

Structural Strain Theory

[Robert K. Merton](#) developed the [structural strain theory](#) as an extension of the functionalist perspective on deviance. This theory traces the origins of deviance to the tensions that are caused by the gap between cultural goals and the means people have available to achieve those goals.

Culturally Accepted Goals Vs. Culturally Approved Means

Societies are characterized by both culture and social structure. Culture establishes goals for people in society while [social structure](#) provides (or fails to provide) the means for people to achieve those goals. According to Merton, in a well-integrated society, people use accepted and appropriate means to achieve the goals that society establishes. In this case, the goals and the means of the society are in balance. It is when the goals and means are not in balance with each other that deviance is likely to occur. This imbalance between cultural goals and structurally available means can actually lead an individual into [deviant behavior](#).

The achievement of economic success in the U.S. is a great example that helps further explain the structural strain theory. In the United States, economic success is a goal that most everybody strives for. The legitimate means to economic success are education and jobs. Not all groups of people have equal access to these means, however. The result is structural strain that produces deviance. [Lower class individuals](#) are most likely to experience these strains because they aim for the same goals as the rest of society, however they have blocked opportunities for success. These individuals are therefore more likely to turn to crime and deviance as a way to achieve economic success. There is a high [correlation](#) that exists between unemployment and crime and the structural strain theory helps explain this relationship.

Five Categories of People

Merton further categorized people into five general categories with regards to their relationship to culturally accepted goals and the means to achieving those goals.

Conformists. Conformists are people who believe in both the established cultural goals of society as well as the normative means for attaining those goals. They follow the rules of society. An example would be a successful investor or businessman who is economically successful because of their employment or hard work.

Ritualists. Ritualists are individuals who do not believe in the established cultural goals of society, but they do believe in and abide by the means for attaining those goals. For example, a middle-management worker who cares little for wealth but still continues to climb the socioeconomic ladder through traditional means and hard work.

Innovators. Innovators are those individuals that accept the cultural goals of society but reject the conventional methods of attaining those goals. These people usually have a blatant disregard for the conventional methods that have been established in attaining wealth and are generally those we regard as criminals. An example is a stockbroker who engages in illegal insider trading. The cultural goal of wealth is accepted, but nontraditional means of insider trading are used. Drug dealers, thieves, and prostitutes are also examples of innovators.

Retreatists. Retreatists are individuals who reject both the cultural goals and the accepted means of attaining those goals. They simply avoid both the goals and means established by society without replacing those norms with their own counter-cultural forces. Severe alcoholics, some homeless people, and hermits are examples of retreatists.

Rebels. Rebels not only reject both the established cultural goals and the accepted means of attaining those goals, but they substitute new goals and new means of attaining those goals. Examples of rebels include the American Nazi party, “skinheads,” and the [Ku Klux Klan](#).