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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.

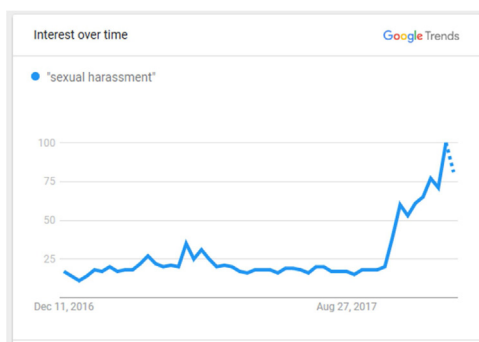
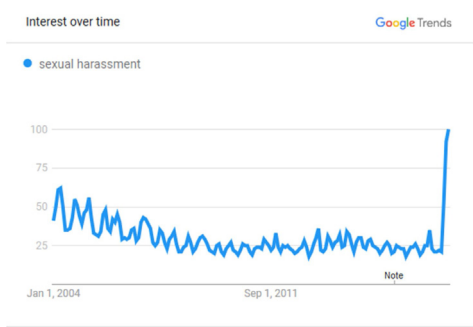
2. Moral dialogue over sexual harassment

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

Commission is a long, expensive, and risky process that, even with victory, may not ultimately end the violation. The 1991 Anita Hill episode may have been a “historical starter” of this dialogue, but was an insufficient “moral shock” to hold powerful men accountable. The moral dialogue also moved abroad, setting off a transnational conversation in 2011. For example, *l'affaire DSK*, the scandal that shattered the exculpatory myth of “séduction à la française,” ended with the resignation of an IMF chief and with justice for an exploited American chambermaid (Fassin, 2017).

The “sociological dialogue starter” in 2016 was the revelation of incontrovertible evidence of a presidential candidate bragging on tape about his own sexual assaults. Victims found one another through #MeToo, an on-line network initiated by African-American women. The newly empowered discarded non-disclosure agreements, and challenged the unspoken rule that powerful men could get away with breaking the law. Famous, respectable, mostly white victims defied the stigma that women “asked for it.” With social support and growing numbers, public confidence grew in the veracity of their claims. About four in 10 women admitted in the 2017 Gallup poll that they’ve been a victim of sexual harassment. A Washington Post/ABC Newsreported that more than half of American women had experienced “unwanted sexual advances,” and a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found one in two women and one in five men have experienced sexual violence other than rape during their lifetime. Raliance, a group of organizations trying to end sexual violence, sponsored a 2018 on-line survey revealing widespread experiences of verbal harassment, sexual touching, cyber sexual harassment, being followed on the street, and genital flashing (Chira, 2018). The accusations of immorality cascaded into a social movement, as documented in this Google Trend graph of interest in sexual harassment over time.



“Megalogues” erupted, as Etzioni predicts. “Intensive, interlinked multiple group discussions” delegitimized abuses of masculine power across spheres of social life. Everyone was talking about harassment. Ordinary working women saw themselves in the confessions of famous actresses. Among men and women alike, the graphic details of predatory behaviour – men exposing themselves, enticing, pleading, touching, groping, threatening – produced widespread disgust, an emotion producing outrage and demands for change.

To use Huntington’s (1981) term, an Ivl gap opened, a discrepancy between American ideals of moral perfection and the inevitable imperfections of institutions, giving rise to disharmony between the normative and existential dimensions of American politics. Throughout history, when Americans perceive this tension and believe strongly in the ideals, their moral outrage and “creedal passion” increases popular participation, in turn producing institutional reform. Today, the overarching value of equal treatment has overwhelmed the realities of partisanship, careerism, and traditional gender roles. Much of the public is demanding that men’s behaviour conform to the law, and that the law is enforced. This seems to be the new moral understanding.

Institutions are changing. Employers are again insisting on harassment and diversity training. Business schools around the country are hastily reshaping their curriculums with case studies on workplace ethics and values. Since the Harvey Weinstein scandal, there has been a fourfold increase of traffic on the EEOC website on sexual harassment. The moral dialogue around sexual harassment is clearly having an effect on American attitudes. In the October 2017 Gallup poll, 69% of Americans said sexual harassment today is a major problem, up from 50% in 1998. The increase was as notable among men (from 45% in 1998 to 66% in 2017) as among women (from 55% to 73%). In November 2017, for the first time since Gallup began measuring Americans’ preferences about the gender of their boss, a majority now say their boss’ gender makes no difference to them. Those who do have a preference are now evenly divided between male and female bosses, also a first in Gallup’s trend. (<http://news.gallup.com/poll/221216/concerns-sexual-harassment-higher-1998.asp>)

So it would appear that American society has indeed engaged in a moral dialogue and reached a new, shared, moral understanding. Until, that is, one remembers the U.S. President describing in a taped conversation that he had committed sexual assaults, made all the more credible by paying hush money to a porn star and a Playboy bunny with whom he had affairs. A dozen women continue to accuse him of inappropriate behavior before his election. Closure for the nation may never be reached until the unrepentant leader confesses and apologizes, resigns, or loses a lawsuit. If the President gets away with sexual harassment, some powerful men will not change their misogynist attitudes and locker room behaviour. Flouting the rules will “unravel voluntary compliance over time because,” as Etzioni writes, “those who adhere to the norms will feel that they are being taken advantage of or treated unfairly and feel like ‘suck-

ers.” More than a slap on the wrist is required to ensure compliance.

This is where the State comes in. Moral indignation must ultimately be backed up with the rule of law. Senator Kristin Gillibrand and other women in Congress have called for investigations into the accusations against Trump, saying, “It’s the right thing to do and these allegations should be investigated.” Until they are, moral consensus may not be enough for immoral behaviour to change.

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