

What is Anomie? Discuss Robert K. Merton's Theory of Anomie.

Meaning of Anomie:

The term "anomie" originates from the Greek word *anomia*, meaning "without law." In sociology, it was first used by Émile Durkheim systematically in 'The Division of Labor in Society' (1893) and 'Suicide' (1897). He used it to describe a state of **normlessness**, where social norms breakdown, lose their authority, or fail to regulate individual behavior. In such conditions, individuals experience uncertainty, disorientation and disconnection from society's collective conscience.

Durkheim argued that anomie typically arises during periods of rapid social change, industrialization, urbanization, economic crisis, when traditional norms and values weaken but new ones are not yet established. This leads to higher rates of deviance, crime, and even suicide.

Robert K. Merton's Theory of Anomie

Introduction:

Building on Durkheim, American sociologist Robert K. Merton reformulated the concept of anomie in his essay 'Social Structure and Anomie' (1938). While Durkheim emphasized the breakdown of norms, Merton focused on the mismatch between cultural goals and institutionalized means of achieving them.

Core Arguments:

- Every society defines cultural goals for example, wealth, success, social mobility in the U.S "American Dream."
- At the same time, it prescribes legitimate institutional means to achieve those goals for example, education, hard work, and lawful employment.
- Social Structure 'restricts or completely eliminates access to approved modes of acquiring these goals through legitimate means. In other words, structural impediments exist for those in lower classes who share

the cultural goal for success but have limited means to attain them, lack of education and job opportunities create a strain towards anomie, which may translate into deviance.

Merton's adaptations to Anomie

Merton argued that there are five general adaptations to anomie. The key to each is (ii) whether there is an acceptance or rejection of cultural goal of success and whether or not the choice is to strive for the goal via ~~or~~ legitimate or conforming means.

		Institutionalized means	
		accept	reject
Cultural goals	accept	Conformity	Innovation
	reject	Ritualism	Retreatism
		new goals	
		new means	
		Rebellion	

~ Merton's Deviance Typology

(i) Conformity:

Conformists have accepted the cultural goal of success or wealth attainment, and they are trying

to achieve it via legitimate means. Most college students might be considered conformists as they work hard to earn degree to get better jobs and have more success after graduation. For Meier, conformity was the only non-deviant adaptation to strain and anomie.

(ii) Innovation:

It is the adaptation for those who have accepted the cultural goal of Success and wealth attainment but are trying to achieve it via illegitimate means. Any crime for profit is an example of innovation. Robbers, thieves, drug dealers, embezzlers, would all be ~~and high priced~~ classified as innovators.

(iii) Ritualism:

This is a category for those who have abandoned the cultural goal of wealth and success but continue to use legitimate to make their living. Example: dedicated workers who will never advance to management roles, a student who graduates college without any career plans but applies for job because that is what is expected next.

(iv)

Retreatism:

It is the adaptation of those who have rejected both the cultural goal of success and wealth, as well as, legitimate means of achieving them. Merton describes these people as, "in the society but not of it."

Example: chronically homeless and serious drug addicts might be considered retreatists.

(v)

Rebellion:

This adaptation is for politically deviant, those who do not play by the rules but work to change the system to their own liking. Rebels reject the cultural goals and replace it with another primary goal; that may ^{use} legitimate or illegitimate ^{means} to achieve that goal. In other words, rebels will use whatever means necessary to achieve their goal.

Example: terrorist groups who use violence in an attempt to achieve their political goals.

Critiques of Anomie

Messner and Rosenfeld discuss four

critiques of Merton's anomie theory. First, (vi)
Merton assumes that value consensus exists
in society and that the goal of monetary
success is held above all. It was pointed
out that we should not assume that
those values are universal; other goals
may be equally or even more important
depending on person. Second, Merton's theory
is class biased and have difficulty
accounting for deviance among the privileged (v)
classes. Third, Merton seems to suggest
that providing more equal opportunities
offers a realistic solution to crime and
deviance; Messner and Rosenfeld do not believe
this to be the case. Finally, Merton never
precisely defines anomie.

Development of Merton's Theory

Richard Cloward, a student of Merton, extended
the theory further by adding the dimension of
illegitimate means. Just as not every one has
access to legitimate means, not everyone has
access to illegitimate means. Those who
obtain success through illegitimate means do

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not necessarily have the skills and connections to do so. Cloward and Ohlin argued that to understand deviance, we need to understand not only the motivations of individuals but also the accessibility they have to participate in deviant acts.

Anomie example

Abuse at Abu Ghraib

A recent study analyzed at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in terms of the concept of anomie.

Mestrovic and Lorenzo argue that there were high levels of social disorganization at Abu Ghraib and within the social structures of

U.S. Army and others who interacted with prisoners. This grew progressively worse over time; this confusion produced widespread deviance among prisoners and U.S. personnel alike. Sources of confusion were identified as confusion about who was in charge, insufficient training, pressure to obtain intelligence etc.

This led to U.S. soldiers torturing & humiliating Iraqi prisoners in unspeakable ways.

Conclusion:

Merton's theory of anomies originates from Durkheim's concept of normlessness, anomie, when societal norms get blurred and there is nothing to regulate individual conduct. It is the first sociological explanation for causes of deviant behaviour. It shows how people adapt to achieve their goals.