

Breakdown of Ties That Bind People Together

Considering the whole of Durkheim's writing on anomie, one can see that he saw it as a breakdown of the ties that bind people together to make a functional society, a state of social derangement. Periods of anomie are unstable, chaotic, and often rife with conflict because the social force of the norms and values that otherwise provide stability is weakened or missing.

Merton's Theory of Anomie and Deviance

Durkheim's theory of anomie proved influential to American sociologist Robert K. Merton, who pioneered the sociology of deviance and is considered one of the most influential sociologists in the United States. Building on Durkheim's theory that anomie is a social condition in which people's norms and values no longer sync with those of society, Merton created the structural strain theory, which explains how anomie lead to deviance and crime. The theory states that when society does not provide the necessary legitimate and legal means that allow people to achieve culturally valued goals, people seek out alternative means that may simply break from the norm, or may violate norms and laws. For example, if society does not provide enough jobs that pay a living wage so that people can work to survive, many will turn to criminal methods of earning a living. So for Merton, deviance, and crime are, in large part, a result of anomie, a state of social disorder.