

## Merton and Me: Strain Theory Applied to One Chicago Family and Neighborhood

### RESEARCH QUESTION:

To what extent is Merton's Theory applicable to people in Chicago's Washington Park neighborhood?

**ABSTRACT:** Many low-income Chicagoans continue to experience residential segregation, high levels of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, poor healthcare outcomes, and diminished life chances. These dynamics accurately characterize the neighborhood in which I grew up, Washington Park. I refine and extend sociologist Robert Merton's strain theory, applying it to my family and neighborhood. According to Merton, the structure of society creates a disconnect or strain between culturally valued goals and the means of attaining those goals. For example, the goal of upward social mobility and material success is shared by all but the means of *legitimately* attaining those desired outcomes is blocked for many based on race and class. Merton identifies five adaptive responses to this disconnect or strain. Having seen these adaptive responses play out in my family and neighborhood I believe Merton's ideas deepen our understanding of life in under-resourced communities.

Statement of Problem: Rates of deviant behavior in Washington Park are high. According to the US census in 2010 the population of the Washington Park area was 11,717. The poverty rate was 39.1%. The unemployment rate was 23.2%. Educational attainment is low as well at 28.3%. According to *The Chicago Tribune*, crime rates are high in Washington Park and ranks 5th among Chicago's 77 community areas for violent crime. It ranks 6th for property crime and also ranks 6th for quality of life crimes.

## METHODS;

I chose this topic because this is a reflective piece of how my experience growing up in Washington Park has allowed me to witness my family adapt in different ways, because of the social strain of cultural goals and scarce resources to achieve goals has made me a conformist. The culture enjoins the acceptance of three cultural axioms. First, all people should strive for the same lofty goals because these are open to all. Second, present seeming failure is but a way-station to ultimate success, and third genuine failure consists only in the lessening or withdrawal of ambition.

## Types of Individual Adaptation;

I. Conformity- To the extent that a society is stable, individuals adapt to both cultural goals and institutionalized means and strive to achieve them legitimately.

II. Innovation- When the cultural emphasis on the success goal is accepted but individuals use illegitimate means to achieve their goals.

III. Ritualism- Involves the abandoning or scaling down of the cultural goals of success and social mobility to the point where one's aspirations can be realistic. Individual rejects the cultural obligation to try to get ahead in life but still follow the rules.

IV. Retreatism- The individual rejects both cultural goal and institutional means. People who adapt in this way are as we would say in the society but not apart of it.

V. Rebellion- This adaptation is when individuals replace existing goals and means with new ones with the intention of bringing about social change.

Data Analysis; Robert Merton's theory is applicable to my family and neighborhood. I have seen each type of individual adaptation in my own life or close family member. Merton identifies a disjuncture for people between what he calls cultural goals or in other words the ends toward which we are all socialized to strive. In my family and neighborhood cultural goals are emphasized but the acceptable means we have to reach institutionalized means are not emphasized as much.

In all instances of choosing to strive toward any cultural goal is limited by institutionalized norms. This is what keeps the society stable. A stable society means you will have conformist such as me and two of my other siblings. We have chosen to go to school and get a job to support ourselves as we are striving to reach our aspirations. The next most common adaptive response in my family and neighborhood is Innovation. An example could be how most people in my neighborhood think that selling drugs is a good and easy way to get money. However, they do not internalize the institutional norms and recognize that it is illegal and will land them in jail sooner or later. The third adaptation is Ritualism. An example is when someone draws in their horizons, but still continues to abide by institutional norms. I have seen this in six of my siblings. My older sister graduated high school and never went to college. Instead she got her CDL license to drive the school bus, she has worked at Wal-mart, Casey's gas station and many other small jobs that would pay the rent. The fourth adaptation is Retreatism. This is the most

common in my Aunts and Uncles because they reject both cultural and institutionalized mean. Most rely on welfare and subsidized housing. Some of them are addicted to drugs and cannot get a job so they have dropped out of society. The fifth and final adaptive response is Rebellion. My oldest brother reminds me of this one. He blames the government for what has happened in his life and he does not want to get a job. He believes they should pay for his housing and food. His behavior falls into the Innovation adaptation as well because he tries to get ahead in life by pursuing means that was normal and available to him which is selling drugs to feed his family.

Discussion; To what extent is Merton's Theory applicable to people in Chicago's Washington Park neighborhood? Broader patterns of crime characterize certain groups of people because of the social "strain" they face between the good things society offers and their inability to legitimately attain them.

According to my analysis I extend Merton's ideas by going a step further to say that people can utilize several adaptive responses at once. An example could be how my aunt had a daycare, and sold drugs out the same house. Her behavior was illustrated from the two adaptations, Innovation and Ritualism. Another example is how my sister falls under Ritualism and Retreatism. She abides by the rules but she has lowered her standards and is a hair stylist because she could not find a job as a dental assistant after she finished the program. She is a

retreatist because she uses marijuana to allow her to escape from the requirements of society.

Future Researchers should focus or elaborate on the current finding that people's behavior can fall under more than one category. In other words a person may respond to strain in multiple ways and therefore fitting into one of Merton's categories simultaneously.