

Introduction to:

Messner, S. F., & Rosenfeld, R. (2000). *Crime and the American dream* (Third ed.).
Monterey: Wadsworth.

CAD is an example of a macro-level strain theory. Strain theories posit that discrepancies between opportunity structures and realistic possibilities of culturally significant goal attainments create “**strain**” which then **indirectly** leads to crime, or to other outcomes.¹ Strain can create a variety of **mediating** psychological or social psychological or sociological states, including **anomie**.

The term anomie was originated by that famous French sociologist, Emile Durkheim.² Writing at the end of the 19th century he described it as a state social isolation and normlessness. The term is very rich, and has been operationalized in a number of different ways.³ The normlessness of anomie has been considered one of the five components in a broader concept of alienation.⁴

¹ Merton, R. K. (1957). *Social theory and social structure*. Glencoe: Free Press; Rosenfeld, R. (1989). Robert Merton's contributions to the sociology of deviance. *Sociological Inquiry*, 59(4), 453-466.

² Durkheim, E. (1960). *Suicide*. New York: Free Press.

³ The term is very rich, but has been operationalized with anomie scales. Here are some items in scales analyzed by Fischer, C. S. (1973). On Urban alienation and anomie: Powerlessness and social isolation. *American Sociological Review*, 38(3), 311-326.

(1) “Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves”?

(2) “Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair”?

(3) “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people”?

(1) “Would you say that most of the time people are more inclined to help others, or are more inclined to look out for themselves”?

(2) “If you don't watch yourself, people will take advantage of you. Do you agree or disagree with that”?

(3) “Some people say most people can be trusted. Others say that you can't be too careful in your dealing with people. How do you feel about that”?

(4) “No one is going to care much what happens to you when you get right down to it (agree-disagree).”

(5) “Human nature is fundamentally cooperative (agree-disagree).”

De Grazia, cited in Dean (1961) looked at the French terms Durkheim linked with the term anomie or anomia:

Between Durkheim and today additional threads of theorizing around strain,⁵ alienation and urbanism,⁶ powerlessness and disorder,⁷ impacts on self concept,⁸ and corporate deviance and normlessness,⁹ to name just a few, have emerged. We also have mergers between strain theories and social learning theories.¹⁰ In short, these ideas go off in a lot of different directions.

CAD is giving us an extremely macro-level version of institutional anomie theories (IAT). They see their contribution as part of an anomie revival.

You want to pay especially close attention to two things:

- 1) the structure of their argument. How do they connect “macro-social organization” and crime? You want to understand their model (p. 85), each of the concepts therein, and each of the processes depicted.

The specific words and phrases in French that Durkheim repeatedly used—*un perpétuel état de mécontentement, tourments, déceptions répétées, inutilité, désorientée, inquiétude douloureuse, malaise, stérilité, intolérable, désenchantement, douloureux*—help us create the composite picture of anomie as it affects the individual. It becomes apparent that anomie as Durkheim conceived it in the subjective sense had three characteristics: a painful uneasiness or anxiety, a feeling of separation from group standards, a feeling of pointlessness or that no certain goals exist.

Note, however, that Durkheim’s analyses were ecological, not individual level.

⁴ Dean, D. D. (1961). Alienation: Its meaning and measurement. *American Sociological Review*, 26(5), 753-758.

⁵ Cullen, F. T. (1988). Were Cloward and Ohlin strain theorists? Delinquency and opportunity revisited. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 25, 214-241.

⁶ Fischer, C. S. (1995). The Subcultural Theory of Urbanism - a 20th-Year Assessment. *American Journal of Sociology*, 101(3), 543-577; Wirth, L. (1938). Urbanism as a way of life. *American Journal of Sociology*, 44(1), 1-23.

⁷ Geis, K., & Ross, C. (1998). A New Look at Urban Alienation: The Effect of Neighborhood Disorder on Perceived Powerlessness. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61, 232-246.

⁸ Rosenberg, M. (1972). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁹ Vaughan, D. (1999). The Dark side of organizations; Mistake, misconduct, and disaster. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 271-305; Passas, N. (1990). Anomie and corporate deviance. *Contemporary Crises*, 14, 157-167.

¹⁰ Agnew, R. (1999). A general strain theory of community differences in crime rates. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 36(2), 123-155; Agnew, R. (2001). Building on the foundation of general strain theory: Specifying the types of strain most likely to lead to crime and delinquency. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 38(4), 319-361.

- 2) What evidentiary support do they have? How strong is it? A recent critique has suggested that IAT is *unfalsifiable*.¹¹ Do you agree with this critique or not?

You want to think about:

- whether sub-national tests are appropriate for this theory or not. Recent researchers¹² have conducted both state level and county level tests of the model. Is this extension across levels of aggregation justified or not?
- what does it mean to say the theory is about **moderating effects**?
- whether you agree that structure and culture can both be included in a single theoretical model.
- when you look at how anomie is operationalized, do you find this to be something different than a lack of trust or a lack of social capital?

¹¹ Chamlin, M. B., & Cochran, J. K. (2007). An Evaluation of the assumptions that underlie institutional anomie theory. *Theoretical Criminology*, 11(1), 39-61.

¹² Chamlin, M. B., & Cochran, J. K. (1995). Assessing Messner and Rosenfeld Institutional Anomie Theory - a Partial Test. *Criminology*, 33(3), 411-429; Maume, M. O., & Lee, M. R. (2003). Social institutions and violence: A sub-national test of institutional anomie theory. *Criminology*, 41(4), 1137-1172.