

SOC 3290 Deviance
Lecture 9: The Anomie Perspective

Today I will discuss the anomie perspective, a view that focuses in on normlessness, on the one hand, and discrepancies between means and ends, on the other. In fact, there are two distinct but related versions of anomie theory. The first focuses in on normlessness (a.k.a. anomie), a state where nobody seems to know the rules, as precipitating deviance. The second defines anomie as a discrepancy between socially engendered goals and the availability of legitimate goals to achieve them.

Theoretical Images I: Durkheim and Normlessness:

Central to the anomie perspective is the idea that deviance arises as a result of unfulfilled human aspirations. The first take on this is rooted in the 19th century work of Emile Durkheim. He used the term *anomie* to describe a state of normlessness. A society characterized by anomie was said to lack the regulatory constraints necessary for the adequate social control of its members. In this it resembles the idea of social disorganization, with both theoretical perspectives focusing on normative chaos resulting from social change.

Yet, there are important theoretical differences as well. Social disorganization was typically presented as a spatial or socio-ecological problem affecting particular parts or zones of a society undergoing change. Anomie, in contrast, was conceived more as a temporal problem affecting the entirety of a given society. Anomie, as well, was seen as a discrete, historically specific problem for societies in transition from the traditional to the modern world, while social disorganization was envisaged as an ongoing problem for all societies in all periods. Thus, the consequences and control implications of anomie and disorganization were conceived differently. Social disorganization produced a search for reorganization, sometimes through involvement in deviance. Anomie, however, was seen as releasing an instinctually based form of human greed - the pursuit of unlimited aspirations. Thus, while disorganization theorists supported efforts to “patch up” or restore the normative organization of particular zones or sectors of society, Durkheim saw the need for a massive, society-wide reorganization of the normative structure.

To begin to understand Durkheim’s approach to anomie, we must consider (1) his view of human nature; and (2) his perceptions of the social context in which he lived. In the case of the former, Durkheim’s conception of human nature was extremely ambivalent, even contradictory. On the one hand, he asserted that there is no human nature without society. All was socially shaped. However, elsewhere he seems to allow for a set of human propensities - natural tendencies - that could only be realized in society - and that could almost be described as the basis of society. For example, he suggests that our human nature is characterized by an “inextinguishable thirst”; that our capacity for desire and feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss. This is something that he feels must be curbed or regulated. It is to provide this proportion, to regulate our otherwise insatiable aspirations, that society comes into being. While it is hard to reconcile Durkheim’s two images of human nature, perhaps it is sufficient to say that

both our natures and our involvement in society could have the same result: unlimited aspirations or desires that could not all be fulfilled in a situation of limited resources. Since limits are not internally generated, they must come from society, perceived as fair, moral, etc. When they aren't, there will be trouble. Similarly, when they are not clear, there will be trouble. This is what Durkheim saw all around him: the crisis of modern society and the basis for his understanding of deviance.

Durkheim was witnessing societies characterized by the transition from the traditional to the modern world. He saw a shift in the basic normative patterns around which societies are organized. In his own terms, this involved a shift from the patterns of *mechanical solidarity* to those of *organic solidarity*: from simple, traditional forms of society to complex, modern ones. These problems occupied his entire career as a social theorist - problems filled with danger that shaped his conception of anomie and its relationship to deviant behavior.

Durkheim himself was born into a highly traditional, segregated society (Ashkenazic Judaism), but spent his adult life in an intellectual wrestling match with a French society undergoing the pains of modernization. He was exposed to the rigors of a demanding, secular French education, the secular French Republic, and entered deeply into dialogue with the intellectual elite of French society. In other words, in the course of a lifetime Durkheim made the transition which French society as a whole took several centuries to make - the transition from traditional to modern life. Through this journey, he became acutely aware of the consequences of massive social transformation: anomie.

Durkheim's analysis of the relationship between anomie and deviance is concentrated in his analysis of suicide. Published in 1897, Durkheim demonstrated that something commonly thought of as a very private act could only be adequately explained by the ways that societies are structured (i.e. not by biology or psychology). Durkheim carefully examined available statistical data on patterns of suicide and produced a thoroughly sociological account by which to explain variations in the suicide rate. Moreover, his concern with suicide reflecting the general malaise of European societies intersected with his own personal concerns regarding the suicide of a close friend.

Durkheim's primary explanation of the comparatively high rates of suicide in the modernizing industrial societies of western Europe involved his conception of the deviance-producing potential of anomie. In addition to anomie, however, he outlined three other forms of social organization which induced high rates of suicide: *egoism*, *altruism* and *fatalism*. In contrast to the normlessness of anomie, these other forms represented instances in which the normative or moral order encourages its members to take their own lives.

The first form of morally-induced suicide Durkheim labeled *egoistic*. Here the collective conscience of a given society paradoxically contains the seeds of its own destruction. The moral order contains ideas which encourage a radical separation between individuals and the social group (e.g. Protestantism, western intellectual society, single individuals). Such dangerous

individualism views people as responsible for their own actions (e.g. “A personal relationship” to God; the authority of individual reason over social tradition; lack of integration into the normative rules of a marriage). In each case, in times of trouble or error the person constrained only by this morality of individual responsibility may be especially prone to suicide. S/he has no community to turn to for support, and his/her norms oddly encourage individual freedom from norms.

Next, Durkheim talks of *altruistic* suicide, a form found in societies where the collective conscience is so binding that there is virtually no distinction between the individual and the group. The individual lives and dies for the group, and his/her personality is but a reflection of the collective personality of the group (e.g. traditional Japanese hara-kiri by Samurai, or by Japanese pilots during WWII).

Third, Durkheim made brief reference to *fatalistic* suicide, one socially induced by the hopeless regulatory frameworks of slave societies. These totally crush human aspirations rather than channel them into individualism or self-sacrifice for the group. Those who live in slavery become dominated by a sense of fatalism - a sense that their actions cannot change their state in life - and thus engage in another socially structured route toward high rates of suicide.

Thus far, we have seen that the egoistic, altruistic and fatalistic forms of suicide were each encouraged by the normative structures of certain societies. But what happens when the normative structure of a society is weak or disrupted? This is what Durkheim meant by *anomie*, a social condition which also produces high rates of suicide and, by implication, other forms of deviant behavior as well.

But why is this? Recall that Durkheim argued the normative force of society shields individuals from the “inextinguishable thirst” of unlimited aspiration. When something disrupts the normative structure, the thirst of aspirations emerges as again insatiable. This is said to happen during periods of severe economic crisis or sudden prosperity and growth. Under such conditions, there are winners and there are losers, and many don’t end up where they expected. Those who don’t achieve their “just desserts” must learn a new and unaccustomed order of morality, or to readjust their expectations. This isn’t an easy or quick process, and, in the meantime, ongoing adherence to old aspirations and norms can be quite painful. Such a state of anomie increases the likelihood of suicide by heightening “the suffering which detaches people from a reduced state of existence even before they have made a trial of it” (e.g. the suicides among large stockholders at the onset of the Great Depression; the “sky’s the limit” aspirations encouraged by rapid economic growth running normatively unchecked until they hit the wall). Essentially, social and economic resources are always finite in character, but everyone cannot have everything. Unchecked by a regulative morality, however, the awareness is lacking. Competition and aspirations spiral together until they crash into the empty abyss of unfulfillment. This race for an unobtainable goal, this competition becomes more violent and painful. “Effort grows just when it becomes less productive. How could the desire to live not be weakened under such conditions?”

This dynamic would be destructive enough if limited to short, abrupt periods of economic turmoil. However, Durkheim felt the problem was much greater. Anomie was becoming a chronic condition in the modern world - one where economic progress consisted largely in the freeing of industrial relations from all other social and moral constraints. Before this time, the normative powers of religion, the state and occupational groups had imposed constraints on the economic order, but these were losing their force.

Here, Durkheim introduced his important distinction between restraints governing simple, relatively undifferentiated traditional societies and those needed to restrain complex, highly specialized modern societies. In Durkheim's view, members of simple societies generally approach each other as whole persons and engage in very similar social and economic activities. These societies were constituted by a group of people whose whole lives were relatively visible to one another and who were tightly joined by the repressive norms of "*mechanical solidarity*." Here, individual uniqueness was repressed in favor of collective oneness, and one set of diffuse norms mechanically governed society as a whole (e.g. small tribes or traditional rural communities like the Amish).

Yet, Durkheim saw that such traditional societies were on the decline. Massive increases in the volume and density of human populations had made social life far more complex. The personal quality of simple society was being replaced by anonymity; similarity of roles by a highly specialized division of labor. Common religious beliefs and rituals that promoted solidarity were losing their power. New rules and regulations were needed, not based on the mechanical repression of difference but on the rational "restitutive" regulation of variety. Science, not religion, would guide the construction of this new order of morality. Yet, the rules of this new order, deemed *organic solidarity*, were slow in coming. What was apparent was the lack of order, the lack of morality. The old, normative "mechanical" order was disappearing faster than the new "organic" order was emerging. Economic and industrial successes were being made at the expense of earlier government, religious, and occupational group regulation, exciting unlimited appetites and freeing them of previously limiting authority without providing the ultimate possibility of their satisfaction. As a result, society was thrown into a state of anomic deregulation. Suicide, and, by implication, other forms of deviance were on the rise.

Theoretical Images II: Merton and the Goals-Means Gap:

As noted earlier, there are two versions of anomie theory. Durkheim's grew out of the crisis of early 20th century European society, focusing on the deviance-inducing potential of normlessness. The second approach appears in the work of Robert K. Merton. Merton extended Durkheim's ideas to the crisis of mid-20th century America.

Merton was born in the slums of South Philadelphia, and, unlike many of his peers, made an unlikely and meteoric rise, through a series of scholarships, to Harvard University. For Merton, the unfulfilled aspirations of many of his former peers remained a central concern, but normlessness did not. Merton pictured anomie rather as a socially structured contradiction

between *normatively induced aspirations* and the lack of *available means* for *legitimately* attaining *valued* cultural goals. Merton focused on the idea that success is the main goal presented to us in North American society. Almost everyone is expected to try and be successful - materially or otherwise. However, the capitalist economy in which we live is based on inequalities, and not everyone is able to obtain that success. According to Merton, persons lacking legitimate means to success may feel pressured to use illegitimate means to achieve the goals that society says they should. Merton calls the discrepancy between the goals valued by society and the legitimate means to achieve them anomie. The more of such anomie that exists in a society, the greater the pressure towards crime.

Under Merton's theory, lower-class individuals are more often to be denied legitimate means and more frequently become criminal offenders or "innovators." This image is consistent with images provided by the media and official statistics. The argument essentially is that the cause of lower class deviant activities (e.g. stealing, selling drugs, engaging in organized crime, etc..) is a societal condition marked by the inconsistency between society's overemphasis on the success goal and its underemphasis on the use of legitimate means for achieving it.

Yet, it is important to note that, despite this social pressure towards deviance, not everyone would respond to it in the same fashion. Many may respond to it by accepting the success goal while rejecting the use of legitimate means for realizing it - something Merton refers to as innovation. Yet, many individuals of various social classes may respond differently. Merton, therefore, suggests other types of adaptation.

1. *Conformity*: This involved accepting both the cultural goals of success and the legitimate means for achieving them.

2. *Innovation*: See above.

3. *Ritualism*: This involves rejecting (or limiting) the success goal while accepting the legitimate means for attaining them (e.g. "playing the game"; "going through the motions"; "doing only what you have to do on the job"). This is common among lower middle class people who either lower their aspirations or abandon high success goals so that they can more easily realize their aspirations.

4. *Retreatism*: This involves rejecting both the cultural goal of success and the legitimate means of attaining it. Essentially it is a withdrawal from society into oneself, such as we see in drug addicts, alcoholics, outcasts, vagrants, etc.

5. *Rebellion*: This involves rejecting the prevailing social expectation of success in the "rat race" as well as the socially legitimate means of achieving it. Instead, here the individual attempts to overthrow the existing system and put in its place new goals and means for achieving them (e.g. political radicals, terrorists).

In each of these adaptations, deviance is viewed as the normal product of a contradictory and stratified structuring of society's goals and means. Deviance is explained by the manner in which society strains people, rather than by the way people strain society.

Merton's provocative analysis has generated a number of extensions, reformulations and modifications. In 1951 Talcott Parsons extended Merton's notion of strain to further include strains at the interpersonal and individual levels (e.g. the inability to reconcile one's own expectations with those of others, or strains produced by the failure to make institutionally prescribed object attachments, such as socially appropriate romantic attachments). Another extension of Merton's ideas was introduced by Robert Dubin, who attempted to subdivide Merton's idea of institutionally available means into prescriptive norms and descriptive practices.

But we will focus today on the most widely hailed modifications of Merton's approach. The first of these relates to the work of Cloward and Ohlin (1959), who added the concept of *illegitimate opportunity* to this picture. They argued that the strain anomie may encourage criminality, but does not necessarily determine the type of criminal conduct in which people become involved. Illegitimate opportunities, like legitimate ones, may also be differentially available. How one deviates may have much to do with the illegitimate opportunities available to individuals faced by anomie. Given a preponderance of illegitimate opportunities over legitimate ones, three possible delinquent subcultures are possible: (i) the *criminal* (where youth mix with older petty criminals and learn property crime from them); (ii) the *conflict* (where disorganized youth form into groups and fight with each other in gangs); and (iii) the *retreatist* (where activity revolves around some form of illicit consumption, such as drug taking).

Albert Cohen (1955) has also contributed to Merton's formulation. Focusing specifically on delinquency, he criticizes Merton's approach as being "too atomistic," contending that the way a person experiences strain and selects one or another mode of deviant adaptation is highly dependent on his or her interpersonal associations, upon his or her social reference group. In this respect, he noted that working class males often cannot achieve success according to middle class standards (e.g. verbal fluency, academic intelligence, the ability to delay gratification, courtesy, opposition to fighting, and respect for property). They thus find it tough to do well in the middle-class dominated school system. Experiencing such "status frustration," they gravitate together and attempt to develop new norms and standards by which they can succeed. These take the form of a rejecting counter culture in which they can compete more fairly among themselves for high status in accordance with their own criteria of achievement - criteria often standing in direct opposition to the "respectable" middle-class criteria. This results in anti-social behavior and gang delinquency.

Essentially, Cohen adds the idea of status frustration to Merton's theory, such that it is not merely the goal-means gap that causes deviance, but more specifically, that status frustration serves to link these, and catalyze them into deviant, delinquent behavior.

Identifying Anomic Deviance:

Following WWII, the U.S. was brimming with a renewed faith in the positive value of science (e.g. it helped win the war, so could help solve all kinds of other problems as well - including the problem of deviance). The research methods used by social scientists in the anomie tradition generally fit in well with the professional-technical interests of the post WWII welfare state (e.g. official statistics; quantitative surveys), in the process producing statistical measures of anomie and its relation to deviance. This was all legitimized by the authoritative image of science, enabling them to grab a piece of the profitable pie of scientific problem solving. Yet, this commitment to a hard-science method of social research distracted anomie researchers from the valuable insights available from other, less quantifiable methods (e.g. historical perspective, qualitative field research). Indeed, an analysis of 86 studies of anomie between 1941-64 showed that few used these methods, but the vast majority used statistics. This professional-technical research model thus systematically neglected the historical development of specific social structural arrangements as well as the concrete human experiences of persons said to be caught up in such structures.

Within the confines of this quantitative tradition, investigators developed several well-known measures of anomie. The first of these, developed by Bernard Lander, is supposed to represent an objective measure of normlessness in a given community. It consisted of a three-factor cluster index including: (1) official data on the rate of delinquency; (2) the percentage of nonwhite population in a geographic area; and (3) the percentage of homes which were owner-occupied. According to Lander, these were together indicative of normlessness in a given community inasmuch as they were believed to reflect "the breakdown or weakening of the regulatory structure of society." While delinquency was taken as direct evidence of the lack of normative regulation, a large percentage of non-whites in a previously white area was considered to be an indicator of the transitory or unstable nature of the neighborhood. Lack of home ownership was taken as a measure of family instability - another indicator of normlessness. Using this measure, Lander found these factors to be significantly related to one another. Despite some criticism, Lander's measures were commented on positively by Merton.

The second measure of anomie represented a quantitative attempt to obtain information on the subjective experience of anomie at the individual level. It used a 5-item scale developed by Leo Srole in 1956 in an attempt to measure an individual's sense of being dislocated within the world of social structure. This included measures of whether an individual felt that: (1) community leaders were indifferent to his/her needs; (2) little can be accomplished in a society which is unpredictable/lacking order; (3) life goals are receding rather than being realized; (4) life holds little meaning and small prospect for one's children; and (5) one cannot count on associates for social and psychological support. Of course, some have argued that Srole's scale does not so much measure anomie as despair, hopelessness and discouragement. Yet, again, Merton spoke favorably of this method that, when aggregated, could provide an effective measure of the means-ends discrepancy within society at large - and help to test the hypothesis that those with like degrees of anomie are more likely to engage in deviant behavior.

The final measure of anomie - also subjective - involves measurement of position

discontent: attempts to obtain an index of the degree of pressure exerted towards deviance exerted by one's aspirations. This measure, used by James Short, seeks to identify discrepancies between a person's socially nurtured aspirations and his/her socially positioned expectancy to fulfill those aspirations. This was used in his studies of delinquency, comparing gang boys with non-gang boys in terms of their (and their fathers') occupational aspirations and expectations.

While anomie has been commonly measured by one of these methods, the corresponding measurement of deviance has generally involved the use of official government statistics. This, in itself, introduces a certain bias into the research process - as official data are far from valid and reliable scientific data. They are influenced, at one end, by stereotypical perceptions by police and diagnostic agents about who is likely to be perceived as deviant (e.g. race, class, neighborhood, etc.). In the middle are organizational factors affecting the quantity and style of official data production (e.g. internal pressures, management style, internal reward structure). At the other end, a number of overtly political factors also influence official reports (e.g. public opinion, impact on funding, etc.). All such factors make the exclusive use of official data a poor vehicle for assessing deviance.

While other theoretical traditions encounter these problems as well, the near exclusive reliance on official statistics by anomie researchers is disturbing (particularly since anomie theory itself points to socially structured inequalities). Perhaps what lies behind this is the professional-technical posture of post WWII government sponsored social research: much simply accepted official bureaucratic definitions of what and who was deviant - and definitions of problems followed the money. Since the question for most liberal social scientists was to explain the troublesome deviance of the lower class, research in the anomie tradition generally followed suit.

Social Control of Anomic Deviance:

Social control strategies associated with the anomie perspective aim at changing the structures of society as a whole. Different structural changes are recommended by each of the perspective's two dominant theoretical strands. For Durkheim, social control is said to begin with the reconstruction of the normative, or moral structure of society (e.g. reminding one of fundamentalist groups like the "Moral Majority"). Yet, Durkheim really wasn't seeking to return us to the past. Instead, he encourages the establishment of a new civic or secular moral order - not one based on religion (as in past societies characterized by mechanical solidarity), but on a new secular base for civic morality.

Durkheim's approach took two general forms. The first involved his proposal for the formation of occupational associations which would provide experiential ties for increasingly specialized workers in the highly rational modern economy. This would increase their fellowship with one another and diminish the separation brought about by the specialized division of labour. It would also enable them to develop, through interaction, a common moral perspective. Unfortunately, Durkheim was never very specific about this proposal. These associations wouldn't be like trade unions, medieval guilds, but much wider in scope, more interested in the

general social structure, mediative between individuals, other individuals, and the state, and involved in a wide range of educational and recreational activities. Yet, how these were to be set up and administered, Durkheim never tells us.

Durkheim's second general idea for moral reconstruction was education. He argued that it was the moral duty of social scientists to use their knowledge to guide public affairs along an enlightened course - one informed by the scientific findings of sociology. In this sense, sociology was, for Durkheim, the functional equivalent of what religion had been in the past - a means of making sense of the world and of morally orienting oneself toward future action. He believed that sociology would foster a new form of secular morality based on the rational comprehension of social facts. Indeed, by 1914, the Durkheimian perspective had become a standard feature of elementary school courses on civic morality throughout France.

In contrast to Durkheim, Robert Merton's approach to the social control of anomic deviance took a different form - one directed at efforts to eliminate the strain between societal goals and differentially available means. In principle this could be done in one of two ways: (1) society could be re-socialized to "accept" the reality that not all persons were meant to achieve the same goals, eradicating the destructive "myth" of equal access to resources/social mobility (e.g. like the Indian caste system, which is legitimized as "supernaturally ordained") ; or (2) smash the current "noble lie" about equality of means and replace it with a genuine system of equal access for all (e.g. affirmative action, equal-opportunity, anti-racism and anti-sexism strategies that remove barriers to equal access to societal success goals).

In the early 1960's, the latter aspect of Merton's ideas were translated into an applied program for social reform ("Mobilization for Youth"). This program, the precursor of 17 others to follow, involved a massive assault on the socially structured obstacles for success for youth in a predominantly non-white, 67 square block area of Manhattan. It sought to increase employment ability, training, to help youth achieve employment goals, provide employment opportunities, and to overcome discrimination in hiring. It also assisted residents in developing effective strategies of community organization. This work, involving Cloward and Ohlin as consultants, resonated with the liberal domestic politics of John F. Kennedy, and extensive federal funding backed up this pilot project. Indeed, the preamble of this program against delinquency is said to "read like a passage from Cloward and Ohlin's book." Ironically, ideas originating in the writings of a former street-gang member (Merton) were now officially sanctioned as those of the U.S. government and well received in academic circles to boot.

But how well did these ideas fare in practice? If measured by a specific reduction in delinquency, they generated few positive outcomes. The consensus for this negative outcome was that these programs were simultaneously too radical and not radical enough. On the one hand, they were too radical for those who had commissioned them. Organizing the afflicted soon meant that lower income citizens began using federal funds to strategically oppose a wide range of blocks to equal opportunity (e.g. rent strikes, public demonstrations, and legal action on behalf of welfare recipients - often backed up by data collected by these groups). Those running the system

viewed this as “biting the hand that feeds them” - some even feeling that public funds were being used to encourage “commies and commie sympathizers.” It wasn’t very long before the government dropped the program, and soon thereafter the FBI started to investigate community organizers. The fear was that the program was going beyond its mandate to reduce delinquency, and could even encourage a widespread radical movement among the poor (i.e. handouts from above were fine, but not encouraging the poor to change the social pattern of their poverty on their own terms). Soon, this program dissolved into conflict, and the unequal opportunity structure it had been designed to challenge reasserted itself. Moreover, there has never been any serious assessment of its actual effect on the rate of delinquency. Perhaps its vision was simply not radical enough - the practical power of the sociological reformers proved no match for the strong political and economic interests of those threatened by a fundamental restructuring of the American opportunity system.

The Anomie Perspective Today:

The anomie perspective has had enormous influence on contemporary thinking about deviance and social control, perhaps dominant in sociological thought about deviance between the 1950's and 1970. Much of this has to do with the popularization of Merton’s formulation by Cloward and Ohlin and Albert Cohen, despite the fact that few studies of this approach provided a direct test of Merton’s position. Perhaps the anomie perspective also became so widely endorsed because of a “common tendency in sociology to accept intriguing and well-formulated theories in advance of adequate empirical support.” This may have been buttressed by the fact that this formulation shared an affinity with the more general, commonsensical vision of scholars at the time (e.g. the “rise of the welfare state” with the growing involvement of government bureaucracies in the organization of everyday life).

This rise of the welfare state affected sociology deeply - indeed led to the growth of “professional” sociology. The social sciences increasingly became a well-financed technological basis for the Welfare State’s efforts to solve the problems of industrial society. This funding was accompanied by a demand for applied, or useful, programs of research. This made it necessary to alter sociological theory to fit the practical needs of bureaucratic problem-solvers. This presented certain dilemmas for sociologists of the 1950's-early 1960's. Much U.S. sociology remained firmly in the grip of the functionalist perspective, yet its overly optimistic approach offered little of the “system fixing” utility demanded by government funding agencies. Some functionalist sociologists could abandon these theoretical concerns when applying themselves to practical matters, but this resulted in an unfortunate disjunction between theory and research practice. It also led to the danger that sociologists could be obviously co-opted by those who paid them.

Sociologists were enabled to (apparently) escape these dilemmas through the work of Robert Merton - which was proposed as a theory of the “middle range.” This would preserve functionalism’s concern for the interrelationship of parts within the structure of the system as a whole. Yet, it would also be pitched at a low enough level of abstraction so as to be translatable into empirical research and concrete policy analysis. “Middle-range” theory was an ideal solution

for sociologists at work in the Welfare State. It would be theoretically abstract enough for them to maintain their identity as “detached scholars.” It would be practically concrete enough for them to maintain attachments to the business of problem-solving and to reap the financial and political benefits associated with government-sponsored research.

Of course, the study of deviance and social control benefitted greatly from this dynamic. Merton’s anomie theory was widely hailed as both theoretically sophisticated and practically useful. It excited both the sociological imagination and the bureaucratic welfare-state reformer. Moreover, it could be read as critical of certain elements of the social structure without being seen as critical of the system as a whole. As such, it was politically safe: emphasizing the American creed of individual social mobility and ways to accentuate it rather than the more fundamental structure of social inequalities throughout the system.

In terms of actual research done under the aegis of the anomie perspective, there has been a great deal (e.g. on mental illness reflecting the breakdown of the controlling and regulatory functions of the social system; on drug use and addiction reflecting blocked legitimate vs. illegitimate opportunity structures). There has also been a considerable amount of anomie research on the topic of suicide, relating the Durkheimian factors of relative social integration and social regulation to variations in the suicide rate in various social contexts. As well, there has been a large body of delinquency research that draws on the anomie framework (e.g. Empey’s study of socially structured strain and juvenile lawbreaking, where the real strain is seen to be between students lacking goals and school officials who think they ought to have them - reinforcing a sense of being “out of control” by delinquents - who are not so readily fooled by the social illusions protecting others). This brief listing suggests that there are many as yet unexplored possibilities for the study of anomic strain.

Assessment of the Anomie Perspective:

The anomie perspective makes an important contribution in its view that aspirations to deviate are rooted in the structural contradictions of society. This general idea has endured the test of time. Yet, whether reflecting Durkheim’s or Merton’s formulation, the anomie perspective has been the subject of numerous criticisms. It is to these that we now turn.

Durkheim’s links between normative deregulation and suicide, for example, has been attacked as vague and occasionally contradictory (e.g. such matters as structurally induced discrepancy between aspirations and means, stress created by the collapse of external standards, meaninglessness and social irresponsibility generated by moral deregulation). Such inconsistency prevents Durkheim from developing a coherent explanation of anomic suicide. Moreover, his statistical data - and subsequent empirical support for his theses - is less conclusive than once believed (e.g. cases that don’t fit are ignored or inadequately explained away).

Merton’s work has also been subject to criticism - some of which we’ve already noted (e.g. those by Cloward and Ohlin and Albert Cohen; the reliance on official statistics). Yet,

others have criticized Merton for the implication that the highest rates of deviance occur among the lower classes. Perhaps they are more vulnerable to certain forms of deviation due to their structural position, but so are middle-class managers and upper-class owners of highly competitive corporations. Aren't such persons also exposed to powerful strains to use any available means to achieve the American dream? The failure of Merton to systematically consider anomic deviation by the more privileged classes may have something to do with his theory's prepackaged responsiveness to the problem-solving demands of the welfare state. Other suggested problems involve what Merton left out - the impact of being labeled deviant, and whether anomie is possible in societies where social position is fixed or ascribed.

Yet, Durkheim and Merton's work have become part of the theoretical core of the contemporary sociological imagination - presenting general conceptual orientations more than precisely testable propositions. Indeed, they saw their work in these terms. In this sense, both men's work succeeded.

Their conceptual concerns converge at a general point of theoretical orientation: high rates of deviance are said to be structurally encouraged by contradictory developments in the organization of society - and sociologists will generally argue that to deal with deviance, you have to deal with problems in the social structure. This idea is almost second nature to sociologists today, and a clear strength of the anomie perspective.

Before closing, however, we will discuss two more general problems with the use of social-structural concepts by anomie theorists: (1) an overly exaggerated sense of the unity of social structure; and (2) an area in which structural analysis isn't extended far enough.

The first of these criticisms asserts that anomie theory overly exaggerates, or reifies, the idea of a unitary structure for society as a whole (e.g. the common cultural commitment to the American dream is an assumption that may not be borne out in reality). Is U.S. culture really as homogeneous as Merton assumes? Couldn't it be, rather, that it is a collection of interrelated but frequently competitive sub-groups or subcultures, each with a relatively distinct set of cultural goals? Even the efforts of dominant groups to extend their own values, such as through the impact of the mass media, may be mediated by a plurality of diverse ethnic, regional, gender, age, class, and neighborhood reference groups. In fact, some of these may become organized into contracultures that forcefully reject the cultural dominance, or hegemony, or those in structured positions of power.

Moreover, recent studies of the deviance and criminality of women back this up, suggesting that women are presented with gendered, cultural goals quite different from those presented to men. These traditional goals (marriage and family) are relatively more accessible than occupational/financial/material success, and, according to Eileen Leonard, may help explain, at least in part, why women haven't traditionally been subject to the same anomic strains toward crime as men. But, in recent years, as these traditional gendered goals have received less emphasis for women, and womens' financial/career success have been given much focus, female

involvement in crime has notably increased. All of this suggests the need to reformulate anomie theory to carefully take into account variations in culturally induced goals rather than to merely assume a single goal cutting across all groups.

The second major criticism suggests that the structural analysis underlying anomie theory isn't extended far enough. For example, while there is at least an affinity between Merton's theory and Marxist analysis (e.g. their focus on the contradictions inherent in the social structure of capitalist societies that limit equality of opportunity), some have suggested that Merton is, at best, a "cautious rebel." He is said never to take his reasoning to its logical conclusion - settling for a critique of equal opportunity without really looking hard at what lies behind it: the economic and structural organization of capitalism itself.

It is thus argued by many Marxists that what remains tacit or hidden in Merton's work must be made explicit. The political-economic structure of capitalism must be recognized as a basic source of the contradictions which produce high rates of deviance. To resolve these contradictions, and thereby structurally curtail deviance, capitalism must be replaced by a system of economic relations where everyone would be guaranteed not only equal opportunity, but equal access to the means by which production is organized and its benefits distributed. Partial reforms like Merton's simply do not go far enough ("treating the symptoms, not the cause").

This challenge to Merton's approach is important - even though we must also recognize that capitalist societies are currently undergoing major structural transformations that may *dissolve* rather than *resolve* the contradictions of structured economic inequality. Baudrillard, for example, suggests that "postmodern" capitalism saturates our daily lives with fascinating media images such that new, technology-driven forms of capitalism make it hard to discern the differences between real social contradictions and imaginary cultural obsessions, between authentic human experience and corporate packaging of "virtual experience." Within this "New World Order" capitalist culture "begins to shift from the potentially explosive condition of anomie to the more absorbent or implosive condition of anomaly."

What happens to the experience of structured social contradiction when power no longer appears to vertically suppress one class beneath another? When contradictions aren't repressed but made so visible they appear almost blinding? When power cynically blurs differences between insiders and outsiders without giving away any of the economic, racial or sexual privileges one group holds over another? Here we enter a world of postmodern capitalism where meaningful cultural commitments give way to a nihilistic play between what fascinates and what is fearful (e.g. WASP males coming to feel they are the victims of affirmative action programs by minorities, despite evidence of these groups' disenfranchisement). This "virtual reality" may have more to do with deviance in such a context (e.g. the "backlash") than the real differences between these groups.