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# The Crime Of Theft Through The Marxism Theory and Merton's Strain Theory

In this essay proposal, I will be talking about two theories (Marxism Theory and Merton's Strain Theory) that help explain the crime of theft. Both theories talk about how crime is socially induced instead of being personal and individualised, therefore criminal behaviour is a social phenomenon (White, Haines & Asquith, 2017). I argue that both these theories explain theft, however there are limitations for each theory that I will also discuss as well as comparing and contrasting them throughout this proposal. Crime: Theft Theft is the act of taking another person's belongings or property without that person's consent. A person that does this is known as a thief (Kaplan, Binder and Weisberg, 2012). Prevalence In September 2017, the total number of thefts recorded (excluding motor theft) across whole of New Zealand was 5,948. This number increased with time; the total number of thefts recorded in December 2017 was 6,491 and in January 2018 was 7,289. Bay of Plenty had one of the most amount of thefts recorded (POLICE DEPARTMENT).

Stealing is now becoming more of a prominent problem in New Zealand. Manifestations Manifestation is the implication or the effect of an action or an event (Davies & Pearson, 1999). The manifestation of theft according to the Merton's Strain Theory would be economic gain for that individual (White, Haines & Asquith, 2017). Stealing becomes a way to survive, as discussed in the Genesis section below. The manifestation of theft according to the Marxist Theory would also be economic gain but as a form of subsistence for the non-elites and to maximise profit for the elites (White, Haines & Asquith, 2017). Genesis We do not think that the social strata of liberal countries such as New Zealand as being defined through class (France & Roberts, 2017). In New Zealand, the social order is defined through 'social and economic status' (p. 12). The difference between the New Zealand richest and the poorest has increased over the years, causing social inequality (Rashbrook, 2013).

France and Roberts (2017) state that the social class also holds a 'pivotal place in analyses of structural constraints on young people's origins and destinations' (p. 69). The poorer people are therefore stuck in their state and are unable to get out; all of these factors drive criminal and delinquent behaviours (as a survival strategy). Therefore, the genesis for the Merton Strain Theory and Marxism Theory would be the inequality in the social and economic status. Merton's Strain Theory According to Strain Theory written in Crime and Criminology text by White, Haines & Asquith (2017); crime is the result of social disjuncture that show a 'social strain within a society' (p.77). Merton argued that crime can be described in relation to two variables- culturally defined goals of a society and institutionalised means through one can

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achieve these goals (Merton, 1938). According to Merton (1983) people have the same cultural goal driven by society- the American Dream of wealth, status and success but have different opportunities to achieve those goals. Therefore, people can respond to strain in five different ways: conformism, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion (Merton, 1938).

So, to achieve wealth and success, people tend to lean towards delinquent behaviour. Keeping this in mind, I believe that people that steal are innovative and can be understood using this theory. A research study done by The New Zealand Parliament in 2011, showed an overall increase in income inequality measured by Gini coefficients in 1985 (0.27) and 2008 (0.33). It also talked about an increase in poverty rates of younger people, especially Maori and Pacific children. The Office of the Children's Commissioner found out that poverty had negative impact on the children's' education, confidence, social groups as well as having psychological and physical effects (Bellamy, 2011). Due to the social inequality in New Zealand, people lack the means to achieve the goals and stealing becomes a survival strategy. According to the article written by Agnew (2012), the frustration caused by the lack of means leads to the individuals to 'try to obtain money through acts such as theft' (p. 33).

### Critiques

- Theory best applies to lower class people-> Doesn't talk about the people (rich people) that have the resources and therefore the means to achieve the goals but still lean towards stealing.
- This theory also does not explain why crimes are more prevalent in a specific age group (such as late teenagers steal more than older people)
- Theory focuses mainly on individual responses to strain, not on group based crime
- Doesn't talk about the intra- and inter- personal aspects of the crime which can be explained better i.e. by the labelling theory Marxist Theory Marxist Theory is based on the study of the division of the power in society which causes social and economic inequality. The elites (that have the institutionalised means) hold the 'decisive power in a society' (p. 116) to determine what is criminal and what is not, whereas the non-elites (working class) don't have that decisive power (White, Haines & Asquith, 2017). Similar to the Merton's Strain Theory, the working class (less powerful people) are demoralised in the capitalist society and tend to lean towards criminal behaviour such as stealing as a way of subsistence. The article by Stanley (2016) talks about the existing social inequalities in New Zealand and how the marginalised population are linked with crimes such as theft. However unlike the Merton Strain Theory, the Marxist approach also explains why the powerful (the elites) also steal (e.g. fraud) as well even though they have the wealth and the means. This is due to the need to accumulate and to 'maximise profit' (117) so that they can maintain their high-class status and economic dominance (White, Haines &

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Asquith, 2017). An example in New Zealand would be when Lynette Watson embezzled more than \$114, 000 from her own non-profit Maori trust (Chisholm, 2017).

### Critiques

- Not everyone who is in poverty commits the act of theft; same as the Merton theory- Doesn't talk about the intra- and inter- personal aspects of the crime
- Theory is too broad and generalised (Williams, 2012).
- Romanticises the image of the thief as the 'primitive class rebel' (129), understating the harm caused to the victims (White, Haines & Asquith, 2017).
- The article by Stanley (2016) I used as evidence to say that existing social inequalities can lead to theft could be biased, as it is written by a director of criminology aiming at the Victoria University students.
- A point to note would be that the focus on the powerful people stealing is more business related and on a much larger scale (e.g they are less likely to shoplift and commit minor theft crimes like this) than the non-powerful. Therefore, this theory doesn't explain why some powerful people would steal the same things as the non-powerful people.
- Theory touches on Media (powerful) that only focuses on certain groups of people (such as certain ethnic groups) when reporting about the alleged crimes of theft, so what we see is very selective news; the working class do not get the whole picture Evaluation.
- Both Merton's and Marxism's theories give good explanations on theft.
- However, the Marxist theory can explain why rich people would steal, but even so doesn't explain why some powerful people would steal the same things as the non-powerful people
- Both Merton and Marxism explain why lower-class people steal due to lack of means and as a way of survival really well.
- Both theories do not focus on the intra- and inter- personal aspect of theft and neither talk about why theft is perhaps more common in a specific age group.

I argued that both Merton's Strain and Marxist Theories explain the crime of theft well. However, I also talked about how Marxism's theory explains some aspects of theft better (i.e. why rich people would steal) which Merton's theory of means ends equation didn't explain. I

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also discussed the similarities between the two theories and how both theories explained really well why the working class people steal. In conclusion, I think we can look at the two theories to explain some aspects of crime, but it is important to notice that there are limitations to each theory. This just goes to show that criminal behaviour is very subjective and abstract.

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