

In the fields of Criminal Justice and Sociology, the study of deviant behavior typically centers on negative themes – how crimes are a result of the strains in society, for instance. In the midst of all of this, we learn of one especially compelling theory – that of anomie. This theory speaks of our need as humans everywhere for structure and order that we can count on daily. When we are ripped away from that comfort zone, the results can be devastating. Whether it be as a result of natural disasters (like earthquakes, floods, fires, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, and monsoons) or manmade upheaval (divorce, job loss, transfers to new locations, moving in general, a recession, market crashes, or even hitting the lottery), or life’s challenges (the limits caused by aging, disease, the death of loved ones, etc.), coping mechanisms *can* force people to strive for balance in deviant ways. We shun the normlessness of anomie, and the frustration and confusion that surround the lack of familiarity that often accompanies unwelcome (or even merely unanticipated) change.

The idea of this work is the result of Emile Durkheim, which was further refined in more recent years by Robert Merton. In order to view it more closely, we need to examine the overarching question that Anomie Theory poses within the study of Sociology and Criminal Justice. Namely, *how does social structure induce deviance?* Anomie theory suggests that the social structure itself, rather than the individual, literally *causes* deviance and, it can be added, the possibility of discovery as well. Individuals are forced into this mode by conditions in society. The most important of those conditions is “anomie.” Anomie is a condition in society in which people are confused about what the correct norms and values are. This confusion can make people more apt to engage in deviance, or, to depart from the typical argument, to possibly engage in innovative behavior to better their own situation as well as the world at large.

On the criminological side, Durkheim suggested in 1897 that distinct characteristics of communities influence the levels and types of deviant behavior that occur. His original work accounted for different rates of suicide and despair in several different European countries (Durkheim, [1897] 1966). Here, assumptions were made about human nature. He contended that human beings have a limitless desire for all things, but especially for love, money, and success. Happiness actually depends on *external controls* on those desires. Normally, society regulates and disciplines the impulses of individuals, but anomie occurs when this regulation is absent. Here, a society is *not* in control: The individual “aspires to everything and is satisfied with nothing.” Anomie, then, is the environmental condition where society fails to regulate or constrain the behavior of its members. A sense of normlessness and a lack of structure is the result. Higher suicide and higher despair rates are markers on the extreme end of this condition of anomie. There appears to be a direct, positive correlation between the two. Three situations can be used to illustrate this affect. The *first* is rapid

economic growth or depression. People come to expect certain material rewards for their efforts during periods of economic stability. But such expectations may not be met during times of change. In *both* of these types of situations, growth (and the economic prosperity that accompanies it) and depression (when even living from check to check may no longer be possible), people's hopes (as they have come to know them) are not met. We in turn note an increase in rates of suicide and despair (interestingly, more due to growth than due to depression, contrary to Marx). *Secondly*, the commercial world is in a constant state of flux, creating anomie. Far-reaching economic goals are continually sought. And little control over material aspirations (little control over greed, in other words) produces disorientation. One always wants more than they can get - if profits are posted at \$100 million, the company then wants \$100 billion. Nothing gained is *ever* enough. *Thirdly*, there is the example which at first seems out of place. It is of inadequate sexual gratification, which can manifest itself in terms of anomie. Documented suicide is highest among young, unmarried males, due to the "unrestrained pursuit of physical desires." Men go wild without the structure of marriage, the rules of fidelity. Why is this not the case for young, unmarried females? As we have all observed, they are labeled very negatively for unbridled lust. We are familiar with the terms coined to brand them - in earlier times these would include strumpet, harlot, and temptress (all indicating frown-worthy promiscuity). Men, on the other hand, still to this day are alternatively viewed as sowing wild oats or being a swinging bachelor or a player, in the "boys will be boys" tradition. So, this same behavior is given an entirely different interpretation based on gender. However, in all three of these situations, there is greater suicide and despair observed due to the setting in of anomie - meaning there is very little regulation of individual desires going on. As Durkheim famously pointed out, even what appears to be the very personal act of suicide (or despair in general) can be attributed at least in part to the social forces at work in the community surrounding the person in question.

Now let us turn to Robert Merton's Anomie Theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Merton used the concept of anomie to explain why it is that some people are involved in crime (Merton, 1938; Merton, 1968; Messner, 1988). This work of mine extends this idea to wildly life-changing, positive behavior as well. He contended that we are governed by culturally-defined goals and acceptable means. The most important goal is monetary success. We are literally socialized to strive for money, to be successful - in school, on TV, in movies, advertising, etc. As for the means to get there - limits are placed by the law on how we are supposed to achieve that goal of success. We are restricted to certain, acceptable ways to achieve this. Now, in a perfect world, *both* should be *equally* emphasized. But in western societies, the goal tends to be emphasized *over* the means. If the emphasis on both is not equal, an obvious imbalance is the result. The socially-approved goals do not match with the socially-approved means of achieving those goals. For instance, since we are

socialized to strive for success and that is most often measured in how much money a person makes, some people in society may find wealth difficult to achieve, due to little education, few job skills, or even just sheer bad luck on the job market. Therefore, they cannot achieve the wealth which is so important to being considered successful. Hence, the contradiction: Though we accept the goal of being well-off, many people find themselves blocked from the means to legally achieve that success. This blockage leads to feelings of helplessness, which is anomie. There is a confusion of people whose means do not match their goals. You want to be successful, yet you are prevented from being successful, all at the same time. So, there is frustration with what is perceived as an unfair system. Blocked people may try to attain wealth in some other way, for example, through theft or fraud. Alternatively, they may give up and simply turn to escapes like drugs and/or alcohol. Deviance is literally a *symptom* of the separation of goals and means. People feel powerless. There are strains within society itself - the blockages to success - that actually *exert* pressure on some people to deviate, rather than to conform.

**Merton's Typology**

		CULTURAL GOAL	
		<u>Accepts</u>	<u>Rejects</u>
CONVENTIONAL MEANS	<u>Accepts</u>	<p><b>Conformist</b> (average worker)</p>	<p><b>Ritualist</b> (low-level bureaucrat, unambitious worker)</p>
	<u>Rejects</u>	<p><b>Innovator</b> (bank robber, thief, drug dealer)</p>	<p><b>Retreatist</b> (vagrant, "hippie," drug addict) <b>Rebel</b> (terrorist, revolutionary)</p>

*Figure 1*

Merton analyzed the different ways in which people can respond to anomie. It is here that a reaction equated with resilience will later be added – with the positive consequences for the world that may follow. It is shown that the same individuals may in fact respond differently in varied situations and times in their lives. This, in other words, is NOT an explanation based on sheer personality types. And not everyone who is blocked turns to crime. In fact, Merton suggests that there are several different ways that people can respond to anomie. This response depends on two factors: 1.) whether the person *accepts* the cultural goal of attaining wealth/success; 2.) whether the person *accepts* the conventional means of achieving that goal.

**Conformists** want to achieve such goals of success, and generally use approved means, even if they ultimately do not end up achieving the goal. For instance, most all of us are being conformists at this moment. We are doing what we are supposed to do in order to lead successful lives. **Innovators** want to achieve the goal, but they do not use the conventional means to do so. In example, students who want a good grade may try to cheat on an exam – spending more time devising an elaborate plan than it would require to simply buckle down and do the studying in the traditional manner. Bank robbers, thieves, and drug dealers also attempt to take the “easy way out” to success by innovating. **Ritualists** abandon the cultural goal, but they continue to follow the conventional means. These folks are just going through the motions of seeking success. They may have given up on really making it. They now just try to get by in doing as little as possible – just enough not to get fired. **Retreatists** give up on *both* achieving the goal *and* the conventional means of reaching it. They just hang out, and are often considered a “double failure.” These are people who don’t even go through the motions anymore; they just tune out, drop out, and give up on the goal and working toward it entirely. **Rebels** also reject both the cultural goal and the conventional means, but they attempt to substitute these with *other* goals and *other* means. In a radical sense, the means may be to overthrow the government, with the goal being to have a classless society. Another example would be a terrorist who has given up on working through the system. They plant bombs on their own, or work with elaborate, isolated cells world-wide.

The point is that different people can respond very differently to anomie, depending on whether they accept or reject the cultural goals and conventional means. However, people make a choice *because* they are experiencing anomie. They may turn to crime or they may retreat based on conditions in society, and their particular interpretation of them. What is key here is that they would *not* react in

deviant ways unless there was a problem in the social structure to begin with. People are socialized to strive for success, but they are often blocked. This means that the social structure itself is out of adjustment, and this can literally cause one to turn to crime, or to other forms of deviance.

It is the alternative form of **innovation** that will be addressed here. In concert with Durkheim and Merton, individuals can still choose to attain the cultural end goal of a form of success, but through unconventional means, though *positive* ones in nature. Not everyone has to rob a bank or deal drugs to achieve satisfaction in a world that seems less than fair and just. Examples range from gang members all the way to charity workers, with the same end goal in common: the greater good of humankind. Multiple examples exist, and more are being created each semester by way of a Deviant Behavior exercise in my classes entitled "Positive Anomie." Ideas touch on showcasing underwater exploration for living space expansion (solving looming population explosion concerns); complete elimination of single car transportation in favor of efficient, inviting forms of mass people-moving (thus, striking the need for much of the present and burgeoning dependence on fossil fuels); the outlawing of "fast food" as we have currently come to know it in favor of easy, healthy eating alternatives (to further fight the war on obesity); promoting a buddy-system child-on-child mentoring program to lessen the risk of bullying in schools; in a similar vein, introducing social media "bans" on ganging up behavior which has led, in extreme cases, to world-wide suicide attempts and some successes at extinguishing lives; and the introduction of other countless proposed world options for which there would be significant push-back, due to the disturbing levels of anomie they create (in the very real form of confusion and frustration). People are naturally opposed to change, especially jarring, seemingly unnecessary forms of it.

The three examples to be elaborated upon presently involve very different types of disasters that we have faced in completely different realms - one is natural, and the other two are man-made, and have been in the making for quite some time now. The first stems from post-Katrina research - the mammoth hurricane and ensuing flood that devastated the New Orleans, Louisiana area August 29, 2005. Most residents were displaced from their homes as a result of the storm, and over 20,000 sought refuge in the Superdome sports facility under extreme conditions of discomfort - lack of sleeping space, lack of privacy, lack of food, lack of water, lack of hygiene, lack of life-giving medications, etc. Tempers flared, fights were brewing, and crimes of all sorts were being committed. The police were nowhere to be found. Many on duty had taken their department-issued cruisers and fled the area. They were later taken into custody for auto theft. In the aftermath of the storm, it was reported that a tourist asked a police officer for assistance. He replied "Go to Hell, it's every man for himself." The anomic feelings that accompany total tragedy and loss everywhere one looks had

trickled down to even the peace-keeping forces in the form of law enforcement.

To the surprise and shock of many, those who entered on the scene of the Superdome to establish order and bring relief were not the few formal agents of the law left to deal with the recuperation efforts. They were certified gang members – many of whom were affiliated with a history of notorious crimes. After all, the situation was the epitome of the fiercest level of anomie, and survivors needed desperately to be rescued. But instead of terrorizing and looting those who did not feel that they could possibly fall any lower, these gang members, who were fully armed with powerful weaponry, reached out their hands and lifted up the masses before them, of all colors, of all ages, and from all walks of life. Disasters of this grand proportion are the great equalizer. Suddenly, all beings are facing a battle for their lives, and that always works better as one unit.

The gang members quickly and efficiently established order. Fighting ceased – for it was simply not tolerated. The mandate was set by the gang members, and those in desperation deferred to them, happy to finally have some sense of order again present in their lives. Next, the plan was to loot the city only to feed, clothe, hydrate, medicate, and protect those in need. The pact formed was to protect one another, and keep the peace amongst them (Rodriguez et al., 2006; Tierney et al., 2006; Varano et al., 2010). Similarities can be drawn to a number of motorcycle gangs in the United States and elsewhere that in fact raise major amounts of money for charity, bring toys to tots, and often can be heard arguing the fine points of the philosophical greats throughout history. This is a side of gangs with which the public is also made rarely aware. Just like the hard-core gang members who become literal saviors in a storm, the chaos this creates in terms of broken stereotypes in the best of ways is translated into positive anomie (behavior which deviates from the norm in a good way, while disconcerting, nonetheless).

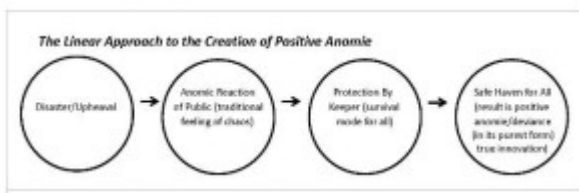


Figure 2

The second instance stems from some pivotal research by Ruth Garner and Mark Gillingham (1996), and along with Young Zhao (2002a; 2002b) conducted in Wisconsin and Michigan on juvenile delinquency and life-altering opportunities offered by after-school programs there. They found that kids respond to the strains and pressures of poverty by initially innovating in very negative ways, getting caught, going to detention (or worse), and then repeating the cycle over and over again. The time



span when they are most at-risk of deviating is after school and before the dinner hour (contrary to many late night studies). Those who included computer access in their after-school programs enjoyed excessive success in keeping the children actively engaged, and beyond that, training them to become certified Web Masters who could literally orchestrate business successes in corporations in new, creative ways. CEOs began employing these juvenile Web Masters, creating a positive outlet for their tremendous feelings of helplessness due to the uncertainty that accompanies oppressive anomie. The result was self-esteem and confidence building beyond compare in any other venue. All temptation to further live a life of crime diminished and eventually vanished over time. They were in control of their own destinies finally, and held the success of big businesses in the palm of their hands. The feeling is unequaled by any other accomplishment they had come to know, large or small. They experienced true conversion experiences, and brought other juveniles into the fold with their "street cred" reputations. In comparison, those after-school programs that did not have computers, or did not allow creative, fun uses of the ones they DID offer, were full-fledged failures. Opportunities for innovation were the key, and the kids seized on the idea of development of their mobile, tech-talent to, in a sense, run the world from their own computerized platform. They literally came off the streets and into the board rooms with developed talent that adults often lack.

The third example is drawn from the current Catholic Church, in contrast with the same church of the past. Pope Francis is the truest, purest embodiment of positive anomie. From the moment of his arrival at the Vatican in his newly-elected role, he has shaken up the standard traditions. No pomp

and circumstance, less reliance on religious dogma, charisma supplanting stoicism, and inclusion emphasized over exclusion, a true example of living out the Gospel message every day in every way, Francis is a man with life experience who equates the church itself *with* its members.

This is a man who has exhibited positive anomie/deviance throughout his life – in his home country of Argentina where he has always been beloved, to the point now, where he is leading Catholics world-wide, and bringing many of those fallen away willingly back into the fold. The priests, the bishops, the cardinals all have license to be progressive models of Post Vatican II. This new innovation and departure from recent norms has brought significant relief not only to the masses (who once mostly thought of themselves as unworthy and heavily burdened by guilt), but to church leaders themselves, including numerous women, who now express hope on a number of fronts where the church is involved. Some select quotes by our Society of Jesus Pope Francis illustrate the point of his willingness to stir our sense of presence and responsibility for the poor, the sick, and the disenfranchised.

Rather than Pope Benedict's smaller, more committed church, which many viewed as exclusive and unbending, Pope Francis wishes to "find new ways to spread the word of God to every corner of the world." He goes on to contend that "we need to avoid the spiritual sickness of a church that is wrapped up in its own world: when a church becomes like this, it grows sick." In his annual papal "state of the world" speech to diplomats, Francis warns that we are becoming a "throw away" society – whether that be signified by wasted food or discarding life. He tasks us all to turn our backs on indifference (Spokesman-Review, 2014). He continues on another day by saying that "in our ecclesiastical region there are priests who don't baptize the children of single mothers because they weren't conceived in the sanctity of marriage. These are today's hypocrites – those who clericalize the church, those who separate the people of God and salvation."

On vanity, he offers his wisdom: "An example I often use to illustrate the reality of vanity, is this: look at the peacock; it's beautiful if you look at it from the front. But if you look at it from behind, you discover the truth... Whoever gives in to such self-absorbed vanity has huge misery hiding inside them." On taking risks, Pope Francis opines, "It is true that going out on the street implies the risk of accidents happening, as they would to any ordinary man or woman. But if the church stays wrapped up in itself, it will age. And if I had to choose between a wounded church that goes out on the streets and a sick, withdrawn church, I would definitely choose the first one." He critiques the church as it stands, maintaining that "leaders of the Church have been Narcissus, flattered and sickeningly excited by their courtiers. The court is the leprosy of the papacy." After all, "money has



to serve, not to rule." In truthful humility, he admits, "I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I AM a sinner."

Pope Francis shows us the way of progress when he notes, "I like it when someone tells me 'I don't agree.' This is a true collaborator. When they say 'Oh, how great, how great, how great,' that's not useful." Dialogue is the key to productive change, in other words. For "grace is NOT part of consciousness; it is the amount of light in our souls, not knowledge nor reason" (Collazo & Rogak, 2013; Pope Francis, 2013).

He adds that "I dream of a church that is a mother and a shepherdess." "Right now, we don't have a very good relation with creation." All of this is couched in the quotation from early in his papacy, when Pope Francis famously quips, "who am I to judge?" in relation to gay marriage, relationships, and statuses in general.

Perhaps more effectively even than notorious gangs as the saviors to the destitute in New Orleans Post-Katrina or kids becoming Web Master kings and queens from previous oppressive backgrounds, Pope Francis has shaken the world-wide Catholic Church into righteousness already, and given warning to those whose values have fallen out of line with the ultimate Christian mission of doing for others and often forsaking ourselves in the process.

The positive anomie that is accomplished with creative innovation on the plus side of deviance brings insight into a theory that historically has singularly focused on negative, often criminal, outcomes. When one departs from the conventional norm in the face of the stark anomie created by a natural disaster or simply by life's random placement in a setting of poverty, they are fully expected to make the best of the situation by engaging in criminal acts, or escaping into a mind-altering existence of noncompliance with societal expectations. Active innovation via robbery, drug dealing, turning tricks, etc. is the standard response. But why does it have to always be this way? When the cultural goal of success is rewritten into one of helping those who often cannot help themselves, then unconventional means to achieving that success can equal a new, creative approach to old patterns of problems. This sometimes manifests itself in terms of stirring behavior. Recipients do not anticipate this, and will tend to react to the anomie created by such unexpected moves with similar discomfort to those moves that are wildly negative in consequence. When those affected recover from the initial shock of the resulting good that takes place, they will be heartened and no longer so jaded by what was once perceived as an impossible, uncaring world. Whether existing in the United States, in Europe, or in a Third World developing nation, meeting upheaval with wise, gentle or even jolting direction is an outcome experienced in the original Renaissance

Age. New, innovative ideas spring not only from conventional necessity, but sometimes from the depths of bottoming out in a life where the doors to possibility have been continually slammed shut in the past.

## **Bibliography**

Durkheim, Emile, *Suicide: A Sociological Study*, New York: Free Press, 1966.

Garner, R. and M.G. Gillingham, *Internet Communication in Six Classrooms: Conversations across Time, Space, and Culture*, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996.

Garner, R., Y. Zhao, and M. Gillingham (Eds), *Hanging Out: Community-Based After-School Programs for Children*, Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey., 2002a

Garner, R., Y. Zhao, and M. Gillingham, "Children's Use of New Technology for Picture-Taking." *First Monday*, Vol. 7, No. 9 (September): on-line journal, 2002b

Merton, Robert K., "Social structure and anomie", *American Sociological Review*, 3:672-682, 1938.

Merton, Robert K, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, New York, Free Press, 1968.

Messner, Steven F., "Merton's 'social structure and anomie': The road not taken." *Deviant Behavior*, 9:33-53, 1988.

Pope Francis, *Only Love Can Save Us: Letters, Homilies, and Talks of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio*, Translated by Gerard Seromik. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2013.

Pope Francis, *In His Own Words*, Edited by Julie Schwietert Collazo & Lisa Rogak, Novato, CA: New World Library, 2013.

Rodriguez, Havidan, Joseph Trainor, and Enrico L. Quarantelli, "Rising to the challenges of a catastrophe: The emergent and prosocial behavior following Hurricane Katrina." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 604, No. 1 (March): 82-101, 2006.

Spokesman-Review, "Papal Speech Decries Abortion." January 14, pg. A2, 2014.

Tierney, Kathleen, Christine Bevc, and Erica Kuligowski, "Metaphors matter: Disaster myths, media

frames, and their consequences in Hurricane Katrina.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 604, No. 1 (March): 57-81, 2006.

Varano, Sean P., Joseph A. Schafer, Jeffrey M. Cancino, Scott H. Decker, and Jack R. Greene, “A tale of three cities: Crime and displacement after Hurricane Katrina.” *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 38, Issue 1 (January-February):42-50, 2010.