

child abusers and improving the protection of vulnerable children. The media frequently carry dramatic stories of crime and deviance, which spark a sense of public outrage against the acts or groups concerned. This often unites the public in displays of disapproval, and provides the opportunity for society to condemn deviant behaviour and, by punishing criminals, to reassert the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and strengthen collective values.

- 2 *By enabling social change.* Some deviance is necessary to allow new ideas to develop, and enable society to change and progress.
- 3 *By acting as a 'safety valve'.* Deviance can act as a 'safety valve' releasing stresses in society. For example, mass violent protest demonstrations might be seen as an outlet for expressions of discontent avoiding wider and more serious challenges to social order.
- 4 *By acting as a warning device* that society is not working properly. For example, high rates of suicide, truancy from school, drug addiction, divorce and crime point to underlying social problems that need solving before serious threats to social order develop.

Strain theory and anomie

Merton (1968 [1957]) develops functionalist theory by attempting to explain why deviance arises in the first place. He suggests that social order is based on a consensus around social goals and approved means of achieving them. Most people share goals – for example, financial success, having their own home and possessing consumer goods – and most conform to the approved means of achieving them, like working in paid employment. However, in an unequal society, Merton argues not all individuals have the same opportunity of realizing these goals by approved means because of things such as, for example, unemployment, low pay, racism or lack of educational success. This means they face a sense of strain and anomie (normlessness), as the dominant rules about how to achieve success don't meet their needs. He argues there are different 'modes of adaptation' or responses to this situation, ranging from the conformity most people display, to one of four forms of deviance, which he calls innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion. These are illustrated in table 6.1.

Evaluation of Merton's strain theory

While Merton's strength is that he clearly explains deviance as arising from the structure of society, there are some criticisms.

Table 6.1 Merton's strain theory

Mode of adaptation	Accept means?	Accept goals?	Example
Conformity	✓	✓	The non-deviant, non-criminal conformist citizen
Innovation	✗	✓	Factors like poor educational qualifications or unemployment mean some can't achieve goals by approved means so turn to crime as an alternative
Ritualism	✓	✗	Give up on achieving goals, but stick to means, e.g. teachers who have given up caring about student success, or office workers who have abandoned hopes of promotion and are just marking time until they retire
Retreatism	✗	✗	Drop-outs like drug addicts or tramps who give up altogether
Rebellion	✗ (✓)	✗ (✓)	Reject existing social goals and means, but substitute new ones to create a new society, like revolutionaries or members of some religious sects

✓ = accept ✗ = reject