SOCI 344 Sociology of Deviant Behaviour
Session Seven
The Theory of Anomie - Durkheim
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Session overview

• Introduction

• Earlier, in explaining the approach to the formulation of theories to explain criminal behavior we identified three main explanatory frameworks, namely, the kinds of people theories, the kind of situation theories and theories derived from the conjunction of both factors.

• As we saw much earlier, the kinds of people theories are mainly the biological theories which suggest that the criminal is born and not made and the psychological theories which emphasize that crimes are committed by mentally abnormal people.
Session outline cotd.

• The theories of anomie as formulated by Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton are typically a kind of situation theories since they explain how changes in the social structure of a society create a situation favorable to the violation of law.
Session Outline

- The main topics to be covered in this session are as follows:
  - Topic One: The genesis of Durkheim’s theory of Anomie;
  - Topic Two: Durkheim theory applied to Ghana
  - Topic Three: The effects of Durkheim’s anomie in Ghana
Objectives/expected outcomes for the session

On the completion of this session, you should be able to –

• Explain the social factors that explain the onset of anomie according to Durkheim
• Describe how Durkheim’s theory originally formulated to explain suicide, explains economic criminality in post colonial nations, using Ghana as an example
• Explain the specific factors of economic criminality in Ghana
Introduction

Durkheim used the term anomie in his first work, The Division of Labor in Society published in 1893. This work was concerned with the problem of how a society with a high degree of social differentiation such as the France of this day, was able to maintain some sort of cohesion.

The concept of anomie however played only a small part in Durkheim’s total theory of the division of labor. It was in his classic study of suicide which appeared four years later that the concept of anomie took on its great importance in Durkheim’s theoretical presentation, but in a considerably revised form. How relevant is this theory to the explanation of crime?
Anomie - Durkheim

- The central presuppositions on which Durkheim’s theory is founded are that, basically the human appetites (that is, a person’s desire for the quantity of material supplies necessary for the physical maintenance of his life) are insatiable.

- Human activity he says. “naturally aspires beyond assigned limits, and sets itself unattainable goals. The more one has, the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs”. (2958:508).

- There is nothing, Durkheim asserts, “in man’s organic nor in his psychological constitution which sets a limit to such tendencies.
Thus, on its own, human nature is most often incapable of assigning any limits to its passions. In reaction against this essentially morbid disposition, society – every society, imposed moral order (a set of regulations) which define the limits to which different categories of its members can legitimately aspire. Without this social ordering, “no human being can be happy or even exist.

This moral order assigns “the relative reward due to each, and the consequent degree of comfort appropriate on the average to workers in each occupation. The different functions are graded in public opinion and a certain coefficient of wellbeing assigned to each according to its place in the hierarchy.

According to accepted ideas, for example, a certain way of living is considered the upper limit to which a workman may aspire in his efforts to improve his existence”. (1958:509-510).
• Durkheim thus began with the assumption that every society begins as a state of nomia.

• According to Murray (quoted by Merton, 1958:552) a state of nomia is one in which “every class has its appointed Moira or portion, its Ergon or function, and things go right if each class and each individual fulfils his Moira and performs his Ergon, and does not transgress or trespass on those of others”.

• In other words -There are certain accepted rules in society which determine the upper and lower limits of the standard of living for the different categories of workmen located in the different social classes – as in the Lower, Middle and Upper classes;

• These ideas and limits are however subject to change according to changing economic and moral standards.
• As an illustration, if a man in the working or lower class (for example a laborer) is allocated a motor bike as his means of transport, the middle class person, (i.e. a professor) would be allocated a BMW car as his means of transport and an upper class person (the ruling elite - president and his ministers) would be allocated Benzes.

• All of these allocations would be commensurate with the levels of the legitimate income earned by people in these class categories

• Because these limitations are subject to change according to changing economic and moral standards, a laborer may be allocated a VW for his transport, the professor, a Benz and the ruling elite two Benzes, etc, if the economy improves and the society becomes prosperous.
• However, in times of an economic disaster or of an abrupt or sudden growth of power or wealth, these standards (limitations) are suddenly and violently thrown out of order, and it takes a long time to find new ones.

• **In this situation, human appetites, originally insatiable, are no longer controlled by public opinion, and a state of deregulation, normlessness or anomie is the result.**

• In a state of anomie, no established classes exist anymore and in the absence of the original limitations, the sky now becomes the limit and a race is begun by all the classes for unattainable goals.
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Under these conditions, religion loses much of its influence, and the government which should regulate the economy becomes its servant.
• In an anomic society, the individual is not sure of what to expect or what is expected of him.

• Disoriented and insecure, some commit suicide.
Topic Two
Durkheim’s theory applied to Ghana

• Durkheim’s theory of anomie was originally intended to explain the factors which predispose people to commit suicide.
• But this theory is applicable to other forms of deviance apart from suicide? The applicability of this theory to economic criminality in Ghana has been investigated by Abotchie (1988).

• The main hypothesis investigated was that the incidence of economic crimes became predominant in the post-independence era as a result of the acute anomie, that is, the normlessness occasioned by the transition of the Gold Coast from colonialism to independent Ghana.
The ‘beneficent transition’ which gave birth to anomie in Ghana was political independence which brought about what Durkheim referred to as the abrupt growth of power and wealth.

This growth of power led to the removal of the limitations imposed by the colonial regime on the maximum level of the aspirations of the natives of the Gold Coast.

Under the colonial regime, the natives had little or no access to the opportunities open to the European settlers, with reference to social status and style of life.
• For example, (a) the topmost position to which an African Civil servant to could be elevated in the colonial administration was the rank of an Assistant Colonial Secretary.

• And in the Police Force, the topmost rank a indigene could attain was Inspector.

• Further (b) African Civil servants occupying bungalows were forbidden to have their wives live with them in the residential areas, (because the white colonialists thought that African women were not neat enough to keep the bungalows clean)
• (c) In the economic field, the Land Bill of 1894 took away the rights of the indigenes to benefit from the exploitation of the mineral resources of the country, especially gold.

• Under this bill, the colonial Administration took over what it called wasteland or forest lands of the country, thereby curtailing the rights of the indigenes to sell their lands to European concessionaires (Addo-Fening, 1976:118). This limited the opportunities available to the natives to make wealth.

• Further (d) under the Native Jurisdiction Ordinance of 1878, the financial resources of the Chiefs was curtailed by the Colonial administration by imposing limitations on the scope of the fines that they could impose on the guilty.
According to Amenumey (1964:235) the Ordinance permitted chiefs to pass bye laws on 15 subjects only and to impose fines up to 5 pounds or two sheep. And in civil cases, chiefs were authorized to judge cases up to 25 pounds and 50 pounds in succession suits. Fines above these limitations would constitute an offense.

The euphoria engendered by the removal of these limitations, created for the Ghanaian elite, a feeling of “unfettered freedom” under which they considered “all means legitimate” to attain the hitherto unattainable European type goals, according to de Graft-Johnson (1976).
• In the absence of limitations on the appetites, the degree of success and prestige in post-independence Ghana was evaluated on the quantum or quality of status symbols individuals secured.

• In other words, the greater the number of cars or houses a person had, or the higher their quality, the greater is the person’s social honour.

• Conspicuous consumption characterized by the acquisition of either a superabundant and / or high quality status symbols, became the determinant of the applauded level of success or prestige.
• The social pressure exerted by the new evaluation system on all and sundry particularly the elite – to attain the applauded level of prestige, predisposed them to economic crimes.

• The main aim of these crimes is to make a lot of quick money or avoid the loss of money or property or gain a personal or business advantage
The immediate impact of political independence on the people of Ghana was the feeling of freedom from the colonial restraints it inevitably gave to all and sundry.

The slogan which soon caught on with the masses after independence was “freedom”; and this was soon given official expression in the national motto, “Freedom and justice”.

Significantly however, the first fruits of this freedom were mostly accessible only to the elite group constituted as at independence by the top hierarchy of the ruling political party, namely, the Convention Peoples Party, (CPP), top Ghanaian Civil Servants and the bourgeoning petty bourgeoisie of the time.
• To these, independence meant not mere freedom from “the grip of colonial misrule and misgovernment”, it meant the removal of all bonds which have hitherto held down the aspirations of the people of the Gold Coast.

• It meant, according to de Graft-Johnson (1975:175) an “unfettered freedom” to reach for the sky. And in their drive to reap the benefits of this freedom, this elite group considered, as a corollary, that “all means were legitimate” (de Graft-Johnson, 1975:172).

• “Under anomic conditions”, wrote Alpert, “the social brakes get out of order and individuals’ want soar rapidly. A ‘the sky is the limit’ psychology develops.” (1961: 206).
As a consequence, the condition of anomie engenders a healthy, but fierce competition in conspicuous consumption by status aspirants in response to the reckoning that, the person whose quantum and/or quality of material supplies is greater, is duly deserving of higher prestige.

This competition, in the absence of limitations, exerted considerable pressure on status aspirants in Ghana to adopt a variety of deviant responses, including, as the evidence in the evidence in the Commission of Enquiry reports suggest, corruption, extortion, and black, market currency offences to obtain money to attain greater social honors.
As Durkheim (1958:512) has indicated, “unlimited desires are insatiable... and being unlimited, they constantly and infinitely surpass the means at their command”.

This implies that **while the goals attainable in anomic societies are unlimited, the legitimate means available to persons desirous of these goals are limited.** Consequently, in the quest for unlimited goals, there is the probability that legitimate incomes would become inadequate.

However, because the thirst for novelties remains inextinguishable in anomic societies, the desire by status aspirants to raise their standard of living predisposes those who find their legitimate incomes inadequate to commit economic crimes.
• These crimes were predominantly acts committed by concealment or guile to obtain money or property, or to avoid the loss of money or property or to obtain a business or personal advantage. They include embezzlement of public funds, bribe taking and corruption, extortion, tax evasion – all of which fall into the category of white collar crimes.

• The majority of persons whose assets are listed acquired more cars and houses than they required for a reasonable ease of living.
• An illustrative example can be cited from the Jiagge Commission’s report on one of the Ministers in the First Republic

• This minister alone acquired 32 houses and 18 cars between 1951 and 1966, the largest volume of assets acquired by any of the investigated persons. Evidence of his taste for quality, in spite of the great number of his houses, is provided in the following description of one of his luxurious houses.

• According to the Quantity Surveyor appointed by the Commission this house was, "the most magnificent house he had seen in Ghana. The building has marble facing in the Rooms and along the passages. The bathrooms have marble mosaic facing. There are air conditioners and about 28 chandeliers....” The
• Apart from houses, the acquisition of cars were equally held in high esteem.

• The Jiagge Commissions’ findings indicate that the majority of persons investigated acquired between 4 to 20 cars over maximum period of 14 years, and that more than a reasonably necessary number of these cars were in serviceable condition concurrently.

• The brand of cars were frequently changed. Less sophisticated cars were either sold or given out as gifts. Almost all the investigated persons had Mercedes Benz cars of various models. Mercedes Benz cars were considered the most prestigious cars in the mid sixties (and even up to date).

• In addition to Benz cars, Jaguar, Studebaker, Buik, Citroen, Thunderbird, Chevrolet and Cadillac cars were commonly acquired also, evidently because of their high rating in the hierarchy of prestigious cars.
Sources of Illegal Income

- The relevant question is – what is the source of funding for the conspicuous consumption habits of these high ranking and other public officers?

- Persons against whom adverse findings were made, were mostly those whose total expenditure during their tenure of public office exceeded their total income from all legitimate sources.

- And as regards the sources of monies used to finance the excess expenditures, the findings of the Commissions reveal that these came largely from bribes, extortion of various kinds of commissions, tax evasion, and illegal exchange of foreign currencies.
• In his Dawn Broadcast, the then President Nkrumah said among other things,

• “I have stated over again that members of the CPP must not use their Party membership or official position for personal gain or for the amassing of wealth. Such tendencies directly contradict our Party Constitution which makes it clear that the aims and objectives of the Party, among other things are the building of a socialist pattern of society ...”

• In considering remedial measures, I have found it necessary to direct that a limit be imposed on property acquisition by Ministers, party officials and Ministerial Secretaries ...” (1961:2-9)
• Under the limitations, no Minister or Ministerial Secretary was to own, more than two houses of a combined value of G20,000 (twenty thousand Ghana pounds); more than two motor cars, and plots of land with a total value greater than G500 (five hundred Ghana pounds). (1961:1)

• On the basis of these limitations, Nkrumah ordered six members of his government to surrender to the State, specified properties which were in excess of the limits. Six other members of his government were asked to resign because of their varied business connections.
the act supports the postulation that post-independence Ghana was anomic, in the sense that there had been no limitations on the appetites of the people. Secondly, the imposition of these limitations suggests that Nkrumah had, in time, realised that the absence of limitations led to superabundant property acquisition by his Ministers and party officials.

What was the reaction of Nkrumah’s Ministers to the limitations? They sought, through guile and concealment the acquisition of additional properties; but since they could no longer publicly proclaim their ownership, they registered these in the names of kinsmen.
• One of Nkrumah’s Ministers revealed this strategy before the Jiagge Commission.

• He declared: “When Nkrumah made his Dawn Broadcast’, I had a plot at the airport ... I arranged with a contractor to put up a building there... in the name of my niece. The agreement with her was that whenever she was leaving Ghana, she must surrender my house back to me”. (1968:123)
Summary

• In times of an economic disaster or of an abrupt or sudden growth of power or wealth, the standards set for various classes of people, are suddenly and violently upset, and it takes a long time to find new ones.

• In this situation, insatiable human appetites are no longer controlled by public opinion, and a state of deregulation, normlessness or anomie is the result.

• Under such conditions, no established classes exist anymore; the sky becomes the limit for all and a race begins for all and sundry for unattainable goals. In such a society, the individual is not sure of what to expect or what is expected of him. Disoriented and insecure, some commit suicide.

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• The euphoria engendered by the removal of the colonial limitations, created for the Ghanaian elite, a feeling of “unfettered freedom” under which they considered “all means legitimate” to attain the hitherto unattainable European type goals.

• Conspicuous consumption became the determinant of success. The social pressure exerted by the new evaluation system on all and sundry particularly the elite – to attain the applauded level of prestige, predisposed them to economic crimes.
• Nkrumah was disappointed with what has been variously aptly described by Asamoa (1980:6) as the ‘riotous expensive style of life’ and by Le Vine (1975:59) as ‘cathartic conspicuous’ consumption of his Ministers and party officials.

• In his Dawn Broadcast, he imposed limitations on the numbers of houses, cars and plots of land to be acquired by his Ministers.

• But through guile and concealment those involved sought to acquire additional properties; but since they could no longer publicly proclaim their ownership, they registered these in the names of kinsmen.
Assignment

• Durkheim identified three conditions under which anomie might occur – namely an economic disaster, an abrupt or sudden growth of power or an abrupt or sudden growth of wealth. We have seen how a sudden growth of power could lead to anomie. Under what circumstances do you think a society or an individual might experience anomie when there is an economic disaster or a sudden growth of wealth?
References

