

Strain Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of strain theory, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory
2. Merton's Four Responses to Strain

1. ROBERT K. MERTON AND STRAIN THEORY

Robert K. Merton, an American sociologist, developed a theory called **strain theory** that relates deviant behavior of individuals to the structure of society. Strain theory holds that society structures deviance. The way that society is set up causes strain in people's lives, and this strain could cause them to act out deviantly.

IN CONTEXT

In society, there are cultural goals and ends that all people strive for. In America, these goals and ends are wealth, social honor, and material comfort. They tend to cluster together, and there are culturally and socially sanctioned ways of arriving at these goals and ends, which are the means to the cultural goals.

Cultural Goals/Ends

Wealth
Social Honor
Material Comfort

Conventional means to achieving these cultural goals might include education, getting a good, well-paying, socially honorable job, and hard work--the American way. When you achieve success using the conventional means, Merton called this conformity. The majority of people want to conform, therefore they will play by the rules and get an education, work hard and get a good job. However, unconventional means such as criminal activity can also get you to the culturally sanctioned ends.

Means to Goals/Ends

Education
Good Jobs
Hard Work
Criminal Activity

Merton looked at how people responded to the strain or ease that they faced in getting to these goals, represented by the zigzag line in the middle of the diagram. Not everybody can get to the culturally-sanctioned ends using the same means, like education and good jobs. For a certain segment of the society, it's simply not feasible or likely that they're going to arrive here by conventional fashion. Merton theorized that this strain causes them to act out criminally and deviantly.



TERM TO KNOW

Strain Theory

A theory of deviance that suggests deviance results from the mismatch between cultural goals such as honor, wealth, and material comfort on the one hand, and the means to achieve those goals on the other.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Robert K. Merton

An American sociologist who developed Strain Theory to explain the structural underpinnings of crime in society.

2. MERTON'S FOUR RESPONSES TO STRAIN

According to Merton, there are four ways that people respond to strain in their lives:

- **Innovation:** Innovation occurs when the conventional path to social honor is rejected as futile or impossible for a particular person. Therefore, people innovate and resort to things like street crime, violence, gang hierarchy, the shadow economy or the black market, or basically, any action that they perceive will get them to the culturally-approved ends of wealth and material comfort.



HINT

Keep in mind that this is a structural theory. The fault doesn't necessarily lie with the individual; it's a way to understand deviance in relation to the structure of society.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, and Steve Jobs--three innovators in society--didn't play by the rules. They dropped out of school, yet they were wildly successful.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you are a black youth born in a very poor inner city neighborhood of New York City or

Chicago. What are your future job prospects? Are you likely to feel strain in your life?

Yes, you are, because black people have been systematically shut out of labor markets for centuries. Job opportunities aren't as easily secured in your position, so you might have a more difficult time and feel more strain in your life. This strain is uncomfortable and unpleasant, so it causes you to potentially act out in a deviant fashion. However, it's important to note that innovation does not always have to involve criminality.

- **Ritualism:** Ritualism refers to when you recognize that you might not be able to get to the culturally approved ends by the means available to you, but rather than resorting to crime, you turn inward and resign yourself to not achieving the culturally-sanctioned goals. In this scenario, you live legitimately without engaging in crime so that at least people will view you as honorable and playing by the rules, but that feeling of strain never goes away.

This causes people a lot of pain and suffering in life because although they're playing by the rules, they don't achieve what culture says they are supposed to achieve. People live with this their entire lives, making ritualism a very painful way to deal with the strain that society puts in people's lives.

- **Retreatism:** Retreatism happens when people drop out and don't even bother to pursue the culturally-approved goals of society anymore. They cease to care about them. While those who respond with innovation or ritualism continue to accept the current cultural model and try to achieve it, retreatists are no longer concerned about these goals or claim to care about them.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Alcoholics, drug addicts or homeless people are examples of retreatists. They've given up on the accepted cultural goals that society has put forth, so they reject the dominant cultural model.

- **Rebellion:** Rebellion occurs when people deny the cultural logic of their society and the means to achieve social honor, and put forth a new value set, a new way of life that is counter to the dominant cultural goals of society. They not only drop out like retreatists, but they take their retreat one step further and actively propose alternative cultural traditions.



BIG IDEA

Merton's idea that strain is a structural facet of American society also provides a macro way to view deviance. Given that deviance is structured, it will exist as long as the social structure promotes strain in people's lives. It's also unlikely that this strain will disappear anytime soon for people in society. Since it is this strain that causes some people to act out deviantly, as Merton theorized, deviance will always exist in response to strain.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about sociologist **Robert K. Merton's strain theory**, which relates deviant behavior of individuals to the structure of society. You also learned about Merton's theories on the **four responses to strain**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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PEOPLE TO KNOW

Robert K. Merton

An American sociologist who developed Strain Theory to explain the structural underpinnings of crime in society.