Lecture 6: The Sociology of Anomie: Conformity and Deviance

The social psychological study of conformity examines the pressures on individuals to conform to the expectations of a group, society, organization, or leader.

The classic experiments were conducted by Solomon E. Asch, an American gestalt psychologist who undertook a series of small-group studies on the social pressures to conform. His subjects were asked to answer a basic puzzle (for example on the length of a line) when others provided a manifestly incorrect answer. Many subjects felt under pressure to give the same incorrect answer; however, the majority resisted pressures to conform, and even those who acquiesced offered reasonable explanations for doing so, despite subsequently expressed doubts about their behaviour (Asch 1952).

Asch argues that the results conform his view of human nature, which is of human beings as creative and rational organisms, in contrast to the tradition that views them as passive and responding only to environmental pressures.

Durkheim’s Classic Contribution

Emile Durkheim is rightfully considered to be one of the founders of modern sociology. This French sociologist began his academic career in the late 1800s, a time when sociology was not widely accepted in Europe or elsewhere as an independent scientific discipline. Durkheim devoted his life’s work to the advancement of this new field of study. In his first two major books originally published in the early 1890s, The Division of Labor in Society (1933) and The Rules of Sociological Method (1938), Durkheim outlined what he saw to be the distinctive theoretical problems and methodological strategies of sociological inquiry. In the latter book, he identified the analysis of “social facts” as the unique subject matter for the science of sociology. Social facts, according to Durkheim, are phenomena that are properties of societies rather than of individual members of societies. The rates of divorce, crime or suicide in a society or the nature of a society’s legal system are examples of social facts that Durkheim considered to be external to individuals. Most important, Durkheim argued that social facts could only be explained sociologically; that is, by reference to other social facts: “The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness” (1938: 110).

Durkheim applied these general principles to a particular research problem in his third major book, originally published in 1897, Suicide (1951). He deliberately focused on the seemingly individualistic phenomenon of suicide in order to demonstrate the power and distinctiveness of sociological inquiry. What better or more dramatic way is there to build a strong case for sociology than to look beyond the individual—to society—for the causes of suicidal behavior? Using a vast body of data from official records on suicides in different parts of Europe, Durkheim documented marked variations between countries in suicide rates. This evidence, Durkheim argued, shows that “each society has a definite aptitude for suicide” (1951: 48) – a social fact that is external to the individual members of a given society. Additional analyses of these data convinced Durkheim that the suicide rate of a given society could not be explained by racial characteristics, psychological abnormalities, or other extrasocial causes, and that, “by elimination, it must necessarily depend upon social causes” (1951: 145). Throughout the remainder of Suicide, Durkheim attempted to prove that “certain
states of (the) social environment” (1951: 299) are the determining causes of different patterns of suicide rates.

Durkheim identified four distinct environmental conditions that he believed to be responsible for various patterns of high suicide rates: egoism, altruism, anomie, and fatalism. At this point, we shall focus only on the best known of these four causes of suicide, anomie.

Anomie refers to an environmental state where society fails to exercise adequate regulation or constraint over the goals and desires of its individual members (Durkheim, 1951: 241-276). It is important to note that Durkheim’s conceptualization of anomie is based on a general assumption about the psychological or biological nature of individual human beings. He wrote that the human “capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss” (1951: 247). From Durkheim’s viewpoint, individual happiness and well-being depend on the ability of society to impose external limits on the potentially limitless passions and appetites that characterize human nature in general. Under the condition of anomie, however, society is unable to exert its regulatory and disciplining influences. Human desires are left unchecked and unbounded—the individual “aspires to everything and is satisfied with nothing” (1951: 271). Out of disillusionment and despair with the pursuit of limitless goals, many individuals in the anomic society take their own lives. Therefore, high rates of anomic suicide are the product of the environmental condition of anomie.

Durkheim argued that the condition of anomie could explain at least three kinds of suicidal phenomena. First, in historical data on suicide rates in Europe, Durkheim found that sharp increases or decreases in the economic prosperity of a society were associated with increasing rates of suicide. Suicide rates were lowest during times of economic stability. Durkheim reasoned that economic crises disrupted society’s regulatory influence on the material desires of its members. Economic booms or depressions undercut the predictable material goals from which individuals would ordinarily derive satisfaction. Second, in addition to cases where anomie resulted from rapid economic change, Durkheim also presented evidence that “one sphere of social life—the sphere of trade and industry—is actually in a chronic state” of anomie (1951: 254, emphasis added). In commercial segments of society, where far-reaching economic goals are continually sought and “greed is aroused without knowing where to find ultimate foothold” (1951: 256), a lack of regulation over material desires becomes a constant state of the social environment. Durkheim explained high rates of suicide among business people as a result of this chronic state of anomie. Finally, Durkheim analyzed how inadequate regulation of sexual desires could also produce high rates of anomic suicide among certain social groups. Single males, in particular, are in social circumstances where their unrestrained pursuit of physical pleasure is likely to lead to disillusionment and suicide. Marriage functions to regulate sexual desire, and husbands typically have lower rates of suicide than unmarried males. Thus, the concept of anomie is used by Durkheim to explain a variety of social facts. Variations in suicide rates across time, by occupation and by marital status, are all linked theoretically to this general environmental condition.

Durkheim’s work has been the subject of extensive discussion and criticism. Nonetheless, his study of suicide has endured as a classic example of the macro normative approach to theory and research on deviance. We should note that Inkeles (1959) has questioned the sociological purity of Durkheim’s analysis by pointing out that psychological assumptions about the limitless nature of human desires can be found in Suicide. However, Durkheim generally
treats psychobiological qualities or potentials as constants rather than as variables in his analytical scheme: “human nature is substantially the same among all men, in its essential qualities” (1951: 247). Variations in suicide rates cannot be explained by psychological constants but only by variations in the social environment that “lies outside individuals” and exerts external influences upon them (1951: 324). Following the clear directions laid down by Durkheim, the anomie tradition has continued to focus its search for the causes of deviant behavior on large-scale variations in the environmental features of society.

**Merton’s Theory of Social Structure and Anomie**

The other major contribution to the anomie tradition is Robert Merton’s theoretical analysis of “Social Structure and Anomie” (1938; 1957). Durkheim’s work provided the intellectual foundation for Merton’s attempt to develop a macro-level explanation of rates of norm-violating behavior in American society. But, in Merton’s hands, the anomie tradition advanced well beyond Durkheim’s singular concern with suicide to become a truly general sociological approach to deviance. In contrast to Durkheim, Merton bases his theory on sociological assumptions about human nature. Merton replaces Durkheim’s conception of insatiable passions and appetites with the assumption that human needs and desires are primarily the product of a social process: i.e., cultural socialization. For instance, people reared in a society where cultural values emphasize material goals will learn to strive for economic success.

Indeed, Merton focuses on the extreme emphasis on material goals that characterizes the cultural environment of American society. In this respect, Merton’s description of American society is quite similar to Durkheim’s observations regarding the unrelenting pursuit of economic gain in “the sphere of trade and industry.” However, Merton extends this materialistic portrait to include all of American society. Merton not only argues that all Americans, regardless of their position in society, are exposed to the dominant materialistic values, but that cultural beliefs sustain the myth that anyone can succeed in the pursuit of economic goals.

Anomie, for Durkheim, referred to the failure of society to regulate or constrain the ends or goals of human desire. Merton, on the other hand, is more concerned with social regulation of the means people use to obtain material goals. First, Merton perceives a “strain toward anomie” in the relative lack of cultural emphasis on institutional norms – the established rules of the game – that regulate the legitimate means for obtaining success in American society. Second, structural blockages that limit access to legitimate means for many members of American society also contribute to its anomie tendencies. Under such conditions, behavior tends to be governed solely by considerations of expediency or effectiveness in obtaining the goal rather than by a concern with whether or not the behavior conforms to institutional norms.

Together, the various elements in Merton’s theoretical model of American society add up to a social environment that generates strong pressures toward deviant behavior (1957: 146, emphasis in original):

> When a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain common success-goals for the population at large while the social structure rigorously restricts or completely closes access to approved modes of reaching
these goals for a considerable part of the same population, ... deviant behavior ensues on a large scale.

This chronic discrepancy between cultural promises and structural realities not only undermines social support for institutional norms but also promotes violations of those norms. Blocked in their pursuit of economic success, many members of society are forced to adapt in deviant ways to this frustrating environmental condition.

Just how do people adapt to these environmental pressures? Merton’s answer to this question is perhaps his single most important contribution to the anomie tradition. Merton presents an analytical typology, shown in the following table, of individual adaptations to the discrepancy between culture and social structure in American society.

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<th>Merton’s typology of individual adaptations to environmental pressures</th>
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<td>Type of adaptation</td>
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<td>I. Conformity</td>
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<td>II. Innovation</td>
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<td>III. Ritualism</td>
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<td>IV. Retreatism</td>
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<td>V. Rebellion</td>
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Note: + signifies acceptance; – signifies rejection; and ± signifies rejection of prevailing goal or means and substitution of new goal or means.

These adaptations describe the kinds of social roles people adopt in response to cultural and structural pressures. Conformity, for instance, is a nondeviant adaptation where people continue to engage in legitimate occupational or educational roles despite environmental pressures toward deviant behavior. That is, the conformist accepts and strives for the cultural goal of material success (+) by following institutionalized means (+). Innovation, on the other hand, involves acceptance of the cultural goal (+) but rejection of legitimate, institutionalized means (-). Instead, the innovator moves into criminal or delinquent roles that employ illegitimate means to obtain economic success. Merton proposes that innovation is particularly characteristic of the lower class – the location in the class structure of American society where access to legitimate means is especially limited and the “strain toward anomie” is most severe. Driven by the dominant cultural emphasis on material goals, lower-class persons use illegitimate but expedient means to overcome these structural blockages. Thus, Merton’s analysis of innovation, like Durkheim’s analysis of anomic suicide, arrives at an environmental explanation of an important set of social facts; i.e., the high rates of lower-class crime and delinquency found in official records.

However, Merton goes on to explain a much broader range of deviant phenomena than just lower-class crime and delinquency. His third adaptation, ritualism, represents quite a
different sort of departure from cultural standards than does innovation. The ritualist is an overconformist. Here, the pursuit of the dominant cultural goal of economic success is rejected or abandoned (-) and compulsive conformity to institutional norms (+) becomes an end in itself. Merton argues that this adaptation is most likely to occur within the lower middle class of American society where socialization practices emphasize strict discipline and rigid conformity to rules. This adaptation is exemplified by the role behavior of the bureaucratic clerk who, denying any aspirations for advancement, becomes preoccupied with the ritual of doing it “by the book.” Since the ritualist outwardly conforms to institutional norms, there is good reason to question, as does Merton, “whether this (adaptation) represents genuinely deviant behavior” (1957: 150).

Merton has no doubts about the deviant nature of his fourth adaptation, retreatism, the rejection of both cultural goals (-) and institutionalized means (-). Therefore, retreatism involves complete escape from the pressures and demands of organized society. Merton applies this adaptation to the deviant role “activities of psychotics, autists, pariahs, outcasts, vagrants, vagabonds, tramps, chronic drunkards, and drug addicts” (1957: 153). Despite the obvious importance of ritualism to the study of deviant behavior, Merton provides few dues as to where, in the class structure of society, this adaptation is most likely to occur. Instead, Merton’s analysis of retreatism has a more individualistic flavor than does his discussion of other types of adaptation. Retreatism is presented as an escape mechanism whereby the individual resolves internal conflict between moral constraints against the use of illegitimate means and repeated failure to attain success through legitimate means. Subsequently, Merton’s conception of retreatism as a private way of dropping out was given a more sociological interpretation by theorists in the subcultural tradition (Coward. 1959; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960).

The final adaptation in Merton’s typology, rebellion, is indicated by different notation than the other adaptations. The two ± signs show that the rebel not only rejects the goals and means of the established society but actively attempts to substitute new goals and means in their place. This adaptation refers, then, to the role behavior of political deviants, who attempt to modify greatly the existing structure of society. In later work (1966), Merton uses the term nonconformity to contrast rebellion to other forms of deviant behavior that are “aberrant.” The nonconforming rebel is not secretive as are other, aberrant deviants and is not merely engaging in behavior that violates the institutional norms of society. The rebel publicly acknowledges his or her intention to change those norms and the social structure that they support in the interests of building a better, more just society. Merton implies that rebellion is most characteristic of “members of a rising class” (1957: 157) who become inspired by political ideologies that “locate the source of large-scale frustrations in the social structure and portray an alternative structure which would not, presumably, give rise to frustration of the deserving” (1957: 156).

The appeal of Merton’s theory and a major reason for its far-reaching impact upon the field of deviance lies in his ability to derive explanations of a diverse assortment of deviant phenomena from a relatively simple analytical framework. This is precisely what a general theory of deviance must do. The utility or adequacy of Merton’s explanations of these forms of deviant behavior is a separate question, of course, a question that has led to a large body of additional theoretical and empirical work in the anomie tradition. Merton has continued to play an active part in the cumulative development of this macro-normative tradition through

References


Questions

1. Explain the classic experiments conducted by Solomon E. Asch.

2. Describe Durkheim’s contribution to the understanding of social facts.

3. What is meant by ‘anomie”?

4. Describe the types of suicide as given by Durkheim.

5. Explain Merton’s Theory of Social Structure and Anomie.

6. What is Merton’s understanding of the concept of deviance?

7. Critically examine Merton’s typology of individual adaptations to environmental pressures.