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## Sociology: Moral dialogues and normative change

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### ABSTRACT

Moral dialogues are one mechanism of cultural change, allowing communities to resolve conflicts and revise the fundamental norms and values governing their members' relationships. This essay illustrates the moral dialogue process with the debates over sexual harassment in the Trump era. Victimized women launched a transnational "megalogue" that pervaded politics, business, entertainment, academia, and other spheres. It transformed norms, institutions, and enforcement of acceptable behavior in employment and in public, resulting in a new shared moral understanding. However, the fact that the President is not punished for immorality demonstrates that normative change ultimately requires the rule of law.

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Amitai Etzioni's essay on "Moral Dialogues" – the social processes through which people form new shared moral understandings – emphasizes the necessary norms and values that underlie social interaction and community cohesion. Social relationships are the purview of the discipline of sociology, especially its Durkheimian tradition. The cultural and moral motivations for engagement with others contrast with the self-interest foregrounded in economics and with the coerced conformity stressed in political science and the law. Sociologists maintain that people comply voluntarily and even at their own expense if they believe that norms are legitimate and just.

While justifications of behaviour may be both practical and moral, they also have emotional valence. Much psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience report that

social emotions like compassion, gratitude, and pride are more powerful motives than material rewards. We help others because it feels "right," not because we expect reciprocity. And we often regulate our behaviour more in response to informal social sanctions such as ostracism, shaming, and ridicule than to legal or economic penalties for noncompliance.

Yet socialization into a culture and internalization of shared values are never complete. Values may be rejected, and rules challenged. Diverse subcultures and behavioural patterns persist. Conflicts erupt, disturbing consensus. Cultures are neither monolithic nor static. Assuming they are so has led many a communitarian into trouble.

Etzioni's essay does seem to assert that societies rest upon an identifiable if unnamed set of core moral values, while admitting a modicum of pluralism or multiculturalism. Even if such core values could indeed be enumerated, they are not forever fixed. Etzioni points to one reason why: culture changes through a process that he calls "moral dialogue."

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Moral dialogue proceeds through stages. After establishing the “baseline” moral understanding, sociological dialogue starters initiate intensive, interlinked multiple group discussions or “megalogues” necessary for moral dialogues to take place on a large, even transnational scale. Moral dialogue draws on both emotional expressions and reason. Dramatizations, demonstrations, or parables engage the emotions and invoke overarching “core” values for justification. Moral dialogues reach closure with the transformation of attitudes, values, behaviour, and even the law, and with the establishment of a new “shared moral understanding” different from the baseline.

In laying out such a sequential process, Etzioni’s approach to moral dialogue resonates with sociologist Stanley Cohen’s (1972) stage theory of “moral panics.” A moral panic is a concern or fear, spread among a large number of people by moral entrepreneurs or the media, that some evil condition, episode, person or group threatens societal values and interests. Depicting the threat through simple, recognizable symbols arouses the public emotionally. While concern about menacing “folk devils” is usually widespread, it quickly dissipates. The authorities respond, sometimes disproportionately, restoring social order and producing social change. Moral panics reinforce cultural binaries of good and evil, purity and dirt, security and danger, but, the theory posits, there is no guarantee that condemnation of societal threat or deviance will unite the society in a new moral consensus. Unlike a moral dialogue, a moral panic may just reinforce tradition.

## 1. Justifications

Etzioni’s moral dialogues, in contrast, differ from the “hot” passionate irrationality of moral panics and culture wars. Moral dialogues also differ from rational deliberations based on “cold” logic and facts. Rather than evidence, people offer justifications, appealing to an overarching value that the parties to the dialogue share. In Boltanski & Thévenot’s (2006) conception of justification, appeals to a higher general principle help opponents reach agreements and coordinate action. People answer in moral terms for their behaviour to those with whom they interact. Unlike Weber’s post hoc, even deceptive forms of “legitimation,” these justifications are genuine and sincere, overcoming obstacles to cooperation.

However, these French sociologists are skeptical about the communitarian assumption that a culture has a hierarchy of “core values” taking precedence over secondary values that are more diverse. Boltanski and Thévenot identify different logics of justification *within* the same culture: civic (Rousseau), market (Adam Smith), industrial (Saint-Simon), domestic (Bossuet), inspiration (Augustine), and fame (Hobbes). Given multiple core values, agreement with all of them is insufficient to determine which shall prevail in any given circumstance. As people compete to legitimate their definition of the situation, their justifications may appeal to any of these conflicting logics. Indeed, even rational argument is moral, but belongs in a different order of justification than that of other value approaches. Since different moral justifications dominate in markets, politics, families, religion, and other social spheres, moral dialogues

can never be confined to the “third sector.” They are everywhere in social life.

Therefore, the communitarian assumption that social life rests upon “Shared Moral Understandings” cannot evade the inevitable social conflicts over which values, in this instance or another, should prevail. Communitarianism is often depicted as a “Third Way” of compromise between Marxist and liberal conceptions of social order. Yet, a community’s resolution of differences may, unhappily, require more than dialogue, however copious and democratic the participation in it. To be sure, voluntary compliance with legitimate social norms reduces the costs of social interaction. But sometimes it becomes necessary for the authorities to impose a higher common principle – perhaps derived deductively through philosophical reasoning or an absolute ethical theory – in order to get anything done.

Etzioni optimistically posits that moral dialogues end in “closure” through legal and behavioural changes and restoration of shared understandings. The dialogues not only shore up, but also negotiate and revise core values. They are thus a methodology for peacefully producing cultural change, as illustrated in Etzioni’s case study of the acceptance of same-sex marriage. In what follows, I apply the moral dialogue approach to the case of sexual harassment in the Trump era, concluding that the process unfolded much as Etzioni suggested it would, but not reaching closure without endorsement of the State.

## 2. Moral dialogue over sexual harassment

Sexual harassment has long been illegal, but the prohibition was rarely enforced. Norms began to change in 2016, with the outrage over Donald Trump’s “locker room talk,” captured on the Access Hollywood tape. The day after his Inauguration, masses of American women in pink knit “pussy hats” held protest marches. The defeated female candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton, tweeted, “Thanks for standing, speaking and marching for our values,” later blaming her defeat partly on misogyny. The disgust swelled again with the Alabama primary victory of Roy Moore, a judge removed from office for breaking man’s law, and accused by multiple women of dating and sexually assaulting them as minors. The dam broke when reputable actresses revealed their experiences of sexual harassment and assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. Through social media, more women found their voices and were heard. One by one, they credibly accused men at the pinnacle of entertainment, business, academia, and political power of sexual misconduct. Celebrities on the left and right were fired. Politicians and moguls resigned. The frenzied media could barely keep up confirming the allegations. TIME Magazine named “The Silence Breakers,” those women who spoke out against sexual assault, the 2017 Person of the Year. For many, this wave of feminism constitutes a cultural revolution.

Has this process unfolded as a moral dialogue? After all, moral strictures and laws prohibiting sexual assault are not new. But at “baseline,” the norm of women’s submission to male domination acted to discredit victims’ complaints and preclude punishment of harassers. Filing a discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity

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