

### The AQA specification:

- Different theories of crime

### The exam requires you are able to:

- ▶ Describe the functionalist explanation of crime and deviance.
- ▶ Evaluate the functionalist explanation of crime and deviance.

## Functionalism and crime

### Durkheim's functionalist theory of crime

**Functionalists** see the aim of society as to encourage **value consensus**, which means individuals must agree to conform and comply with the same values, norms and goals of acceptable behaviour, rather than their own. By bringing individuals together to agree on the same core principles, this will help bring about a harmonious and cohesive society.

### Durkheim reasons why crime occurs:

Durkheim (1858-1917), argues not everyone can comply with the rules of society which is why crime will occur. He suggests crime and deviance are not only 'normal' but a **universal** and **inevitable** part of all societies. Some of the reasons why individuals do not conform to the core values are:

- **Socialisation.** Successful socialisation occurs when individuals conform to the values and norms of acceptable social behaviour in society. Socialisation is very important as it helps maintain **social order** and **control** in society. Not everyone is socialised effectively (e.g. poor upbringing) in sharing the same basic values everyone agrees to which may result in a rise in crime and deviance.
- **Social change.** Durkheim was writing at a time of considerable change when Western societies were moving from a pre-industrial state of existence towards industrial expansion. The rapid rise of industrialisation and the demand for division of labour (specialised jobs) led to the rise of an individualistic lifestyle, as well as the decline of religious influence and control. This resulted in society becoming fragmented which made it hard for its members to comply with the same rules as in pre-industrial societies.

The consequence of rapid social change resulted in **anomie** (normlessness, i.e. 'lawlessness'). Individual moral constraints to comply with the agreed values are weakened, as people become different from each other in a modern society, leading to individual desires and expressionism. This, according to Durkheim, could lead to the rise of crime and deviant behaviour. Therefore, he saw the growth of modern industrial societies as one of the causes for the breakdown of social cohesion resulting in anomie.

### The positive functions of crime

Durkheim claims that only when crime is extremely high or low does it become disruptive to society. A moderate amount of crime and deviance can benefit society because it performs positive functions which help maintain social order. Durkheim believes there are four essential functions crime and deviance perform for society:

1. **It reaffirms moral boundaries.** Crime helps us reinforce and maintain our moral behaviour – our shared norms and values. Public outcry and punishment of offenders help reaffirm the moral boundaries of acceptable behaviour in society. It unites individuals together against what is unacceptable behaviour (e.g. 7/7 London terrorist attack and the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre) which reinforces the commitment to shared values and therefore strengthens

social cohesion in society.

- 2. Crime encourages social change.** Durkheim suggests that while too much crime may threaten social order, too little crime may also be unhealthy because society's values and norms are too strong which prevents the possibility of social change and progression occurring in society. Deviant behaviour allows the society's values and norms to be challenged. Today's deviance sometimes becomes tomorrow's morality. For example, many people denounced Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela as criminals at the time of their arrest. But their deviant behaviour helped to bring social change to many civil rights issues.
- 3. Crime acts as safety valve.** Kingsley Davis (1936), claims certain deviant acts can have a positive function. For example, pornography or prostitution provide sexual satisfaction for sexually frustrated men without threatening the family as an institution. This is because prostitution acts a safety valve as it provides a release from the pressures and strains of life without threatening the family.
- 4. Crime acts as a warning device.** According to Cohen (1955), certain crimes act a warning light that there is something dysfunctional in an aspect of society needing to be addressed. This may draw attention to the problem leading to measures to resolve it. For example, riots, protest marches and school truancy all signal there is discontent and changes need to be made within the social system.

### Merton's strain theory

**Robert Merton** (1938), a functionalist, expanded on Durkheim's concept of anomie to explain criminal and deviant behaviour. His theory, named the **strain theory**, was written in the 1930s and based on American capitalist society. Merton explained the causes of crime and deviance were due to **structural inequality** (unequal opportunities mainly due to class position) which can lead to some people deviating from the agreed basic rules of society. He notes the interplay of two factors which can lead to crime and deviance:

- **Structural factors:** structural inequality, i.e. unequal opportunity, notably for the lower-working-class.
- **Cultural factors:** the emphasis on achieving society's cultural goals, i.e. the 'American Dream' (material wealth and lifestyle) but not having the legitimate means of achieving them.

Merton argues economic success can lead to achieving the culturally approved goals – the 'American Dream'. When there is structural inequality in society, most notably within the working class, the opportunity to achieve culturally approved goals places greater 'strain' (pressure and tension) on individuals to achieve them. As a consequence, this can lead to the breakdown of norms of accepted behaviour known as 'anomie' which can result in criminal behaviour and deviancy. Merton identified five types of **modes of adaption** (responses) to the strain of anomie in attempting to achieve society's cultural goals:

- 1. Conformity.** Individuals who accept the goals through legitimate means. This would be the true 'American Dream' success story, where wealth and prestige through talent and hard work can be achieved by the ordinary person. In this sense, they are not criminals but law abiding citizens.
- 2. Innovation.** Individuals who accept the goals of society but do not have the legitimate means of achieving them so they use illegitimate means. Such individuals often tend towards criminal behaviour to seek wealth – mainly the working-class who resort to criminal activity like theft and burglary.
- 3. Ritualism.** Individuals who accept the goals of success and money or the means of achieving them, but have lost sight of the 'end goals' (material wealth) but continue to follow the 'means' of achieving them. Those who are happy with what they have and do not aspire to greater wealth. For example, civil servants, shop workers, secretaries, nurses, and teachers.

4. **Retreatism.** Individuals who reject the goals and the legitimate means of acquiring them, and who often react by dropping out of society (e.g. 'new age travellers', drug addicts, alcoholics and tramps).
5. **Rebellion.** Individuals who reject the goals and means of success and ideally would like to replace them with radical alternatives to bring about social change in society (e.g. political activists or religious fundamentalists).

Merton's modes of individual adaptation to anomie		
Responses	Goals	Means
<b>Non-deviant</b>		
Conformity	+	+
<b>Deviants</b>		
Innovation	+	-
Ritualism	-	+
Retreatism	-	-
Rebellion	+/-	+/-
Key:        + = acceptance;        - = rejection;        +/- = reject old and substitute with new		

There are differences to how Durkheim and Merton saw anomie. Durkheim saw anomie as the consequence of a rapid social change in the whole of society, whereas Merton applied anomie to the disadvantaged lower classes in society. In this respect, Merton's strain theory has similarities with subcultural theory as it focuses mainly on one social group, i.e. the working class.

## ✓ X Evaluation

### Evaluation of the Durkheim theory

#### ✓ A useful explanation.

A strength of the Durkheim's theory of crime is it offers a social explanation for the causes of crime as opposed to a crime being biologically (genetic) and psychologically (maternal deprivation) determined, which were prevalent at that time. The implication for society is that crime levels can be controlled by social engineering (i.e. social policies).

#### X It ignores social differences

A limitation of Durkheim's theory of crime is it fails to explain the social differences of crime. It does not account for why certain individuals (based on class inequality, ethnicity, or gender) are more prone to commit crime than others. This suggests Durkheim's theory offers only a partial explanation of crime as it cannot account for the social differences that can influence who commits a crime or not.

#### X It ignores the crimes of the powerful

Marxists are critical of Durkheim's theory because it fails to explain the relationship between power and crime. [1] It fails to acknowledge criminal laws are made to benefit powerful social groups; [2] the bias of law enforcement agencies (the police and the courts) is against the lower-working-classes. For example, the police are more likely to focus on working-class crimes, which class are more likely to be arrested and prosecuted than those crimes committed by the powerful (e.g. business activities). This shows Durkheim's theory does not account for the fact that those in power can influence the social distribution of crime in society, which leads to a biased view of the criminal statistics of working-class people.

### ✗ **It is not appropriate to modern society**

Durkheim's theory may be outdated or, at best, is more appropriate for more simplistic societies rather than modern multi-cultural societies, such as in the UK. Modern industrialised societies with varied cultures are more fragmented and diverse, and it is hard to see how there can be a shared agreement on morality in society. The suggestion is the theory is no longer applicable to contemporary society as not everyone shares the same values to strengthen social cohesion.

### ✗ **Theoretical contradiction.**

Durkheim's theory of crime has been criticised because there seems to be a contradiction in his theory. Does deviance help promote social stability and reaffirm moral boundaries through punishment of offenders (*point 1*); or does it prepare the way for social change through the testing of society's social boundaries (*point 2*)?

## Evaluation of Merton's strain theory

### ✓ **It explains the high level of working-class crime**

Merton's theory was one of the earliest attempts to provide a sociological explanation for the high level of crime in modern societies. It provides a key explanation for the disproportionately high working class representation in criminal statistics and among the prison population.

### ✗ **The unreliability of official statistics**

Merton's strain theory explains why the working class are over-represented in criminal statistics. However, it is generally recognised how unreliable official crime statistics can be. For example, it is now well known that white-collar and middle-class crimes are more widely committed than crime statistics would have us believe. In this respect, Merton has also been criticised for exaggerating working-class crime and ignoring crimes of the powerful.

### ✗ **The exaggeration of agreed consensus**

It has been argued Merton exaggerated the degree of consensus in America and other Western capitalist societies that everyone is pursuing the goals of material wealth. This may have been true in the 1930s, but in modern plural 21-century society with a diversity of different cultures, many people do not share the same material objectives.

### ✗ **The strain theory does not necessarily lead to crime**

The strain theory cannot account for why some people – especially those from the working class or who are economically at a disadvantage and who may experience strain – do not turn to criminal activity but comply with the values of mainstream society.

### ✗ **Purposeless crimes**

The strain theory accounts for crimes and deviance that are economically driven. However, it fails to explain criminal acts that have been committed just for "fun" such as vandalism, violent crime and sexual crime.



## Exam Questions

1. Outline **two** reasons why functionalists see crime as inevitable. . . . . [4 marks]
2. Outline **three** criticisms of the functionalist view of crime and deviance. . . . . [6 marks]
3. Applying material from **Item ...**, analyse **two** functions of crime and deviance. . . . . [10 marks]
4. Applying material from Item ..., analyse the strain theories to our understanding of crime and deviance. . . . . [10 marks]
5. Applying material from **Item...** and your knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of functionalist approach in explaining the nature and extent of crime and deviance. . . . . [30 marks]