Abstract

Using anomie theory, in this paper it is argued that the new generation migrant workers (NGMWs) in China are not only receptors under structures, but also a reactive force towards those structures. However, anomie theory has faced theoretical ambiguities, controversies and misunderstandings. It also lacks the power to explain micro-to-macro relationships. For these reasons, anomie theory is first clarified and refined in this study based on its classical roots. It is then further developed by introducing the concept of social momentum to mend its theoretical lacuna. It is argued that anomie naturally reflects structural discoordination at the macro level, and that deviance and normlessness, although typically seen as indicators of anomie, are only its symptomatic presentations. Furthermore, social momentum, determined by the quantity, solidarity and modes of adaption, reveals the capacity of a social category to influence structural relationships.

This study demonstrates that China entered a comparatively anomic age after its economic reform. The NGMWs can be considered as a potential antithesis to anomie in China, as implied by certain qualities of their uniqueness indicated in earlier studies. The NGMWs’ social momentum is analysed according to a field study carried out by the author in 2015 in Shanghai and the 2011 Chinese Social Survey (CSS 2011). The data from the survey and study are used to discuss whether the NGMWs will help to remedy anomie. The findings show that (1) the NGMWs’ social momentum is strong but segmental and fragile due to the primary level solidarity of them, i.e., they lack a strong identity, and (2) the directions of their social momentum can be narrowed to two undetermined modes. The NGMWs tend to aggravate the symptoms of anomie, as they are weakly attached to cultural norms. However, they have an uncertain and not yet fully formed effect on the essence of anomie.
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