



# Understanding the devaluation of vulnerable groups: A novel application of Institutional Anomie Theory



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## ABSTRACT

Prejudices legitimize the discrimination against groups by declaring them to be of unequal, especially of less, worth. This legitimizing power is highly relevant in social conflicts of modern societies that are governed by market-oriented value systems. However, prejudice research has yet to be linked to sociological discourses on the marketization of society. We argue that Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT), a theory originally developed to explain crime rates, offers a fruitful macro-sociological framework for a better understanding of micro-social prejudices that emerge along with processes of marketization. Extending IAT to explain prejudices in a German study based on survey data offers a first attempt to underpin our theoretical hypotheses with empirical data. Although the results need to be interpreted with due caution, they suggest that the extended IAT model can be usefully applied to explain how a marketized mentality is related to different forms of institutional integration, and how it is conducive to specific prejudices that emerge in market-dominated societies against purported economically burdening social groups.

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## 1. Introduction: objectives and theoretical frame

The marketization of modern society, i.e. the economizing of the non-economic, has long been a central issue in sociological debates (see e.g., [Habermas, 1985](#); [Bourdieu, 2003](#); [Polanyi, 1957](#)). Currently this debate has become increasingly important in sociology as economic crises have called attention to the limits of an unbounded economization. The debate has focused primarily on the definition and theoretical framing of economization and a concomitant individualization. However, one important potential consequence of marketization has been only hesitantly discussed: the unequal and unfair treatment of social groups and the stereotyped attribution that groups fail to measure up to, or that they even contravene, the demands of modern 'high-performance societies.' This issue of contemporary prejudices is of great societal importance since such sentiments have an effect on the quality of social cohesion more generally (see e.g., [Hogg, 1992](#); [Zick and Küpper, 2012](#)). Yet to date no coherent theoretical perspective has been advanced to explain how prejudices caused by marketization processes on the macro-social level are established in the form of sentiments, opinions, intergroup relations, etc. on the micro-social level. Which sentiments does marketization foster to reproduce and express its principles that undergird social hierarchies?

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To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon it is worthwhile to transcend the boundaries that tend to separate disciplines. We argue that a theory is required that takes social perceptions and experiences of marketization seriously. Such a theory is Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT), originally put forth by [Messner and Rosenfeld \(1994, 2013\)](#) to account for comparatively high crime rates in the U.S. A core idea of the theory is that the institutional structure of many Western capitalist societies tends to promote an institutional imbalance of power in favor of the economy, which they call institutional anomie at the macro level. This macro-level property is in turn manifested in individual-level instantiations of anomie. Anomie is less understood as normlessness or absence of culture that eventually results in personal anomia in IAT,<sup>1</sup> but rather as the dominance of egoistic motives and a morality that transports monetary success and personal achievement as the very metric of good or bad.<sup>2</sup> IAT is distinctively sociological in character, drawing upon a wide range of classical social theory, including Polanyi's influential discussion on the disembeddedness of the economy from social relations (1957). Furthermore, the theory has proven to be applicable beyond the borders of American society.<sup>3</sup> Studies of cross-national variation in crime rates informed by IAT have generated a fair degree of support for the approach ([Messner and Rosenfeld, 2006](#)). We propose that the theory can be extended to apply to other anti-social phenomena such as prejudices against low status groups that are considered to be unprofitable from an economic point of view. Our underlying premise is that persons who strongly embrace the market-based values of cultural anomie as highlighted in IAT are prone to be prejudiced in order to legitimize the exclusion of groups that do not conform to the rules and priorities of market society.

To explain the links of IAT to contemporary emerging prejudices legitimizing an exclusion of less market-conforming groups, the theory needs to be extended in two fundamental aspects. First, the macro-level tenets of IAT have to be translated to the micro-level. Second, IAT has to be applied explicitly to prejudices as the explanandum. This theoretical exploration eventually leads to an explanatory framework that differs in significant ways from established approaches to prejudice. We address these tasks in the sections immediately below. In the last section, we link the theoretical exploration with tentative empirical research that needs further validation, yet offers an initial empirical insight on the main ideas. We present the results of a first study in Germany testing the capacity of the extended version of IAT to explain prejudices against groups that are susceptible to low valuation when judged by market-oriented criteria.

## 2. Institutional Anomie Theory and prejudices

[Messner and Rosenfeld's Institutional Anomie Theory \(1994, 1997\)](#) is grounded in but expands [Merton's anomie theory \(1938, 1968\)](#). Both approaches define an unfettered striving for success in capitalist society as a core component of an anomic culture leading to deviant behavior ([Bernburg, 2002](#)). While Merton concentrates on features of the stratification system that translate an anomic culture into deviant behavior (specifically, blocked access to the legitimate means for success), IAT specifies the institutional configuration that encourages the emergence of an anomic culture ([Bernburg, 2002: p. 738](#)). This, according to Bernburg, links IAT to Durkheim's European concept of anomie (1893, 1992), and makes it more directly relevant to social change.

The central claim of IAT is that high rates of violent crime are likely to be found in capitalist market economies where the economy dominates those institutions that are not by their nature orientated to economic criteria ([Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994, 1997, 2013](#)).<sup>4</sup> The dominance of the economy and the relative impotence of essentially non-economic institutions, such as the institutions of education, the family, or the political system, are manifested in three principal ways: first, non-economic functions and roles are devalued; second, non-economic roles are accommodated to economic requirements when role obligations are in conflict; and third, the economic, market-oriented standards of the economy tend to penetrate into many non-economic institutions. The consequence is an imbalance in the institutional order (the so-called 'institutional balance of power') at the structural level and anomie in terms of a new "ethic" that furthers the limitless striving for achievement at the cultural level.

Anomie in IAT is thus not solely represented by a breakdown of social controls or the failure to replace them by new ones which would further personal feelings of anomia, i.e. a lack of orientation due to the weakening of norms and social controls (e.g. [Seeman, 1959; Srole, 1956](#)), but rather by a culturally prescribed striving for economic success that is largely resistant to moral and non-economic normative restraints, i.e. by a "by-any-means-necessary-mentality". Pure technical expediency tends to guide the selection of the means to pursue personal goals. This anomic orientation toward the means of social action is grounded in a culturally dominant constellation of market-friendly values that appear in a very pure form in the culture of the U.S., and thus this constellation of values is commonly referred to as part of the 'American Dream ethos' in the scope of IAT. Anomie in IAT is thus not so much understood as an *absence* of culture, a deregulation or normlessness, but rather in the second essential meaning of anomie, as a *product* of the culture of modern capitalism that transports specific values (for this conceptualization of anomie see also [Örru, 1987](#)). These values include a very strong achievement orientation, an excessive or egoistical individualism, a universalism by which standards of success apply uniformly to all members of society, and the fetishism of money, i.e., the consecration of money as the very metric of success ([Messner, 2003](#)). At the same time,

<sup>1</sup> For the conceptualization of anomia in terms of a loss of orientation or normlessness due to a weakening of the regulatory force of social norms see e.g. [Seeman \(1959\)](#) or [Srole \(1956\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> For discussions on the two distinct essential meanings of anomie, the weakening of moral and normative regulation on the one hand and a new kind of morality or culture on the other hand see e.g. [Örru \(1987\)](#), [Durkheim \(1897\)](#) or [Merton \(1938\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> For a critique of some of the tenets of American exceptionalism implied in IAT see [Garland \(2005\)](#), [Bernburg \(2002\)](#), [Sassen \(1996\)](#) and [Passas \(1997\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> See also [Currie \(1997, 2013\)](#) for extended discussions of criminogenic processes associated with 'market societies.'

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