



EC SO4002: Who Are We?: Culture and Identity

Theme 5: Conformity and Deviance

Learning Review

What did we cover in Theme 4?

If you are online please raise your hand to contribute, we will take online responses first.



Subculture as a Continuum

In Theme 4 we looked at sub-cultures and resistance and assimilation



Resistance ← → **Assimilation**

Which we all exist on and move along according to circumstance.

Resistance or Assimilation

Deviance or Conformity

- The idea that some individuals are not able to follow social norms or choose not to follow them is also known as **deviance**.
- The idea that an individual can 'assimilate' the norms of society is also known as **conformity**.
- We will now take some time to look at these concepts in a little detail.

Conformity

- Conformity is the tendency of people to make their actions comply with prevailing norms or expectations, despite their personal beliefs or preferences.
- It may also refer to a tendency to alter beliefs in line with those of others.
- Some social psychologists have argued that there are distinct conformist personalities that are the result of particular patterns of socialization, while others have focused on the social pressures existing in a group, organization, or leader, or because of the perceived expectations of others in general.

Conformity

- Biologists have recognised that the pressure to conform exists in other 'social' animals.
- For example it has been noted that primates would tend to eat the same colour food as that eaten by the majority of the group. (Whiten & van der Waal, 2016) 1. 
- Therefore it is possible to theorise that the desire to 'conform' is a natural response in social animals.
- It can also be seen that this relates to the need for **Belonging** identified by..... ? [Maslow.](#)

Conformity

- This tendency to conformity has been observed by social psychologists such as Solomon Asch in *Social Psychology* (1952)
- This has become known as the Asch Paradigm

The Asch Paradigm in action

2.



Conformity

Another example of conformity in action

3.



*Why do you think people want to conform with others?
Take a moment to think about this and then share your thoughts
with the group.*



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So why do people conform?

Pryor *et al* (2019) identify the following reasons why people conform;

- First, compliance is the simplest, most direct motive for conformity to group norms.
- It occurs because members wish to acquire rewards from the group and avoid punishment.
- Compliance is characterized by a change in observable behaviour to match the social norm while maintaining a private lack of acceptance of the norm itself.

(Pryor *et al*, 2019)

So why do people conform?

Pryor *et al* (2019) identify the following reasons why people conform;

- Second, 'identification' occurs when individuals conform because they find other supporters of the norm attractive.
- Identification as a motive for conformity is often revealed by an imitation process in which established members serve as models for the behaviour of others.
- For example, a newly promoted manager might attempt to dress and talk like her successful, admired boss.

So why do people conform?

Pryor *et al* (2019) identify the following reasons why people conform;

- Third, individuals may conform to a norm because they have truly and wholly accepted the beliefs, values, and attitudes that underlie it.
- Conformity occurs because the norm is seen as right, not because it achieves rewards, avoids punishment, or pleases others.
- That is, conformity is the result of internal rather than external forces.

(Pryor *et al*, 2019)

Conformity

- Robert Merton, in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1957) saw conformity and deviance as being inter-related.
- Merton's work focused primarily on the USA but has been used by sociologists to explore the connection between conformity and deviance.
- He was particularly interested in exploring why crime rates in the USA increased during the 1940s.

Conformity

- Merton argued that there was increasing pressure on individuals to achieve the American Dream
- This is based on American Declaration of Independence which talks about people's right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'
- There was a general belief that society was a 'meritocracy'

What do we mean by the phrase meritocracy?

Raise your hand to contribute.



Conformity

- The social value of 'meritocracy' is the belief that anyone can achieve through hard work and effort regardless of race, gender, class etc.
- The 'American Dream' leads people to believe that it was everyone's right to have the things that made them happy
- Over the course of the Twentieth Century this became conflated with the possession of material goods (material culture Theme 3)
- This can also be seen to be the case in the UK

Conformity

Conforming to material culture;



Conformity

- For most people this means the ‘pursuit of goals through acceptable means’
- For example; education & work
- In this way people were encouraged to follow society’s norms (i.e. conformity)

Merton's Strain Theory

- However, Merton argued that some people do not have access to the same advantages or cultural resources as others in society.
- This places them at a disadvantage and means that hard work alone will not allow them to achieve success
- For these people the goals of society (the house, car, clothes, phone etc.) are out of reach

Group Discussion; Why might people not be able to achieve?



Merton's Strain Theory

- Merton argued that this disconnection between the desire to conform to social norms and the ability to conform leads to 'anomie'
- Anomie was a concept first used by the sociologist Emile Durkheim in the 19th century
- It is generally taken to mean 'an absence, breakdown, confusion, or conflict in the norms of a society',

(Scott & Marshall, 2014)

Merton's Strain Theory

Anomie

- Anomie describes the feeling of deprivation compared to others
- It is illustrated in everyday speech by the phrases;
 - "Haves and have nots"*
 - "It doesn't matter how hard I work I'll never succeed"*
 - "It's all right for them"*
- For Merton, this means that only those with the advantages can succeed and others need to find alternative courses of action

Merton's Strain Theory

- For Merton these alternative courses of action include;

Innovation

- People who choose this course of action want to attain the goals set by social norms
- i.e. they want the house, the car, the clothes, the phone etc.
- However, they believe that they can not acquire them through legitimate means
- And therefore turn to alternative means (e.g. theft)

Merton's Strain Theory

- For Merton these alternative courses of action include;

Retreatism

- People who choose this course of action feel that they are not able to achieve the goals
- They can often feel that therefore they have no place in society
- Such people choose ways of retreating from or rejecting society
- e.g. drug or alcohol misuse

Merton's Strain Theory

- For Merton these alternative courses of action include;

Ritualism

- People who choose this course of action continue to pursue the *means* established by social norms (e.g. hard work or education)
- Although these do not lead to the *goals* (e.g. because they are in low paid jobs)
- Thus turning up to work becomes an *end* in itself despite the fact that it does not bring the rewards

Merton's Strain Theory

- For Merton these alternative courses of action include;

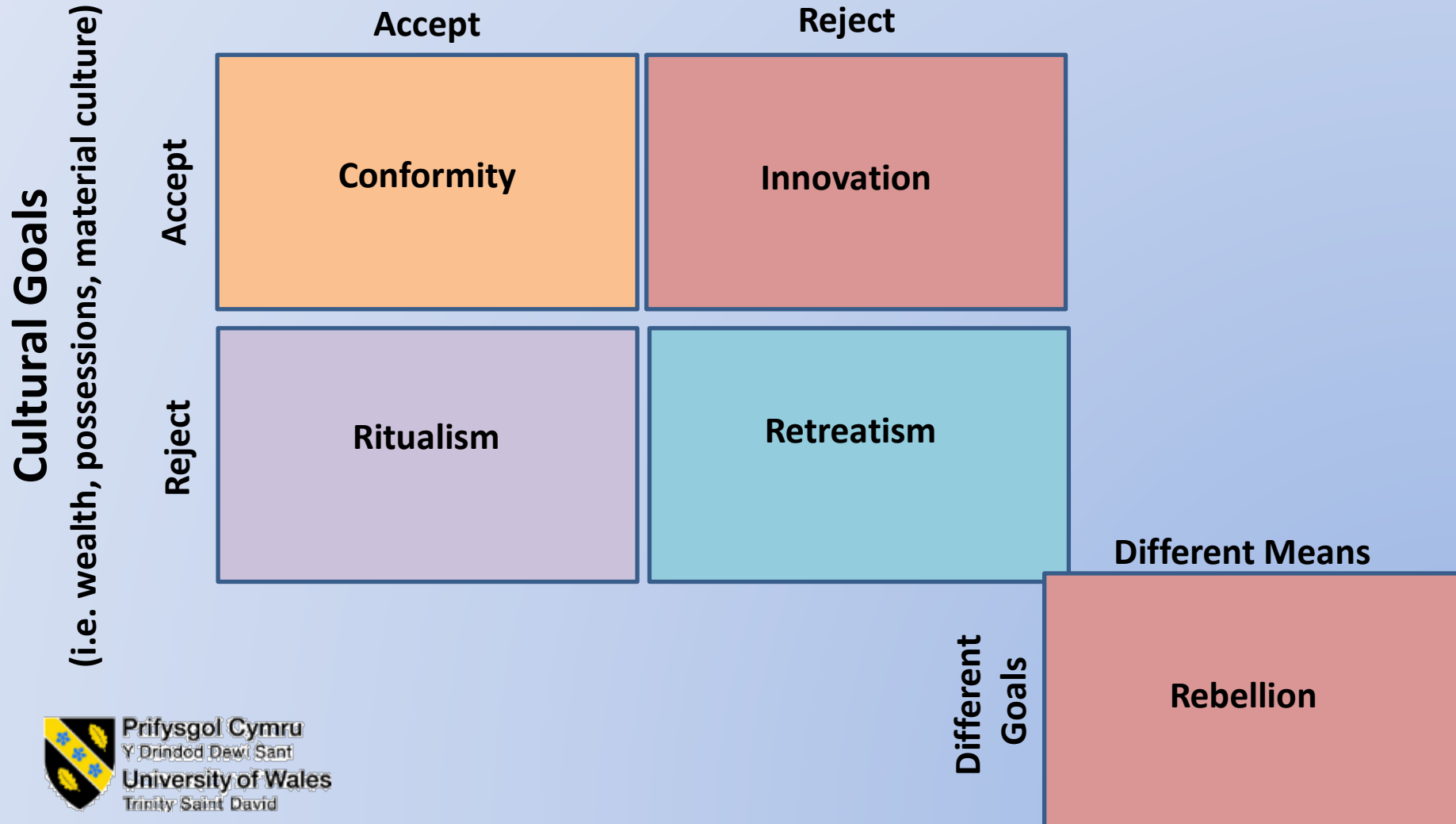
Rebellion

- People who choose this course of action reject both the *means* (work etc.) and the *goals* (material wealth)
- Instead they seek to replace these with different values
- These are often politically radical (e.g. anarchism, communism)

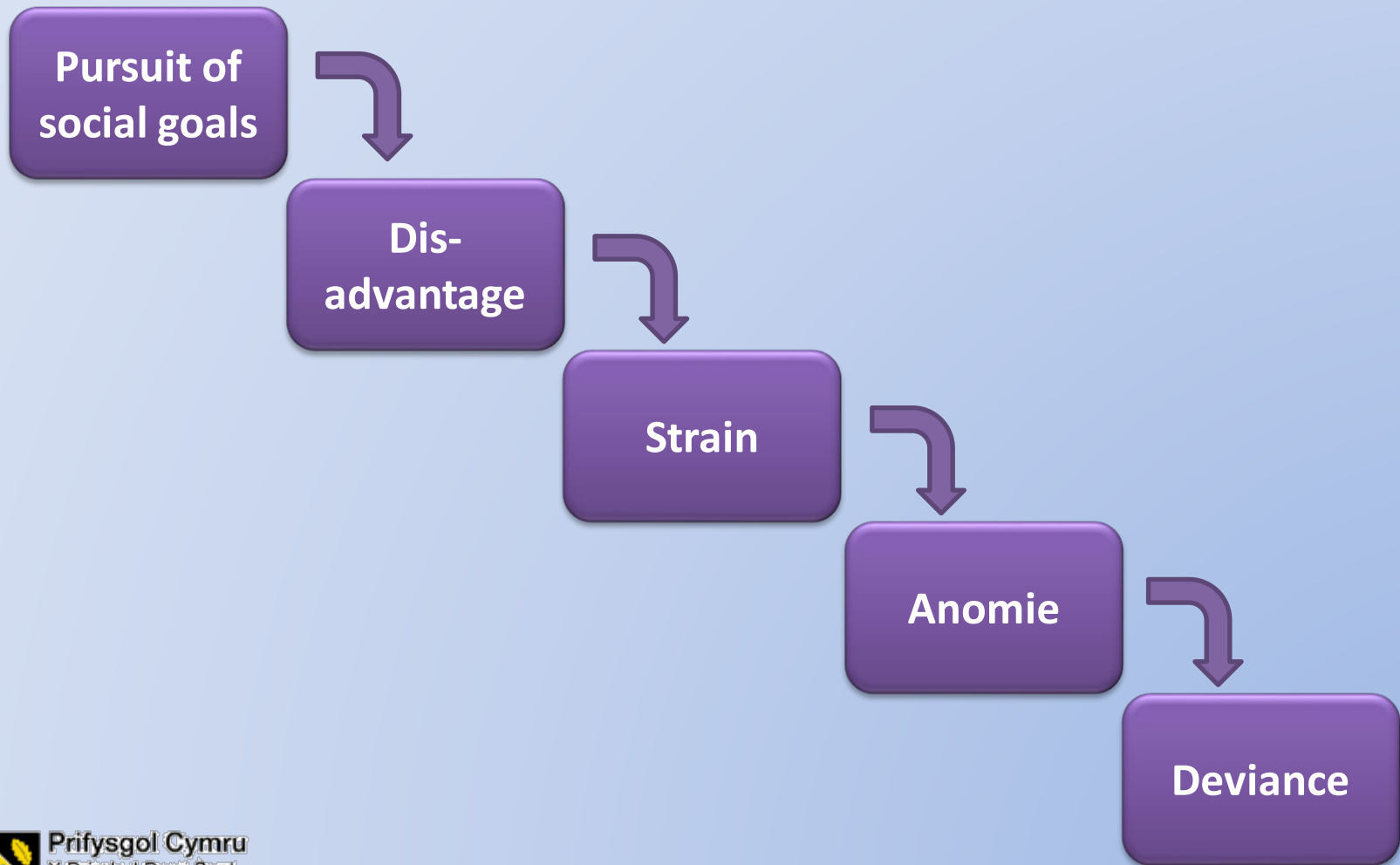
Merton's (1957) Deviance Typology

Institutionalised means

(i.e. work, education, membership of 'in-groups')



Merton's Strain Theory



Criticisms of Merton

- Some researchers have criticised the theory for focussing only on the lower classes (e.g. Byym & Lie, 2007, p.197)
1. Merton's strain theory does not explain why only some working class people turn to crime
 2. It explains economic crime (e.g. theft, burglary) but not violent crime (e.g. murder, assault)
 3. It does not help us to explain middle-class, 'white collar' crime
 4. Because Merton relied on official crime statistics his theory was automatically biased

Why might this be the case? Raise your hand to contribute



The Criticisms Answered?

1. Why only some lower class people turn to crime?

- Cultural theorists (e.g. McRobbie, 1994) argue that membership of sub-cultural groups, like those we looked at in Theme 3, provide social rewards that mean that innovation does not necessarily lead to crime but to creative resistance instead.
- Sarah Thornton (1995) refers to this as 'social capital'
- But what is social capital?
- The concept was first used by Pierre Bourdieu and we will look at this in the next Theme.

The Criticisms Answered?

1. Why only some lower class people turn to crime?

- In the sense used by Thornton social capital includes;
- In depth knowledge of the 'scene',
- Possession of in-group objects,
- Shared language or argot,
- Shared appearance or style, and;
- Commitment to the in-group above all others



Sub-cultural social capital - Examples



Football Fa



Line Dancers (Italy)

The Criticisms Answered?

2. What about violent crime (i.e. crime that does not result in material gain)?
 - Robert Agnew (1992) attempts to seek an answer to this question in his General Strain Theory
 - ‘Strain’ can occur for the following, additional reasons;
 - Failure to achieve non-economic goals (e.g. praise)
 - Discrimination (e.g. racial, sexual)
 - Removal of positive stimuli (e.g. loss of a loved one)
 - Introduction of negative stimuli (e.g. bullying)

The Criticisms Answered?

3. What about middle-class / 'white collar' crime?

- Criminologists see the answer to this question in the concept of 'relative deprivation'
- In summary, this means that affluent, 'successful' people will compare themselves with other more affluent, more successful people.
- They therefore see themselves as disadvantaged
- This in turn leads to strain as defined by Merton

See for example (Webber, 2007)

Conformity: a Biological Explanation

- Scientific developments in the 21st Century have allowed us to observe how the brain operates
- This has meant that we can look for biological/genetic reasons for conformity/resistance
- For example;

4.



- Therefore we might be genetically programmed to be conformist or resistant

Deviance

- Whether we accept Merton's argument or not, we can recognise that some people choose not to follow society's norms
- This is known as deviance.

What examples have we already looked at?

Raise your hand to contribute



What other examples can you think of?



Deviance

Scott and Marshall (2014) argue that there are two, inter-related aspects to deviance;

- The first aspect is the concept of deviance as the practice of violation of social norms for example;
- People who break religious norms are 'heretics',
- People who break legal norms are 'criminals',
- People who break health norms are 'sick',
- People who break cultural norms are 'eccentric', and so forth.
- Since norms exist in most social situations, such a definition of deviance is very wide-ranging, and enters every sphere of social life.

Deviance

- The second property highlights deviance as a stigma construct,
- That is to say a label bestowed upon certain classes of behaviour at certain times, which then become devalued, discredited, and often excluded.
- This characteristic can also be seen as very wide-ranging:
- For example, people may see friends as deviant simply because they belch or talk too much;
- whilst terrorists may become political martyrs in the eyes of those who share their particular values.
- The study of deviance here is concerned primarily with the construction, application, and impact of stigma labels.

Deviance

- In Theme 4 we looked at some examples of non-normative or deviant behaviour
- We briefly discussed how our own socialisation effected our response to the examples
- We will now undertake an exercise devised by Monika Ulrich (2010) to explore this further.



Guided Study: Deviance as a Social Construct

*Work through the exercise on the Guided Study sheet.
We will then discuss our thoughts on the exercise as a group or
using the Forum on Moodle if you are not attending in person.*

Dimensions of Resistance

Passive



Active

Micro



Macro

Overt



Covert

Passive Subcultural Resistance

Theories of resistance linked to consumption

Resistance **THROUGH** consumption

Or

Resistance as appropriation



Passive Subcultural Resistance

Theories of resistance linked to consumption

- Examples include
 - Young Muslims adopting hip-hop music and tattoos from black American culture (Nasir, 2016)
 - People actively seeking alternative ways of obtaining music: e.g. illegal download sites (Garcia-Bardida *et al*, 2011)
 - Using traditional forms of dress and behaviour in non-normative ways in Lesbian and Gay Pride parades (Kates & Belk, 2001)

Active Subcultural Resistance

- Truancy and delinquency represented partial insights into the schools' roles in reproducing class subordination
- 'opposition to staff and exclusive distinction from [conforming students] is continuously expressed . . . [through] the three great consumer goods supplied by capitalism . . . clothes, cigarettes and alcohol' (Willis, 1977, p. 17).
- In this case deviant behaviour is seen as intentional

Micro . . . Macro

Refers to where and how resistance occurs;

Micro

Individualistic

Situational

Single moment of
resistance

Macro

Collective

Global

A lifetime of
resistance

Overt . . . Covert

Obvious, Seen, Noticed and Observable

Versus

Covered, Unseen, Unnoticed and Unobserved

Overt Subcultural Resistance

- *Overt Resistance:*
- a behaviour that is visible and readily recognised by both targets and observers as resistance
- and is intended to be recognised as such includes collective acts such as social movements and individual acts of refusal . . .

(Hollander and Einwhner, 2004, p. 545)

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Overt resistance



Covert Subcultural Resistance

- ***Covert Resistance:***
 - acts that are intentional yet go unnoticed (and, therefore unpunished) by their targets
 - although they are recognised as resistance by other, culturally aware observers
- (Hollander and Einwhner, 2004, p. 545)

Covert resistance



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Classifying deviance and resistance



Guided Study Activity: Classifying acts of resistance

Work through the Guided Study sheet on Moodle.

We will discuss this in our next session together.

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