

The Question of Moral Action: A Formalist Position*

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This article develops a research position that allows cultural sociologists to compare morality across sociohistorical cases. In order to do so, the article suggests focusing analytic attention on actions that fulfill the following criteria: (a) actions that define the actor as a certain kind of socially recognized person, both within and across fields; (b) actions that actors experience—or that they expect others to perceive—as defining the actor both intersituationally and to a greater extent than other available definitions of self; and (c) actions to which actors either have themselves, or expect others to have, a predictable emotional reaction. Such a position avoids both a realist moral sociology and descriptive-relativism, and provides sociologists with criteria for comparing moral action in different cases while staying attuned to social and historical specificity.

After several decades outside the limelight of sociological theorizing, moral action is back at the center of attention. This reflects a broader swinging back of the theoretical pendulum. If “toolkit” and “repertoire” theories of action went beyond the sociology of norms and values that once dominated the intellectual landscape (e.g., Lamont 2000; Swidler 1986; see also Silber 2003), the new sociology of morality attempts to return sociology to the deeper existential meanings that people give their actions, to the question of “the moral” (e.g., Abend 2008, 2010; Hitlin and Vaisey 2010; Smith 2003).

While this focus makes the sociology of morality a potentially valuable enterprise, there is a problem: the conceptual position taken by most sociologists of culture who deal with morality precludes any meaningful comparison between cases. As most cultural accounts of morality lean toward agnosticism and description, assuming (at least methodologically) that we should not start with our own definition of the moral, sociologists usually end up being only able to provide specific and situated descriptions of what their interlocutors term “moral” or “good” (see also Abend 2008).

But this descriptive position is limited. Although it may be philosophically prudent, it precludes any attempt to arrive at comparative or general statements about processes, mechanisms, or aspects of moral action. The most that a descriptive-relativist sociology of morality can provide us with is genealogy, comparing cases that already share the specific category of “the moral.” Otherwise, as I argue in more detail below, we cannot meaningfully compare how morality operates in different fields—we simply cannot assume “it” is the same object across cases. In short,

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without a stronger methodological approach to our object of study, research projects in the sociology of morality are destined to remain detached and isolated from others, and when implicit comparisons between cases are made, the criteria for such comparisons (and even their very logical possibility) will remain underdefined.

This article outlines a research position that would allow sociologists to compare moral action across sociohistorical cases without committing to a strong substantive definition of morality, and while staying attuned to the ways in which action is understood in the specific locations and historical junctures the sociologist studies. I do *not* try to adjudicate the question of morality—that is, to provide a definition of morality that would tell us, once and for all, what morality *is*. This would only transform sociologists into meta-ethicists, throwing sociologists into an alien language game. Rather, borrowing insights from different strands of thought—most prominently from the resurgence of “virtue ethics,” from social-psychological studies of the self, and from work in moral psychology stressing the role of emotions—I outline a sociological research position that focuses on a tentative class of actions that sociologists who are interested in morality should look at. Thus, the position outlined here offers a methodological standpoint rather than an analytical definition. I am unsure that sociology is well equipped to provide meta-ethical definitions; we can, however, capture some aspects of what people usually call “the moral.” In doing so, I hope to open a new vista for comparative studies.¹

To develop such a standpoint, this article proposes that sociologists focus on actions that (a) *define the actor as a certain kind of socially recognized person, both within and across fields*. As this initial position is much too broad (after all, *every* action constructs the actor as a specific kind of person), I then move to a second proposition, narrowing the focus to: (b) *actions that actors experience—or expect others to perceive—as defining the actor both intersituationally and to a greater extent than other available definitions of self*. Thus, we can think about this self-definitional aspect of the moral as positioned upon a double spectrum: the first relating to the extent to which actions “infiltrate” other situational domains; the second mapping the extent to which an aspect of personhood is perceived as the most salient feature defining the actor, over and against other possibly relevant identifications (see also Hughes 1945; Stryker 1968). Being a bad lecturer usually isn’t seen as defining the person in other situations as much as, for example, using offensive language. On the other hand, using offensive language is much less salient in defining the actor than being violent toward one’s children. Last, and now borrowing from moral psychological studies of emotions, I further narrow the scope to (c) *actions that define the self intersituationally and saliently, to which actors either have themselves, or expect others to have, a predictable emotional reaction*. Taken together, these criteria provide a system of moving parts that accounts for variation and change (see Krause 2010), while building up toward a formal analysis of the “deep positionality” that person-centered theories of morality assume. This research position is simultaneously relativist (in that it does not purport to tell us substantively what moral action *is*) and presents analytic criteria both for choosing cases and for disaggregating different aspects of cases.

¹Throughout this article, I regard moral action as the crucial element in the sociology of morality. This is not self-evident (see Abend unpublished). I do this for two reasons: first, the definition of action presented here is broad, including not only moments of active judgment, but also narrative constructions. Second, since this definition focuses on experience—on phenomenology rather than social ontology—the moments of active construction, that is, action, are highlighted.

The self-definitional moments and actions highlighted in this article should not, however, be thought of as necessarily reflecting a unified or static cultural system—thus returning to a “value-norm” vision of the social. The audiences of self-defining action are often far from coherent, and though people may be part of a relatively narrow social configuration, they often partake in overlapping social circles that may define action and personhood very differently. For similar reasons, this position does not highlight only knee-jerk *habitus*-generated reactions to situations and actions, but the social-existential dilemmas actors navigate in their everyday lives, very often consciously, where there is seldom a simple and correct way to define personhood. As Boltanski and Thévenot have stressed (2006; see also Spring 2010), the act of valuation is crucial for any attempt to map the domain of the moral. How actors perceive the self-definitional aspect of certain actions, and how actors expect others to react, is usually far from automatic; it is a shifting and contested arena that multiple audiences may define differently.

The article begins by briefly presenting current sociological positions regarding the study of morality, and some problems that are associated with these positions. I then spell out the criteria proposed in the article, using empirical cases, including “ethical consumerism,” some of Duneier’s (1999) findings in *Sidewalk*, and research concerning Orthodox Jews in the United States, as illustrations. After addressing possible objections to the proposed research position, the article concludes by demonstrating its pragmatic use—providing new comparative possibilities and questions, and allowing sociologists to disaggregate processes of change over time.

SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE SOCIOLOGY OF MORALITY

As Abend (2008) recently argued, the sociology of morality can be seen broadly as locked between two positions, which we can think about, to use meta-ethicist philosophers’ jargon, as “realist” and “skeptical.” In meta-ethics, the issue of realism is concerned with the question of whether there is something that is objectively good out there, a measure that can serve as a yardstick beyond the vagaries of personal preference, society, and history; an objective truth value for moral claims. Simply put, if we think there is such a yardstick (and that we know it), we are “realists”; if we do not, we are closer to an “anti-realist,” or at least a “skeptical,” camp.²

On the side of moral realism in sociology, social theorists found different ways to derive the moral, ranging from a social-structural analysis linking the moral with the smooth operation of society, to one that predefines human nature and then measures the social against this definition. One of the most important realist positions, as Abend argues, is Durkheim’s. This position, at least as it is spelled out in Durkheim’s earlier writings (e.g., [1893] 1984, [1902] 1964; see also Abend 2008), can be thought of as a version of “structural realism.” Thus, the contingent structure of society produces a specific morality—the way people view each other and their place in the world. To the extent that social relations correspond to social structure (and especially to the structure of the division of labor), the society is “healthy”; to the extent that there is a mismatch between social structure and such morality, it is “pathological.” The Durkheimian position is realist in that there is a true morality

²The main difference between a nonrealist position and a skeptical one is ontological. For nonrealists there is no truth value for moral claims, and the basis of moral judgment has to be found in other places (such as the social, or in personal preferences). Skeptics such as Mackie (1977) may agree that there could be a truth value for moral claims, but hold that we cannot assess such claims. For the purposes of this article, the differences between the positions are negligible (see also Abend 2008).

for each kind of society; it is structural in that the structure of the society defines the shape of the moral.

Although this structural-realist perspective was not actually taken up by many sociologists, there are other influential varieties of realism. Thus, to take another widely used example, the early Marxist perspective (e.g., Marx [1844] 1959) uses the definition of a human “species-being” to delineate the good. “Man” is defined as a social being that lives through the externalization of action, and the good is thus *ipso facto* connected to the “natural,” that which completes the germ of human potentiality. This, then, provides moral leverage to Marx’s critique of capitalism: capitalism becomes not only a form of systematic economic exploitation, but is simultaneously a social form that alienates men from their species-being. Another “species-being-like” position that influenced sociological thought is that developed by Levinas (1998; see Bauman 1989). In this rendition, humans are assumed to be always-already responsible for the “Other,” a responsibility that is prior to—and even at odds with—cultural knowledge.³

Be that as it may, the problem with these realist positions is clear. They require us to make strong epistemological and ontological assumptions that are hard to sustain. Such a position requires not only a leap of faith on the part of the sociologist, but assumes that this leap can be taken by her audiences. Especially given post-structuralist critiques of personhood and the emphasis on the construction of the subject (see, e.g., Bourdieu 2000; Elias [1939] 1994; Foucault 1970), agreeing *a priori* to a definition of “human nature” seems to be a problematic move, as is equating morality to the smooth operation of social relations. Although the sociologist may be partial to a specific realist version of personhood and thus of morality, locating such a definition at the heart of her project makes it extremely vulnerable.

On the other side of this philosophical divide, we can find most cultural anthropologists as well as sociologists of culture. Although (and again, as Abend argues convincingly) there are various slippages between different types of relativism in those works, they share a “descriptive-relativism.” On a basic level, morality is seen as that which the members in the field define as such (see Lukes 2008). The question of whether the definition of the people studied is “true” in some ontological sense is bracketed, and we are left with what anthropologists call an *emic* position, a native category. Here, we do not ask what the moral is, but how a specific vision of morality is locally constructed. This position seems, at first sight, to be quite prudent. As opposed to realist positions, the descriptive-relativist protects herself by remaining close to her interlocutors’ own definitions; the problems of philosophical justification are sidestepped.

Yet this position also has its limitations. If we substitute “morality” for “the ways in which subjects define morality,” we use morality as a category of practice (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). This, in turn, means that we will find it almost impossible to compare morality across cases. After all, the fact that actors in different places call something “moral” (or, if we take research beyond the English-speaking world, that specific actors translate it in that way) does not in itself allow any meaningful comparison, as any such comparison would transubstantiate categories of

³There are other similar positions, drawing on other definitions of “man,” such as Smith’s (2010) humanism, communicative rationality posited by Habermas (1985), and the synthesis of Mead, Winnicott, and Hegel recently offered by Honneth (1996). Sociologists also seem to sometimes implicitly assume a utilitarian-eudemonistic framework where morality is related to the distribution of happiness and/or human thriving. In psychology and neuroscience there are, of course, even stronger versions of a realist position, tied to evolutionary sociobiology and developmental psychology (see, e.g., Irons 1991; Turiel 1983).

practice into a unified category of analysis. In effect, we encounter the philosophical problems of cultural and historical translation, along with the indeterminacy such translations involve (see Quine 1960, 1987).

Furthermore, a descriptive-relativist position also curtails our ability to compare moral action within cases over time. Although this may be somewhat less intractable than comparing across cases, it would minimally mean that sociologists could only construct “genealogies of morals” (see Foucault 1984). Within the confines of such an analysis, the recurring question would be that of the emergence of “morality” as a category of practice and the transformations of this category, along with the actors and institutions that make this category their own and who struggle with each other to define its meaning.

Some sociologists of morality, of course, feel they are on better epistemological grounds by circumscribing their analysis in such a way, and the study of single cases and of genealogies is surely a productive form of sociology. However, this position’s limitations should be clearly articulated. There would be no way to compare the morality of peoples who did not develop this specific category to those who did. Indeed, it would be sociologically meaningless to speak about the “morality” of such groups or of times in history when the category wasn’t salient or did not exist, and the study of morality must be circumscribed to the study of the places in which this category is used. In practice, this would mean that the sociology of morality must only be a sociology of a particular European category, and perhaps its translations in contact situations such as colonialism or trade. As a consequence, the promise of the sociology of morality as a study of the existentially cared-for aspects of human life must be at least bracketed, if not completely discarded.

To understand this limitation, it is useful to turn to the parallel predicament facing sociologists of religion when asked to define their object of study. On the one hand, they are justifiably wary of historically located answers that would exclude practices and discourses they would like to attend to—for example, a definition that hinges on belief in a deity excludes forms of Buddhism and Taoism (see Durkheim [1912] 1995:27–33), a definition that centers on the explanation of the physical world in supernatural terms assumes a separation between “natural” and “unnatural” that is itself quite modern ([1912] 1995:22–26). On the other hand, many sociologists of religion do not want to assume that “religion” is a specific Western category, and that the study of comparative religion is thus essentially meaningless, as there is, in effect, nothing to compare (cf. Asad 2003 for a genealogical position). Moreover, as Berger (1967:175–77) points out, when sociologists avoid defining “religion” they often end up picking their examples based on undertheorized “common sense” heuristics; though Weber (1978:399) avoided any *a priori* definition of religion in his “sociology of religion,” the examples he uses are drawn unreflectively from the *religionwissenschaft* of his day.

As a way out of this predicament, sociological definitions of religion outline an abstracted, “formal,” structure that could include a plethora of phenomena that people usually think of when they speak of religion—Durkheim’s ([1912] 1995) distinction between the sacred and the profane, Berger’s (1967) “cosmization of the nomos,” or Geertz’s (1973) cultural definition of specific meaning-structures, all share this form of reasoning.⁴ Although many phenomena that are not usually thought of

⁴I call this position formalist since it shares the same logic that inspired early literary critics to call their emergent school “Formalist.” The key insight of writers such as Shklovsky ([1917] 1965) was to maintain that the poetic should not be defined by specific *content*, but by a *form* of writing, a writing that defamiliarizes the mundane approach of readers to the world.

as religious are inevitably captured by these definitions, this widening scope is not understood as a weakness of the theoretical-methodological construct, but as a way to point to interesting similarities.

The position developed in this article has much in common with those developed by Durkheim, Berger, and Geertz in the context of religion. However, unlike these definitions (or at least unlike the way these definitions are usually understood), I am skeptical about the possibility of capturing the “essence” of the moral through a sociological construct. Instead, as I argue in more detail in the conclusions, the position developed in this article has more modest aspirations—not to define “the moral,” but to allow certain comparative projects that would shed some light on existing questions ethnographers and sociologists of culture work on, as well as to provide analytic tools for sociologists who study how salient cultural categories and identities change over time.

In developing such a perspective, this article joins other projects that have similarly tried to avoid both the pitfalls of realism and the limitations of descriptive-relativism. One such position within the sociology of morality, which I will draw on below, is that forwarded by Vaisey (2009). Based on emotivism and an intuitionist-emotivist strand in the psychology of morals (see, e.g., Haidt 2001), and using insights developed by Bourdieu, Vaisey seems to sidestep the problem of definition by arguing that it isn’t about what people *say* about morality (see also Mills 1940), but about emotional reactions inculcated through people’s social position. Moving from a reflexive preoccupation with discourse to a noncognitive analysis of emotions, Vaisey provides a theory of morality that seems to be nonrealist, but that allows a comparison across cases, using emotional reactions as the basis for comparison. However, such a theoretical position, as philosophers such as MacIntyre (1984:12–14) convincingly argued in their reaction to philosophical emotivism, seems to beg the question. After all, we have emotional reactions all the time. What *kind* of emotions are we talking about? In what kinds of situations are emotions deemed *moral*? If we claim that these are *moral* emotions, or *moral* situations, we have come full circle (as we must ask, then, what exactly makes them moral); if we don’t, we cast our analytic net much too widely.

A FORMALIST RESEARCH POSITION REGARDING MORAL ACTION

The following, then, is an attempt to construct a research position circumscribing a realm of moral action. In doing so I make use of a few resources, the most important of which are social-psychological studies of self and identity, strands in the philosophy and psychology of emotions, and the resurgence of “virtue ethics”—a philosophical position that locates the realm of morality in the question: “What kind of person am I?” I proceed below by starting with a general claim, and then spelling out its constitutive assumptions as well as providing some examples that I believe are good to think with.

- (a) Moral action is an action that defines the actor as a certain kind of socially recognized person, both within and across fields.

The past few decades, starting with Anscombe’s (1958) seminal paper, have seen an explosion of positions arguing against the nineteenth-century Kantian (or neo-Kantian) moral position. Starting with Aristotle rather than Kant, this group of positions, dubbed “virtue ethics,” has replaced the Kantian moral question “What

is right or obligatory to do?" (Trianosky 1990:335) with the assertion, neatly summarized by Oakley (1996:129), that: "An action is right if and only if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances." The difference between these positions may not be self-evident. However, the potential revolution in thinking about morality offered by virtue ethics is in claiming that character is not the consequence, but the constitutive structure of morality. Claims about morality are primarily claims about certain kinds of people.

There are many versions of virtue ethics, positing different ways to answer the question of what it means to be virtuous—spanning the gamut from realist positions arguing that virtues exist "out there" (usually based on a list of virtues constructed by the philosopher with regards to the potential to forward "human thriving"), to nonrealist perspectives that argue that virtues are historically and socially constructed (for varieties of the former, see Foot 2001; Hursthouse 1999; Slote 1992; for positions somewhat closer to the latter, see MacIntyre 1984; Taylor 1989). Bracketing for the moment the question of what acts can be defined as virtuous, this philosophical position maps onto sociological debates regarding the definition of selfhood in action—how action constitutes subjects both in relation to social "others," and within their own social group. In other words, we must attend both to binary semiotics of self-definition and to the internal field dynamics through which people define themselves.

Although these two questions are not identical, they both approach the question of the constitution of selfhood by tying it to systems of differences. Drawing inspiration from de Saussure's ([1916] 1986) semiotics, these studies assume that moral meaning and identification can be understood as a continuous delimitation and definition of the things that members are *not*. From this shared theoretical starting point, these studies then proceed in different, if complementary, directions. The literature on boundaries implies that the stakes of self-definition are the question: "Am I a member?" The literature regarding fields, on the other hand, argues that the stakes of identification are very often the question: "What kind of member am I?" The former is organized between self and Other, the latter occurs within a multidimensional space of shared meanings and action.

Taking such an approach to meaning into the realm of group identification, the literature dealing with boundaries (Barth 1969; for overviews, see Lamont and Molnár 2002; Pachuki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007) translates the question of morality into a question of membership. To be moral is to be a part of the group; to be immoral is to trespass these boundaries into the realm of the Other. Explicitly "combining Durkheim with Saussure," Alexander (2003:6) thus treats the moral as condensations of the social. Here, morality emerges both because human thought and action are organized in binary opposites and because these actions or situations can be seen as synecdoches that stand for group identity. Implementing this account, Alexander and Smith (1993) show that even though U.S. politicians may use the concept of "autonomy" or "activeness" in very different ways, this "cultural code" is always understood as imbued with positive moral valence and stands for all that is American in U.S. civil society, counter to "dependency," its structural opposite.

Moreover, as the literature influenced by the Weberian concepts of "status" and "social closure" suggests, boundaries are important in internal stratification. Within societies, status groups are stratified through differentiations of taste (see, e.g., Beisel 1990; Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1982, 1987). To take one prominent example that develops this theme, Lamont (2000) shows that definitions of morality—vocabularies and enactments of the socially defined "good"—form an extremely important axis of

distinction. In fact, as Lamont argues, many working-class members' racism should be seen through such a "moral" lens, the dark side of boundary maintenance.

Further complicating this semiotic analysis, Bourdieu theorizes another aspect of the relation between actions and positions within a social field (Bourdieu 1990, 1996; see also Martin 2003). Bourdieu argues that within a bounded field, actors use taste and the definition of the "good" to struggle for internally defined "symbolic capital," which is often not translatable into positions in the general social arena. Within a field, actors must share an appreciation, or a desire, for what Bourdieu calls the *illusio* of the field—the "good" in the dual sense of moral and economic objects of libidinal investment (Bourdieu 2000:164–68). Indeed, the acquisition of symbolic capital is defined precisely by actors' ability to shape goods in the field according to the basic investments of the *illusio*. Actors thus act not only to differentiate themselves from those outside the group and to reassert their membership, but to define what kind of members they are—their specific positions within the field.

The "field position" aspect of morality is thus far more nuanced than external membership boundaries. Although positions are always relational—much like inter-group boundaries—field positions are not laid out on a totem pole of belonging. For example, Steinmetz (2008) recently explored how field dynamics worked in the case of colonial management: the basic symbolic capital in the colonial field, "knowledge of the natives," took different forms in different contexts, with "colonial experts" vying for position in a complex and multidimensional field. His study shows that there are many ways to be a "good" member, and there are multiple (and contending) practical strategies for recognition in a field.

The semiotics of boundaries and the Bourdieusian analysis of field positions allow us to think about moral action as a thoroughly social construct. However, if the stakes of moral action are actors' positions both across and within boundaries, this means that—at least from the point of view of the researcher—any action can be seen as imbued with morality. After all, as Bourdieu (1984) and others cogently demonstrate, taste in music, clothing, and sports is highly positional; even the way one walks through a museum can reveal a social position (Bourdieu 1993). In other words, if we simply substitute morality for positionality, we soon realize that every action has a moral horizon. This, in turn, means that the category is very limited as an analytic tool—it simply captures too much to be useful. The question, then, is which kinds of self-definitions we should focus our attention on. In the next two sections, I try to tackle this question.

- (b) Moral action is a self-definitional action that actors experience—or expect others to perceive—as defining the actor both intersituationally and to a greater extent than other available definitions of self.

Virtue ethics helps us think about morality through subject-positions. However, as opposed to most virtue ethics philosophers, a formalist position cannot predefine the nature of virtue. Doing so would bring us back to either realist or descriptive-relativist positions, with the problems and limitations that both these positions entail. Thus, rather than trying to answer the question "what are virtues?" we must ask what are the differences between virtue-imbued definitions of self, and other definitions of self that we would like to leave outside the sphere of a sociology of morality. To do so, I argue, along with a wide literature in the social psychology of selfhood, that self-definition involves two spectrums of generality—some actions are experienced as defining actors only within the situation or the limited field, whereas others are

experienced as defining them across situations; some actions define only a part of personhood, whereas others color our entire being (Hitlin 2008; Stryker 1968). I thus suggest that we circumscribe the realm of the sociology of morality to actions that define the actor intersituationally and to a greater extent than other available definitions of self. Returning to philosophers such as Kierkegaard, an important part of the difference between the aesthetic and the ethical as modes of experience and action is precisely the movement from the ephemeral glimpses of the aesthetic to a transsituational ethical position (Kierkegaard [1843] 1992; see also Katz 1975).

In other words, although self-definition may be a substratum of all action, actions differ in what we can think of as an experienced intersituational spectrum, as well as a spectrum of salience. Some acts are understood by actors to define them only partly, and only in a well-circumscribed set of situations, whereas other actions are understood to define the person more broadly—so that an action taken in one realm is consequential for the definition of the actor in other situations (see also Hitlin 2003, 2008; Stryker 1968). Importantly, we now shift from a social ontology to a phenomenology. It is probably true that every action defines the actor intersituationally in that actions in one situation are connected to other actions, carried out in other social situations (see Bourdieu 1984; Foucault 1977 for arguments along those lines), but these “discourse” or “meta-field” level connections are often only visible from the point of view of the sociologist. On the other hand, other actions *are* experienced (at least in certain junctures) as intersituationally consequential, and/or as more important for the definition of the actor, either by actors themselves or by others who are potentially monitoring them and imputing intersituational definitions of self from their acts. Moreover, even if actors themselves emphatically do *not* consider a certain act as self-defining in an intersituational sense, or as defining their entire selfhood, they may still expect others to treat some actions as more intersituationally relevant and as more important for their definition of self than other actions (see, e.g., Caplow 1984; Tavory and Swidler 2009).⁵

The intersituational spectrum of self-definition can be understood as the relation between different sets of situations. Here, the question is one of the generality of a social position. In highly delimited fields, some actions are seen as consequential for the positionality of self only within the field. Thus, for example, in an ethnography of science fiction fans in Israel, Gelerenter (2005) shows that one can be a specific kind of science fiction fan, and highly passionate about her position, but the definition of the person as a specific kind of fan will be perceived by most actors as circumscribed only to the situations in which science fiction is important, usually a neatly limited set of situations. How a Tolkien enthusiast translates the word “elf” into Hebrew was the topic of passionate debates, but wasn’t expected to carry over into other situations in the fan’s life. The same can be said for most positions within professional fields. I can be a specific kind of sociologist, journalist, or plumber, but experience this position, and expect others to perceive my professional position, as circumscribed to these situations in which I perform this specific identification.

⁵This opens the question of when acts become “moral,” adding temporal complexity to the position outlined above. Taking temporality into account, we can focus on actions that are not experienced or perceived as intersituational or salient definitions of self when performed, but that others (or the actor herself) later impute such status to. Although this article does not directly deal with these temporal dimensions, the structure of this question is similar to the structure of the question of “events” as analyzed by Sewell (1996). As Sewell convincingly argues in the case of the 1789 storming of the Bastille, when an event takes on the properties it is later known for is an empirical question, dependent on processes of event construction. Similarly, when morality “happens” is an open, and potentially productive, empirical question.

Other actions are seen to infiltrate the entire gamut of situations—though they may do so to different degrees. To take one example, ethical consumerism, as some have pointed out, is an interesting site for the contestation of moral action, struggling over the definition of self within consumption. Although consumption is always a self-definitional act, what the ethical consumerism movement attempts to do is make it both intersituational and explicit in new ways. What kind of mineral water, what eggs, and what meat one buys (see, e.g., Crane 2001; Weber, Heinze, and DeSoucey 2008) become explicit self-definitional questions. If consumers buy “fair trade coffee,” “freedom eggs,” or “free-ranging beef” they are suddenly offered another horizon for their actions, as it defines them as certain kind of people—both politically and ecologically. Like “patriotic” consumerism in other contexts, ethical consumerism is an attempt to imbue an action that is usually not experienced as self-defining with an explicit intersituational position, to transform it into an act that can perhaps be termed “self-signaling.”

If the first spectrum is related to the consistency of identifications across situations, the second spectrum—closely related but analytically distinct—is related to the salience of the specific identification within the array of identifications that people constantly occupy. Thus, some definitions of self are experienced as more self-defining than others and render other identifications secondary if not irrelevant. Although actors may realize that they and others occupy different categories, these vary in their relative salience.⁶

To take one example that shows how an action varies in its salience in different communities we can take the case of American Orthodox Jews who become non-religious. Thus, in Winston’s (2005) ethnography of Orthodox Jews in the New York area who become non-Orthodox, their actions of defiance—from men cutting off their beards and earlocks to women dressing “immodestly”—are seen as comprising a total, highly moral position that colors the entire subject. In a few of the cases Winston describes, the families and other close Orthodox friends first try to contain the person, to treat the act as a lapse of reason, thus trying to minimize the power of the act to define the subject by claiming the actor wasn’t himself (or herself) when the act was carried out. If this strategy of dealing with the implications of action on selfhood does not work, people who become non-Orthodox often find themselves shunned or excommunicated by others in their community—there can be no contact with these people precisely because the action is “total” in its implications. Thus, in this situation, the action is perceived by other Orthodox Jews as so totally defining the subject that the only way to deal with it is either by severing the link between action and personhood (the person “wasn’t himself”), or by severing ties with the offender, since the action defines him irrevocably.

In Los Angeles’s Orthodox community, however, the same action is seen as less of a total identification, and families often stay in close contact with family members who have become non-Orthodox, and non-Orthodox children often live with their Orthodox parents (Tavory 2010a). Following religious edicts still colors other situations and the very definitions of actors: members in the community often speak both

⁶Hughes (1945) had something similar in mind when he pointed to the difference between a “master status” and other sets of status positions. Thus, if at a certain point in time women considered themselves (and, importantly, men considered them) to be primarily “mothers,” then a failure in this key arena would “contaminate” other arenas; or, more to the point, success in other arenas would be considered by most of the people she expects to interact with as subservient to her “failure” as a mother. See also the literature on “identity salience” in the context of interactionist identity theory (Stryker 1968; Stryker and Burke 2000).

sadly and derisively about people who became less religious. And yet, the salience of becoming non-Orthodox is not as hermetic, or “total,” as in Winston’s (2005) case. Although Orthodox parents often said they hoped their children would see the errors of their ways and come back to the fold, and—especially in cases of teenagers—people often said it was a “phase” (another way to say that the actions somehow did not define their loved ones’ identity), members were also proud of their children’s secular achievements, bragging about their college careers, their kindness, how they were still “good boys.” Thus, though still high on the spectrum of identity salience, acting in “non-Orthodox” fashion was not a “total” moral position.

What both these cases point toward is that the question of moral action, at least as it is approached here, is often in flux. As we increasingly live in a world in which there is a multiplicity of audiences and of positions of self, actions may be seen as more salient or intersituationally self-defining for one set of audiences, and less so for other audiences. Thus, in the terms suggested here, what eggs one buys is a moral action for a certain (and perhaps widening) audience for whom this kind of consumption defines the self intersituationally; for others—even some who consume these products—this may be much more situationally circumscribed. Similarly, becoming non-Orthodox has different moral salience in New York’s Williamsburg and in Los Angeles’ Melrose area.

The last section greatly circumscribed the domain of the sociology of morality. Instead of attending to every act of self-definition—or rather to the self-definitional aspect of every act—the domain of the sociology of morality is those definitional acts where the definition of self is experienced as “contaminating,” as defining the actor not only in the specific situation or set of situations, but across situations; not only one of many identifications, but a salient identification that is more self-defining than others. This circumscription of the moral, however, may still be too wide. After all, there is a multiplicity of salient and intersituational identifications that we often exempt from moral evaluation. In order to further delimit the scope of this research program, we must move from the cognitive evaluation of selfhood to the emotional valence of action.

- (c) Moral actions are actions that define the self intersituationally and saliently, to which actors either have themselves, or expect others to have, a predictable emotional reaction.

In order to further delimit the domain of the sociology of the moral, I would like to suggest that some intersituational self-definitional acts produce predictable emotive reactions across situations, whereas others do not. More importantly, actors expect others to have strong emotional reactions (either positive or negative) to some actions and self-definitions and not to others. Thus, the final layer in the research position I suggest is influenced both by emotivist philosophers such as Stevenson (1944), as well as by less radical emotivist-intuitionist positions, such as those espoused by Haidt (2001) and Vaisey (2009). According to such a position, emotional reactions are the defining elements of the moral. The domain of the sociology of morality is thus delimited to these acts of self-definition for which actors experience a relatively foreseeable emotional reaction, as well as those that they expect others to react emotionally to. Being judged “hot blooded” is, at least today, simply not as emotionally laden as that of being “bloodthirsty.”

Of course, in many situations reputations and character traits are also emotively laden. We can think about a definition of an actor as acting “smartly” as such a case.

But although being “smart” would be positively emotionally laden in some situations, in other situations it wouldn’t—it would either be neutral, or even sometimes be negatively evaluated (as in cinematic portrayals of evil geniuses). Moreover, even in situations in which it is positively emotionally laden, actors would not expect it to be treated as such across fields and situations. Thus, it is not only that the act has to be emotionally charged within the situation, but that the emotional valence of the definition of self is seen as constant across situations. Indeed, if we would say that acting “smartly” is always positively charged, it would become—like character traits such as “bloodthirsty”—a moral evaluation.⁷

Some intersituational and salient definitions of self, then, are more emotionally involved than others. To take one highly charged moral situation, in Duneier’s (1999) *Sidewalk*, the chapter about public urination conveys how an action that most of us take for granted, how people “go” when “they got to go,” can define them in a totalized way. The unhoused street vendors he describes experience this question as self-definitional so that being careful to “piss” either in a restaurant, or even in a bottle, connotes a certain kind of person, whereas pissing against a wall or in the middle of the street connotes quite another—a person that reverted to a “fuck it” attitude. Where basic amenities are stripped away, the question of how to piss and defecate thus becomes a crucial way to define the self. But this is also an important site because this definition of self is not emotionally neutral. The unhoused people Duneier spent time with both knew that others may react with disgust to unhoused people urinating in the open, but also dreaded the ramifications that the “fuck it” attitude implies, a fall from the social that is feared precisely because of the precarious social space they occupy (see also Katz 1996).

The complexity of this situation, both in terms of self-definition and in terms of the emotional aspects of action, brings us back to the discussion of emotivism in the introduction. We now return to an emotivist position regarding the sociology of morality from a firmer vantage point, having delimited its domain by focusing on actions that are seen as self-defining saliently and intersituationally. The problem of “what kind of emotion do we analyze?” that threatened to make the emotivist position circular (MacIntyre 1984) is partly sidestepped. We do not need to define the range of “moral emotions” (see, e.g., Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek 2007) but only the stakes of action—its perceived ramifications for the salience and intersituational definition of self. We thus solve both excesses of emotivist theories. On the one hand, we refrain from detailing a logically circular list of “moral sentiments” as did Smith ([1759] 2010) in his otherwise masterful *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and many others after him. On the other hand, we avoid treating all moral evaluations as nothing more than visceral feelings of disgust or approval. Rather, like the dizzying gamut of social definitions of self, emotional reactions are immensely complex and varied.⁸ Although we might be tempted to treat emotions as relatively simpler than

⁷It may be appropriate to stress here once more that the question of *why* a specific definition of self becomes intersituationally self-definitional or emotionally charged should not matter for the research position I offer here. This is both because, as emotivists claim, trying to come up with a cognitive explanation for the construction of the moral may be misleading, and also because we cannot assume *a priori* that the social processes leading to these evaluations are always the same.

⁸There is, however, one important ramification regarding the range of emotions—it must be an emotional reaction tied to a definition of selfhood. Thus, the emotional reaction is one that philosopher Strawson (1962) called “reactive attitudes”—emotionally charged reactions that are pitched toward a particular definition of personhood as one that “owns” a self. As Foucault (1964) shows, the medicalization of insanity meant the silencing of those medicalized, constructing them precisely as nonmoral objects rather than moral subjects. The question of this definition of selfhood, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

symbolization, emotionality, like categorical definitions, is not only placed on an axis between positive and negative but is inextricably tied to the symbolic content of the definition of self.⁹

Thus, although the valence of emotional reactions is important, it does not stand on its own. Returning to the ethnography of Orthodox Jews in Los Angeles, although acting in an “Orthodox” way is important, there is often no simple definition of what it means to do so. Although there are certain taboos and necessary observances, proscribed and prescribed actions, there is also a vast array of situations in which actors perceive themselves to be defined intersituationally and saliently, but where different “correct” courses of action exist. In these situations, different actions may be all emotionally “positive,” but still define actors in different ways, so that the emotional valence of action is far from simple. To take one example (Tavory 2010a), the answer to the question of how one acts with regard to “transgressive” and profane images placed prominently on the main streets—an act that is perceived as defining the subject—can be quite divergent. Orthodox people can position themselves as “pious and wary,” as “saving potential Jews from spiritual darkness,” or even as flirting with danger.

This also means that moral action should not be seen as primarily an automatic habitus-generated reaction. Rather, moral situations can be sites of social dilemmas that are embodied without becoming automatic (see also Ignatow 2007; Pagis 2010; Winchester 2008), as the stakes of the moral are an intersituational self-definition that is far from a binary “good versus bad.” Although, as Vaisey argues convincingly following Haidt (2001), it is often the emotional tail that wags the symbolic dog, there is both no clear separation between tail and dog and—in many situations—the emotional valence of an action is a resource for self-definition rather than its determinant. For example, such emotional reactions may not necessarily be the actor’s gut reactions, but may entail reflexive deliberation, where the actor attempts to ascertain what emotional reaction is appropriate in evaluating a specific self-definitional situation.¹⁰

THE DEVIL’S ADVOCATE: STEREOTYPES, MORES, AND THE SILENT DOMAIN OF THE MORAL

The position developed above circumscribes a class of actions that would provide cultural sociologists interested in morality with a common ground for comparison. However, like any formal delineation, it may seem to capture too much, to include actions and evaluations that we often treat as nonmoral. Alternatively, it might seem to miss phenomena that others have seen as central to the sociology of morality. Below, I present three potential problems with the ways this article delineated the domain of the sociology of morality, alongside some tentative replies.

⁹See Proudfoot’s (1985) discussion of emotive reactions in the context of religious experience. As he persuasively claims, the line differentiating symbolization and emotion (or, for that matter, all experience) is artificial.

¹⁰Smith’s ([1759] 2010) discussion of the appeal to “the man in the breast” in his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—an appeal to the normative impartial spectator that is internalized by actors—makes precisely this point (a point bearing interesting similarities to that made by Mead [1934] in his discussion of “the generalized other”).

Stereotypes and Reputations

One potential limitation of this circumscription is that it leaves a class of self-identifications that include “stereotypes” and “reputations” within the domain of the moral. After all, stereotypes and reputations are precisely stable self-identifications that are considered to remain stable intersituationally, and color the entirety of subjects’ selves. Moreover, these often do entail certain emotional reactions. This is true both for general social stereotypes, of the sort “Italians are . . .,” and for personal reputations that subjects construct for themselves, or that others construct for them, characteristics such as “stubborn” or “lazy.” If this is the case, though, wouldn’t the proposed definition, again, cast its net too widely, capturing both actions that we usually call moral, but also many other identifications and actions that we do not?

Morals and Mores

Closely related to reputations and stereotypes, we might want to distinguish between morals and mores, actions that are evaluated with reference to moral selves, and those that we ascribe to local habits and cultures. As Lukes (2008) cogently argues, we may distinguish between different mores, related to different peoples or groups, yet maintain that these mores are not the same as morals. To make this point, Lukes quotes Herodotus’s *Histories* (2008:29–30). At one point, Herodotus relates how the Persian king Darius looks with amusement at how peoples with different funeral rites view each other’s actions. The Greek burn their fathers, the Callatians eat them—and they both look with horror at each others’ actions. And yet, as Lukes later comments (2008:65–66), there may be a common moral kernel to the actions of the Greek and the Callatians—they both act in order to show their respect to their forebearers, and both Darius and Herodotus, it seems, see this shared moral truth through the diversity of mores (though the Greeks and the Callatians, apparently, do not). Doesn’t the above definition blur this distinction?

The Moral Silence of Everyday Life

Whereas the last two points question whether the position advanced is too broad, we may, also, ask whether it may be too narrow. Thus, the position outlined here focuses on actions that actors—though not necessary those performing the act—*perceive* or *experience* as having a high intersituational and salient relevance for their definition of self. We do not experience every moment as moral because our actions—although far from uniform—usually fall within the confines of typified schemas (Schutz 1967; Sewell 1992). This is true even in realms that may potentially contaminate the entirety of a person’s identification. As many sociologists have demonstrated (e.g., Alexander 2003:109–21; Alexander and Smith 1993; Douglas 1966; Smith 2003; Wuthnow 1987), parts of our environment are normally experienced as more consequential than others. And yet, taken-for-granted and unreflexive actions have moral horizons, which emerge when breached. But if this is so, isn’t this research position focusing too narrowly on the actualization of moral life? Doesn’t that mean that we are, in effect, looking for our keys under the spotlight?

SOME REPLIES

There is indeed an important convergence between the actions delineated in this article and the domain of stereotypes and reputations. After all, stereotyping assumes that some predefinitions of actors or groups are, at the very least, self-defining and stable, so that they provide readily available ways to understand and evaluate action (see, e.g., Hilton and von Hippel 1996; see also Hitlin and Piliavin 2004:360–62). However, stereotypes and reputations capture a different universe of cases, only partially converging with the domain delineated above. The relation between these two analytic domains can be thus conceived as an imaginary Venn diagram, where some moral evaluations are not stereotypical, and others are; where some stereotypes and reputations are moral, and others are not. This overlaid area of the moral/stereotypical is not, moreover, something we can analytically decide upon in advance, but a potentially fluid empirical question.

In many cases, moral and stereotypical definitions of self converge. A stereotype such as “the bloodthirsty Muslim” is a case where the stereotype predefines action (e.g., fighting for independence) as immoral depravity precisely in the sense given to it above—intersituationally stable, salient, and emotionally laden. In describing how white Americans justified the massacre of Native Americans in California, Pessah (2008) shows that in order to justify genocidal acts to the state and funding agencies, white settlers first defined Native Americans as morally “depraved,” based on both readily available stereotypes and alleged cattle raids that they defined as “depredations.”

However, such cases are not the rule, and two areas of divergence are in evidence. On the one hand, stereotypes include self-definitions that either are not salient for the definition of actors, or that do not evoke a predictable emotional reaction. Reputations such as “stubborn,” or “smart,” evoke different emotional reactions in different situations; that Italians are considered “hot blooded” may not be perceived as a salient definition of self. On the other hand, moral evaluations of action are not necessarily tied to the typification (Schutz 1967) of the group the actor belongs to. They can simultaneously pertain to specific individuals, and to generalized definitions of personhood that actors do not perceive as tied to specific groups (see, e.g., Gecas and Burke 1995).

Whereas the differentiation and partial convergence of stereotypes, reputations, and the domain of the sociology of morality can thus be described in terms of an analytic Venn diagram, the difference between mores and morality lies also in local evaluations of action. As with stereotypes and reputations, mores are closely related to questions of morality, a point that was not lost on the forerunners of the sociology of morality.¹¹ To differentiate mores and the kinds of actions that would fall under the proposed sociology of morality, I suggest that we rethink Herodotus’s story that Lukes (2008) presents. The point of the story is twofold. From the point of view of the Greeks or the Callatiaens, the details of the funeral rites are moral. The outrage of the Callatiaens seeing the Greeks burn their dead, as well as the outrage of the Greeks seeing the Callatiaens eating theirs, is indeed moral, in the sense delineated above.

¹¹Thus, when writers such as Martineau (1838, quoted in Abend 2010) write of morality, it is mores *and* morality that they write of; as Abend (2010:561) points out in passing, Durkheim’s science of morality was “variously called *science de le morale*, *science de faits moraux*, or *physique des moeurs*.” The fact that Durkheim, Martineau, and others treated the two categories interchangeably does not, in itself, justify this usage.

However, the interesting difference arises when we take the point of view of King Darius—an “Etic” point of view of relative detachment. King Darius’s bemused look at funerary rites, as Lukes’s rightly observes, assumes that underneath local patterns of action lies a shared intent—a lay division that looks much like the Parsonian distinction between “norms” and “values.” From this point of view, however, naming an action as one governed by mores is to bracket the emotional valence of the specific act. The action defines the actor as a member of a specific group, but not much beyond that. For Darius, burning or eating deceased parents does nothing more than define the Greek as Greek and the Callatiaens as Callatiaens. In other words, defining an action as derived from mores is precisely to bracket its emotional meaning and extricate what may be otherwise evaluated in moral terms from this domain. Indeed, the evaluation of action as pertaining to mores may counter its moral evaluation, a way to claim certain actions could be ignored *qua* self-defining actions that should produce a specific emotional reaction.

This act of bracketing action and evaluating it as the manifestation of cultural mores assumes that we take a position of detachment. It is precisely *not* the point of view that most Greeks or Callatiaens take—if they would have, no outrage would be evoked. Instead, it is the relativizing stance of specific actors, actors that are in the position of the Simmelian stranger (Simmel 1950): outsiders, intellectuals, and people occupying social roles that place them beyond the fray. Defining actions as mores, then, is a particular stance regarding the relation between selfhood, culture, and action, in which “culture” mitigates the relation between action and selfhood.

Lastly, answering the reservation regarding the delimitation of moral action to action *experienced* as self-defining in the sense developed above requires us to turn our sights to the question of the potential of self-definition (see also Tavory 2010b). It is undoubtedly true that some habitual actions that are usually not perceived as moral can suddenly become moral questions (in the sense described above). What that means, however, is far from simple. As mentioned above, from an “Etic” point of view, *all* action can be seen as self-definitional. Moreover, the very existence of an ordered social life may be seen as a fragile achievement that actors actively sustain in action and interaction. The reactions to breaches that both Garfinkel (1967) and Goffman (e.g., 1959, 1963) speak of are precisely moments when the taken for granted is broken, revealing a moral substratum of everyday life.¹²

And yet, even if every action is thus predicated on a moral substratum, some taken for granted and unreflexively performed actions may have more of a potential to define the self than do others. To know to what degree this is so, we cannot simply posit the morality of unreflexive action, at least in the sense developed in this article. Rather than a weakness of this definition, this question raises a set of research possibilities into sites in which such a moral substratum becomes manifest. As breaches in social life occur quite regularly, we can see, over time and place, the effects of such breaches. Doing so, would, then, tell researchers how the salience of

¹²Rawls’s (1987, 1989) work on the moral dimension of Goffman’s work and on ethnomethodology is exemplary in this context. As Rawls shows, there is an argument for the existence of a form of communicative morality in the work of Goffman, as well as an attempt to unravel the moral dimensions of the constant reconstitution of order in ethnomethodology. Although these claims are convincing, especially as they are systematized and developed by Rawls, there are some differences between this position and the one developed here. Most importantly, Rawls is interested in the moral substratum that living in a society must entail. This, however, is a general and abstracted domain—the ongoing production of order (of any kind), the joint production of communicative competency. It may be true that in *any* society people need to sustain selfhood and reproduce order, but this tells us little about the variation in the way different aspects of selfhood and order are experienced in members’ lives.

different identities that are not usually made explicit changes over time. It is not that actualization tells us nothing about the potential for self-definition, but that assuming it *a priori* stops us from asking relevant questions.

DISCUSSION

Having constructed this tentative formal-relativist approach for the study of moral action, I am now in a position to say something about the crucial question that any analytic proposal faces: What do we stand to gain by using it? To use James's ([1907] 1981) blunt phrase, what is its intellectual "cash value"? What kinds of questions can we now ask? What research avenues are opened as a result of its implementation? In what follows, I briefly outline and exemplify two potential uses of this research position: one related to the possibilities opened by comparison, and the second related to our ability to disaggregate social processes we are interested in, a question that pertains to the resolution of our descriptions.

The research position presented in this article provides a disciplined way to look at an aspect of human action that people themselves experience as defining them in important ways: actions and definitions of self that travel with them wherever they may go, that color their entire being and that are accompanied by predictable emotional reactions. Such a sociology of morality allows us to focus on the stuff existential dilemmas are made of, emotionally charged actions that define people's selves in their own eyes, as well as in the eyes of potential others. This circumscription, in turn, pushes us to think about the locations and temporalities of these actions. In this sense, it can be read as a heuristic offered to sociologists of culture. If part of the warrant of the sociology of culture is to capture the worlds of meaning within which different groups live, focusing on sites that people experience or expect others to perceive as defining their being may be a generative program.

The pragmatic value of this approach, however, does not automatically follow from its focus on self-defining moments. We can, quite agnostically, see what actors define as important without resorting to the tortuous specifications presented above. And yet, rather than simply positing that there are important sites in the lives of members, this position also gives us analytic tools to compare sites. Beyond the common sociological impulse—to generalize based on a comparison of different cases—the value of such a comparison is twofold. First, comparisons allow us to show similarities between social processes and sites that look, initially, very different (see, e.g., Becker 1998). This, in turn, is not only useful as a way to tickle our sociological imagination, but for the following reason: if comparisons are possible, we can study the conditions that bring about the salience of one configuration of actions rather than others.

To return to Duneier's (1999) work, we can begin, for example, to think about the specific place that extreme poverty of unhoused people plays in making urinating more moral for them than it is for other groups. Instead of positing, with critics such as Wacquant (2002), that showcasing the moral life of poor black homeless people is a form of liberal hypocrisy, we can ask what it means to live in an environment that was not built to cater to members' actions; what this form of marginality—shared by homeless people, religious minorities, and other groups—means for sustaining actors' self-identifications in everyday life. In such a situation, members have to make explicit aspects of their lives that others take for granted. Extreme poverty, in this reading, is a form of marginality that results in a multitude of moral situations. Drawing also on ethnographies of urban poverty such as Liebow's (1967), one possible hypothesis

would be the following: *the less the environment is built to cater to a specific category of people, the more moral situations would arise in these people's lives.*¹³

This hypothesis also provides us with new ways to understand groups that self-marginalize themselves consciously, that choose to live in an environment that forces them to make such self-identifications explicit. Thus, for example, Smith (1998) has argued that the success of evangelical Christianity in the United States is due to members' ability to find a productive tension between participation in a nonconservative milieu while holding conservative religious attitudes and practices. Although this subcultural theory of religious success is provocative, it may be better specified if we ask when and where do members of such religious groups find themselves in self-defining situations, and in relation to which relevant audiences. One possibility, in that case, is that the tension Smith posits is, in effect, the product of consciously throwing oneself into a life where the self needs to be constantly defined. This constant need for self-definition, in turn, may be part of what draws members and keeps them engaged—transforming their lives into a morally imbued adventure.

A life imbued with such moral situations may thus be a precarious and angst-provoking existence, but also a celebration of subcultural choice. Studying different experiences of marginalization and the way different groups handle moral situations within them, can show both surprising similarities, but also help attune us to the differences in the way these situations and definitions of self are understood.

Beyond such comparative questions and hypotheses, the approach developed in this article may also be used as a way to disaggregate historical processes. Here, the relative complexity of the position—including intersituational definition, identity salience, and emotional reaction—may be useful. To take the well-trodden example of changes in the status of divorce in the United States and Europe over the past decades, we can ask new questions regarding the shift in cultural understandings of divorced persons. Rather than noting that “today, broken marriage has lost the stigma it had a century ago. Divorced persons are no longer considered social mishaps or moral deviants” (May 1980:163), we can ask new questions about the stages of this contraction of the moral dimension of divorce.

Thus, for example, Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim's well-known thesis posits a relation between individualism and the rise in divorce (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 1995; Beck Gernsheim 1999). Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995) argue that with the rise of the moral horizon of individualism and the entry of women into the workforce, love and marriage began to be understood as self-projects, precariously constructed by an autonomous self. This, however, is a post hoc description, rather than a description of process. As such, it does not clearly differentiate between possible processes of change—Did the rise of individualism in other arenas present a new moral horizon for actors, who could use the language of self-construction as a way to make moral sense of the dissolution of marriage? Did this moral horizon, then, weaken the intersituational definition of the act of divorce, so that people ceased to be divorcees, but rather just people who divorced, an action that does not define their selfhood? Alternatively, perhaps the change is due to a shift in the identity salience of women in terms of marital status, a shift that stems from the increasing possibility women had of defining themselves in relation to other available statuses. In this case,

¹³This proposition opens the way to a comparative study of what, for lack of better terms, we might call the “moral topography” of different groups, as well as a comparison of the processes through which similar topographies are constructed and lived. The development of this concept, however, is the topic of another article.

the discourse of individualism and self-construction would be better conceived as a vocabulary of motive (Mills 1940) that justifies a change of a different kind.

Another example of shifts in the understandings of action is that of condom use in sub-Saharan Africa. In the wake of the AIDS epidemic, the reasons for low condom use have received much attention. As Tavory and Swidler (2009) argue, part of the reason that people avoid condom use is that, even though they know the risks full well, condom use defines the actor in a particular way—for example, as a person in search of a committed relationship rather than one looking for a one night stand. However, in the interviews conducted for that study it seemed that young people use condoms more regularly, even in relationships that have a potential to become more serious. If this shift is real, the reasons for it are not well understood. One possible explanation is that the plethora of pro-condom-use messages results in a slow shift in the intersituational meaning of condom use, so that people do not see it as signifying something about the person. Another explanation, however, would be that foreign NGOs' insistence on condom use resulted in unexpected consequences—that condom use posits the user as a modern, Western, subject. Once again, the research position detailed above could help researchers focus the questions they ask—what changes when a moral action is redefined.

In short, focusing on the domain of action delineated above—on intersituational and salient self definitions that entail a predictable emotional reaction—may have both intrinsic and pragmatic value. In itself, focusing on the existential dilemmas in which every person is enmeshed is something that sociologists of culture care about. One of the key questions fueling much of the sociology of culture is, after all, how meaningful life is socially constructed. Pragmatically, this delineation of the domain of moral action produces new comparative questions, as well as better tools for disaggregating the processes of change. As such, this research position aims to open avenues for further research—enabling sociologists to ask new questions, and, hopefully, find new answers.

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