



The Anomie Within

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Simulations

The Anomie Within

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This is a simple simulation based around **Merton's** concept of anomie (which loosely involves the idea that while behavioural norms structure every social situation there are occasions where, for whatever reason, we become confused about what is expected of us in that situation, either because the situation changes in some way or because we misunderstand the normative rules of that situation).

In this respect what we're aiming to do here is place students in an everyday situation (the classroom) where they've come to learn expected behaviours – both their own and, most importantly that of the teacher – and then disrupt those expectations. This should give students a (mild) dose of anomie and they will react in different ways.

Background

The sim can be used to introduce the concept of anomie and, if you use it in the context of crime and deviance, **Merton's** Strain Theory (how people react to different types of social strain).

Alternatively if you're using it in the context of research methods you can use the sim to illustrate the idea of either a **natural** or a **field experiment** (the distinction is not always necessary for A-level Sociology but a simple way of distinguishing between the two is that although both types are done "in the field" (i.e. not under laboratory conditions) a field experiment is one deliberately planned by the researcher; i.e. they set-up a specific experiment in a given context whereas a natural experiment involves the researcher taking advantage of a naturally-occurring experimental situation (such as comparing some form of behaviour before-and-after something naturally occurs).

However you decide to play it, **Garfinkel's** (1967) **breaching experiments** took a similar (no pun intended) form to the anomie sim in that he deliberately violated people's social expectations in order to reveal unobservable features of the social world (such as norms) and the various ways people 'construct reality'. In one experiment **Garfinkel** sent student researchers into restaurants where they were instructed to deliberately mistake customers for waiters while the latter's reactions were secretly observed. A contemporary example is **Mann et al.'s** (2003) 'sousveillance' experiments, one of which involved going into shops that had security cameras (*surveillance*) and 'reversing this gaze' (*sousveillance*) by filming the shop assistants as they served customers. By breaking the *surveillance norm*, the experiment demonstrated how it has become an accepted, everyday, *uncontested* part of life in modern societies.

The Simulation

The sim can take one of two forms, depending on how brave you are, your acting ability and the level of anomie you want your students to experience...

1. Mild Form: In this form the teacher should wait until their students have entered the classroom and settled in preparation for the lesson. You should enter last and instead of doing whatever it is you normally do (take a register for example) you should take out a newspaper or magazine, sit at the front of the class and proceed to read it. A newspaper is helpful here because you can use it to completely cover your face – you can hear the students but they can't see your reaction.

While it's possible to use something like a tablet or mobile instead these tend to be less effective because your students could interpret their use as somehow being part of your class preparation / something you urgently need to do etc. rather than a deliberate provocation.

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You can, of course, embellish your performance with whatever props you like (a cup of tea and a biscuit always goes down well, particularly if your school / college has a strict “no eating / drinking in the classroom” policy).

If students try to directly address you in some way you should bat them away with either noncommittal answers (a grunt or two works well) or simple statements like “I’m busy, see me later” that serve only to confuse the situation further.

The sim probably only needs to last for a few minutes – students tend to quite quickly start to react to your “strange behaviour” in a range of ways and it is these different reactions you need to identify and explore once things have returned to normality.

Once you’ve explained the concept of anomie, for example, it’s useful to ask different students what they thought was going on in the initial “strange situation” and how they reacted to it (the idea of *reacting* to some external normative stimuli being integral to Strain Theory for example).

If you’re using the sim as part of a research methods / perspectives lesson on the other hand it’s useful to question the students about how they explained your behaviour to themselves; this leads into the example of explanatory frameworks used extensively by Interactionist sociologists, for example.

2. Strong Form: If you can carry it off – and want to produce very strong anomic reactions in your students – arrive in the classroom once the students have settled and then break down in tears. Start gently with a few sobs and catches in your voice and then rapidly descend into a full-blown emotional breakdown...

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