

*Anomie and Strain: Context and Consequences of Merton's Two Theories**

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Robert Merton presented two, not always clearly differentiated theories in his seminal explorations on the social-structure-and-anomie paradigm: a strain theory and an anomie theory. A one-sided focus on Merton's strain theory in the secondary literature has unnecessarily restricted the power and effectiveness of Merton's anomie theory. For although structural strain is one way to explain why deviance occurs in the context of anomie, it is not the only way. We contend that scholars who are critical of strain theory should not automatically discard Merton's anomie theory, because the perspective of anomie is compatible with several other theories of crime and delinquency. Offering examples of previous integration efforts, we maintain that Merton's theoretical model can benefit from the input of other theories of crime and deviance as much as these other theoretical perspectives can fine-tune their models and explanations.

Introduction

Robert Merton's paradigm of social structure and anomie has been enthusiastically embraced as a valuable analytical framework, especially for the study of crime and deviance. First presented in 1938, Merton's theoretical model has been the springboard for scores of subsequent research projects and theoretical discussions (see, e.g., contributions and bibliographies in Adler and Laufer 1995; Passas and Agnew 1997). In fact, Merton's "Social Structure and Anomie" paper—in its various manifestations (Merton 1938; 1949a, b; 1957, 131–60; 1968, 185–214)—is the most quoted contribution in sociology (Besnard 1987, p. 272; Cole 1975, p. 175). Although Merton's work on social structure and anomie is an undisputed classic in sociology, however, there has continued to be much confusion and debate over the years as to the meaning and status of Merton's conceptualizations (Agnew and Passas 1997; Bernard 1987; Levine 1985, pp. 57–61). Relatedly, Merton's contribution has been heralded as among the most significant of all major sociological theories (e.g., Garfield 1980; Orrù 1990; Passas 1995), but it has also been criticized as fundamentally flawed (e.g., Besnard 1990; Kornhauser 1978).

The confusion over the merits and limitations of Merton's theory has several origins, no doubt, some of which may have little to do with the empirical adequacy of the theory or other aspects of its intrinsic merits, but instead relate more to various currents in the social organization of sociology (Cole 1975). In this paper, we discuss conditions and implications of how the reception and understanding of Merton's social-structure-and-anomie theories have

been unfairly discounted. We suggest that the depreciation of Merton's ideas is partly due to his own inconsistent use of certain terms in his writings over the past half-century. Moreover, it does not help that his work in this area remains unfinished. In particular, we argue that in his contributions on social structure and anomie, Merton forwarded two distinct theories that he did not always clearly distinguish. First, he presents a theory of anomie, referring to a deinstitutionalization of norms that occurs when there is a disjunction between the emphasis on cultural goals and institutional means (Merton 1938, p. 673; 1968, p. 189). Second, he presents a strain theory of deviant behavior that holds that people are more likely to pursue illegitimate means to attaining culturally prescribed goals when they are blocked from accessing the institutionalized means to these goals (Merton 1938, p. 679; 1968, p. 211). In addition to the fact that Merton has not always differentiated clearly between anomie and strain, these theoretical components have not always been very well distinguished in the secondary literature.

The arguments we will advance to substantiate the viewpoint that Merton developed two theories in his seminal work can, to some extent, rely on prior theoretical work. Particularly, Robert Agnew (1997, p. 33) and Steven Messner (1988, pp. 41–43) have identified distinct theoretical perspectives within Merton's broader paradigm of social structure and anomie. But some of the conditions and the implications for sociological crime and deviance research regarding Merton's multiple theories have not yet been adequately recognized. In this paper, we will argue that Merton's strain theory actually restricts the power and effectiveness of his anomie theory. We will advance the idea that Merton did not have to confine his theory of deviant behavior to structural strain, but could have taken other routes to make sense of the linkage between the social state of anomie and the structurally determined distribution of deviance. Merton himself alluded to these factors in his writings and occasionally even suggested them explicitly (e.g., Merton 1997a), but it remains an unfinished task to introduce a theoretical perspective of deviant behavior that is complementary to and integrated with the anomie framework. Although structural strain is one way to explain why deviance occurs in the context of anomie, there is no theoretical necessity for it being the only way. Although it is obviously beyond the confines of this paper to settle the debate on the appropriate level and mode of the explanation of crime and deviance once and for all, our discussion will specify building blocks toward a comprehensive criminology in the Mertonian tradition.

We do not develop our analysis solely on the basis of a conceptual discussion; we also situate it in terms of a sociological investigation of the ebbs and flows that have historically marked the development and reception of the social-structure-and-anomie paradigm. In a recent paper, Robert Agnew and Nikos Passas (1997) ask whether the Mertonian paradigm constitutes a unified theoretical

tradition. The authors answer in the affirmative, but their focus is mainly on the existing intellectual work that has historically emerged from Merton (via Durkheim) (Agnew and Passas 1997, pp. 9–11). Their answer, in other words, is appropriate relative to the external, social context of the Mertonian tradition, but it leaves unaddressed the question on the (internal) systematics of theory, which—as Merton (1968, pp. 1–38) himself has argued—has to be kept distinct from its history. Other scholars, however, have debated the merits and limitations of the Mertonian paradigm exclusively in theoretical terms (e.g., Kornhauser 1978). Focusing on aspects of both the history and the systematics of the Mertonian framework, our paper will discuss the reception of Merton's theories in the social-scientific literature and explore theoretical issues related to the sociological explanation of deviant behavior.

“Social Structure and Anomie”: The Birth of a Classic

In a recent commentary, Merton (1997a) nicely points out the unfinished nature of his contributions on anomie and deviance by speaking of his “*evolving* idea of anomie-and-opportunity-structures” (p. 518; emphasis added). Next to the original version of the “Social Structure and Anomie” article in the *American Sociological Review* in 1938 and the numerous reprints of that paper in scores of textbooks, Merton has continually reworked the paradigm through revisions and extensions (Merton 1949a, b; 1957, pp. 131–60, 161–94; 1968, pp. 185–214, 215–48; 1995; 1997a), related discussions (Merton 1955, 1971), responses to criticisms (Merton 1959, 1964), and added theoretical reflections (Merton 1997b, 1999). These developments can only be analytically, but not empirically divorced from the social context of the scholarship in which they occurred. Thus, we first take a look at the history of the reception of Merton's work on the basis of an analysis of citations in the Social Sciences Citation Index and its current online version, the ISI Web of Science. Though this strategy is, of course, not without limitations (Cole 1975, pp. 186–87), it does provide some revealing findings.

Merton's writings on the social-structure-and-anomie paradigm continue to be frequently cited to this day (see Table 1). In fact, the number of citations to Merton's various “Social Structure and Anomie” papers has increased in recent decades, after it took a dip in the early 1970s. The steady popularity of Merton's work, however, is not altogether a blessing and cannot be taken as a straightforward indication of the continued popularity of Mertonian theory today. A closer look reveals the striking fact that the total number of references to Merton's seminal article in the *American Sociological Review* (Merton 1938; hereafter *ASR*) has consistently increased over the past fifty years and was at an all-time high in the second half of the 1990s. Although this may partly be due to the fact that scientific production in sociology has generally increased, the finding remains counterintuitive, inasmuch as Merton's theory is surely less applied

Table 1
Citations to Merton's "Social Structure and Anomie," 1956–2000

| | <i>American Sociological Review (ASR), 1938</i> | <i>Social Theory and Social Structure (STSS), 1949</i> | <i>STSS 1957</i> | <i>STSS 1968</i> | Total | % <i>STSS</i> |
|-----------|---|--|----------------------|----------------------|-------|------------------|
| 1956–1960 | 3 | 23 ^a | 19 | — | 45 | 93 |
| 1961–1965 | 11 | 12 ^a | 66 | — | 89 | 88 |
| 1966–1970 | 23 | 6 | 82 | 0 | 111 | 79 |
| 1971–1975 | 31 | 0 | 19 | 1 | 51 | 39 |
| 1976–1980 | 58 | 5 | 19 | 6 | 88 | 34 |
| 1981–1985 | 74 | 1 | 9 | 4 | 88 | 16 |
| 1986–1990 | 68 | 1 | 6 | 4 | 79 | 14 |
| 1991–1995 | 69 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 79 | 13 |
| 1996–2000 | 84 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 88 | 5 |

^aIncludes one reference to Merton 1949a.

Source: Data for 1956–1980 were based on hard-copy editions of the *Social Science Citation Index*. Data from 1981 onward were calculated from the same index in the Web of Science Citation databases (ISI 2003). End date is August 2000.

today than in the 1960s, when the popularity of the functionalist paradigm was at an all-time high (Cole 1975, p. 175). But the well-documented intellectual and political attacks on structural functionalism and the decline of its popularity during the 1970s are not reflected in a corresponding decline in citations to the 1938 *ASR* article.

Yet, when we also consider the various versions of "Social Structure and Anomie" published in the editions of Merton's 1949 collection *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949b; hereafter *STSS*), a more telling picture is revealed. Merton's *ASR* paper of 1938 was first revised and expanded for inclusion in an edited volume on the family (Merton 1949a). This explains the separate attention paid in the revised paper to the role of the family in the context of the social structures of deviant behavior (Merton 1949a, pp. 309–11; 1968, pp. 212–13). In the same year, the revised version was reprinted in the first edition of *STSS*, a volume that went through two more editions, in 1957 and 1968. The

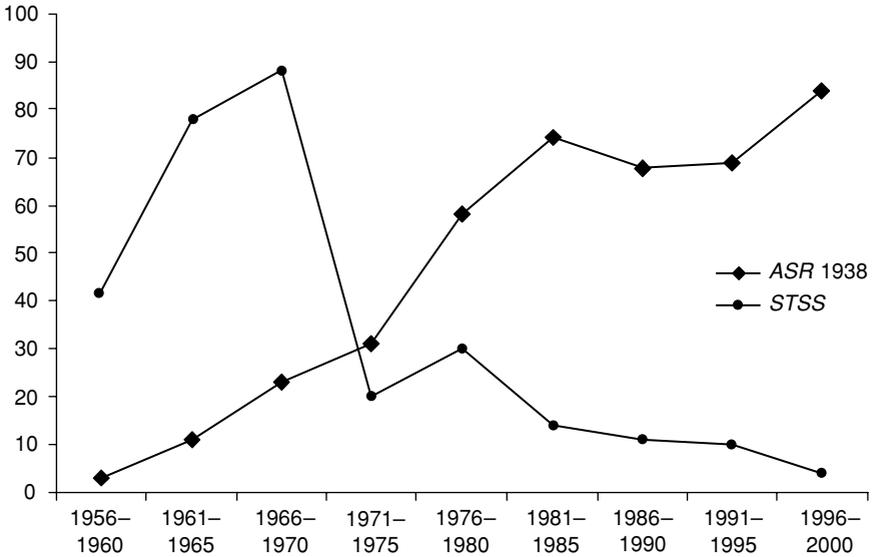


Figure 1

Citations to Robert Merton's 1938 *American Sociological Review* (ASR) Article and Its Expanded Chapter-Length Version from All Editions of *Social Theory and Social Structure* (STSS) Combined.

1957 edition reproduced the anomie paper from 1949 (Merton 1957, pp. 131–60) as well as a supplementary chapter called “Continuities in the Theory of Social Structure and Anomie” (Merton 1957, pp. 161–94). The 1968 edition included reprints of both chapters (Merton 1968, pp. 185–214, 215–48). Investigating these various editions, it is clear that the number of references to the social-structure-and-anomie papers in *STSS* was relatively high during the 1960s, then suddenly and sharply declined during the 1970s and has continued to decrease ever since. Though the number of citations to the *ASR* 1938 paper did increase during the functionalist demise of the 1970s, it was then about equal to the number of references to the various *STSS* versions, which had dropped dramatically since the 1960s.

Comparisons between citations to the 1938 *ASR* article and the various *STSS* versions are also telling. As visualized separately in Figure 1, from the 1970s onward, the number of references to Merton's *ASR* paper of 1938 has continually increased, at the same time as the number of references to the various *STSS* versions has decreased. The proportion of citations to the various *STSS* editions dropped steadily from the 1960s onward, from more than 80 percent in

the 1960s to between 30 percent and 40 percent in the 1970s and only 5 percent at the close of the twentieth century. In other words, the effective dominance of structural functionalism and the influence of Merton's paradigm on social research in the 1960s are demonstrated by the high proportion of citations to the mature version of the social-structure-and-anomie paradigm in the *STSS* editions.¹ For indeed, Merton's 1938 *ASR* article is but a twelve-page outline of a theoretical framework that is later developed in much more detail in the various *STSS* editions (Cole 1975, p. 206).² Thus, it appears that the criticisms against functionalism that invaded the field more and more effectively from the late 1960s onward served to diminish the prestige of the ideas contained in *STSS*. This is shown by the dramatic decline during the first half of the 1970s of the citations to the social-structure-and-anomie paradigm presented in the *STSS* editions. An additional contribution to this decline was a general decrease in the popularity of crime and delinquency research (Garfield 1987, p. 6; Cole 1975, p. 201). Thereafter, however, the further decline in the popularity of functionalism during the last decades of the twentieth century is demonstrated, not by an overall decline in citations to the social-structure-and-anomie perspective, but by a continual and very pronounced decline of references to the *STSS* versions of Merton's theories.

Since any serious discussion, application, or empirical test of Merton's anomie framework has to rely on one of the *STSS* versions, it can be deduced that the increase in citations to the *ASR* paper since the early 1980s is indicative of something other than an increasing influence of Merton's work on theoretical and empirical research practices. The continually growing success of Merton's 1938 *ASR* article, we maintain, is indicative of the status of Merton's contribution as a "classic" among contemporary sociologists. Though now revered as a classical contribution, the Mertonian paradigm of strain and anomie is today much less applied and tested in empirical research and is generally not discussed in theoretical excursions in an intellectually meaningful degree of detail. Instead, references to Merton's social-structure-and-anomie paradigm have changed qualitatively to become, as Stephen Cole (1975) suggests, "ceremonial" in nature (p. 209).³ These kinds of references are more likely to be made to the 1938 version, which presented the theory in its most seminal form, even though that early formulation is rather sketchy and lacks the sophistication of the expanded *STSS* versions, not to mention the entire body of work in the social-structure-and-anomie paradigm. The price of becoming a classic is that one is no longer a contemporary. And we do not see the giants on whose shoulders we stand.

What our citation analysis cannot reveal is that this effect is perhaps even more acute in the contemporary textbook literature, in which it is almost always the original "Social Structure and Anomie" article from 1938 that is reprinted (see Snell, Green, and Wakefield 1994). This is surely acceptable when a

compendium explicitly deals with the history of criminological thought (e.g., Rock 1994, pp. 389–402), especially when one wishes to indicate that Merton was among the first to develop a distinctly sociological theory of deviant behavior that reacted against biological and psychological explanations (Merton 1938, p. 672; see also Merton and Ashley-Montagu 1939). But the practice is more problematic when a compendium is meant to contribute to the systematics of criminological theory (e.g., Pontell 1999, pp. 37–44). Among the most critical shortcomings of the ambiguous ceremonial status of Merton's paradigm in respect to the systematics of theory are the many continued misunderstandings and misreadings of Merton's theoretical formulations and their relevance for contemporary work on crime and deviant behavior. In the remainder of this paper we will focus on some of these theoretical issues and particularly bring out the existence and implications of at least two theories in the social-structure-and-anomie paradigm.

Merton's Concept of Anomie

Borrowing a term sociologically introduced by Durkheim ([1893] 1984), Merton adopts the anomie concept as part of his effort to suggest that biological explanations of deviant behavior are inadequate to explain social reality and that, instead, structural conditions should be considered as inducing deviation from prescribed patterns of conduct. Although the concept of anomie appears in the title of Merton's original article, the term is used only casually in two passages, without even a mention of Durkheim (Levine 1985, p. 57). Later papers by Merton more explicitly include and discuss the term, also referencing Durkheim (e.g., Merton 1968, p. 189), but the usage and meaning of the term is clearly multiple and not entirely consistent with Durkheim's use (Deflem 1989; Hilbert 1989; Levine 1985, pp. 57–61). Furthermore, the macrosociological concept of anomie has often been confused with the social-psychological concept of anomia, although Merton himself clearly distinguished between the two (Merton 1968, pp. 215–17). The conceptual ambiguity over Merton's anomie concept is at least partly a result of Merton's own inconsistent use of the term. As Donald Levine (1985) argues, Merton's various formulations of anomie demonstrate "a pattern of steadily increasing semantic confusion" (p. 58). Levine argues that Merton employed at least ten definitions of anomie from 1938 to 1964 (Sztompka [1998] suggests four definitions). This cloudiness of meaning causes Levine (1985) to opine that "Merton failed to acknowledge the ambiguities of anomie in his own work" (p. 60).

How, then, can we define Merton's concept of anomie? For the purposes of this paper it is useful to rely on the two social-structure-and-anomie chapters from Merton's revised and enlarged edition of *STSS* (Merton 1957, pp. 131–60, 161–94; 1968, pp. 185–248). It is in this work that Merton was

most concerned with developing and clarifying the paradigm, devoting an entire new chapter to the matter in which he also included separate sections on “The Extended Concept of Anomie” and “Indicators of Anomie” (Merton 1968, pp. 215–20).

The most precise, if not always consistently used, definition of anomie provided by Merton refers to “a literal *demoralization*, i.e., a deinstitutionalization, of the means” that is the consequence of a dissociation between cultural goals and institutional norms (Merton 1968, p. 190). Anomie has often been believed to refer to a general imbalance between cultural goals and the legitimate ways to achieve those goals (Deflem 1989). That is clearly not the case, for Merton’s concept of anomie refers to “a *specific imbalance* where cultural goals are over-emphasized at the expense of institutionalized means” (Orrù 1987, p. 122). Unfortunately, as Margaret Farnworth and Michael Leiber (1989, p. 263) argue, more generalizing conceptual reinterpretations of Merton’s theory have added to the disillusionment of Merton’s model. What Merton primarily adjusts in the different versions of his work from the 1938 article to the 1968 chapters is the nature of the source of anomie. As Marco Orrù (1987, pp. 138–41) argues, in the 1938 article Merton uses the notion of anomie very broadly to refer to any kind of imbalance between cultural goals and institutionalized means. Merton suggests that when means and goals are emphasized at disproportionate levels, anomie will be the result. Yet elsewhere in the paper Merton describes anomie in terms of a particular type of disjunction of means and goals: when society stresses the achievement of cultural goals but does not equally emphasize the prescribed means to those goals, a deinstitutionalization of means occurs, “the integration of society becomes tenuous and anomie ensues” (Merton 1938, p. 674). From this early formulation, it is clear that anomie refers to having such a singular devotion to the goals of society that following the designated means to achieving those goals becomes unimportant. The secondary literature often fails to understand Merton’s concept of anomie and frequently mistakes it as a structural situation of blocked opportunities. Harold Finestone (1976, p. 166), for example, suggests that Merton’s concept of anomie can be regarded as a disjunction between universal American goals and the lack of access to these goals. As we will argue below in more detail, however, this statement refers to Merton’s theory of strain, rather than his theory of anomie.

In the revised and extended papers after 1938, Merton further clarifies the concept of anomie and argues that “[A]ny cultural goals which receive extreme and only negligibly qualified emphasis in the culture of a group will serve to attenuate the emphasis on institutionalized practices and make for anomie” (Merton 1968, p. 235). In other words, when society places a greater stress on achieving the culturally preferred goals—whatever they are—but does not equally stress the approved norms regulating the means to achieve those goals, society

is in a state of anomie. Merton's concept of anomie in the broadest sense is concerned with the disparate emphasis that exists between cultural goals and institutionalized means. More narrowly defined, however, anomie is said to exist when the "cultural (or idiosyncratic) exaggeration of the success-goal leads men to withdraw emotional support from the rules" (Merton 1968, p. 190).

Merton's Strain Theory

In both the article of 1938 and the later elaborations, Merton is intent on explaining the concept of anomie at the structural or macro level. Having explained anomie in terms of the peculiar constellation of the cultural structure of the United States, Merton proceeds to analyze how individuals adjust to the patterns of goals and means in one of five different ways. Thus, Scott Menard (1995) aptly points out that Merton's paradigm is best viewed as "an attempt to span both macrosocial and microsocial levels of analysis by tracing the individual-level consequences of cultural and social-structural phenomena" (p. 139). Merton (1968) refers to the types of adjustment to anomic conditions as "modes of individual adaptation," the differential distribution of which manifests the pressures exerted by the social structure (p. 194). The most common mode of adaptation is *conformity*, the acceptance of both cultural goals and institutionalized means. Among the deviant alternatives is *retreatism*, a rejection of the goals and the means of society. Another deviant alternative is the relatively uncommon adaptation *rebellion*, referring to the rejection and active substitution of both the goals and the means of society. *Ritualism* occurs when the means to legitimately pursue the cultural goals are adhered to despite the fact that the goals themselves are out of reach or abandoned. The final mode of adaptation is *innovation*, which refers to the acceptance of goals but the rejection of means.

Not surprisingly, the innovation adaptation has received the greatest attention from sociologists interested in the study of deviance and crime. Merton himself (1968) spends most of his discussion trying to explain the concept of innovation, a response that reportedly "occurs when the individual has assimilated the cultural emphasis upon the goal without equally internalizing the institutional norms governing ways and means for its attainment" (p. 195). It is striking how much this definition of one of the modes of (individual) adaptation parallels Merton's definition of the structural sources for the (social) state of anomie. It is, indeed, at the social-psychological level that Merton offers an explanation of why some people delegitimize the institutionalized means while remaining committed to the cultural goals. In formulating a reason for anomie, Merton advances his strain theory.

Merton (1968, pp. 216–17) argues that "[T]he social structure strains the cultural values, making action in accord with them readily possible for those

occupying certain statuses within the society and difficult or impossible for others.” Most individuals in society accept the cultural goals, but the access to legitimate avenues for goal attainment are blocked for other people, causing them to reject the legitimate (and often legal) means to achieving the accepted goals. According to Merton, this differentiation and its consequences are not randomly distributed across society. The class structure operates in such a way that “[T]he greatest pressures towards deviation are exerted upon the lower strata” (Merton 1968, p. 198). For while the success value is dominant across society, legitimate means are not equally accessible: “It is the *combination* of the cultural emphasis and the social structure which produces intense pressure for deviation” (Merton 1968, p. 199). Hence, the deviant form of innovation is disproportionately present in those strata where legal opportunities for reaching the cultural goals are less or not accessible. Consistent with this formulation, the notion of opportunity has most recently moved to the foreground in Merton’s discussions on deviance (Merton 1995, 1997a). Merton (1997a, p. 519) now refers to his theory of deviant behavior as “the theory of anomie-and-opportunity-structures,” a formulation which more distinctly brings out the strain component next to the theory of anomie.

In sum, Merton asserts that given the dominance of the success theme in American culture (1968, pp. 200, 220–24), persons who are blocked from reaching the “wealth goals” of society will often employ illegal methods for attaining monetary success (1938, p. 679). In this sense, it is the social structure that is postulated to be putting pressure on individuals to commit crime. Such a structural, distinctly sociological explanation of deviance rightly excited the sociological community and inspired scores of theoretical and empirical articles. The theory became so popular that during the 1960s it was considered the dominant explanation for deviance (Agnew 1992, p. 47). From the 1970s onward, however, several empirical studies, primarily conducted by control theorists, began to question the empirical validity of strain theory (Kornhauser 1978). Although Merton’s theory was held to be theoretically plausible, many of the studies conducted to test the theory returned falsifying results. Allen Liska (1971), for example, presented three separate studies that contradicted the premise that delinquency is a result of a strain between ends and means. Marshall Clinard (1968, p. 158) concluded that while the theory “is logical on the surface, there are so many objections to the theory that it cannot be accepted.” A skeptical attitude toward Merton’s strain theory was fairly prevalent throughout the 1970s and 1980s, so that the perspective was much less applied in deviance research. And although there has been a revival of the Mertonian paradigm since the 1990s, discussions persist on the lack of empirical support for Merton’s strain theory (Paternoster and Mazerolle 1994, pp. 235–36).

Disentangling Anomie and Strain

Several scholars have blended Merton's concept of anomie with his theory of strain, thereby discounting the differences between the two concepts (e.g., Sharma 1980; Walsh 2000). The problem is sometimes further complicated by inclusion of the concept of alienation (e.g., Mitchell 1984; see Besnard 1987, pp. 354–65). At other times, the anomie concept is completely ignored in treatments of Merton's theory of deviance. Relying on a conception that distinguishes two theories in Merton's paradigm, Francis Cullen (1984, p. 76) thus rightly argues that “[F]ew assessments have been made of the anomie portion of his general paradigm of deviant behavior.” Richard Johnson (1979), for example, does not even mention the term “anomie” in his discussions of strain theory, although Merton's strain theory is largely dependent upon his theory of anomie. This dependency, however, is not reciprocal, for anomie theory does not require the concept of “blocked access” for a deinstitutionalization of means to occur. Nevertheless, in the secondary scholarship, dissatisfaction with Merton's strain model of deviance has often resulted in an outright rejection of his theory of anomie as well (see the overviews by Bernard 1984, 1987; Besnard 1987, pp. 284–98; Burton and Cullen 1992; Menard 1995; Rosenfeld 1989).

Sources of Confusion

A first set of factors in the ambiguous reception of Merton's social-structure-and-anomie paradigm concerns elements of the empirical research tradition on anomie and strain. Some argue that Merton's theory of deviant behavior has clearly been refuted in empirical research (Kornhauser 1978, p. 180), while others offer a more nuanced picture to suggest that the empirical tradition in the anomie or strain tradition has produced favorable or, at worst, mixed results (Bernard 1984; Besnard 1987, pp. 266–72; Passas 1990, 1995; Sharma 1980). For the purposes of our analysis, it is noteworthy that the lack of clear research results can partly be attributed to the fact that research has suffered from oversimplified tests of Merton's theories, which have ignored the existence of both structural and social-psychological components in the model (Menard 1995). Especially neglected has been the pivotal role of the conditions of various modes of adaptation as mediating influences on the type and frequency of deviant behavior. Indeed, the structural condition of anomie alone cannot be a determining factor of deviance, because, from the viewpoint of Merton's original formulation, anomic conditions pervade American society. Thus, at best, it can be argued that anomie causes a generally high incidence of deviance throughout society, congruent with the Durkheimian notion of the normality of crime (Merton 1968, pp. 185–86). It can also possibly be argued that anomie can be held accountable for a relatively high rate of deviant behavior

relative to other societies (Messner 1988). However, the differential distribution of different forms of deviance across various social strata within society—arguably the most central aspect of Merton’s theory of deviant behavior—has to be accounted for by influences that are mediated through the class structure (socioeconomic status) (Merton 1968, pp. 198–203).

A second source of confusion over Merton’s theory of deviance is of a distinctly conceptual nature. As already mentioned, the evolving nature of Merton’s paradigm may have hindered an adequate reception (see Cole 1975, p. 175; Merton 1995, pp. 6–17). Additionally, in Merton’s relevant writings of the 1950s and 1960s, which were most influential, conceptual ambiguity also contributed to the confusion over anomie and strain (as foes and friends alike have pointed out; see Besnard 1990; Passas 1995). There, indeed, Merton (1968, p. 217) suggests that when the cultural goals and their structural accessibility are “malintegrated, . . . there is a strain toward the breakdown of norms, toward normlessness . . . the social condition of anomie.” Elsewhere, Merton (1968, p. 211) similarly speaks of “a strain towards anomie,” when no such strain can logically exist, since anomie is a condition of strain. It is not surprising, therefore, that researchers have (mistakenly) rejected Merton’s anomie theory on the basis of empirical investigations that actually deal with elements of strain theory. For the central aspect of Merton’s theory of anomie is not differential access to the legitimate opportunities for culturally dominant goals, but rather the differential emphasis the cultural structure places on goals and legitimate means. As Marco Orrù (1987, p. 123) argues, it is “not the structurally limited opportunity for success that originally causes anomie; rather, it is the *culturally induced pressure* to be successful that accounts for anomie.” In the 1990s, Merton acknowledged that his prior work had not sufficiently addressed the mechanisms that link anomie and deviant behavior. He therefore wrote several new articles to develop a theory of opportunity-structure (Merton 1995, 1997a, 1997b). Though we do not assess this extension here (see Marwah and Deflem 2001), the fact that it has been formulated so recently strongly suggests why prior research in the Mertonian tradition may have suffered from conceptual ambiguities (Agnew and Passas 1997, p. 5; Hilbert and Wright 1979).

Elements of Separation

There have been some prior discussions of Merton’s social-structure-and-anomie paradigm that indicated that anomie and strain are distinct concepts. Most critically, these writings argue that the relation between strain and deviant behavior is more complex and mediated by certain conditioning influences (Broidy 2001, pp. 10–12). Agnew (1992, 2001) has also critically relied on this insight in his development of general strain theory, the most important and influential extension of the Mertonian theory of deviance today. Agnew formulates general

strain theory as a social-psychological theory of crime and deviance that identifies certain coping mechanisms under conditions of the structural context of strain. As such, general strain theory constitutes a microtheoretical specification of Mertonian strain theory (Agnew 1997, pp. 33, 41, 43; Agnew and Passas 1997, p. 2).

Messner (1988) also distinguishes two theories in the Mertonian paradigm in terms of different levels of analysis, differentiating between a (micro) strain theory of deviant motivation and a (macro) anomie theory of social disorganization on the structural distribution of deviance. In terms of deviant motivation, Messner (1988, p. 39) proposes that this element of the Mertonian paradigm involves the classic proposition that individuals are pressured to deviate from socially prescribed norms when they “confront restricted opportunities despite cultural injunctions to aspire to lofty goals.” And with respect to the uneven distribution of deviance across society, Messner (1988, p. 44) conceives of anomie as a social condition that promotes “the withdrawal of allegiance from social norms and high rates of deviance.” Thus, Messner reformulates anomie theory to argue that the pressure exerted by the condition of anomie explains the distribution of deviance across society, while the strain theory of deviant motivations is concerned with the deviance of individuals.

In our view, a conception of anomie as a model of deviant behavior unnecessarily restricts Merton's original theoretical model, which he developed to analyze important elements of the social and cultural structure *within which* a theory of deviant behavior—at the macro or micro levels—still has to be developed. A separation of strain and anomie is consistent with Merton's ideas, but not in terms of a distinction between micro and macro levels of analysis (Deflem 1999). Instead, the Mertonian theories of anomie and strain deal with distinct realities of social life, so that different theoretical explanations of deviant behavior, such as strain theory, can be integrated into the broader anomie model of social-structural organization. Thomas Bernard (1987, p. 267) has similarly argued that Merton's social-structure-and-anomie paradigm contains “a *cultural* argument that focuses on the value of monetary success and the importance of using legitimate means in pursuing that value, and a *structural* argument that focuses on the distribution of the legitimate opportunities in the society.” Bernard (1987, p. 269), therefore, not only separates the concept of anomie (resulting from an imbalance of means and goals) from the concept of strain (the socially structured availability to achieve goals), but also maintains that Merton's cultural argument can be “decoupled” from the structural argument so that strain is not the only possible force that exerts pressures toward deviance.

R. E. Hilbert and Charles Wright (1980) also argue that Merton's social-structure-and-anomie paradigm involves two theories. They further maintain

that sociologists have often neglected the anomie component of the paradigm, especially in introductory textbooks. The omission is puzzling, because “[t]here is no adequate justification on either theoretical or methodological grounds, or in terms of the demands of contemporary research design and measurement, for emphasizing only one aspect of Merton’s theory” (Hilbert and Wright 1980, p. 153). Hilbert and Wright suggest the neglect of anomie theory is due to the typically left-leaning political orientations of sociologists and the protest era of the 1960s and early 1970s, which led to an overemphasis on the structural class-related aspects of Merton’s paradigm (see also Wright and Hilbert 1980). The structural aspects of Merton’s paradigm are indeed relatively compatible with a more critically oriented sociology, as Merton himself and others have recognized (Merton 1975, p. 109; Groves and Sampson 1987). Ironically, the past emphasis on the class structure component in Merton’s work is paralleled, as Craig Reinerman (2000, p. 252) has pointed out, by a much less sympathetic attitude toward the Mertonian paradigm as a whole during the conservative era of the 1980s and 1990s. As such, the focus on individual-level—rather than macro—explanations in some recent interpretations of Merton’s paradigm, such as in general strain theory, is also not divorced from political conditions.

In sum, our analysis has shown that the theories of anomie and strain in Merton’s paradigm are analytically distinct in such a way that the anomie perspective does not necessarily require strain as a sociological explanation of deviant behavior. The only logical dependency is one of strain theory upon anomie: strain can only lead to deviance in an anomic society. In his original formulation of strain theory, Merton postulated pressures that were mediated through a stratified class structure as the primary structural reason for why individuals commit deviant and potentially criminal acts. “Owing to their objectively disadvantaged position in the group,” Merton (1968, pp. 233–34) writes, “some individuals are subjected more than others to the strains arising from the discrepancy between cultural goals and effective access to their realization. They are consequently more vulnerable to deviant behavior.” This position rests on the assumption, as Travis Hirschi (1969) has argued, that people will exclusively pursue legitimate means to success if only they have the opportunity. Strain theory thereby assumes that “[C]rime and delinquency are the product of social forces driving individuals to do things they otherwise would not do” (Bernard 1984, p. 353). Yet the dependence of strain theory on anomie is logically unnecessary and theoretically unfortunate, as anomie can provide an important framework for exploring the development of deviant behavior through other explanatory models.

The construction of a new integrated theory of deviance in the anomie framework is beyond the scope of this paper, but some attempts have already

been made to merge insights from the Mertonian paradigm with criminological theories other than strain. Most famous are the efforts by Albert Cohen (1955, 1965) and Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960) to close the gap between Merton's theory and the Chicago School tradition. More recently, Richard Rosenfeld and Steven Messner have sought to connect the Mertonian paradigm with social-control theory in their institutional-anomie theory (Messner and Rosenfeld 1994, 1997; Rosenfeld and Messner 1997). Notwithstanding potential problems with such theoretical fusions (Cullen 1988; Bernburg 2002), it is noteworthy that they harmonize with Merton's own ambitions to integrate various criminological theories within his overall conceptual framework (e.g., Merton 1995, 1997a).

Conclusion

We have argued that Robert Merton developed two distinct theories in his social-structure-and-anomie paradigm. On the one hand, Merton presents a theory of anomie that postulates that an imbalance between cultural goals and socially acceptable means will result in a deinstitutionalization of the legitimate means. On the other hand, to explain why some individuals are led to perform deviant acts, Merton suggests that social barriers posed by characteristics of the socio-economic structure restrict people from achieving the cultural goals of society, thus straining or pressuring many of them toward deviant behavior. While strain is a possible explanation for how anomie results in deviance, it is not the only available theoretical option. Strain and anomie are not reciprocally interdependent concepts. The scholarship on anomie and/or strain theory, however, has often misunderstood the distinction between Merton's two theories, in part because of the evolving nature of Merton's work and a lack of clarity in some of his various formulations. Ebbs and flows in scholarship discussing and applying the social-structure-and-anomie paradigm, furthermore, have also been affected by broader social and sociological currents that have molded the reception of Merton's theories.

Based on our analysis, scholars who are critical of strain theory should not necessarily discard Merton's anomie theory, for it is actually compatible with several other theories of deviant behavior and, if properly employed, may help these theories fine-tune their own explanations of deviance. While it is beyond the scope of our paper to determine which sociological theory of deviant behavior might best fit the Mertonian paradigm, we have argued that Merton's social-structure-and-anomie paradigm remains a valuable perspective for the study of deviance in society. Merton's proposition that there is a disjunction in American society between cultural goals and institutionalized means may still be fruitful in building a sociological framework for understanding crime and deviance, today as much as some six decades ago.

ENDNOTES

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¹This finding could be even more pronounced, as citations to the *STSS* versions of the “Social Structure and Anomie” papers may be masked as general references to *STSS*, which between 1955 and 1987 received over 3,600 citations (Garfield 1987, p. 4). Note that for our analysis as reported in Table 1 and Figure 1, citations to the various *STSS* editions were identified as citations to the social-structure-and-anomie chapters when the appropriate chapter and/or page numbers were specified in the source documents.

²In the first revised version of the 1938 *ASR* article, published in the edited volume *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*, Merton (1949a) explicitly mentions in the opening footnote that the paper had been “thoroughly revised and extended” from the original publication, arguing that the framework of analysis remained the same but that new propositions were introduced that were “undeveloped in the earlier paper” (p. 275, note 1).

³The qualitative shift in the manner in which Merton is used in the contemporary criminological literature could even be so dramatic that Merton’s work is mentioned without citation, because and to the extent to which the paradigm has become part of a general body of scholarly knowledge that is considered common property (Garfield 1980).

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