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The Concept of Anomie in Explaining Crime

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THE CONCEPT OF ANOMIE IN EXPLAINING CRIME

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Abstract: The sociological concept of anomie, describing the breakdown of ethical standards, has been widely influential in the field of criminology. This article examines the explanatory power of classical and contemporary anomie theories (namely Strain Theory and Institutional Anomie Theory) in understanding a vast array of crimes as well as exploring the effects of dramatic sociocultural changes in modern history. The article concludes that anomie theories provide robust explanations for certain types of crime (specifically property crime, violent crime, organized crime, and white-collar crime) and notes the empirical challenges in assessing the validity of such theories.

Introduction

Sociologist Émile Durkheim introduced *anomie*, the French term to describe a state of normlessness, to the study of crime and deviance in the late nineteenth century, leading to the development of strain theory and other similar extensions.¹ The concept of anomie has been widely influential in the development of prominent sociological theories of crime, including of the Chicago School. However, the study of Merton's strain theory, the first coherent theory of anomie, did not begin until the 1960s, at which point it was met with overwhelming criticism. According to British criminologists Downes and Rock, strain theory has become "a routine

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¹ Tim Newburn, *Criminology* (Florence, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2017), 187-191.

conceptual folly for students to demolish before moving on to more rewarding ground”.²

Nonetheless, the development of contemporary anomie theories over the past three decades reflects the resurgence of this concept in understanding crime. Contrary to sociologist Colin Sumner’s claim that the sociological study of deviance is dead, contemporary extensions of Merton’s strain theory continue to influence modern criminology, improving the explanatory power of anomie in relation to crime and deviance.³

The concept of anomie is useful in situating crime within specific sociocultural contexts and provides compelling explanations for the factors and motivations underlying property crime, violent crime, organized crime, and white-collar crime. By the same token, however, theories of anomie demonstrate limited explanatory power for other types of crime (i.e. expressive crime) and are further limited by the challenges of operationalizing and empirically testing its key concepts.

Overview of Anomie Theories

Previous criminological work on anomie emphasizes the social and cultural elements that shape crime, thus de-emphasizing the role of legal construction. The central tenet in anomie theories is that human behavior is based on shared norms that shape people’s goals and the acceptable means through which to achieve those goals. Anomie occurs when there is an imbalance between these goals and their means due to either an overemphasis on goals, as Merton proposes, or insufficient moral regulations on individual desires, as Durkheim argues.⁴

² Newburn, *Criminology*, 187-191.

³ Robert Reiner, *Crime, the Mystery of the Common-Sense Concept* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2016), 53-55.

⁴ Jón Gunnar Bernburg, “Anomie, Social Change and Crime. A Theoretical Examination of Institutional-Anomie Theory,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 42, no. 4 (September 1, 2002): 729-42.

Durkheim founded the sociological tradition of anomie that Merton later built upon in the development of strain theory. Consequently, these two are known as classical anomie theorists. Extensions of anomie theory include Messner and Rosenfeld's Institutional Anomie Theory, Vaughan's "Organisational Deviance," and Passas's "Reference Group Analysis." Institutional Anomie Theory highlights the moderating power of non-economic institutions, Vaughan's theory analyzes deviance in the context of organizational misconduct, and Reference Group Analysis applies anomic pressures to industry and trade.⁵

Durkheim: Anomie and Deviance

Durkheim first employed anomie in explaining crime by focusing on sociological explanations of deviance, specifically suicide, during the late nineteenth century.⁶ Durkheim viewed crime as actions that offended the collective feelings of society, or what he termed the "conscience collective." Through this lens, conceptions of crime are relative, changing between different societies and in different historical contexts depending on what offends the moral code of a particular society. Durkheim viewed crime as inevitable and integral component of society because it encourages social action in response to violations of accepted norms, thereby reinforcing collective values. As such, crime plays an adaptive role in introducing new practices to society, most especially by underscoring group norms.

Durkheim lived through the Industrial Revolution and developed the concept of anomie to rationalize the social and psychological changes he witnessed firsthand. He theorized that in times of social transformation, rapid and dramatic changes in economic and political circumstances contribute to the breakdown of existing social arrangements. Consequently, new

⁵ Bernburg, "Anomie, Social Change and Crime. A Theoretical Examination of Institutional-Anomie Theory".

⁶ Newburn, *Criminology*, 182-186.

forms of moral regulation must be introduced to maintain social cohesion. Durkheim believed that modern industrial societies have a greater affinity for anomie because of the complex nature of new social systems.⁷ Because anomie occurs when moral constraints are unable to limit individual desires sufficiently, without adequately adapted structural constraints in modernizing societies, individuals are pushed toward deviant behavior.⁸

Merton: Strain Theory

Merton built on Durkheim's belief that anomie results from poor normative regulation to develop the concept of structural strain.⁹ Merton contends that there are two key elements of social and cultural structure: the socially valued objectives and the acceptable means of reaching such objectives.¹⁰ These objectives, which are culturally defined and shared by all members of society, often involve prestige. In Merton's mid-twentieth century American context, this shared goal was financial success fueled by the consumption, greed, and materialism of the "American Dream." As such, Merton contends that anomie arises from the misalignment between a society's objectives and means.

Merton sought to understand how existing social structures exert substantial pressure on some groups, pushing them to nonconformist behaviors. He was most concerned with the disproportionate stress placed upon specific objectives since this could encourage people to disregard the permissibility of means and instead pursue expediency. He explains that

⁷ Cecil L. Willis, "Durkheim's Concept of Anomie: Some Observations," *Sociological Inquiry* 52, no. 2 (1982): 106–13

⁸ Newburn, *Criminology*, 182-186.

⁹ Newburn, *Criminology*, 187-191.

¹⁰ Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 5 (1938): 672–82

individuals can have five possible responses based on whether they accept or reject the goals and legitimate means to achieve those goals.

The most common response is conformity, which occurs when both the means and the goals are accepted. Conformity maintains the stability of the social structure and constitutes conventional behavior. On the other hand, the latter four adaptations—retreatism, rebellion, ritualism, and innovation—are deviant. Retreatism, the least common, occurs when both goals and means are rejected. Retreatists, such as drug addicts, psychotics, and vagabonds, are “in society but not of it.” Rebellion can involve rejecting or accepting both the goals and means of society since it involves an overhaul of all existing standards and a desire for a new world order. Ritualism describes situations where people lose a commitment to cultural goals but maintain a strong attachment to means. Ritualists still conform to social expectations but are considered deviant because they abandon society’s shared aspirations. Finally, innovation occurs when people are drawn to the same cultural values but relinquish legitimate means to achieve them. This is known as the illegitimacy adjustment when people assimilate to the culturally defined goals but not the moral norms otherwise governing so-called “legitimate” means.¹¹

Merton argues that the illegitimacy adjustment occurs because society holds the same goals for all members but provides differential access to such goals because of class structures. For populations that are taught to value the same achievements yet face institutional barriers to achieving them (namely the lower-class), vice and crime become attractive and efficient options to attain financial success. Merton emphasizes that it is not just poverty in isolation that causes

¹¹ Newburn, *Criminology*, 187-191.

antisocial behavior, but also the coupling of poverty with high barriers to compete for the objectives pursued by society.¹²

Messner and Rosenfeld: Institutional Anomie Theory

Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT), introduced by Messner and Rosenfeld in 1994, is arguably the most prominent contemporary theory of anomie.¹³ Messner and Rosenfeld extend Merton's strain theory by further explicating the interplay between culture and social structure: though IAT resembles strain theory in that American exceptionalism is at the root of anomic pressures, Messner and Rosenfeld further assert that the capitalist market economy is the structural source of anomie. As an unusually powerful institution, the market economy disrupts the value orientations of other social institutions, allowing values such as self-interest, ambition, and competition to dominate. In comparison, familial, educational, and political institutions struggle to regulate the dangerous values fueled by the market economy. The result is an institutional imbalance in societies where a capitalist economy dominates, placing greater emphasis on monetary success and consequently creating strong anomic pressures.¹⁴

Anomie in Understanding Social Change

The concept of anomie provides a way to understand how social changes—specifically the changing role of social institutions and the dynamic nature of social arrangements— influence human behavior. Durkheim used anomie to explain the breakdown of existing social conditions following the Industrial Revolution. Industrialization was characterized not only by technological change but also socioeconomic and cultural shifts with the rise of urbanization,

¹² Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie".

¹³ Bernburg, "Anomie, Social Change and Crime".

¹⁴ Bernburg, "Anomie, Social Change and Crime".

workforce mobilization, and commercialization. Consequently, society moved from what Durkheim saw as a relatively primitive social order characterized by mechanical solidarity to a more complex order rooted in organic solidarity.¹⁵ According to Durkheim, primitive, pre-modern societies have relatively undifferentiated divisions of labor, so social order was organized through uniformity and group norms were therefore enforced through retributive sanctions since identifying and excluding outsiders was key to maintaining group identity.

As the Industrial Revolution created a highly differentiated divisions of labor, however, social inequalities were heightened as members of society began to unevenly accumulate wealth. Thus, Durkheim argues, social solidarity became rooted in heterogeneity under this complex state, with social cohesion resting on the interdependence of diverse individuals. The result was a decline in retributivism as the function of law and punishment later became regulating interactions between diverse members, rather than maintaining uniformity.

Moreover, Durkheim noted that social inequality, family trouble, economic crises, and overconsumption of material goods were more prevalent in modern industrial societies. He purported that with the rapid modernization of society, new forms of moral regulation could not replace existent forms quickly enough—creating a state of anomie plagued by the social problems he observed.¹⁶

In a similar fashion, Merton used anomie to describe the unique socioeconomic conditions of his time. Merton's strain theory can be seen of as a critique of the American Dream's fundamental ideology, most specifically its values of consumption, greed, and

¹⁵ Newburn, *Criminology*, 182-186.

¹⁶ Willis, "Durkheim's Concept of Anomie: Some Observations".

materialism.¹⁷ The American Dream painted a picture of the United States as a land of opportunity where anyone could achieve success with hard work. These ideals attracted many immigrants to move to America to build better lives for themselves, but high unemployment, slumped financial markets, and poor business prospects defined a decade-long financial recession. Despite the fact that President Roosevelt's New Deal aimed to stimulate the economy and promised the same prosperous and egalitarian environment as before, Merton asserts that the high institutional barriers to success for the lower-class precipitated anomie and nonconformist behavior from these groups.

Merton cites Berkeley criminologist Lohman's study on high-crime areas in Northern Chicago to illustrate strain theory.¹⁸ He argues that while the American Dream is fed to all members of society, the limited career advancement opportunities for unskilled laborers and low-income workers reduces any prospects of true financial success. Indeed, it is rare for members of these groups to achieve success through legitimate means given the lack of educational and economic resources in high-crime areas. Differential access creates strain on this population, pushing them to pursue illegitimate means such as organized crime. The Great Depression only intensified this strain and prolonged the state of anomie as low-income groups struggled most from widespread unemployment.¹⁹

The concept of anomie also applies to socio-historical contexts outside the Western world. Chinese criminal justice academic Linda Zhao used institutional anomie theory as a framework to analyze the surge in China's crime rates after the market-oriented economic

¹⁷ Newburn, *Criminology*, 187-191.

¹⁸ Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie".

¹⁹ Newburn, *Criminology*, 187-191.

reforms of 1978.²⁰ That year marked the beginning of China's "Reform and Opening Up" period when Premier Deng Xiaoping launched free market policies that have been credited for the two-digit GDP growth that China has experienced ever since. However, the first decade of reforms saw overall crime rates increase by 340% and serious crime rates increase ten-fold. Violent, property, and white-collar crime rose steadily in the subsequent three decades, with, for example, robberies surging by seventeen times from 1981 to 2002. Zhao theorizes that China's sudden change to a market economy and the government-driven cultural shift to cultivate values of entrepreneurship, individual economic success, and wealth redefined socially valued goals. Following the introduction of capitalist economic policies, there was a marked shift from a collectivist culture to one in which financial achievements became a measure of individual worth. As economic development became more concentrated in coastal, urban regions, however, rural migrant workers bore an increasingly heavy burden due to their exclusion from social welfare and housing programs in major cities. These workers were also vulnerable to exploitation as they lacked education and could rarely advance from a career of manual labor. Zhao further argues that the lack of legitimate means for rural migrant workers to achieve success encouraged crime, thereby explaining the dramatic increase in violent and property crime. Strains were also present for middle- and upper-class citizens, specifically government officials, leading them to engage in corruption. Government officials on low salaries witnessed non-Party members accumulate wealth through new economic policies, thus creating anomic pressures towards white-collar crime.

²⁰ Linda Shuo Zhao, "Anomie Theory and Crime in a Transitional China (1978—)," *International Criminal Justice Review* 18, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 137–57

Nevertheless, Zhao notes that IAT cannot fully account for the strains in China's unique sociopolitical environment, especially because strains were a product of the disconnect between China's Marxist-Leninist political ideology and the capitalist principles that sustained China's economy. Zhao contends that this ideological conflict amplified anomic tensions in both upper and lower classes, contributing to the surge in crime throughout China's transitional period. Hence, though anomie is a powerful concept in analyzing individual deviance as a result of social change, the nature of the strains may vary depending on particular sociocultural contexts.

Anomie in Explaining Certain Types of Crime

The concept of anomie has proven useful in explaining organized crime, property crime, and violent crime. Organized crime entails cooperation between individuals in pursuit of an organization's goals and usually involves careful planning, recurring cycles of crime, and intricate organizational dynamics.²¹ It aligns closely with Merton's description of innovation as a deviant adaptation because innovators share the same cultural goals of monetary success but do not have access to legitimate means of achievement. Merton asserts that these innovators become more susceptible to the "promises of power and high income from organized vice, rackets and crime" as organized crime is motivated by the promise of significant financial rewards but uses means that violate the law.²²

Anomie also offers a compelling explanation for property crime such as theft, shoplifting, and burglary since property crime provides an expedient method to acquire material goods and progress towards material success. Merton posits that this type of crime is concentrated in the lower classes because they have the least access to legitimate opportunities, consistent with a

²¹ J. Miller, *21st Century Criminology: A Reference Handbook* (Thousand Oaks, California, 2009), 590

²² Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie".

large body of research that highlights income inequality as the strongest correlate of property crime.²³ Furthermore, radicalized income inequality in major American cities has been attributed to fundamental labor market changes in the past, namely the removal of industrial jobs. This relates to Durkheim's theory that moral and regulatory norms struggle to keep up with rapid changes in socioeconomic conditions. The result is insufficient moral regulation, thus creating a state of anomie.

Empirical evidence supports the relationship between anomie and theft. In a multi-level study of over 58,000 households in twenty-six countries, marketing academics Martin et al. found that greater wealth disparity, greater achievement orientation, heightened individualism, and less future orientation were all associated with higher levels of theft, consistent with Merton's work.²⁴ Martin et al. interpreted theft as deviant consumption in the context of consumer behavior. As material symbols of wealth become more visible through globalization and technological advances, the emphasis on materialistic goals is only strengthened. When consumers face difficulties achieving material satisfaction through conventional means, theft proves an immediate and effective method to satisfy these desires.

IAT also applies to violent crime, which is typically more prevalent among members of the lower-class. In fact, Messner and Rosenfeld's 1997 study bolstered IAT by using it to analyze cross-national homicide rates.²⁵ Specifically, Messner and Rosenfeld examined how political and economic institutions could account for cross-national variation in the homicide rates of forty-five modern industrialized countries. They found that the "decommodification of

²³ Miller, *21st Century Criminology: A Reference Handbook*, 541-543.

²⁴ Kelly D. Martin, John B. Cullen, and Michael W. Martin, "What's Yours Is Now Mine: Deviant Consumption Through Acquisitive Crime," *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 32, no. 1 (2013): 140-57.

²⁵ Steven F. Messner and Richard Rosenfeld, "Political Restraint of the Market and Levels of Criminal Homicide: A Cross-National Application of Institutional-Anomie Theory," *Social Forces* 75, no. 4 (June 1, 1997): 1393-1416

labor,” or a measure of resources available to help citizens reduce their reliance on the market economy, was negatively correlated to homicide rates. America’s low decommodification score, accompanied by the dominance of its capitalist economy, is an explanation for its unusually high homicide rates. Thus, Messner and Rosenfeld’s findings lend support to their hypothesis that non-economic social institutions should moderate all crimes.

One criticism of anomie (and more specifically of Merton’s theory), is that it does not provide an explanation for the crimes of the powerful. Indeed, Merton’s account focuses on how institutional barriers exert anomic strain on the lower class to commit crime. At the same time, however, members of the upper class have clear access to legitimate means of achieving socially valued objectives, so there is no motivation for deviant behavior under his theory.

The theories of contemporary sociologists are more effective in explaining crimes of the powerful. Nikos Passas, professor of criminal justice at Northeastern University, added the concept of reference groups to anomie theory in his 1997 publication “Anomie and White-collar Crime”.²⁶ He argues that conceptions of the socially valued goal, including the meaning and content of the aspiration, vary by social status. Passas purports that anomic tensions exist in all social classes, so members of different classes can similarly struggle in achieving their goals. Relative deprivation occurs when individuals select comparative referents who are better off to compare themselves to, thereby generating a strain towards deviance.

Under this context, anomie theory becomes applicable to white-collar crimes. The term “white-collar crime” is used loosely to describe crimes committed in corporate settings by people

²⁶ Nikos Passas, “Anomie and White-Collar Crime,” in *Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory*, 2 vols. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010), 57–58

deemed respectable due to their occupation.²⁷ Driven by the goal of monetary success in relation to one's wealthy colleagues as comparative referents, one could easily feel that his or her legitimate means are insufficient to achieve the level of success enjoyed by comparative referents. This is consistent with the majority of research on white-collar crime, which points to financial need as its primary motivator. While white-collar workers may not exhibit an objective financial need, the "fear of falling," or losing one's hard-earned financial security, can be amplified in comparison to one's high-achieving reference groups. American criminologists Schoepfer and Piquero's test of IAT in explaining embezzlement in America found support for this revised theory: the study found that voter participation was negatively related to embezzlement, while high school dropout rates were positive correlated, consistent with the idea that political and educational institutions moderate crime.²⁸ Furthermore, higher unemployment rates were associated with lower levels of embezzlement. Though this may seem inconsistent with IAT, it is as expected for white-collar crime because unemployment limits individual's opportunities for offending.

Nonetheless, the explanatory power of anomie in other sorts of crime is subject to critique. For example, Durkheim asserts that crimes shock society's collective consciousness, yet not all crimes call for the kind of moral outrage that violent crimes or property crimes engender. Speeding, recreational drug use, and tax evasion are all crimes that do not seem to violate core moral norms held by societies and are generally more accepted. Likewise, Merton's strain theory does not seem generalizable to all types of crime. The key element in strain theory is society's overemphasis on monetary success as the collective goal, but some types of crime cannot be

²⁷ Miller, *21st Century Criminology: A Reference Handbook*, 549.

²⁸ Andrea Schoepfer and Nicole Leeper Piquero, "Exploring White-Collar Crime and the American Dream: A Partial Test of Institutional Anomie Theory," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 34, no. 3 (May 1, 2006): 227-35

explained by this objective. Expressive crimes, especially domestic and sexual violence, are largely a product of personal motivations with the aim of making a statement. As such, expressive crimes cannot be explained by cultural-level pressures in the same way that instrumental crimes can be. In addition, it is hard to make the case that vandalism or drunk driving are a product of the same strains on the lower-class as theft.

Merton concedes in his paper that his four deviant adaptations are not collectively exhaustive and that there may exist other adaptations not addressed by his means-ends matrix. Given that so many different types of crime exist, a limitation of strain theory is the lack of adaptations available to address other types of offending. Perhaps the greater issue though is Merton's assumptions about the types of goals shared by society. Merton assumes that financial success is the core objective for all members of society. He acknowledges the presence of countercultures in American society but does not attempt to incorporate them into strain theory.²⁹ For example, members of the lower-middle class tend to prioritize financial security over competition and therefore would not share the same fixation on financial success that Merton suggests. Likewise, craftspeople typically pursue the perfection of their skill over monetary compensation. To assume that financial success is the blanket objective for all members of American society seems myopic and limits strain theory's explanatory power.

Empirical Validity of Theories of Anomie

While Merton's work on anomie was published over eighty years ago, there has been limited empirical assessment of its validity since, largely because anomie is an inherently elusive and difficult concept to test. Researchers have yet to develop an accepted measure of anomie

²⁹ Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie".

because of its abstractness and differentiation in definition. With regards to Durkheim, the idea of the conscience collective is highly abstract and his theory of social transformation and the inability of moral regulations to keep pace with changes requires longitudinal studies of the moral norms in society. Likewise, any test of Merton's theory requires not only a measure of anomie, but also measures of the degree of emphasis placed on monetary success, the availability of legitimate means to achieve success, and more importantly, what constitutes achievement of the socially valued goal. For contemporary theories like IAT, the strength of non-economic social institutions must also be accounted for. Therefore, challenges with operationalizing anomie and related theoretical sociological concepts significantly limits their testability, and thus, their empirical validity.

The limited empirical research on anomie has primarily relied on single-factor proxies to measure anomie. For example, researchers may rely on a measure of economic strength, such as GDP and unemployment rates, as a proxy for the emphasis on capitalist objectives. As for economic inequality, researchers may turn to absolute measures like life expectancy or infant mortality rates, as well as relative measures like the Gini coefficient^{30,31} One study that analyzed the linkage between social organization and deviance was conducted by Baumer and Gustafson, leading American sociologists and criminologists, in 2007.³² The study used survey data from the American General Survey Study to gauge the degree of commitment to monetary success and degree of commitment to legitimate means. The study then used (1) official measures of

³⁰ The Gini Coefficient is a measure of economic inequality which ranges from 0, indicating perfect equality, to 1, indicating maximal inequality

³¹ John K. Cochran and Beth Bjerregaard, "Structural Anomie and Crime: A Cross-National Test," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 56, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 203–17

³² Eric P. Baumer and Regan Gustafson, "Social Organization and Instrumental Crime: Assessing the Empirical Validity of Classic and Contemporary Anomie Theories," *Criminology* 45, no. 3 (2007): 617–63

instrumental crime rates across American communities, and (2) single proxies to address the strength of other social institutions.

Overall, the findings lend moderate support to both Merton's strain theory and IAT. As predicted, the strong commitment to monetary success combined with weak commitment to legitimate means had a criminogenic effect. There was no evidence, however, to support Merton's emphasis on limited access to legitimate opportunities weakening commitment to legitimate means. Indeed, what was actually significant were the real levels of attainment (as opposed to accessibility of opportunities), thus still supporting Merton's central claim about differential access. In addressing IAT, the findings were consistent with the important role of welfare assistance and family socialization considering that reducing commitment to goals though the moderating role of education, political structure, and religion was not evident. One possible explanation for this observation is that welfare systems provide a direct means of increasing access to financial goals while families act as a form of social control.

Nevertheless, Baumer and Gustafson's methodology reflects further challenges in testing theories of anomie. The study assessed commitment to goals and legitimate means by how much respondents agreed to the two statements: (1) "Next to health, money is the most important thing," and (2) "There are no right or wrong ways to make money, only hard or easy ways." The statements are not only vague and insufficient to capture one's goal-orientation, but they are also predicated on the assumption that monetary success is the main shared goal in society, an assumption which has not been proven. Finally, another issue with testing IAT is that the moderating role of the family could also be evidence of Routine Activities Theory. In fact, greater socialization within families may increase the guardianship of potential targets, thus

discouraging others in the neighborhood to target them. In addition, the presence of guardians may also hinder the development of deviant subcultures that support groups.

Recent empirical work has attempted to capture the multiplicative effects of strain theory's many facets, rather than considering each factor independently. Cochran and Bjerregaard, who specialize in capital punishment and gang membership respectively, conducted a cross-national study using official data from INTERPOL³³, United Nations, and World Bank for thirty-nine countries.³⁴ Examining strain theory and IAT, the researchers noted that structural anomie requires three elements: (1) cultural emphasis on wealth accumulation, (2) economic structure that allows for individual wealth accumulation, and (3) presence of structural barriers limiting access to legitimate means of achieving monetary success for some members. To best capture anomie, they proposed the following equation:

$$\text{Structural Anomie} = \text{Economic Freedom Index} \times \text{GDP} \times \text{Gini Coefficient}$$

To incorporate elements in institutional anomie theory, Cochran and Bjerregaard also used single proxies for non-economic institutions. For example, divorce rates were used to account for strength of family, voter turnout for political engagement, and educational expenditure for strength of education system. The findings suggest that their proposed measure of anomie has predictive efficacy, explaining nearly one third of cross-national variation in homicide and theft. While the study represents progress towards operationalizing anomie, empirical work still needs to be conducted on the implied causal linkages in these theories (i.e. the link between economic inequality and anomie). Moreover, precise definitions must be developed to make the theories more testable. While conventional studies have relied on the size

³³ International Criminal Police Organization, an intergovernmental organization facilitating global crime cooperation

³⁴ Cochran and Bjerregaard, "Structural Anomie and Crime: A Cross-National Test".

of welfare programs, as well as educational and vocational training programs available to determine access, these proxies do not capture the effect of possible institutional biases such as racism that could affect actual accessibility for certain populations.

Another criticism of empirical tests of anomie theory is their reliance on official data. Most empirical research on anomie tests the strength of economic factors or social institutions using statistics from global organizations like the United Nations. Furthermore, crime is often solely represented with official crime rates extracted from government datasets. The issue with official statistics is that they tend to overrepresent lower-class crime or crimes committed by people fitting certain profiles. The “dark figure of crime” refers to the element that is not captured in official statistics either because victims do not report crimes or the police did not record crimes.³⁵ Because of this dark figure, it is difficult to ascertain how high actual levels of crime are simply by relying on official statistics, so self-reporting and victimization surveys are frequently used as alternative measures. The reliance on official data in empirical studies may not accurately capture the nature and distribution of crimes, thus limiting the validity of results.

Conclusion

Both classical and contemporary theories of anomie hold that shared norms define our goals and means to achieving these goals. However, institutions and social structures can exert a disproportionate pressure, or strain, on certain groups, pushing individuals in these groups towards deviance and crime. Theories of anomie are useful in providing a lens with which to understand individual deviance, particularly within the context of social transformations ranging from the Industrial Revolution to market reforms of modern China. Furthermore, anomic

³⁵ Newburn, *Criminology*, 42-46.

pressures provide compelling explanations for the roots of organized, property, violent, and white-collar crime. Nonetheless, strain theory's focus on financial success as the predominate socially valued objective limits its explanatory power for expressive crime as well as other types of crime. In addition, the elusive nature of anomie makes it difficult to operationalize, thus presenting challenges for empirical validation.

It is worth noting is that the concept of anomie is not only useful in explaining crime, but also presents significant policy implications for the prevention of crime. Policies geared towards increasing social welfare and wealth redistribution can reduce the disproportionate strain on anomie and deviance among the lower-class. Moreover, increasing investment and participation in educational, political, and familial institutions can have a moderating effect on crime.

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