities, and this contradicts the promises held out by the American Dream.

The poker analogy can be used to indicate the social policy implications of this situation, as Merton saw them. His assumption is that the creation of equal opportunities, that is, a meritocracy, where achievement is based on ability, will eradicate, or at least reduce, relative deprivation, because individuals will appreciate that what they achieve reflects what they justly deserve, making deviant behaviour much less likely. However, realizing the meritocractic ideal would not mean that the players in the game of poker would each begin with the same stack of chips (that would represent a society based upon *equality*), rather, some would still have more chips than others, but all players would accept this as fair, that is, relative deprivation would no longer exist. Again, there are strong echoes of Durkheim here, though for him it was the functional interdependence of a natural division of labour (i.e. one based upon meritocratic principles), rather than a reduction in relative deprivation, which would shift society away from an anomic condition.

Interestingly, not long after Merton first published his ideas on anomie, when America had entered the Second World War, political leaders and social commentators wanted to suspend the American Dream. As part of the wartime effort, Americans were encouraged to view 'consumerism as selfish and decadent' (Samuel 2001: xi). When the war ended, however, commercial television was seen by its proponents as the way to revive the 'national mythology of the American Dream' (Ibid p.x).

Although Merton bases his work on Durkheim, and each sees anomie as a result of the societal norms lacking regulatory power, some key differences emerged as Merton developed his analysis. Crucially, and as noted by Box (1981), in the early part of his article Merton follows Durkheim and discusses anomie as something affecting the whole of society. However, later on when discussing the deviant behaviour arising from anomie, such behaviour is linked to certain sections of society; specifically, the poorer, lower classes. This resulted from his theoretical understanding of the sources of anomie coupled with the empirical evidence from crime statistics, apparently showing the greater criminality of the lower classes.

> Of those located in the lower reaches of the social structure, the culture makes incompatible demands. On the one hand, they are asked to orient their conduct toward the prospect of large wealth … and on the other, they are largely denied effective opportunities to do so institutionally.
>
> (Merton 1993: 259)

Remaining with the Durkheimian model would have meant seeing anomie (and therefore deviance) in existence throughout the whole of

society, among all social classes. There is a further point of departure between the theories of Durkheim and Merton. Durkheim argued that anomie arose out of rapid social change, when a weakening of normative regulation set free unlimited and uncontrolled desires. Merton, however, treats these desires as *expectations* deriving from people internalizing, via socialization processes, the ideology of the American Dream. From the perspective of the individuals concerned, therefore, these are realistic expectations regarding the material rewards that will come their way. Here desires are limited in the sense that they are in line with certain expectations, the nature and magnitude of which will be determined by the reference groups that people look to and choose to emulate. However, deviant behaviour arises because even these limited expectations are, for certain poorer sections of society, likely to remain unmet. Therefore, while Durkheim and Merton agree on what anomie is, they differ in terms of its distribution and its source. For Merton, its source was inequality of opportunity and the resultant relative deprivation; for Durkheim, its source was rapid social change or, in the case of anomic suicide, economic crises.

Many texts on criminological theory (including my own; see Tierney 2006) refer to Merton's analysis in *Social Theory and Social Structure* as an example of 'strain theory'. There are varieties of strain theory, but, as the name suggests, in very broad terms they all see criminal and/or deviant behaviour as the result of something 'going wrong' that places pressure on people to engage in transgressive behaviour. In 1987 two American criminologists (Cullen and Messner 2007) conducted an interview with Merton, who was then in his seventies. Interestingly, during the course of this interview Merton disputed the view that his was an example of strain theory. Here he was defining strain theory as an approach that focused on the individual and sought to identify 'a psychological variable of the internal emotional or other psychic (strain) that individuals caught up in such situations experience' (Ibid:21), adding that he, on the other hand, was 'dealing with rates of deviant behavior in the purely Durkheimian sense' (Ibid:21). Debates about what Merton 'really' meant, and even if he realized the full ramifications of his analysis, have rumbled on since his article first appeared. As Baumer (2007) indicates, contributors to these debates have interpreted Merton's work in three different ways.

Some argue that Merton's analysis *is* an example of the sort of strain theory that he distances himself from in the 1987 interview. Guided by a social psychological perspective, they have examined the ways in which the strains experienced by an individual, because of a lack of opportunities to achieve cultural goals, leads to deviant behaviour (e.g. Kornhauser 1978; Agnew 1987). Others, rejecting this focus on the strain experienced by the individual, have opted for a macro level of analysis, and address the strains resulting from a disjunction between culture and social structure (and

manifested in a weakening of normative controls) then linking these strains to different *rates* of deviance among different sections of society (Bernard 1987; Messner and Rosenfeld 2001). This approach seems to correspond with the comments made by Merton in the interview and, although not based on social psychology, it can none the less be seen as a version of strain theory. Furthermore, and illustrating just how divided opinion is within academic criminology, others have argued that Merton's work incorporates each of these dimensions, though as two separate theoretical models. Baumer (2007) himself enriches these debates further by developing a multilevel theory that seeks to synthesize these different levels of analysis into one, integrated paradigm.

A number of criminologists have sought to show the relevance of Merton's theory to an explanation of deviant behaviour among all sections of society, rich or poor; for example, white collar and corporate crime (Menard 1995; Passas and Agnew 1997; Parnaby and Sacco 2004). In fact, Merton (1957) himself explored this theme in an article on deviance within the scientific community, acknowledging that deviant behaviour arose among all social classes. The argument here is that anyone can experience a gap between expectations or aspirations and opportunities with the resultant strain towards deviance. However, it is useful to distinguish between expectations and aspirations. The latter are perceived by an individual to be desired outcomes that may *possibly* be realized. Expectations, on the other hand, are desired outcomes that an individual feels are *likely* to be realized. This has particular saliency within the context of Mertonian anomie theory because of the notion of relative deprivation – to reiterate: a subjective feeling of being treated unjustly in terms of material achievement (with the irony that the culture in that society has been instrumental in creating these expectations). However, aspirations, and other terms such as 'wants' or 'desires', are important, in that deviant/criminal behaviour is not only, or necessarily, a function of relative deprivation. Returning to the game of poker analogy, an unequal distribution of chips at the start means that even some of the 'well off' have fewer chips than others and, regardless of their feelings about fairness, they may very well covet these extra chips.

Over the years Merton's article has stimulated a huge amount of empirical research and theoretical analysis on the theme of anomie and crime and deviance. Agnew (1992), for instance, has put forward what he calls general strain theory. Focusing on the notion of strain in a social psychological sense, he adds a further dimension to Merton's ideas by looking at non-economic sources of strain (though, as already stated, Merton was aware of other sources). Agnew explores the strain resulting from, first, the 'removal of positively valued stimuli' and, second, the 'presentation of negative stimuli'. The former refers to some personal loss in someone's life, for instance, a divorce or death of a friend; the latter refers to distressing

personal experiences, such as being a victim of crime. Each is said to trigger anger and resentment and eventually engagement in deviant behaviour. Messner and Rosenfeld (2001) have developed what they call 'institutional anomie theory'. They agree with Merton that American society is inherently criminogenic – crime producing – because of the excessive emphasis placed on material success coupled with a limited opportunity structure. However, their subsequent analysis differs from that put forward by Merton.

To begin with, they argue that in comparison with other developed societies, American society is characterized by particularly high rates of homicide and, indeed, serious crime in general (for a critique of this premise, see Chamlin and Cochran 2007). Their explanation for this is based upon a trenchant critique of the American economic system, and they are highly sceptical of the view that an increase in economic growth and opportunities will lead to a corresponding reduction in anomie and, hence, criminality. This, they argue, is because a thriving economy is likely to intensify even further the cultural value placed on material success. They add to this dystopian view of America's future by arguing that the social institutions expected to provide a counterbalance to this obsession with material success, for example, in areas of education, religion and family, will fail to do so. This, the authors argue, is because such institutions will themselves absorb, and be increasingly committed to, the dominant economic values.

Inevitably, given its length of service, Merton's anomie theory has stimulated a large amount of criticism, as well as support, modification and theoretical development (as indicated above). This final section provides a brief overview of some of the major critical arguments.

- Although Merton acknowledged that the relative deprivation resulting from anomie will be found throughout society, he did believe that it and corresponding deviant behaviour was more likely to occur among poorer people. For him, this understanding was based upon the message from official crime statistics combined with his interpretation of the logic of his theoretical model. Critics, however, have argued that this reflected too much faith in crime statistics, which, they say, under-represent amounts of white collar and corporate crime. In addition, as mentioned above, it has been argued that Merton's model is quite capable of explaining deviant behaviour among the better off. In this context, it is important to note that while relative deprivation is a product of social and cultural structures, it involves individuals' subjective understanding of whether or not they are being treated fairly, with rewards matching what they see as reasonable expectations; hence the argument that it is not wealth and material possessions *per se* that are at issue.

- Even if we accept the validity of Merton's formulation, there is no explanation of the dynamics at work whereby some people opt for a specific mode of adaptation (conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism or rebellion). In spite of ostensibly being socialized into the American Dream, many citizens opt for 'conformity'. Among these will, of course, be many who are relatively poor and, in this context, we need to consider such things as the degree to which the Dream is internalized or perceived as credible, the ways in which people shape their own understandings of realistic expectations and what is thought to be morally acceptable behaviour. Similarly, we need to consider the factors lying behind a decision to opt for one or other of the deviant modes of adaptation.
- Cultural criminologists in particular have argued that much criminal behaviour is expressive in nature, and motivated by a desire for risk-taking, excitement and thrill, and so on as opposed to the material rewards highlighted by Merton: brawling and so-called joy-riding are good examples (see Chapter 8). In America, A.K. Cohen (1955), who developed his own version of strain theory, argued that juvenile delinquency tended to be non-instrumental in nature (see Chapter 16). In Britain, Jock Young, who drew on Merton's concept of relative deprivation as part of a left realist approach to crime (see Chapter 11), has more recently, and in line with cultural criminology, stressed the emotional dimension to much transgressive behaviour – 'Merton with energy', as well as social structure, as he puts it. Even predatory crime, such as street robbery, for instance, may be motivated as much by emotion (e.g. exercising power over someone) as by the possibility of financial gain.
- A.K. Cohen also made the point that adaptations to 'strain' – in his case on the part of juvenile delinquents – should be seen as collective, in the shape of subcultural formations. This is clearly at variance with Merton's formulation, which is based upon *individual* modes of adaptation.

Further reading

As always, readers are encouraged to read original sources. In the case of Durkheim: Durkheim, E. ([1893] 1964) *The Division of Labour in Society*. New York: Free Press. Durkhein, E. ([1897] 1970) *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. For a critique of Durkheim's functions of crime argument, see Roshier, B. (1977), The functions of crime myth, *Sociological Review*, May. In the case of Merton: Merton, R.K. ([1938] 1993) Social structure and anomie, in C. Lemert (ed.) *Social Theory: The Multicultural Readings*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

In addition to the texts already mentioned, useful discussions of anomie can be found in Adler, F. and Laufer, W.S. (eds) (1995) *Advances in Criminological Theory: Volume 10, The Legacy of Anomie Theory*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction; Farnworth, M. and Leiber, M.J. (1989) Strain theory revisited: economic goals, educational means, and delinquency, *American Sociological Review*, 54(2): 263–74; Featherstone, R. and Deflem, M. (2003) Anomie and strain: context and consequences of Merton's two theories, *Sociological Inquiry*, 73(4): 471–89; Orru, M. (1987) *Anomie: History and Meanings*. Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin. Volume 11, No. 1, February 2007, is a special edition of the journal *Theoretical Criminology* that is devoted (largely) to Merton's anomie theory and the concept of relative deprivation.