3.1 Subcultural and Strain Theories of Crime and Deviance

AQA 7192 · about 50 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. For short answer questions, one or two sentences is usually enough; for the 12-mark evaluation write in full sentences and include a brief conclusion. Time guidance: 50 minutes for the whole pack.

1 Using your knowledge of Merton's adaptations and Item A, explain two reasons why some young people in the town might adopt innovation, and two reasons why some might adopt retreatism.

(Total for Question 1 is 4 marks)

2 Explain one strength of using strain theory to explain working-class crime.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

3 State one criticism of subcultural theories such as Cohen's or Miller's explanations of delinquency.

(Total for Question 3 is 2 marks)

4 Give one practical method a sociologist could use to study a youth subculture like those in Item A, and state one practical or ethical problem with that method.

(Total for Question 4 is 2 marks)

5 Discuss how far sociologists would agree that strain and subcultural explanations are useful for explaining working-class and youth crime.

(Total for Question 5 is 12 marks)

6 Define what Merton meant by the 'anomie' or 'strain' produced by unequal access to legitimate means in the context of crime and deviance.

(Total for Question 6 is 2 marks)

7 Outline two of Merton's five adaptations to strain (for example, innovation and ritualism) and explain each.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 Define Cloward and Ohlin's term 'illegitimate opportunity structure' as used in their explanation of subcultural crime.

(Total for Question 8 is 2 marks)

9 Identify and explain two of the three subculture types Cloward and Ohlin described: criminal, conflict and retreatist.

(Total for Question 9 is 4 marks)

10 Define Miller's idea of 'focal concerns' of lower-class culture.

(Total for Question 10 is 2 marks)

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11 Item A: A coastal town has a former shipyard closed for two decades. Unemployment is high, many young people drift into gangs. There is one organised ring selling stolen goods, while rival youth groups fight for territory. Local schools report low achievement.

(a) Using Item A and your knowledge, identify two features of the town that support Cloward and Ohlin's explanation for why different subcultures form in different neighbourhoods. **(2)**

(b) Using Item A, explain one way low school achievement could encourage the formation of a delinquent subculture, linking to Cohen or Merton. **(2)**

(Total for Question 11 is 4 marks)

Mark scheme · 3.1 Subcultural and Strain Theories of Crime and Deviance

Question 1

identifies reason for innovation from Item A or knowledge, e.g. organised ring provides illegitimate means to achieve wealth — **B1**

development linking item to Merton, e.g. blocked legitimate means but available illegitimate routes encourage innovation — **B1**

identifies reason for retreatism from Item A or knowledge, e.g. school failure and unemployment leading some to withdraw — **B1**

development linking item to Merton, e.g. retreatism involves rejecting both goals and means, shown by drug use, vagrancy or withdrawal from community — **B1**

Answer: Innovation: the organised ring selling stolen goods offers an illegitimate route to wealth, so young people blocked from jobs or good qualifications may use crime to reach goals. Retreatism: persistent school failure and long-term unemployment can lead some to give up on society's goals and means, withdrawing into drug use or aimlessness rather than seeking status.

Question 2

identifies a strength, e.g. explains link between structural inequality and individual deviance (oe) — **B1**

development, e.g. shows how social structure creates pressure to deviate rather than assuming individual moral failure — **B1**

Answer: Strain theory links structural inequality to individual deviance, showing how lack of legitimate opportunities creates pressure to break rules rather than blaming individual moral failure.

Question 3

identifies a recognised criticism, e.g. they may stereotype working-class values and over-generalise from small, local samples — **B1**

brief development, e.g. this risks blaming culture when material or individual factors may be more important — **B1**

Answer: One criticism is that subcultural theories can stereotype working-class values and over-generalise from small local studies, risking cultural blame when wider material or individual factors may better explain crime.

Question 4

identifies a method, e.g. participant observation, interviews or surveys — **B1**

identifies a practical or ethical problem, e.g. gaining access and trust for participant observation, or risk of harm and confidentiality concerns in interviews — **B1**

Answer: Method: participant observation of a youth group. Problem: gaining access and trust can be difficult, and there are ethical risks in observing illegal activity and protecting participants' confidentiality.

Question 5

Level 1 Basic statements about strain or subcultural theories with little development or limited accuracy. Little or no use of evidence or examples. — **1-3**

Level 2 Some relevant knowledge of strain and subcultural theories with simple development. May include one or two brief examples or limited application to working-class youth. — **4-6**

Level 3 Clear explanation of strain and subcultural theories, with developed use of evidence or examples. Some evaluation, showing awareness of strengths and limitations and comparing different perspectives. — **7-9**

Level 4 Sustained analysis and evaluation, deploying evidence and sociological arguments to show a balanced judgement. Addresses both how these theories explain working-class and youth crime and their limitations, and reaches a supported conclusion. — **10-12**

Indicative content:

- AO1 points: outline of Merton's strain theory, the five adaptations (especially innovation and retreatism), Cohen's status frustration and delinquent subcultures, Cloward and Ohlin's illegitimate opportunity structure and the three subculture types, Miller's focal concerns.
- AO2 points: application to working-class youth, showing how blocked opportunities, low school achievement and lack of legitimate jobs create pressure to innovate or join subcultures; how availability of organised crime leads to criminal subcultures and lack of opportunities to conflict subcultures.
- AO3 evaluative points: strengths include linking social structure to crime, explaining group responses and different local patterns; limitations include overgeneralising working-class culture, neglecting individual agency and ethnicity/gender differences, and methodological limits of early studies; alternative explanations such as labelling theory or contemporary structural inequalities could be considered.
- Comparisons: evaluate whether strain covers individual adaptations while subcultural theories explain collective group formation; consider how Cloward and Ohlin add refinement by noting differing illegitimate opportunities.
- Evidence and examples: use hypothetical or real examples of youth gangs, organised property crime rings, or schooling failure; critique reliance on studies from specific times and places.
- Conclusion: reach a balanced judgement, for example concluding that strain and subcultural theories are useful for explaining some patterns of working-class and youth crime but insufficient alone to explain all variation, and should be combined with other perspectives.

Question 6

identifies that anomie or strain is a social condition where cultural goals exceed legitimate means available to some members of society (oe) — **B1**

development, e.g. this pressure can lead individuals to adapt in different ways, some of which involve rule breaking — **B1**

Answer: Anomie or strain is a social condition where cultural goals, such as success and wealth, exceed the legitimate means available to some people; this pressure can lead to different adaptations, some involving rule breaking.

Question 7

identifies one adaptation correctly, e.g. innovation (oe) **B1**

explains that innovation involves accepting cultural goals but using illegitimate or criminal means to achieve them **B1**

identifies a second adaptation correctly, e.g. ritualism (oe) **B1**

explains that ritualism involves abandoning cultural goals but rigidly following legitimate means or rules **B1**

Answer: Innovation involves accepting society's goals but using illegitimate or criminal means to achieve them, for example theft to gain wealth. Ritualism involves giving up on the goals but continuing to follow legitimate rules and routines, for example doing a low paid job with no hope of advancement.

Question 8

identifies illegitimate opportunity structure as the availability of criminal or deviant means to achieve goals, differing between neighbourhoods (oe) **B1**

development, e.g. this explains why different areas produce criminal, conflict or retreatist subcultures **B1**

Answer: An illegitimate opportunity structure is the availability of deviant or criminal means to achieve success goals in a locality; differences in these opportunities help explain why some areas develop criminal, conflict or retreatist subcultures.

Question 9

identifies one subculture type correctly, e.g. criminal subculture (oe) **B1**

explains that criminal subcultures arise where organised, stable illegitimate opportunities exist and crime is career-like **B1**

identifies a second subculture type correctly, e.g. conflict subculture (oe) **B1**

explains that conflict subcultures occur where illegitimate opportunities are limited, producing violent gang behaviour to gain status **B1**

Answer: Criminal subcultures arise where stable, organised illegitimate opportunities exist so young people can develop crime as a career. Conflict subcultures occur where opportunities are limited, producing gang violence as a way to gain status and respect.

Question 10

identifies focal concerns as the key values and priorities of lower-class subculture that can encourage deviant behaviour (oe) **B1**

development, e.g. examples include toughness, excitement, fate and autonomy **B1**

Answer: Focal concerns are the central values of a lower-class subculture that can encourage deviant behaviour, for example toughness, excitement, fate and autonomy.

Question 11

(a) identifies one feature from Item A, e.g. the existence of an organised ring selling stolen goods indicating organised illegitimate opportunities **B1**

(a) identifies a second feature from Item A, e.g. rival youth groups fighting for territory indicating conflict subculture conditions **B1**

(a) Answer: The organised ring selling stolen goods shows a criminal illegitimate opportunity structure; rival youth groups fighting for territory illustrate conflict subculture conditions.

(b) identifies low achievement reduces access to legitimate success means in education or employment (oe) **B1**

(b) explains link, e.g. Cohen would say status frustration leads to joining subcultures that offer alternate status, or Merton would say blocked legitimate means promote innovation or retreatism **B1**

(b) Answer: Low achievement reduces access to legitimate means of success; Cohen would say this produces status frustration leading boys to form delinquent subcultures offering alternative status, while Merton would see blocked means encouraging innovation or retreatism.