

**SOC 3290 Deviance**  
**Overheads Lecture 9: The Anomie Perspective**

\* There are two versions of anomie theory having different emphases:

- (1) “Normlessness” underlying deviance;
- (2) Discrepancies between social goals & legitimate means

**Durkheim and Normlessness:**

\* *Anomie*= a state of “normlessness”/ insufficient regulatory constraints

\* Similarities/differences with social disorganization theory:

- similar: focus on normative chaos resulting from social change
- different: focus on all society, not just an ecological zone
- different: clearer focus on modernizing societies, not all periods
- different: deviance not search for reorganization, but a release of greed/unlimited aspirations
- different: don’t patch up normative order piecemeal, but overall

\* Durkheim on human nature: (contradictory):

- (1) No human nature without society: socially shaped in entirety
- (2) Human nature = an “inextinguishable thirst” to be socially regulated in face of limited resources

\* When social limits either *unclear*, or seen as *unfair*, trouble ensues

\* Problem of transition between traditional & modern societies = shifts in normative patterns

\* Durkheim on suicide:

- demonstrated “private” acts can only be explained socially
- focus on deviance-producing potential of anomie

\* Types of suicide:

- (1) *Egoistic* suicide: too little social integration (e.g. the unmarried);
- (2) *Altruistic* suicide: too much social integration (e.g. hara-kiri; terrorist bombers/ martyrdom);
- (3) *Fatalistic* suicide: too much social regulation (e.g. slaves; those made to feel worthless);
- (4) *Anomic* suicide: too little social regulation (e.g. rapid economic change; expecting too much leading to relative frustration):

- rapid change removes normative “shield” / releases “insatiable desires”
- winners/losers don’t receive “just desserts” in former terms
- difficulty adjusting/painful
- aspirations spiral against unfulfillment of unobtainable goals
- effort grows when least productive
- one’s desire to live suffers

\* Anomie becoming a “chronic condition”

- economic progress freed from social and moral constraints
- religion, the state and occupational groups waning in influence

\* Mechanical solidarity (waning):

- simple, relatively undifferentiated societies
- similar individuals
- similar social/economic activities
- relative “visibility” to each other
- norms repressive of individual uniqueness

- norms favoring a collective “oneness” (e.g. the Amish)

\* Organic solidarity (growing, but too slowly):

- complex, highly specialized modern societies
- increases in volume and density of populations
- personal replaced by anonymity
- highly specialized division of labour
- common religious beliefs losing power
- new rules slow in emerging
- lack of order/morality in interim: growth in suicide/deviance

### **Merton and the Goals-Means Gap:**

\* Robert Merton:

- downplays normlessness in favor of normatively induced aspirations (e.g. success)
- emphasizes gap between aspirations & legitimately available means of achieving them (i.e. “anomie”)
- the greater the gap, the more pressure toward crime

\* Modes of adaptation to anomie:

- (1) *Conformity* (accepting cultural goals & legitimate means);
- (2) *Innovation* (accepting goals/ rejecting legitimate means);
- (3) *Ritualism* ( rejecting/limiting cultural goals/ accepting legitimate means);
- (4) *Retreatism* (rejecting both cultural goals & legitimate means);
- (5) *Rebellion* (rejecting both & replacing with new ones).

\* Reformulations/Modifications:

- Cloward and Ohlin: added concept of *differential illegitimate opportunity* affecting drift into different delinquent subcultures: (e.g. criminal/conflict/retreatist).
- Cohen: added concept of “*status frustration*” to mediate Merton’s “atomistic” account (e.g. delinquent subcultures of lower class boys unable to compete in middle-class terms).

### **Identifying Anomic Deviance:**

- \* Post WWII faith in science + liberal welfare state = use of official statistics & quantitative measures of deviance/anomie.
- \* Ignored/downplayed: Historical context/analysis  
Personal experience/qualitative approaches
- \* Measures of anomie:
  - Lander (“objective” measure: % nonwhite population/ %home owners)
  - Srole: “subjective” quantitative measure of individuals’ perceptions
  - Short: “subjective” quantitative measures of position discontent
- \* Measures of deviance: official government statistics (biased). Much influenced by government research funding

### **(2) Social Control of Anomic Deviance:**

- \* Two traditions (Durkheim + Merton):
- \* Durkheim: reconstruct the normative/moral structure of society:
  - not a return to past (e.g. religion)
  - a new civic/secular moral order

- \* Strategies: (1) New occupational organizations; (2) Education
- \* Merton: eliminate strain between societal goals & differentially available means
- \* Strategies: Either:
  - (1) Re-socialize society to accept inequality: eradicate destructive myth of equal opportunity (not favored); or
  - (2) Reorganize society so that equal opportunity is available
- \* Early 1960's: Merton's latter approach attempted ("Mobilization for Youth"). Targeted federal attempt to:
  - increase employment ability
  - help youth achieve employment goals
  - overcome hiring discrimination
  - training
  - provide jobs

\* Results:

- No major reduction in delinquency
- Funds used by poor to oppose blocks to equal opportunity
- Officials felt "biting hand that feeds them"
- Programs cut/ FBI investigations began of community organizers
- Power structure reasserted itself
- Too radical/not radical enough (depending on social position)

**The Anomie Perspective Today:**

- \* Enormous influence of anomie perspective (1950's-1970)
- \* Current research on anomie & deviance:

- mental illness
- drug use and addiction
- suicide
- delinquency

### **Assessment of the Anomie Perspective:**

\* Major contribution: aspirations to deviate rooted in structural contradictions in society

\* Criticisms (Durkheim):

- Links between normative deregulation and suicide vague/inconsistent
- statistics less conclusive than once thought

\* Criticisms (Merton):

- Atomistic
- Differential illegitimate opportunity
- Use of official statistics
- Ignoring deviance of higher classes
- Ignoring impact of labeling
- Ignoring societies where social position fixed

\* General criticisms:

- (1) An overly exaggerated sense of the unity of social structure/goals (ignores diversity/subcultures/contracultures & gender)
- (2) Not extending structural analysis far enough (Marxists)
- (3) Postmodern critique: real inequalities less important than “virtual inequalities”