Merton’s Strain Theory Of Deviance Application

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Introduction

An unequal social opportunity structure creates strain for people between legitimate means and the goals that society pushes them to achieve. However, when people do not meet their goals through legitimate means and available opportunities to obtain success, deviance occurs, forcing individuals to commit crimes. The deviance due to misalignment between the “legitimate means” and the “cultural goals” of the society creates situations in which an individual experiences various strains, such as discrimination and violence. Subsequently, these strains raise negative feelings in an individual, leading to deviance if a person does not find a viable option for coping with the misconduct. Principally, Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, in his *Suicide* (1897) and *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), was the first to hypothesize that the breakdown of societal norms leads to deviant behavior and then to the commission of crimes in society (Vito & Mahhs, 2021). Moreover, building on Emile Durkheim’s hypothesis regarding the discrepancy between legitimate means and societal goals, Robert Merton further developed what sociologists call the Strain Theory.

Thesis Statement

Merton’s Strain Theory of deviance proposes a classification scheme of deviant behaviour based on an individual’s adherence to culturally approved goals and his belief in attaining them through legitimate or illegitimate means.

Merton’s Strain Theory

Robert Merton built his theory of Strain on the crime rates in the United States. He proposed that this was due to the ingrained notion of the American Dream in native people, which was to achieve financial success. He noticed that the dream of “wealth attainment” led Americans to employ illegitimate ways of attaining wealth to achieve great monetary success, and in the process, they became criminals. He called the discrepancy between societal aspirations and the means to obtain them “Strain Theory,” as this strain was leading to disorder in society. He emphasized that an extreme emphasis on aspirations and cultural norms prescribes deviant behaviour that takes the form

of robbery, fraud, and rape as a rebellion against the conventional norms of society (Vito & Mahhs, 2021).

Merton hypothesized the Strain Theory to explain the following deviant patterns in society that arise due to social inequality. Merton describes those patterns as ways through which an individual can display deviant behaviour in response to certain cultural goals. These patterns are as follows:

Conformity

Individuals follow the culturally approved societal goals through legitimate means.

Innovation

Individuals accept societal norms and goals but follow illegitimate means to pursue them.

Ritualism

Individuals who give up on culturally approved goals but try to operate according to societal rules are ritualists.

Retreatism

Individuals drop out from the culturally approved goals and reject the legitimate means of attaining the desired goals. Merton includes drug addicts, outcasts, psychotics, and chronic drunkards as examples of such individuals.

Rebellion

Merton includes political radicals in this category as such types of individuals replace societal goals with their own desired goals and devise their own means to attain them in order to bring about social change, sometimes through violence (Vito & Mahhs, 2021).

Application of Merton’s Strain Theory in Societal Crimes

This paper expands on the views of Merton to analyze two societal crimes, robbery and rape, and to study the detrimental socio-economic conditions faced by current American society and the potential reasons that lead people to commit these heinous crimes.

Analysis of Robbery through the Application of Strain Theory

To analyze the crime of robbery through the theoretical framework of Merton's Strain theory, it is important to first understand what the act of robbery actually is. Robbery is a crime that refers to the forcible acquisition of anything of value by depriving the victim of a thing or property that is not lawfully the offender's through threats or physical violence (Anderson, 2007). This act occurs anytime, anywhere, as there is no predetermination. Rather, the use of violence is required to execute the offence of robbery. Statistics from the United States Department of Justice report that around 6 million robbery cases have been reported to police in past years, and nearly 5.5 million of the population lost their lives during this offence.

Building upon Merton's Strain theory, it is noted that unequal societal structures, such as unequal distribution of wealth and resources, are the actual force leading individuals to commit the act of robbery. Merton's adaptation of Conformity is seen when an individual tries to conform to the societal structures society imposes in an attempt to achieve his goals. The inability of individuals to conform to the desired set of societal standards to achieve their goals leads them to dissatisfaction, which results in committing a robbery that is related to Merton's adaptation of Innovation and Rebellion in Strain theory. There is also a group of people who commit the crime of robbery because they do not see any value in conforming to the legitimate ways society imposes on them to achieve their goals. This is related to Retreatism and Rebellion, which Merton used to distinguish retreatists, who, in the majority, are drug addicts who isolate themselves from the rest of society and, therefore, commit robbery to fulfil their needs.

Rebellion is another pattern described by Merton to categorize people who set their own rules in order to change society, whether these rules are legitimate or illegitimate. This group of rebellious people believes that they cannot achieve "financial success" in their lives by following the legitimate ways society describes in the achievement of their goals (Anderson, 2007). Therefore, they commit robbery at the cost of people's lives and property. An example of a Rebellion used by Merton is gang robbers who organize a group of 4 to 5 people to commit planned robberies for "wealth attainment" through the use of violence.

Analysis of Rape through the Application of Strain Theory

The need to analyze the criminal act of rape, which qualifies as deviant behaviour as Merton described in his Strain Theory, establishes the theory's relevance. Statistics from the American Bureau report that the sexual assaults reported to the police and other security agencies in America escalated by 3% in the 2 consecutive years since 2014, making up 85% of females as sexual assault

victims. The criminal act of rape, in conjunction with Merton's theory of Strain and deviance patterns, validates the act as abuse that the offender forces upon another person without the victim's consent. Egan and Wilson, in an attempt to provide the foundational definition of the criminal act of rape, refer to it as "penetration against a person's consent" through the use of abuse and physical force (Anderson, 2007).

In a dynamic approach to understanding the criminal act of rape, patriarchal notions confirm the relevance of the deviant pattern of Conformity. Male members of patriarchal society feel that they have legitimate rights to achieve sexual satisfaction through females and thus conform by committing the act of rape. On the other hand, the majority of the rapists, as Merton described and the American Statistics Bureau also confirmed, are drug abusers and therefore resort to rape forcefully when they are not in their senses due to overdose (Egan, 2012). This group is related to Retreatism and includes individuals who are dissatisfied with their family lives and subsequently engage in rape. Merton's Strain Theory acknowledges deviant behaviour while dating, in which men commit rape as an alternative when they routinely initiate sexual behaviour. On the other hand, victims show Ritualism as they do not report the trauma they face at the hands of offenders (Egan, 2012). Besides, an insidious myth associated with female rape victims around the United States is the claim that females who drink deserve to be raped, which is relevant to Merton's Ritualism. The variables in such cases are usually associated with societal strain, such as fear, rage, power, and lack of self-control, which conform to Merton's adaptations of Rebellion, Retreatism, and Innovation and satisfy the offender's dissatisfaction through violent acts of rape.

Conclusion

The research confirms the relevance of Merton's Strain Theory and its adaptations, showing that individuals who commit rape and robbery fit the patterns described by Merton and use legitimate or illegitimate means to achieve their goals. In addition, through the categorization of individuals according to Merton's adaptations of Conformity, Innovation, Ritualism, Retreatism, and Rebellion, the reasons and motivations which encourage people to commit robbery and rape are also sought in the study.

References

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