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Q8(b)

How, according to Merton, are deviant subcultures generated ?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- How, according to Merton, are deviant subcultures generated?
- Keep the discussion within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Merton:** strain between universal success goals and unequal means.

Adaptations cluster into subcultures with local morals.

- **Cohen:** status frustration and inversion of school values.
- **Cloward and Ohlin:** criminal, conflict, retreatist opportunity structures.

Indian exam and street economies illustrate.

Add gender and labelling to the generator.

Introduction

Robert K. Merton started from a strain between culturally approved goals and legitimate means. Deviant subcultures are generated when groups share an adaptation to that strain and build a local moral world around it. Albert **Cohen** and later **Cloward and Ohlin** developed the subcultural step that Merton's typology invited.

Body**Strain as the generator**

- American culture, for Merton, stresses success. Legitimate means are unequally distributed by class.
- Anomie here is a mismatch, not **Durkheim's** complete normlessness.
- Innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion are adaptations. Conformity is the majority.

From adaptation to subculture

- When innovators or rebels cluster, they teach techniques and justifications. That is a subculture.
- **Albert Cohen's delinquent boys:** status frustration in school produces a reactive subculture that inverts middle-class measures.
- **Cloward and Ohlin:** the form of subculture depends on illegitimate opportunity structures-criminal, conflict, or retreatist.

How generation works, in Merton's spirit

- Structural exclusion plus a shared success myth produces strain.

- Interaction in neighbourhoods, gangs, or workplaces supplies a solution and a name.
- Neutralisation and a local honour code stabilise deviance as normal for members.

Indian illustrations

- Exam coaching and cheating rings as innovation around educational success goals.
- Extortion economies in some urban pockets as criminal opportunity structures.
- Caste or student groups can be subcultures of conformity as well as of deviance; the generator is still strain plus association.

Limits

- **Feminist critique:** strain theory was male-street. Girls' deviance and honour punishments were under-theorised.
- Labelling theory, after Howard Becker, says the audience helps generate the subculture by tagging it.
- Not all subcultures are deviant. Merton's question is specifically about rule-breaking worlds.

Flow diagram

Cultural goals -> Means gap

Means gap -> Merton adaptations

Merton adaptations -> Shared solution

Shared solution -> Deviant subculture

Illegitimate opportunity -> Deviant subculture

Conclusion

For Merton, deviant subcultures grow when strained actors share adaptations and build a local code, especially where illegitimate means are available. **Cohen** and Cloward-Ohlin specify the group step. Classed schools and opportunity structures are the engines. Gender and labelling must be added so the generator is not only a boys' street.

Facts & figures

Merton anomie

Disjunction of goals and legitimate means as a source of deviance.

Five adaptations

Conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, rebellion.

Cohen

Delinquent subculture as a collective solution to status frustration.

Cloward and Ohlin

Differential illegitimate opportunity shapes the type of subculture.

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