Anomie and Strain Theories

Robert Merton

- Early Anomie
  - Was an early challenger to the biological explanations of crime
  - Many believe his article (1938) is the most highly read article in sociology
  - It was Merton’s belief that crime derives from society
  - Defined as the breakdown of social norms; a total loss or rules

- Anomie
  - Felt social values could be divided into two categories
    - Acceptable goals
    - Acceptable means of obtaining these goals
  - Anomie was then a split between the goals and the means as a result of society’s structure
  - Deviance then results when cultural goals and means are separated from each other
Anomie and Strain Theories

• Robert Merton
  – Anomie
    • Noted that certain goals are emphasized throughout society
    • Certain means are also emphasized to reach these goals
    • When goals are too strongly stressed, the stage is set for anomie
    • Anomic conditions can change, as social conditions change

• Albert Cohen
  – Delinquent Boys (Subculture)
    • Student of Merton who asked question that Merton could not answer, “How do we explain the origins of delinquent subcultures?”
    • Cohen discovered that gang delinquency was the most common form of delinquency
    • Individuals in gangs commit more crime in attempts to gain social status
Anomie and Strain Theories

- Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin
  - Differential Opportunity Theory
    - Often considered the easiest theory to understand
    - Individuals who are denied access to the commonly accepted means will be forced to locate alternate means
    - These alternatives are equally well established in the illegitimate structure as in the legitimate structure

- Proposed 3 ideal types of delinquent gang subcultures
  - Criminal Subculture
  - Conflict Subculture
  - Retreatist Subculture

- Criminal Subculture
  - Requires integration of offenders at various age levels
  - Close integration of the carriers of conventional and illegitimate values
  - The systems of relationships between legitimate and illegitimate persons constitute the environment in which a criminal subculture can come into being
Anomie and Strain Theories

- Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin
  - Differential Opportunity Theory
    - Conflict Subculture
      - Transiency and instability produce powerful pressures for violent behavior among the young
      - First, an unorganized community cannot provide access to legitimate channels to success
      - Second, access to stable criminal opportunity systems is also restricted
  - Retreatist Subculture
    - Addresses question of what happens to those who are subject to "double failure"
    - These individuals are more susceptible to becoming retreatists
    - Does not imply that all will become retreatists

- Richard Rosenfeld and Steven Messner
  - Crime and the American Dream
    - There are features of the American Dream that contributes to the high rate of crime
      - Strong Achievement Orientation – personal worth tends to be evaluated on the basis of what people have achieved
      - Individualism – in the pursuit of success, people are encouraged to make it on their own
      - Universalism – everyone is encouraged to aspire to social ascent
      - Monetary rewards – the receipt of money
Anomie and Strain Theories

• Richard Rosenfeld and Steven Messner
  – Crime and the American Dream
    • Felt the core elements of the American Dream have their underpinnings in the economy
    • Conditions are common to all capitalist societies; however, there are two distinctions about the United States:
      – exaggerated emphasis on monetary success
      – unrestrained receptivity to innovation

Anomie and Strain Theories

• Richard Rosenfeld and Steven Messner
  – Crime and the American Dream
    • Capitalism developed in the United States without institutional restraints found in other societies
      – Economy assumed an unusual dominance in the institutional structure of society
    • Dominance is manifested in 3 different ways
      – Devaluation of non-economic institutional functions and roles
      – Accommodation to economic requirements by other institutions
      – Penetration of economic norms into other institutional domains

Anomie and Strain Theories

• Richard Rosenfeld and Steven Messner
  – Crime and the American Dream
    • Devaluation of non-economic institutional functions and roles
      – Education
        – Regarded as a means of occupational attainment
        – Few acquire knowledge for its own sake
        – How many obtain degrees for personal pleasure?
      – Family
        – Disagrees with argument that industrialization causes devaluation of family
        – Some countries have maintained strong commitment to the family, these countries are not “obsessed with crime”
Anomie and Strain Theories

- Richard Rosenfeld and Steven Messner
  - Crime and the American Dream
    - Accommodations that emerge in those situations in which institutional claims are in competition
      - Family
        - Family routines are dominated by the schedules and routines of the labor market
        - This is far different from many other countries
      - Education
        - Educational institutions are more likely to accommodate to the demands of the economy
        - People go to school to prepare for “good” jobs

- Robert Agnew
  - General Strain Theory
    - According to Merton, crime results from the inability to achieve monetary success or other valued goals through legitimate means
    - Developed three major types of strain
      - Strain as the failure to achieve positively valued goals
      - Strain as the removal of positively valued stimuli from the individual
      - Strain as the presentation of negative stimuli
Anomie and Strain Theories

- Robert Agnew
  - General Strain Theory
    - Strain as the Failure to Achieve Positively Valued Goals
      - 3 sub-types of strain under this category
        - First category encompasses most of the major strain theories in criminology
        - Second and third categories are derived from the justice literature and were new at the time of their release

- Strain as the disjunction between aspirations and expectations/actual achievements
  - Everyone is encouraged to pursue the ideal goals but are often prevented from achieving such goals through legitimate means
  - To address criticisms, there have been some who argued that a youth subculture that emphasizes a variety of immediate goals and depends on factors other than social class

- Focus is on expectations not aspirations
  - Literature argues that the failure to achieve leads to such emotions as anger, disappointment, and unhappiness
  - Largely ignored in the literature despite the fact that it could be a better explanation in some ways
Anomie and Strain Theories

• Robert Agnew
  – General Strain Theory
    • Strain as the Failure to Achieve Positively Valued Goals
      – Strain as the disjunction between just/fair outcomes and actual outcomes
        - individuals do not necessarily enter interactions with specific outcomes in mind
        - rather they expect that certain distributive justice rules will be followed
        - as a result of inequity insulting, vengeful, and deviant behaviors may result

Anomie and Strain Theories

• Robert Agnew
  – General Strain Theory
    • Strain as the Removal of Positively Valued Stimuli From the Individual
      – states that loss of a positive influence in life may result in the onset of strain
      – anticipated loss of positively valued stimuli may lead to delinquency as the individual tries to prevent the loss of the stimuli

Anomie and Strain Theories

• Robert Agnew
  – General Strain Theory
    • Strain as the Presentation of Negative Stimuli
      – presentation of negative stimuli may lead to aggression in certain situations
      – Agnew focused on the presentation of noxious stimuli that adolescents cannot escape legally from noxious stimuli
Anomie and Strain Theories

• Robert Agnew
  – General Strain Theory
    • The links between strain and delinquency
      – Delinquency may be a method for alleviation strain
      – Delinquency may be used to seek revenge
      – Delinquency may occur as adolescents try to manage their negative affect through illicit drug use
    • Each type of strain may create a predisposition for delinquency or function as a situational event that instigates a particular delinquent act

• Questions??

• Comments??