

Handbook of
The Sociology of Morality

Edited by

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Introduction: The Return of the Moral

In assembling the very first *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*, Steven Hitlin and Stephen Vaisey have not only demonstrated remarkable intellectual vision, but also rendered a great service to the social sciences and to all those interested in broader normative and empirical thinking about morality and the state of societies. Here is why:

- (1) The educated public has always been eager to learn about and reflect upon the moral fabric of their communities. Readers have often turned to the interpretive social sciences to inform their thinking – witness the popularity of books such as *The Lonely Crowd* and *Habits of the Heart*, two of the sociological best sellers of the last 50 years. They are now increasingly turning to popular books from psychology and philosophy to reflect on broad moral issues. These books often consider how individuals respond to ethical problems that are abstracted from their social context – e.g., the famous “trolley” dilemma. The sociological voice has been less present in these conversations than desirable. More than establishing disciplinary presence is at stake. Indeed, the various fields offer different ways of framing questions – a focus on an ahistorical human nature, boot strapping and individual will power, or on institutions and cultural repertoires (bolstering greater security and recognition). These frames have huge consequences for the thinking of policy makers and the general public about how to address social problems. Sociologists need to be at the table in order to shape conversations about how to create more successful societies – including more moral (fairer, less exploitative, more inclusive) ones.
- (2) Hitlin and Vaisey recognized the need to orchestrate a broader substantive conversation within our discipline among experts of morality. Thus they had the foresight to create a much needed “shared context of recognition,” with the goal of facilitating disciplinary exchange. They have brought together a wide range of scholars who vary in their theoretical approach to the study of morality (favoring the phenomenological, functionalist, rational choice, etc), their preferred method (as they are inspired by grounded theory, inductive or deductive approaches, idiographic or nomothetic ones, and so forth), the research techniques they favor (experimental, interview or survey based, ethnographic, historical, etc.), the analytical level they privilege (micro, meso, macro), and the disciplines and subfields with which they are in conversation (social psychology, criminology, philosophy, cultural sociology, religion, etc.). But this pluralism of approach goes even further: contributors belong to various academic generations. While some came of “academic age” at a time when Harvard’s

Department of Social Relations remained an important point of reference in the social sciences at large (e.g., Teriakyian), many received their PhD only recently and are generally energizing (not to mention energetic) voices in the sociological study of morality. Because of this generational diversity, the new *Handbook for the Sociology of Morality* offers a window into current scholarship which reflects changes in taste and fashion over several decades, as well as a more or less implicit intergenerational dialogue.

But one might ponder: What does sociology bring to the table when it comes to the study of morality?

The centrality of morality to the sociological agenda is not debatable and remains remarkably strong, as this volume demonstrates. Not only was it a concern of our sociological forefathers – most predominantly Durkheim – but it continues to attract considerable interest, as various waves of neo-Durkheimians succeed one another, as exemplified by the work of Mary Douglas, Robert Bellah, Robert Wuthnow, Jeffrey Alexander, John Evans, Gabriel Abend, Mary Blair Loy, Paul Lichterman, and many others. Concern for morality is also central to scholarship inspired by research on small-group study as well as the phenomenological and the symbolic interaction traditions (witness the lasting influence of Berger and Luckman, the work of Anne Rawls, Gary Alan Fine, Robert Jackall, Boltanski and Thevenot, and others). Finally, the literature on morality continues to refract the influence of communitarian thinking and other conversations inspired by philosophy (e.g., in the work of Alan Wolfe and Craig Calhoun, among others).

Although psychologists have more often considered moral universalism (but see signal contributions in cultural psychology such as those of Hazel Markus and Richard Shweder), sociologists have made crucial contributions to the study of the diversity of morality across segments of various populations. They have documented moral visions shared by co-nationals, but also as it is instantiated in working class cultures, in variously gendered cultures, in religious cultures, and so forth. They have shown that individuals draw on available cultural repertoires to develop lives that they consider meaningful, to consider whether they are treating their partners, children, and coworkers fairly, as well as broader societal issues having to do with bioethics, abortion, homosexuality, bank bailouts, unemployment, and diversity – to consider what we owe to ourselves and others. We have also considered the implications of boundary work for understanding the causes for poverty, the culture of the poor, and attitudes toward the poor, including views concerning our responsibilities toward them.

But equally importantly, the sociology of morality has been central to our understanding of fundamental social processes, such as that of identity and group formation. We cannot understand deviance, scape goating, and group hierarchies without factoring in the cultural and often moral meanings on which they are predicated. The study of social movements generally requires a consideration of the moral causes to which they are committed, as does the study of politics, conflict, and self-formation. Moreover, morality is also central to the study of collective memory, reputations, group boundaries, and valuation processes, as exemplified in the work of Ezra Zuckerman, Bruce Carruthers, Wendy Espeland, Carol Heimer, Kieran Healy, Marion Fourcade, Mitchell Stevens, Viviana Zelizer, and others. As such, the study of morality remains at the very center of the sociological enterprise. And there is no sign of its importance diminishing.

Cultural sociology has had a particularly important role in identifying an intermediary analytical plane between traditional social psychology and the more structural dimensions of

social life. To mention only a few examples, the work of Sharon Hays alerts gender researchers that available cultural repertoires form a crucial dimension for understanding gender inequality. Indeed, an understanding of cultural repertoires is an essential complement to labor market research on gender inequality, to symbolic interaction-derived work a la Arlie Hochschild, and to more social psychological work on biases, stereotypes and implicit association. The task of disentangling these analytical levels is far from complete, and much remains to be done in terms of raising awareness of the centrality of cultural repertoires as intermediary analytical levels essential, yet absent, in many causal models.

A complementary research agenda, also tied to the growth of cultural sociology and spreading rapidly, is the study of alternative and competing concepts of worth. Boundary work generated by intra and inter-individual conversations feeds into wider social and symbolic boundaries, into the boundaries drawn toward (for instance) the poor and immigrants, and has implications for policies aimed at dealing with poverty or other social issues, as illustrated in this volume by the paper by Steensland and others. Thus normativity and politics are deeply intertwined; the task of untangling these relationships and of understanding role of meaning making (and morality in particular) in political transformation and reproduction falls to us.

Against the background of such a proliferation of approaches and empirical research, it is clear that we stand to benefit enormously from the timely publication of this *Handbook*. By offering such a broad umbrella, Hitlin and Vaisey are sure to facilitate intellectual exchanges in very palpable ways and to contribute in defining an important research frontier ahead. May this *Handbook* find the readers it deserves.

Michèle Lamont