

An Analysis of Deviance: *Robert Merton's Explanation of Deviance*

The following material represents Merton's attempt to explain deviance. According to Merton, deviance is an adaptation by individuals to the dominant culture. Discrepancies exist between cultural (material) goals and structural opportunities.

Merton presents the following typology of Deviance. According to Merton, people conform to either the opportunities and goals defined by society or they engage in five types of deviance:

Merton's Typology

- 1. Conformity:** The individual conforms to the dominant culture. Here the individual experiences no problem in terms of goals and the means that society provides to achieve those goals. There is, therefore, no need to engage in deviance to obtain goals deemed worthy by society.
- 2. Innovation:** Innovators are people who accept the goals of society. For some reason, like poverty, they cannot achieve societies' goals by legitimate means. They have to use illegitimate means such as stealing.
- 3. Acceptance (ritualists):** People who ritualize have similar problems that the innovator experiences, but for ritualists the individual rejects the goals, but accepts the means. The individual may, for example, choose to work hard knowing that he or she is not going to achieve the goals that society defines as worthy because they do not get paid enough.
- 4. Retreatism:** People who are retreatists reject both the means and goals of society. Drug addicts and vagrants are examples of people who retreat.
- 5. Rebellion:** The individual rejects the culture (values, goals, norms). These individuals pursue alternative cultures. Included in this group are revolutionaries and some gangs.

Critiques of Merton's Typology

Functionalists *assume* that people who are not a part of the dominant culture automatically use the dominant culture as their point of reference. Note that functionalists define legitimate and illegitimate from a middle-class point of view.

Even if we accept the middle-class point of reference, Merton assumes that people who do not have access to goals by legitimate means automatically have access by illegitimate means. How do you steal a color TV? Criminal activity is also a skilled profession. An individual does not just wake up one morning and say to him or herself: "I think I'll rob a TV store today!"

Merton assumes that people who have access to legitimate means and goals automatically use legitimate means and goals. The drug "problem" in middle-class high schools demonstrates that people who have access to legitimate means still engage in deviance. Another example that contradicts Merton's claims is the large number of middle-class teenagers who shoplift merchandise at shopping malls. They do not engage in this activity because they do not have access to means and/or goals. They shoplift because their life is boring.

There is also a problem with cause and effect. Perhaps the cause and effect travel in the opposite direction. The individual may get into drugs, which in turn blocks their access to legitimate goals in society (via drug tests). Finally, when an individual cannot achieve legitimate goals, Merton assumes failure with reference to the person engaging in the deviance. If someone is a successful "hustler," how can we say that person is a failure? He or she is achieving something illegitimately, which means that the individual must have to work extra hard to be a success at his or her deviant profession.

