

THE EVOLUTION OF ANOMIE THEORY

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis covers the progress of anomie theory from Durkheim to Messner and Rosenfeld's recent institutional anomie theory. The contributions of Merton, Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin, and Agnew are detailed as well. It is demonstrated that current anomie theory serves as both a micro- and a macro-level sociogenic explanation for crime. Finally, empirical comparisons of relevant institutions according to institutional anomie theory are provided in an effort to support Messner and Rosenfeld's theory.

Introduction

THE EVOLUTION OF ANOMIE THEORY

It seems as though only a tiny percentage of Americans would give up the opportunity to live in the United States of America. The fact is that few nations provide “rags to riches” stories like the United States. The American dream thrives today just as it did hundreds of years ago. Nonetheless, it is possible that the institutional structure that is so friendly to entrepreneurs may invite high crime rates as well. At this point in time the trade-off is probably acceptable, but if crime rates in this country were to worsen, Americans may consider making some changes in the current institutional structure. It is very possible that the seemingly endless pursuit of self-absorbed financial “success” causes many Americans to lose sight of the importance of other aspects of their lives. After all, how important is monetary success if one is undereducated, detached from society, and isolated at the same time? It may be true that the American dream encourages people to attain monetary success by *any means necessary*.

When the general integrity and character of the American people is lessened through the selfish pursuit of individual success, one should consider whether it is truly beneficial to our nation. As Alexis de Tocqueville writes,

. . . it is easy to perceive that almost all inhabitants of the United States conduct their understanding in the same manner, and govern it by the same rules; that is to say, without ever having taken the trouble to define the rules, they have a philosophical method common to the whole people. To evade the bondage of system and habit, of family-maxims, class-opinions, and, in some degree, of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson to be used in doing otherwise and doing better; to seek the reason of things for one's self, and in one's self alone; to tend to results without being bound

to means, and to aim at the substance through the form; - such are the principal characteristics of what I shall call the philosophical method of the Americans. But if I go further, and seek amongst these characteristics the principal one which includes almost all the rest, I discover that, in most of the operations of mind, each American appeals to the individual effort of his own understanding (Tocqueville, 1956, p. 143).

Americans, like other groups, are imperfect. Perhaps one of the biggest problems in the United States is high crime rates. There are Americans who refuse to leave their dwellings alone at night; they may constantly peer over their shoulders as they travel during the day; and they often require a stranger to earn their trust (Brofenbrenner, McClelland, Wethington, Moen, and Ceci, 1996). Many Americans just accept this as a part of life. Others, however, especially those who have resided in other countries with high standards of living, realize that fear and distrust do not have to be a regular part of life.

Many nations, comparable to the United States with respect to standard of living, manage to have low rates of crime. As Messner and Rosenfeld point out, “The pervasive fear of crime observed in the United States is not an inevitable feature of modern, industrial societies. On the contrary, it is a distinctly American phenomenon” (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994, p. 4). This perception may stem from a greater sense of community and more predictability in other nations, which could also be referred to as a relative absence of anomie. Anomie is defined by Robert Merton as a “. . . breakdown in the cultural structure, occurring particularly when there is an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in

accord with them” (Merton, 1968, p. 216). In other words, anomie is essentially a state of unpredictability or normlessness.

A stable society should ensure that the virtuous succeed in life while the evil do not. Unfortunately, honesty, trust, and kindness seem to be somewhat unimportant in America, and this may be related to the prevailing norms or lack of them. For most scholars, this societal condition is best captured by Durkheim’s anomie theory. The purpose of this thesis is to chart the path of anomie theory from its origin in 1893, and to provide empirical data to examine the balance of three relevant institutions (family, education, and the polity) according to institutional anomie theory. It is believed that institutional anomie theory is a viable explanation for much of the crime in the United States, and a closer examination of data representing three relevant institutions seems warranted.

History of Anomie Theory

Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie was first introduced in 1893. The term anomie derives from a Greek word meaning "without norms" (Reid, 1997, p. 143). Durkheim believed that social cohesion in a society represents a collective conscience, and when social cohesion is lacking, problems will arise in a society (Reid, 1997). When a general sense of community does not exist, difficulties may result through normlessness. More specifically, "Durkheim suggested that in the context of French society at the turn of the nineteenth century, the rapid industrial growth, combined with a less speedy growth of forces that could regulate it, was a source of anomie" (Passas, 1995, p. 93). Anomie represents a weakening of the moral fabric in a community, and, as behavior becomes more and more unpredictable, a state of anomie ensues. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) sum up Durkheim's concept when they write:

It is precisely these cultural emphases upon "infinite" or "receding" goals that . . . put a strain upon the regulatory apparatus of the society. For if men are never satisfied with their position in the social hierarchy, if they are driven by unrealistic desires to improve their lot in life, then they may cease to be bound by the prevailing rules of the society (Cloward and Ohlin, p. 80).

Despite the foresight and accomplishments of Durkheim, he did not develop the concept of anomie as extensively as Robert K. Merton. Merton applied anomie to deviance and crime, while Durkheim utilized it primarily to describe suicide.

Robert Merton's Anomie Theory

Merton's use of Durkheim's concept of anomie explains more than simply a lack of cohesion or norms in a society. Merton's anomie theory covers individual or micro-level anomic pressures as well as macro-level ones.

Nevertheless, it is best known for the micro-level (strain) theory. Merton's strain theory " . . . assumes that people are law-abiding, but under great pressure they will resort to crime; disparity between goals and means provides that pressure" (Adler, Mueller, and Laufer, 1991, p. 112). According to Merton, innovators are individuals who are concerned with attaining financial success with little or no regard to the means through which it is attained. Also, while some upper-middle-SES (socioeconomic status) and upper-SES persons may be innovators, the pressure or strain to innovate is greater for working-class and lower-class Americans. More specifically, he (1968) writes:

[i]t is when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain *common* success-goals *for the population at large* while the social structure rigorously restricts or completely closes access to approved modes of reaching these goals *for a considerable part of the same population*, that deviant behavior ensues on a large scale (Merton, p. 200).

This analysis by Merton helps explain motives for crime at all socioeconomic levels. Merton, however, does not stop with an individual analysis. Anomie pertains to other societies

. . . when we consider the full configuration – poverty, limited opportunity and the assignment of cultural goals – there appears some basis for explaining the higher correlation between poverty and crime in our society than in others where rigidified class structure is coupled with *differential class symbols of success* (Merton, 1968, p. 201).

Critics often overlook the fact that Merton developed aggregate theories of society on a macro level, as they focus on strain theory alone. The reason for this is not really clear. Nonetheless, many researchers are quick to criticize Merton's strain theory, because it involves differential strain for individuals of different

socioeconomic statuses. It should, however, be noted that by contending that a lower-SES individual suffers more strain to innovate than a higher-SES individual, Merton does not mean that a higher-SES person feels no strain at all. Arguments such as this will be discussed in more depth later in this thesis. Merton's strain theory (a subset of his anomie theory) has received much attention in the past, but his anomie theory, which deals with macro-level anomic pressures in the United States and has most recently been advanced by Messner and Rosenfeld, has been gaining much support as of late.

From a macro-level perspective, Robert Merton realizes that an imbalance exists in America. More specifically, he is concerned with Americans *overemphasizing* financial success by *any means necessary*, which causes Americans to become absorbed in individual pursuits. Rather than enjoying personal quests because they are enriching experiences, Americans seem too interested in what it will enable them to acquire.

It is easy to realize that Americans are very competitive in nature. A certain degree of competition is undoubtedly healthy for an individual. After all, competition helps to prepare one for some of the challenges he or she will encounter later in life. Moreover, competition can be very pleasing, like when friends join a softball league for the fun of it. "When, however, the cultural emphasis shifts from the satisfactions deriving from competition itself to almost exclusive concern with the outcome, the resultant stress makes for the breakdown of the regulatory structure" (Merton, 1968, p. 211). This structural breakdown (anomie) is widespread in American culture, and it is this pervasiveness that

welcomes people to use innovative yet illegal techniques to accomplish personal goals (especially monetary success). It is important to note that Merton repeatedly touches upon structural shortcomings of American society, since these shortcomings contribute to the state of anomie (Merton, 1968). The influence of Merton's anomie theory, originally presented in his *Social Structure and Anomie* in 1938, had an immediate impact upon criminologists such as Albert Cohen.

Albert Cohen's Strain Theory

In 1955, Albert Cohen indirectly shed some light upon strain theory with *Delinquent Boys*. While Cohen focuses on subcultural theories of crime and the "middle-class measuring rod," he also covers what he refers to as illicit means theory, which closely resembles strain theory. Illicit means theory, according to Cohen,

. . . indoctrinates all social classes impartially with a desire for high social status and a sense of ignominy attaching to low social status. The symbols of high status are to an extraordinary degree the possession and the conspicuous display of economic goods. There is therefore an unusually intense desire for economic goods diffused throughout our population to a degree unprecedented in other societies. However, the means and the opportunities for the legitimate achievement of these goals are distributed most unequally among the various segments of the population. Among those segments which have the least access to the legitimate channels of "upward mobility" there develop strong feelings of deprivation and frustration and strong incentives to find other means to the achievement of status and its symbols. Unable to attain their goals by lawful means, these disadvantaged segments of the population are under strong pressure to resort to crime, the only means available to them. This argument is sociologically sophisticated and highly plausible as an explanation for adult professional crime and for the property delinquency of some older and semi-professional thieves (Cohen, 1955, p. 35-36).

Thus, Albert Cohen realizes that lower-SES individuals may be uniquely inclined to utilize innovative techniques to achieve their monetary goals. The decision of whether to use conformist or innovative strategies to achieve one's goals is key.

It is difficult to explain why certain individuals resort to innovation while others do not. It should also be noted, however, that Cohen feels that aspirations primarily exist in the form of middle-class status rather than financial success, a slightly different measurement than the one used by Merton. Cohen (1955) touches upon different modes of adaptation (although he does not refer to them as such) when he writes,

[d]ifferent individuals *do* deal differently with the same or similar problems and these differences must likewise be accounted for. One man responds to a barrier on the route to his goal by redoubling his efforts. Another seeks for a more devious route to the same objective. Another succeeds in convincing himself that the game is not worth the candle. Still another accepts, but with ill grace and an abiding feeling of bitterness and frustration, the inevitability of failure (Cohen, p. 56).

In essence, Cohen describes the differences between individuals that could easily be classified within Merton's modes of adaptation (to be detailed later in the thesis) as a conformist, an innovator, a ritualist, and a retreatist. Once again, it should be noted that Cohen refers to individuals aspiring to middle-class status. The influence of Merton's anomie theory is not limited to the work of Albert Cohen. Shortly after *Delinquent Boys* was published, Cloward and Ohlin provided another perspective on anomie theory.

Cloward and Ohlin's Illegitimate Strain Theory

Cloward and Ohlin advanced the micro-level anomie or strain theory a step further with their 1960 publication of *Delinquency and Opportunity*. Though

their work is generally reminiscent of Merton's earlier individual-level strain theory, Cloward and Ohlin aptly recognize that individuals have differential access to illegitimate paths as well as legitimate ones. In fact,

. . . there are variations in the degree to which members of various classes are fully exposed to and thus acquire the values, knowledge, and skills that facilitate upward mobility. It should not be startling, therefore, to suggest that there are socially structured variations in the availability of illegitimate means as well (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960, p. 146).

In other words, some persons may have restricted access to innovate as well as to conform. This contention has been widely accepted ever since Cloward and Ohlin presented it. The next development in anomie theory came from Robert Agnew's general strain theory.

Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory

Robert Agnew addresses another aspect of strain theory through his general strain theory. Agnew essentially claims that Merton only considers economic strain at the individual level (Agnew, 1995). General strain theory holds that there are more types of strain than financial strain alone. More specifically, Agnew holds that success in school, success in athletics, and an interactive social life can alleviate much strain among juveniles and young adults (Agnew, 1995). While this assertion is assuredly true, there still has not been a great deal of research into alternative forms of strain. Agnew's general strain theory has uncovered an area of strain theory that will undoubtedly witness further research in the future. The most recent attention to anomie theory is due to Messner and Rosenfeld.

Messner and Rosenfeld's Institutional Anomie Theory

The popularity of anomie theory decreased in the late 1970s and 1980s, which may be attributable to a wave of conservatism in the United States (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994). However, anomie theory has undergone a resurgence during the 1990s. The main force contributing to this resurgence is the 1994 publication of *Crime and the American Dream*, by Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld.

Perhaps the transformation from Merton's anomie theory to institutional anomie theory is most appropriately expressed by Messner and Rosenfeld themselves.

Merton proposes that the sources of crime in the United States lie in the same cultural commitments and social arrangements that are conventionally regarded as part of the American success story. High rates of crime are thus not simply the "sick" outcome of individual pathologies, such as defective personalities or aberrant biological structures. Nor are they the "evil consequence" of individual moral failings. Instead, crime in America derives in significant measure from highly prized cultural and social traditions – indeed, from the American Dream itself. . . . we offer an explanation of American crime rates that is based on an expanded version of Merton's theory. We amplify the theory in two ways. First, we restore the original macrolevel intent and orientation to SS&A that were removed in the conversion of "anomie theory" into "strain theory." We then extend anomie theory by considering the connections between core elements of the American Dream, which Merton discussed in some detail, and an aspect of social structure to which he devoted little attention: the interrelationships among social institutions. Our basic thesis is that the anomic tendencies inherent in the American Dream both produce and are reproduced by an *institutional balance of power* dominated by the economy. The result of the interplay between the basic cultural commitments of the American Dream and the companion institutional arrangements is widespread anomie, weak social controls, and high levels of crime (Rosenfeld and Messner, 1995, p. 160-161).

At present, the continuing evolution of anomie theory can be found in institutional anomie theory. Advocates of this macro-level theory commonly utilize the perspective to explain a large portion of criminal motivations in the United States. In sum, anomie theory has evolved considerably from its beginnings with Durkheim in 1893 and possesses the robust potential to become the leading sociogenic explanation for criminal behavior in the twenty-first century.

Micro-level Explanation for Crime According to Strain Theory

Strain theory is based on the assumption that people are basically good, and they will only resort to criminal behavior when confronted with extreme stress (Regoli and Hewitt, 1997). Since different factors cause stress in different people, strain could actually result from many factors. For example, a mother may become stressed about her inability to buy food for her children. A businessman may feel pressure to “land a big deal” that would impress his peers and improve his status. Also, a high school youth may be stressed about what he will do with his life when he is finished with school.

Merton’s strain theory holds that an individual may be classified into one of five groups (Merton, 1968). This classification is based on whether an individual chooses to accept or reject the prevailing cultural goals and the institutionalized means used to attain designated goals (see Table 1). Conformists comprise the largest group of people. Conformists not only accept the prevailing cultural goals, but they also accept the existing institutionalized means available to pursue their goals (Merton, 1968). Someone who desires economic success and pursues this in an acceptable or legitimate manner would constitute a conformist. Many Americans are content to fit into the legitimate structure of American society, and these persons are conformists.

On the other hand, innovators are the group that criminologists are most concerned with. They accept the cultural goal of financial success, but they utilize illegitimate avenues to accomplish this (Merton, 1968). A prototypical

example of an innovator is a drug dealer. A drug dealer desires financial success, but he or she is willing to use illegitimate avenues to accomplish that success.

Next, ritualists are unique in that they reject the goal of monetary success and accept the institutionalized means nevertheless (Merton, 1968). A factory worker who “settles” for a less-than-desirable job would fall into this category. Ritualists may be considered deviant, but they are not a concern of criminologists.

Table I

Merton’s Modes of Adaptation

<u>Modes of Adaptation</u>	<u>Cultural Goals</u>	<u>Institutionalized Means</u>
Conform	Accept (+)	Accept (+)
Innovation	Accept (+)	Reject (-)
Ritualism	Reject (-)	Accept (+)
Retreatism	Reject (-)	Reject (-)
Rebellion	Reject Prevailing Goals & Substitute New Goals	Reject Prevailing Means & Substitute New Means

Reference: Regoli and Hewitt, 1997.

Conversely, retreatists are often a concern for those that study crime, because they reject both the goals and the means (Merton, 1968). A vagrant and a drug addict are excellent examples. These types of individuals have completely rejected society, and they tend to live within their own worlds or subcultures. As a result, retreatists may often have fairly extensive criminal records.

Lastly, rebels reject society's goals and means in order to attempt to substitute their own goals and means in place of the old ones (Merton, 1968). While few persons would be classified as rebels, it is possible that some may be able to muster enough support for their cause to enact change in the institutional structure. An example would be the late Martin Luther King, Jr. Although a social mover such as this may indirectly cause some criminal behavior, rebels are not a real concern for criminologists.

Innovation in all Social Strata

Thus, two categories of individuals within Merton's strain theory present a concern; they are the innovator and the retreatist. Since innovators cause much harm through their rejection of institutionalized means, they are of primary interest. It should be noted that innovators permeate the white-collar world in the form of shrewd businesspersons as well as in the form of common criminals. The other category of interest, retreatists, are also likely to cause a considerable amount of crime, but the types of crimes typically committed by retreatists are less severe. Both innovators and retreatists are similar in that they reject institutionalized means. In sum, through considerations of strain, one can understand how a lower- or working-class individual with less access to legitimate means may be inclined to resort to innovation. However, innovators are common within the white-collar world as well.

One of the strongest aspects of strain theory is that it can be used to explain crime in all social strata. Upper-middle- and upper-class crime in the United States is much more damaging than most people suspect. There is little

doubt among researchers that the aggregate damage caused by white-collar offenders greatly exceeds that of street offenders. In fact, the generally accepted estimate “. . . puts the monetary costs of these offenses at about \$200 billion a year. This is roughly twenty times the annual monetary loss or damage due to street crime in the United States” (Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter, 1993, p. 104). It is, however, difficult to compare rates of white-collar crime between the United States and other modern, industrialized nations, because the data from other nations are insufficient. A large majority of white-collar crimes are never made public; even when white-collar crimes are brought to the public’s attention, the effects of the crimes are not wholly understood and the status of the person(s) involved may cause the public to downplay the incidents.

In dealing with the contention that upper-middle- and upper-class Americans are not concerned with extended monetary success, one would do well to consider Cohen’s (1955) thoughts when he writes: “Let us recall that it is characteristically American, not specifically working-class or middle-class, to measure oneself against the widest possible status universe, to seek status against ‘all comers,’ to be ‘as good as’ or ‘better than’ anybody . . .” (Cohen, p. 130). Few persons who are familiar with American society would fail to understand that it emphasizes success through the attainment of goals with much less regard for the means. Perhaps Merton (1968) sums it up best when he purports,

. . . in the American Dream there is no final stopping point. The measure of monetary success is conveniently indefinite and relative. At each income level, . . . Americans want just about twenty-five percent more. In this flux of shifting standards, there is no stable resting point, or rather, it is the point which manages always to be “just ahead” (Merton, p. 190).

The preceding excerpt from Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure* helps one understand how a stock broker with a six-figure annual salary chooses to commit fraud on the market. Indeed, strain theory encompasses more than just lower-class crime.

The micro-level strain paradigm of anomie theory proves very useful when one considers the primary goal of monetary success in American society, especially when this success is attained by any means necessary. More specifically,

. . . when the aim of victory is shorn of its institutional trappings and success becomes construed as “winning the game” rather than “winning under the rules of the game,” a premium is implicitly set upon the use of illegitimate but technically efficient means (Merton, 1968, p. 189).

The fact is that many Americans become so obsessed with “success” in the form of “victory” that they are willing to allow their means toward a goal to stray outside the parameters of the law. Americans understand that modern society is bound by rules and laws, but the illusion of cultural success “. . . leads men to withdraw emotional support from the rules” (Merton, 1968, p. 190). In the United States, it seems that one only needs to open his or her eyes in order to witness this on a regular basis. Despite the aforementioned strengths of Merton's individual-level strain theory, it is not without criticisms. Further examination, however, reveals that some of the criticisms are not as valid as the critics contend.

Criticisms of Merton's Anomie / Strain Theory

Critics of strain theory during and since the 1970s were many as were their criticisms. The criticisms include:

- An assumption that there is a value consensus in society and that the goal of monetary success is supreme (Regoli and Hewitt, 1997).
- Merton's formulation of the crime problem is class-biased. His explanation cannot explain the crimes of the rich and powerful (Regoli and Hewitt, 1997).
- Merton erroneously implies that liberal social reform offers a realistic solution to the crime problem in the United States (Regoli and Hewitt, 1997).
- A precise definition of anomie is not provided (Regoli and Hewitt, 1997).
- Merton does not explain why some individuals become innovators while others with similar pressures do not (Regoli and Hewitt, 1997).
- It does not explain all criminal behavior (Regoli and Hewitt, 1997).

Generally, most researchers should not have a problem accepting the fact that, *overall*, financial success reigns supreme in American society. It is difficult to provide solid proof that financial success overrides other forms of achievement, but an individual who pays attention to what motivates Americans would likely conclude that “. . . there is a chronic fund of motivation, conscious or repressed, to elevate one's status position . . .” (Cohen, 1955, p. 122). In fact, Cohen (1955) even mentions the American dream specifically when he writes, “[h]owever complete and successful one's accommodation to an humble status, the vitality of middle-class goals, of the ‘American dream,’ is nonetheless likely to manifest itself in his aspirations . . .” (Cohen, p. 125). The fact is that most Americans are extremely motivated by the thought of monetary success, perhaps more than anything else.

In America, every one finds facilities unknown elsewhere for making or increasing his fortune. The spirit of gain is always on the stretch, and the human mind, constantly diverted from the pleasures of imagination and the labors of the intellect, is there swayed by no impulse but the pursuit of wealth (Tocqueville, 1956, p. 159).

However, despite the fact that Americans are essentially promised the possibility of financial success through the American dream, there is only a limited amount of wealth to go around, which means financial success for all is simply impossible.

Class (or SES) presents another criticism of strain theory. The criticism of a class-bias is a significant misconception of strain theory. While Merton does insist that the degree of anomie is more severe among lower-class persons, his writings consistently note that the upper classes are not immune to strain. In fact, Merton repeatedly states in *Social Theory and Social Structure* that upper-class and upper-middle-class persons also feel strain to innovate (Merton, 1968). One of the strongest aspects of Merton's anomie theory is that it can be utilized to explain crime in all social strata. Thus, the contention that Merton's theory is class-biased is not as valid as the critics contend.

Next, the criticism that Merton erroneously implies that liberal social reform offers a realistic solution to the crime problem is debatable. It may be true that social reform does not provide many *immediate* significant benefits. After all, efforts such as the Mobilization for Youth in the 1960s have typically shown few signs of making positive differences on a broad scale (Regoli and Hewitt, 1997). Nevertheless, the Head Start program, which was initiated as part of the Mobilization for Youth program, is still going strong today (Regoli and Hewitt,

1997). Thus, liberal social reform may or may not offer a realistic solution. It seems as though one could only evaluate the effectiveness of such programs over the long-term. While this solution seems only partially unfounded, the definition of anomie is not an unfounded criticism.

The lack of a precise definition of anomie is still another consideration. For an individual to conduct research using anomie theory, a more precise definition of anomie would be quite beneficial. After all, if everyone has their own idea of what anomie means, then too many different interpretations would result. In short, how anomie is defined seems like one of the more valid criticisms of Merton's anomie theory. An even better criticism is that strain theory fails to explain why individuals choose a certain mode of adaptation.

Perhaps it is necessary to describe *why* certain persons resort to innovation or some alternative mode rather than conforming. After all, two individuals in similar situations with similar backgrounds may not choose the same mode of adaptation. One may become a conformist and another a retreatist. The reasons that some people take different routes are not explained by Merton's strain theory. Of course, the reason for this is that it may be too difficult to determine at this time. Perhaps requiring an explanation of why different persons choose different modes is simply too much to ask for. Requiring a theory to explain all individual motivations seems almost as unreasonable as expecting any single theory to explain all criminal behavior.

Lastly, perhaps the first criticism of any criminological theory is that it does not explain *all* criminal behavior. However, it may be unrealistic to expect

any single theory to explain all criminal motivations and actions, especially a theory from a single discipline. In fact, with regard to his own theory, Merton (1968) himself understands,

[o]nce it is recognized that the behavior ordinarily described as criminal or delinquent is, from the sociological standpoint, quite varied and disparate, it becomes evident that the theory under review does not purport to account for all such forms of deviant behavior (Merton, p. 231).

Merton's anomie theory is capable of explaining the individual motives behind many crimes in American society. Nonetheless, it does not explain all crime. For instance, it is well known that some juveniles commit delinquent acts "just for the hell of it." Also, some criminals are psychologically or biologically inclined toward criminal behavior. When strain theory is thought of as a part of the macro-level anomie theory, it will prove useful in helping to understand some sociological motivations for crime within a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary theory. Such a theory, however, is beyond the scope of this author and this thesis. In sum, one may conclude that some criticisms of Merton's theory are valid while others are not.

All else being equal, the strengths of the micro-level strain theory easily outweigh its weaknesses. This must be the case when one considers that the theory has existed within the framework of the larger anomie theory for over sixty years. An invalid theory would not last so long. Strain theory, however, is but a part of the larger anomie theory. The most recent version or addition to anomie theory came from Messner and Rosenfeld, and it is with their institutional anomie theory that the focus will now lie.

Macro-level Explanation for Crime According to Institutional Anomie Theory

Messner and Rosenfeld's contribution to anomie theory is commonly referred to as institutional anomie theory. Institutional anomie theory essentially holds that an imbalance exists among the major institutions in America. The relevant institutions are the economy, the family, education, politics, and religion. At present, the economy is overemphasized in the United States at the expense of the other institutions. Concerning this emphasis, Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) write:

[t]he American Dream promotes and sustains an institutional structure in which one institution – the economy – assumes dominance over all others. The resulting imbalance in the institutional structure diminishes the capacity of other institutions, such as the family, education, and the political system, to curb criminogenic cultural pressures and to impose controls over the behavior of members of society. In these ways, the distinctive cultural commitments of the American Dream and its companion institutional arrangements contribute to high levels of crime (Messner and Rosenfeld, p. iv).

The difference between crime rates in the United States and other similar nations may result from “ . . . the *exaggerated* emphasis on monetary success and the *unrestrained* receptivity to innovation” (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994, p. 76). A capitalist government in and of itself cannot explain the differences between crime rates in America and similar nations, especially when one considers that Japan is just as capitalist as the United States.

Americans who are familiar with other modern, industrialized nations often realize that an overwhelming emphasis on monetary success does not exist to the same degree outside the borders of the United States. This leads one to believe that “[h]igh crime rates are intrinsic to the basic cultural commitments and

institutional arrangements of American society. In short, at all social levels, America is organized for crime” (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994, p. 5-6). This is enough to make one wonder if the opportunity to “strike it rich” as an American is worth living a fearful and distrustful existence.

Operational definitions usually prove useful, and Messner and Rosenfeld have some of their own. “In our use of the term the American Dream, we refer to a broad cultural ethos that entails a commitment to the goal of material success, to be pursued by everyone in society, under conditions of open, individual competition” (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994, p. 6). Anomie means an imbalance through normlessness. Lastly, anomie theory is not exactly the same as strain theory. As mentioned earlier in the thesis, strain theory refers to individual modes of adaptation, while anomie theory refers to broader, comparative analyses of macro-level institutions and social structures. Yet, even with these definitions in mind, some may still have their own ideas of what the American dream entails.

Controlling for the Availability of Weapons and Heterogeneity in the United States

At this point several issues require clarification. Critics of institutional anomie theory often point out that America’s unusually high crime rates are largely a result of cultural diversity and of the availability of firearms. However, when gun ownership and racial heterogeneity in the United States are controlled for, crime rates in America still greatly exceed those in other modern, industrialized nations (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994).

These conditions are relatively simple to control for by focusing on crime rates among whites exclusive of firearms. In *Crime and the American Dream*, Messner and Rosenfeld demonstrate that homicides by white Americans alone still occur in the U.S. at a rate that is four times greater than in a group of similar nations; the results are similar when homicide rates without firearms are examined (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994). Also, it is not unreasonable to assume that many of the crimes excluded (as a result of a firearm) would have been committed in another fashion if guns were not so easily available. In sum, it seems as though the causes of inordinately high crime rates in America lie much deeper than easy access to firearms or a racially-mixed society. Once again, high crime rates may result from an institutional imbalance. Since these alternative explanations have been covered, attention will return to the institutional structure in the U.S.

Institutional Structure in the United States

Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) believe that the American dream “. . . provides the cultural foundation for a high level of economic inequality; yet a high level of inequality relegates large segments of the population to the role of ‘failure’ as defined by the standards of the very same cultural ethos” (Messner and Rosenfeld, p. 10). There is little doubt that the American dream has helped empower millions of Americans to accomplish more than they would have without it, but, unfortunately, the American dream also overemphasizes economic success by any means necessary. It is therein that the problem lies.

The American Dream thus has a dark side that must be considered in any serious effort to uncover the social sources of crime. It

encourages an exaggerated emphasis on monetary achievements while devaluing alternative criteria of success; it promotes a preoccupation with the realization of goals while deemphasizing the importance of the ways in which these goals are pursued; and it helps create and sustain social structures with limited capacities to restrain the cultural pressures to disregard legal restraints (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994, p. 10).

The reader should note that positive aspects of the American dream exist.

In fact, the American dream may have served as the driving force that has caused the United States to become the sole world leader.

The strong and persistent appeal of the American Dream has without question been highly beneficial to our society . . . [b]ut there is a paradoxical quality to the American Dream. The very features that are responsible for the impressive accomplishments of American society have less desirable consequences as well (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994, p. 8).

Americans must be willing to accept the good with the bad; they must accept the fact that high crime rates are inevitable in a society that overemphasizes financial success by any means necessary.

The emphasis on cultural goals other than monetary success may hold the potential for creating substantial positive differences in the United States. Naturally, positive results would only be realized in the long-term, since short-term gains are so difficult to evaluate. "To shore up such other institutions as the family, schools, and the polity relative to the economy, a greater share of the national wealth will have to be allocated on the basis of noneconomic criteria" (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994, p. 108). The question is whether Americans would be willing to deemphasize financial success in order for the average American to lead a simpler, more balanced life.

In the United States, economic success takes its toll on other supposedly successful endeavors such as being a parent or learning simply because it is an enriching experience. The institutional imbalance is exemplified when one considers that “. . . education has been viewed primarily as a means to an end. The image of ‘a good student’ as an *intrinsically* worthy ideal is missing from the portrait of the American Dream” (Messner and Rosenfeld, p. 8). Too many Americans pursue educational success merely as a key to attaining a desirable job, which, in turn, will enable them to earn plenty of money. College students and professors know all too well that this attitude pervades the American educational system. Far too many Americans view a college education as a way to make money and accumulate greater wealth.

Similarly, Americans are so enmeshed in the pursuit of success that they are too busy to pay attention to politics or their families. Americans seem to work far more hours on average than people in similar countries – just so they can “get ahead.” Voter turnout in the United States is embarrassing at times, and religious participation among America’s youth has been declining in America for quite some time (Mackie and Rose, 1991; Brofenbrenner, et. al., 1996). Alexis de Tocqueville believed “. . . that the most powerful, and perhaps the only, means which we still possess of interesting men in the welfare of their country, is to make them partakers in the government” (Tocqueville, 1956, p. 104). Tocqueville also felt that religion is especially important in a society that espouses equality (Tocqueville, 1956). Perhaps the most depressing aspect of the American institutional imbalance is its effects on American families. More

specifically, divorce rates in the U.S. have been increasing at a significant rate over the past thirty years (Bennett, 1994). These high rates of divorce have resulted in broken families and a national epidemic of latchkey children. The problems caused by this competitive pursuit of the American dream, therefore, need to be weighed against the positive aspects of the very same concept.

The goal of monetary success overwhelms other goals and becomes the principal measuring rod for achievements. The resulting proclivity and pressures to innovate resist any regulation that is not justified by purely technical considerations. The obvious question that arises is why cultural orientations that express the inherent logic of capitalism have evolved to a particularly extreme degree in American society. The answer, we submit, lies in the inability of other social institutions to tame economic imperatives. In short, the institutional balance of power is tilted toward the economy (Rosenfeld and Messner, 1995, p. 170).

In sum, one should reconsider whether financial success is worth broken families, low political participation, and making higher education little more than a means to an end. It is possible that in continually attempting to surpass each other Americans actually undermine one another. Recent scholarship on institutional anomie theory highlights the theory's utility in addressing the problematic issues plaguing the American drive for success by any means necessary.

Reactions to Institutional Anomie Theory

Chamlin and Cochran presented a partial test of institutional anomie theory one year after the publication of *Crime and the American Dream* (Chamlin and Cochran, 1995). They measured the effects of commitment to noneconomic institutions on rates of robbery, burglary, larceny, and auto theft as related to the poverty level for all fifty U.S. states (Chamlin and Cochran, 1995). It should be

noted that Chamlin and Cochran utilize property offenses rather than violent offenses such as homicide or aggravated assault, since property offenses fit well into anomie theory, and the data for property offenses throughout the U.S. are reliable and readily available (Chamlin and Cochran, 1995). Their results demonstrate some support for institutional anomie theory. “Two of the three indicators of the structure of noneconomic institutions, the ratio of divorces to marriages and church membership, affect property crime in a manner consistent with Messner and Rosenfeld’s (1994) approach” (Chamlin and Cochran, 1995, p. 420). Percent voting, the third economic institution in the analysis, did not prove significant (Chamlin and Cochran, 1995). Despite the exclusion of an educational measurement, the findings support “. . . Messner and Rosenfeld’s . . . core theoretical insight concerning the interrelationships among social structure, culture, and crime” (Chamlin and Cochran, 1995, p. 423). Interestingly, Chamlin and Cochran’s article led to Jensen’s “Comment on Chamlin and Cochran,” which, in turn, caused Chamlin and Cochran’s “Reply to Jensen” (Jensen, 1996; Chamlin and Cochran, 1996).

Jensen believes that the results of Chamlin and Cochran’s “Assessing Messner and Rosenfeld’s Institutional Anomie Theory: A Partial Test” reject the assumptions of institutional anomie theory and are contradictory to the hypothesis of Chamlin and Cochran (Jensen, 1996). If Jensen misunderstood Chamlin and Cochran’s hypothesis, it may explain one of his criticisms. However, it is difficult to understand how this partial test of institutional anomie theory could not support Messner and Rosenfeld’s hypotheses. Thus, Chamlin and Cochran

(1996) “. . . continue to maintain that our empirical hypotheses have been logically and correctly derived from Messner and Rosenfeld’s institutional anomie theory” (Chamlin and Cochran, p. 134). Messner and Rosenfeld themselves presented an article dealing with institutional anomie theory one year after the previously mentioned exchange (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1997).

In “Political Restraint of the Market and Levels of Criminal Homicide: A Cross-National Application of Institutional Anomie Theory,” Messner and Rosenfeld investigate the effects of decommodification on homicide rates in eighteen capitalist nations (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1997). Decommodification essentially refers to the amount of resources allocated for social welfare (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1997). Therefore, since a highly decommodified society would be expected to put less emphasis on the economy relative to other institutions, a negative relationship between decommodification and homicide rates should exist (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1997). It should also be noted that Messner and Rosenfeld control for seven possible confounding variables (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1997). Messner and Rosenfeld (1997) find that “[n]ations with greater decommodification scores . . . tend to have lower homicide rates” (Messner and Rosenfeld, p. 1404). Moreover, the study (1997) “. . . lends credibility to the theoretical perspective informing the analysis – the institutional-anomie theory of crime – and helps to empirically distinguish this perspective from the more conventional stratification-based accounts of variation across societies in the level of homicide (Messner and Rosenfeld, p. 1407-1408). In sum, both the study by

Chamlin and Cochran and the most recent research by Messner and Rosenfeld provide empirical support for institutional anomie theory.

Methodology and Analysis

There are a number of modern, industrialized nations similar in many ways to the United States. It is possible that significant differences exist between the relevant institutions within the United States and similar nations. For example, the size of each country, its geographic location, the number of large urban centers, and the type of government are all important considerations when conducting a comparative criminological analysis.

Taking these factors into consideration, Australia, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom are compared to the United States of America. The four nations selected for comparison are all modern, industrialized nations. Two (Germany and United Kingdom) are in Europe and two (Australia and Japan) are in the Far East region of the world. Furthermore, the United Kingdom has similar laws to the U.S., Japan has a capitalist economy like the U.S., Germany boasts many large cities and urban centers with several million residents each, and Australians seem to possess a general “frontier mentality” similar to that of Americans. Thus, the four countries selected provide a suitable small-scale cross-section.

Crime rates for homicide and robbery from 1986 to 1990 are investigated (see Table 2), since the data are more reliable and violent crimes are the types of crimes that citizens are typically most concerned with (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1996; United Nations, 1999). Naturally, the homicide and burglary rates are measured per 100,000 population. A nation with a greater institutional imbalance (or anomie) would be expected to have higher homicide and robbery rates.

Divorce rates represent the family as an institution. High divorce rates reflect less emphasis on and commitment to the family in general, which would be expected to contribute to higher crime rates. Divorce rates (per 1,000 population) from 1986 to 1990 (see Table 2) are compared to marriage rates (per 1,000 population) in an effort to regulate cultural differences in how marriage as an institution is utilized (United Nations, 1992).

Furthermore, the percentage of total government expenditures on education relative to each nation's gross national product (GNP) from 1986 to 1990 (see Table 2) represents a measure of commitment to education (UNESCO, 1993; UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 1996; UNESCO, 1998; UNESCO, 1999). A lower percentage of governmental expenditures on education would mean that education is underemphasized, presumably at the expense of other institutions. Lower governmental expenditures on education would be expected to increase crime rates. Of course, simply because a government spends money on education does not mean that the educational system will benefit as a result of the expenditures. In fact, it has been written that ". . . the one area where there *is* a demonstrable benefit associated with increased spending is reducing class size" (Brofenbrenner et. al., 1996, p. 207). Nevertheless, greater spending on education does reflect a general commitment to education.

Finally, voter participation rates for national heads of state from 1979 to 1988 (see Table 2) are investigated (Mackie and Rose, 1991). National elections for the head of state of each country represent involvement in the polity. Lower rates of voter participation would be expected to predict higher crime rates

through a greater institutional imbalance. It should be noted that the years do not exactly correspond between the five nations. For example, while the 1980, 1984, and 1988 presidential elections are utilized for the United States, the United Kingdom's 1979, 1983, and 1987 elections are used. The analysis also includes the 1983, 1984, and 1987 elections in Australia; the 1980, 1983, and 1987 elections in Germany; and the 1980, 1983, and 1986 elections in Japan. These

Table II

Mean Data Representing Institutions in a Five-Nation Sample

	U.S.	Australia	Germany	Japan	U.K.
Homicide Rate (per 100,000) (1986-1990)	8.67	2.09*	5.08*	1.69*	1.30*
Robbery Rate (per 100,000) (1986-1990)	229.95	48.29*	48.84*	1.44*	64.85*
Divorce Rate / Marriage Rate (per 1,000) (1986-1990)	.4846	.3513*	.3208*	.2228*	.4191*
Educational Spending (% of GNP) (1986-1990)	5.54	5.16***	4.24*	4.76*	4.82*
Voter Participation (% of eligible adults) (1979-1988)	54.3	89.9**	87.1**	71.3***	74.7**

References: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1996; Mackie and Rose, 1991; UNESCO, 1993; UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 1996; UNESCO, 1998; UNESCO, 1999; United Nations, 1992; United Nations, 1999.

*significant at .001

**significant at .01

***significant at .02

elections are approximate enough to each other and to the 1986-1990 range of other data that they should not pose a problem. Furthermore, there are no outliers in the voter participation data upon examination of voting trends since 1949 (Mackie and Rose, 1991).

Table III

T-statistics Representing Differences between Institutions in the U.S. and Four

Sample Nations

	Australia	Germany	Japan	U.K.
Homicide Rate (per 100,000) (1986-1990)	-104.44*	-27.83*	-90.11*	-327.96*
Robbery Rate (per 100,000) (1986-1990)	-93.16*	-104.97*	-3,770.17*	-86.39*
Divorce Rate / Marriage Rate (per 1,000) (1986-1990)	-31.86*	-25.58*	-102.67*	-27.93*
Educational Spending (% of GNP) (1986-1990)	-4.39***	-16.12*	-20.14*	-14.40*
Voter Participation (% of eligible adults) (1979-1988)	24.43**	23.41**	8.7866***	20.32**

References: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1996; Mackie and Rose, 1991; UNESCO, 1993; UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 1996; UNESCO, 1998; UNESCO, 1999; United Nations, 1992; United Nations, 1999.

*significant at .001

**significant at .01

***significant at .02

Religion is not utilized as another institution in this analysis, because data reflecting *active* religious participation in the five different nations are too difficult to attain. Religious affiliations alone are insufficient. Active religious participation data would prove useful, but the data seem unreliable. More specifically, cross-national survey data has been compiled, but problems with such data have been covered as well (Mol, 1972; Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves, 1993). In sum, the institutions of the family, education, and the polity are represented, while religion is not.

It should be noted that most data (homicide, robbery, divorce / marriage, educational spending) represent the years 1986 to 1990, while the voter participation data correspond closely (1979 to 1988). This recent span of time will help ensure that any outliers do not greatly affect the results. In sum, if financial success is continually overemphasized at the expense of these other institutions in America, one would assume that significant differences would exist between the data representing the relevant institutions of the United States and the four other sample nations.

A statistical comparison of the five-year averages of the data is represented in tables 2 and 3. T-tests are utilized to show significant differences in all of the institutions for all of the comparison nations *relative to the United States*. Significant differences exist for each of the four comparison nation's institutions. The often-reported, enormous differences between the homicide and robbery rates of the U.S. and similar nations is demonstrated through the five-year averages in table 2. Also, as predicted by institutional anomie theory, divorce /

marriage rates in Australia, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom are all significantly lower, which should result in lower crime rates in these comparison nations through a greater institutional balance. The educational measurements, however, do not adhere to institutional anomie theory. The United States spends significantly more on education than all of the comparison nations, which gives the impression that education in America may not be underemphasized. Voter participation data for the four comparison nations are all significantly higher than in the U.S., which, like the divorce / marriage measurements, follows institutional anomie theory. Thus, while it would be more useful if data representing a commitment to economic success and active religious participation data were available, the data for two of the three institutions in this analysis adhere to assumptions of institutional anomie theory.

The use of t-statistics to compare the data in the sample group of nations does not prove anything, but it does enable one to form a more accurate idea of the balance of the institutions in each of the five nations (see table 3). The fact is that the nations involved in this analysis have almost as many differences as similarities. Nonetheless, the significant differences found between the relevant institutions in America and the four other nations do mostly support Messner and Rosenfeld's institutional anomie theory. At the very least, the statistically significant differences warrant more in-depth research concerning institutional anomie theory.

Conclusion

Taking all of the aforementioned aspects of institutional anomie theory into consideration, it seems as though the hypothesized institutional imbalance may indeed be real. It is plausible that Americans are so obsessed with financial success that they partially neglect their families, education, politics, and religion (or any combination of them). This emphasis on financial success may cause many individuals to resort to innovation to accomplish their goals. Moreover, the strain to innovate is felt by all Americans, but the strain seems greater for Americans of lower socioeconomic status.

Messner and Rosenfeld's institutional anomie theory ties Merton's micro-level strain theory into the macro-level, comparative theory quite nicely. With regard to their own theory, they (1994) write, "The great analytical advantage . . . over alternative perspectives on crime is that it always calls attention back to the cultural and structural contexts of conformity to or deviation from conventional goals and means" (Messner and Rosenfeld, p. 59). Institutional anomie theory's greatest strengths lie in its scope and balance. For example, it can be used to explain how fundamental differences exist through a macro-level analysis of the United States compared to other modern, industrialized nations. Furthermore, strain theory, which explains individual motivations within the framework of institutional anomie theory, contributes to the scope and balance when it is integrated into institutional anomie theory. One can understand both lower- and upper-SES crime through this most recent version (institutional anomie theory) in the evolution of anomie theory. In sum, the inclusion of both macro-level and

micro-level analyses of crime as well as lower-class and upper-class motivations to commit crime makes institutional anomie theory both broad and balanced.

Anomie theory has become a leading theory of crime causation since its inception in 1893. Merton established a leading micro-level explanation for criminal behavior and laid the groundwork for a larger macro-level theory at the same time. Messner and Rosenfeld have essentially put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Crime has been and will continue to be one of the most important issues in American society. Although Americans have learned to deal with inordinately high crime rates somewhat effectively, there is no doubt that crime greatly affects the quality of life in the United States. It fosters a general distrust between fellow citizens (Brofenbrenner et. al., 1996). One's knowledge of the pervasiveness of crime in American society prevents an individual from being able to do whatever she desires. Crime actually structures peoples' lives in an adverse fashion, and they are affected by it on a daily basis.

Skeptics may still ask how institutional anomie theory can make a real difference. In other words, how can such a theory be implemented to cause positive effects? The answer, while it may not be simple to implement, is really quite obvious: Americans must learn not to remain obsessed with economic success by any means necessary. The possibility of devaluing monetary success while stressing the importance of politics, religion, education, and the family does exist. However, it is not a lesson that would be easily learned, since it would only work through the efforts of all Americans over a lengthy period of time.

Significant advancements may only be witnessed over the course of several generations.

Within the field of criminal justice, many professionals would certainly have an aversion to implementing wholesale strategical changes in the way they fight crime. After all, to change tactics is to admit error. Even if the methods and goals are changed, everybody must understand and internalize the new strategies and goals if benefits are to be maximized.

Of course, in order for such changes to occur, Congress must support them. It seems doubtful that liberals and conservatives would be able to agree on a single approach for combating crime in the near future. Once again, Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) express it best when they write:

[t]he failure of both liberals and conservatives to offer effective solutions to the crime problem ultimately reflects the inability, or unwillingness, of advocates of either approach to question the fundamental features of American society. In a sense, both are prisoners of the dominant culture. Conservatives and liberals alike embrace the American Dream without reservation and search for an external “enemy” with which to engage in a war. Conservatives direct the war against the “wicked” persons who are held to represent a danger to society. The enemies for liberals are not bad persons but bad social conditions, imperfections of the social structure that make it difficult or impossible for some people to conform to dominant norms. These social imperfections, including poverty, racial discrimination, and lack of education, are typically viewed by liberals as a “betrayal” of the American Dream. Neither group entertains the possibility that the enemy comes from within, that the causes of crime lie within the dominant culture itself (Messner and Rosenfeld, p. 101).

As long as liberals and conservatives fail to consider that crime-producing factors may be inherent within the economic and social fabric of the United States, the situation is likely to remain as it exists. Implementing changes within the current

system may actually prevent so many Americans from becoming criminals in the first place. It provides hope for a long-term, ultimate solution as opposed to a short-term, proximate solution. It attacks the *source* of the problem rather than fight the effects of the problem, and it is in a manner such as this that Americans may be able to permanently reduce crime rates.

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