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## Guest Editorial

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It is surely no overstatement to claim that the concepts of “anomie” and “anomia” permeate much contemporary scholarly and public discourse about crime, violence, and other forms of problematic behavior. At the time of writing (late September 2008), a Google search of “anomie” yielded about 590,000 entries. The results for its individual-level counterpart, “anomia,” were close behind at about 537,000 entries. This special issue of the *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* features efforts to apply these concepts in novel and creative ways to understand the social sources of crime and violence at multiple levels of analysis.

The first paper, by Messner, Thome, and Rosenfeld, is a theoretical essay focused on a relatively recent representative of the anomie perspective—“institutional-anomie theory” (IAT). The authors set out to hone this theoretical approach by clarifying the formal conceptualization of “institutions” and explicating more fully the interconnections among institutional structures, fundamental cultural and normative orientations in a society, and levels of criminal offending, with a particular focus on violent crimes. They argue that modern societies with high levels of criminal violence are likely to be characterized by a disintegrative form of individualism, economic dominance in the institutional order, and tenuous moral authority of the norms. The authors also seek to integrate the macro-level arguments of the theory with processes at the level of individual action. They theorize that the risks of committing acts of criminal violence (as well as other forms of criminal offenses) will be high for actors who prioritize economic roles over non-economic roles, who are relatively insensitive to the moral status of the means of action, and whose performance of economic roles tends to be “disembedded” from social relationships more generally. The authors conclude by highlighting issues in need of further theoretical elaboration, including the formulation of an institutional account for distinctive punishment practices in societies with varying cultural and structural characteristics.

The paper by Bjerregaard and Cochran addresses a vexing problem confronting researchers who attempt to conduct empirical analyses informed by institutional-anomie theory, namely, how to operationalize the core concept of “anomie.” The authors argue that the distinctive prediction of the theory is that high levels of anomie should be generated when the economy allows for the accumulation of great wealth, open competition is emphasized, and yet for many people the social structure restricts access to the legitimate means of accumulating wealth. They propose that gross domestic product (capacity to accumulate wealth), an index of economic freedom (emphasis on open competition), and the Gini coefficient of income inequality (obstacles to legitimate means) can serve as measures of these conditions, and they hypothesize that homicide rates should be predicted by the combination of these factors—a three-way statistical interaction. The results of their multivariate regression analyses based on a cross-national sample are consistent with their hypothesis. The three-way product terms yields the expected positive effect on homicide rates net of control variables, indicating the promise of their methodological approach for cross-national study of anomie.

The next paper, by Frerichs, Münch, and Sander, takes the “classic” (Durkheimian-Mertonian) and the “institutionalist” (IAT) readings of the anomie concept as its points of departure and seeks to widen them into a macro-sociological framework which takes into account specific features of societal transformations that characterize the “age of globalization.” The authors interpret the first dimension of the anomie concept as the conflict between promised cultural inclusion (based on individual achievement) and structurally induced exclusion (inexorably perpetuated underachievement). This interacts

with the second dimension—the precarious and often unbalanced interplay and performance of central societal institutions: state, market, and family. A third dimension is placed on the level of global development: the tension between cross-national convergence regarding the “cult of the individual” and the persisting divergence with respect to institutional realities. For their empirical analysis the authors rearrange traditional indicators of various facets of welfare regimes in order to respond adequately to the post-welfarist transformations and to avoid any sort of “methodological nationalism.” They develop a set of hypotheses which they test with pooled time-series cross-sectional data compiled for twenty developed countries for the period 1970–2004. Several variants of multiple regression models and estimation strategies are applied, with robbery rates as the major dependent variable (which the authors consider to be more compellingly related to the anomie concept than homicide rates). The results across models and strategies are partially consistent, partially inconsistent; some of the consistent results challenge hitherto widely accepted hypotheses. In any case, these analyses and their outcomes are provocative and will certainly stimulate lively discussions about theoretical assumptions and the appropriate methodological devices for testing them.

Stults and Baumer apply variants of the anomie perspective to explain macro-level variation in violent crime, basing their empirical analyses on a sample of sub-national units from the United States. Drawing upon both Merton’s anomie theory and institutional-anomie theory, they hypothesize that an important source of high rates of lethal violence is an “unbalanced pecuniary system.” This refers to a situation wherein high levels of commitment to monetary success goals are combined with low levels of commitment to legitimate means. They further propose an original analytic model of intervening effects to explain this association. Specifically, they hypothesize that an unbalanced pecuniary system affects homicide rates indirectly by increasing levels of firearm prevalence, drug market activity, and property crime, and also by amplifying the effects of these factors on lethal outcomes. They assess these hypotheses with data for counties and county clusters that comprise the sampling frame for the U.S. General Social Survey (GSS). Their results indicate that the indicator of an unbalanced pecuniary system is indeed positively related to homicide rates and that this effect is mediated by higher rates of property crime and higher levels of drug activity. The hypotheses about indirect effects through firearm prevalence and conditioning effects are not supported. Overall, these analyses illustrate the utility of applying anomie theories to explain macro-level variation in different forms of criminal offending in an integrated framework.

Cross-national and temporal variation in crime rates can only be explained with reference to features of culture and social structure that vary correspondingly. But in order to understand individual behavior that accumulatively makes up crime rates, one has to construct hypotheses that relate (anomic) macro-social factors to individual dispositions and interpretations (in this context often summarized under the label of “anomia”). The last two papers open up particularly promising avenues towards achieving this goal.

The paper by Legge, Davidov, and Schmidt is based on a representative panel survey conducted in Germany in three consecutive years between 2002 and 2004. The authors concentrate their analysis on a specific dimension of “anomia”—cognitive disorientation, i.e. the experience of meaninglessness arising from a generalized inability to make sense of what is happening in the larger social environment and to evaluate its impact upon one’s personal life. (Possible connections with normative disorientation are briefly discussed but not systematically studied here.) The study examines the impact that education, age, sex, region (eastern/western Germany), and political orientation exert upon the level of anomia and its change over (an admittedly short period of) time. The authors use the Latent Growth Curve Model supplemented by multiple group comparisons as their main instrument in statistical analyses. This highly potent statistical tool allows the researcher, among other things, to evaluate how the impact of any independent variable may differ with regard to level as opposed to change scores, and it helps to identify and explain inter-individual differences in the intra-individual changes of the dependent variable. So, for example, the empirical findings show that all the socio-demographic variables, including political orientation, are strong predictors of the initial level of anomia but not of its development over time. Though the level of anomia in eastern Germany is persistently higher than in western Germany, it increased more in western Germany, particularly among people with a right-wing political orientation.

The final contribution by Burkatzki directly tackles the question about the way in which a high degree of personal involvement in market activities contributes to undermining commitment to moral norms. He distinguishes three norm-related orientations: communitarianism (attachment to norms of mutual assistance and solidarity), nomocentrism (commitment to law-abiding behavior), and economism (strong aspirations to achieve economic gains). From information collected by means of vignette-based survey questions he then derives a typology of five categories of people who differ in the way in which they combine these three dimensions into unique patterns, for example, radical versus norm-oriented market activists or post-conventional communitarians. Burkatzki also discusses similarities and differences between his typology and Merton’s typology of (five) individual forms of adaptation to anomic

conditions. The analysis proceeds by establishing empirical connections (1) between orientation patterns of actors and their willingness to realize their own advantages by illegal or illegitimate means, (2) between the degree of a person's involvement in the market (measured, for example, by his or her functional employment status) and his or her norm-related orientations. The results of the analyses basically conform to expectations derived from anomie-theory, but they also point to some methodological problems that still need to be resolved. The author also offers some interesting observations on various forms of "corporate violence" that are likely to be fostered by normative orientations represented by radical market activists.

Considered collectively, these papers demonstrate that research on anomie/anomia, though still taking the formulations and insights from Durkheim and Merton as their unifying point of departure, has branched out along an array of new avenues leading to conceptual expansions and refinement, to reformulated interlinkages with diverse theoretical approaches, and to novel methodological strategies. We hope that the articles presented in our focus section may also stimulate international cooperation—particularly in the collection of larger and more differentiated data sets that provide more significant indicators reliably representing theoretical concepts and allowing for multi-level analyses that differentiate and integrate structural and developmental effects.

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