EDITORIAL ESSAY

Opening Constructive Dialogues Between Business Ethics Research and the Sociology of Morality: Introduction to the Thematic Symposium

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Abstract

Over the last decade, scholars across the wide spectrum of the discipline of sociology have started to reengage with questions on morality and moral phenomena. The continued wave of research in this field, which has come to be known as the new sociology of morality, is a lively research program that has several common grounds with scholarship in the field of business ethics. The aim of this thematic symposium is to open constructive dialogues between these two areas of study. In this introductory essay, we briefly present the project of the new sociology of morality and discuss its relevance for business ethics. We also review the contributions to this thematic symposium and identify four specific domains where future research can contribute to fruitful dialogues between the two fields.

Keywords Business ethics · Context · Morality · New sociology of morality · Sociology

Moral phenomena—i.e. those related to evaluations of actions, actors, norms, and practices as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable—constitute the primary sphere of interest for many disciplines and fields within cognitive, behavioral, and social sciences. While the most general explanations of human moral capacity are usually associated with the recent advances of evolutionary biology and psychology (Haidt 2008), these perspectives, important as they are, can hardly provide scholars with a comprehensive picture of moral life, as the latter is based not only on the universal and innate cognitive and emotional mechanisms, but is also imminently situated in diverse forms of social relations. Among these forms, the role of business and organizational relations is still relatively under-represented within the multidisciplinary science of morality (Abend 2013, 2014). Despite the contributions found in few classic works by Dalton (1959) and Jackall (1988) as well as some nascent works building upon French pragmatic sociology (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2006), we still lack a sufficient and thoroughly sophisticated account of the manifestations of morality in organizational settings that can shed light on the contextualized and nuanced character of making moral judgments and implementing ethical principles. The fields of business ethics research and the sociology of morality are particularly important in this respect, largely because both concentrate on clarifying the social mechanisms that are responsible for the variety of moral norms and practices within modern complex societies.

This thematic symposium, thus, is aimed at building bridges between business ethics research and the new sociology of morality in order to advance our understanding of moral phenomena in organizational life. It is a beginning for

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sustained dialogues between two fields that are distinct in their disciplinary identity and intellectual history, yet overlapping in theoretical ambition and empirical terrain, which suggests a considerable potential for mutually beneficial integration. The four articles that are included in this thematic symposium exemplify the promise that such dialogues hold for cross-fertilization and enrichment of scholarship in both fields.

This introductory essay is structured as follows: We first outline the emergence of the new sociology of morality and highlight the salient themes that connects this field with business ethics research. Next, we briefly review how each the four articles in this thematic symposium integrates insights from and contributes to both fields. Finally, we discuss directions for future research by identifying four specific domains where business ethics and the new sociology of morality can have fruitful dialogues.

Dawn of the New Sociology of Morality and Its Relevance to Business Ethics

While morality, understood at the time as a manifestation of human social nature, belonged to the core sociological problems since the discipline's very institutionalization as a scholarly field in the nineteenth century (Durkheim 2010), it was only recently that sociologists attempted to thoroughly revisit the study of morality, after several decades of relative neglect (Abend 2010; Hitlin and Vaisey 2010). This project of the "new sociology of morality" was largely the corollary of the critical reception from sociologists to both the conceptual understanding of morality and the methods for its empirical investigation used in the disciplines where moral phenomena was being examined more frequently— namely, psychology and cognitive science. The primary reservation that sociologists had with how psychologists and cognitive scientists approached the study was related to ontological assumptions about human nature, for the former tend to believe that the universalist perspectives that appear to undergird the latter's perspectives do not pay sufficient attention to some important aspects of moral phenomena, associated with their social, cultural, historical, and contextual character (e.g. Abend 2011; Bykov 2019; Hitlin and Vaisey 2013; McCaffree 2019).

In developing a sociological research program for the study of morality, sociologists have followed classic theorists in their field—such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber—to account for various forms of human moral capacity. Within this purview, they have considered behavior, norms, values, worldviews, and emotions as both dependent and independent variables and have applied it to many morality-related phenomena (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). While this perspective has been vital for establishing the sociology of morality

in its early era, it turned out to need certain vindication in the twenty-first century, largely because the current multidisciplinary field of morality has come to be dominated by research in psychology and cognitive science and its concomitant ontological focus on the innate and universal mechanisms of moral judgment and behavior (Abend 2013; Haidt 2008).

In undertaking this intellectual endeavor over the past decade or so, sociologists investigated a number of important problems, rendering the new sociology of morality to be quite diverse thematically: ranging from conceptual issues (Abend 2011; Tavory 2011) and the role of morality in social action (Vaisey 2009) to rethinking the links of moral ideas to such phenomena as markets (Fourcade and Healy 2007), social class (Sayer 2010), religion (Bader and Finke 2010), and identity (Stets and Carter 2011). However, despite these and other interesting lines of scholarly inquiry, research on business ethics is largely absent from the current agenda in the sociology of morality. That is unfortunate inasmuch as the ongoing debates in business ethics could provide rich and versatile material for developing a more nuanced sociological understanding of morality.

We argue that a more explicit integration of the new sociology of morality and business ethics research would significantly advance our knowledge about the role of morality in shaping strategies of action, forms of interaction, conflict, and reflexivity within the real world of intra- and interorganizational relations. In fact, we already find some exemplars in the recent literature within both sociology and business research. As illustrative examples, we briefly consider economic inequality and corporeal ethics—two debates in the area of business ethics where the relevance of research on the new sociology of morality is particularly apparent.

Economic inequality is one of the most pressing grand challenges threatening the sustainability of human existence, and one of the key problems tackled by scholars in both fields. Since the Second World War, the economic gap between the rich and the poor has grown exponentially across the world (Piketty 2013). Economic inequality is a pivotal concern for business ethics insofar as organizational and management practices function as important conduits for creating, maintaining, and reifying the phenomenon (e.g. see Bapuji et al. 2020; Fotaki and Prasad 2015; Riaz 2015). Given that organizational and management practices are implicated in the propagation of economic inequality, scholars in the field have sought to identify paths for redress (Bapuji and Chrispal 2020; Rauf and Prasad 2020). The new sociology of morality is important in such efforts as it proffers analytical and conceptual tools from which to foreground economic inequality as a distinctly moral issue that is engendered by a set of social and institutional forces. For instance, besides examining the social and demographic factors of economic inequality, sociologists provide both

empirical and theoretical analysis of class culture, demonstrating its distinct "moral significance" (Sayer 2005, 2010; Lamont 2000): from this perspective, inequality appears to be not just an economic fact, but, rather, a phenomenon subjectively supported by a shared sense of moral worth and recognition associated with class positions. Examining how the employees' and managers' behavior in organizational settings is affected by their class culture, including ideas used for justifications and rationalizations of inequality, is an example of a promising contribution of the new sociology of morality to the field of business ethics (Zulfiqar and Prasad in press). Similarly, sociological frameworks on economies of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2006) as well as recent studies of social orders of justification (Forst 2014, 2017) can shed light on the dynamics of the disputed territory of inequality where individuals and organizations are engaged in continuous efforts to justify, negotiate, and redraw its boundaries.

Another debate to which research on the new sociology of morality can make a meaningful impact is, what we call, the corporeal turn in business ethics. Feminist researchers in the field have increasingly recognized that ethics is an embodied phenomenon—and, as such, it cannot be divorced from social experience (Mandalaki and Daou 2020; Prasad 2014; Prasad et al. 2020; Pullen and Rhodes 2014). These researchers have offered empirical evidence to substantiate this position. For instance, Segarra and Prasad (2018) juxtapose Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil against her biography to show how theorizing is an inherently subjective process that is informed by lived experiences. Working along a similar current, Pullen and Vachhani (2020) invoke the ethics of the corporeal to underscore the need to reconceptualize women's leadership traits on their own terms—rather than defining it in essentialist opposition to men's leadership traits. Sociologists of morality, on the other hand, consider body not only as an important component of one's self and identity (e.g. via modifications), but, no less importantly, as an other-oriented, and hence moral, project (Hookway 2012). For instance, as demonstrated by Shaw (2015), such practices as organ and tissue donation, breast milk sharing and assisted human reproduction suggest that the role of the corporeal in other-oriented actions should not be underestimated. Integrating these insights, particularly placing the "corporeal altruism" (including any corporeal practices aimed at fostering the well-being of other bodies, e.g. emotional support through body contact) in organizational and business settings and specifying the embeddedness of moral feelings could advance our understanding of mutual moral support in workplaces, as well as possible tensions associated with it.

With these brief examples, we would like to point out the relevant general lines of research in business ethics and the sociology of morality that demonstrate a considerable potential for mutually beneficial convergence, and we will discuss some other promising directions in greater detail below. Yet, we acknowledge that more specific and focused research would better represent the ways of possible integration of the two perspectives in social inquiry. In the following section, we review the four contributions to the thematic symposium: they are quite diverse thematically, but each provide an interesting example of how the concepts and ideas from the two fields could advance our understanding of morality as applied to the business and organizational sphere.

Contributions to the Thematic Symposium

The article by Chow and Calvard (2020) studies the descriptions and justifications that practitioners in the commercial legal industry in Singapore offer with respect to expressions of morality in their work. It shows that in the highly professionalized and institutionalized context of lawyering work, actors continuously feel pressured to adhere to the established order at the expense of acting according to their personal morals—and, at times, even the morals that are at the core of the law profession. This has resulted in what the authors call "constrained morality"—i.e. a limited, sterile form of morality that only recognizes instrumental, utilitarian values in service of the client and firm interests. The study identifies a set of structural challenges that have gradually inhibited the expressions of morality in this sector, as well as a set of professional identity management tactics that lawyers have been adopting in response to those challenges. These findings provide a solid foundation for future studies that must distinguish between different types of morals (e.g. accepting or refusing pro bono work seem to be very different from bending the moral rules to rubber stamp client activities) (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013), different types of institutional actors (e.g. professional lawyers, individual and firm clients, partners of corporate law firms, public officials, educators of the law profession) (Shadnam et al. 2020), and different types of structural pressures and their effects (e.g. institutional logics influence practices at a very different level from the effect of organizational or professional bodies) (Firat and McPherson 2010).

The article by Rauf (2020) grapples with thorny discourses related to morality in and of new media (focusing on social media, in particular). In revisiting the 2019 case of the terrorist attack on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, Rauf illuminates the complicity of new media in enabling the event. Gleaning insights from the case study, he offers compelling evidence to demonstrate how new media is mobilized by various unscrupulous actors to engage in online othering, wherein certain subjects—often Muslims—are constructed as being "a ubiquitous and an existential

threat" (Prasad 2020, p. 299). It is the process of constructing these subjects as ubiquitous and existential threats to society that encourages acts of terrorism to be enacted against them. Rauf presents subculturization, sensationalization, and popularization as three trajectories through which this phenomenon is achieved. Rauf's study highlights that contrary to commonsensical views, technology (and media technology particularly) is far from being nonmoral or neutral. Rather, media technologies are always morally charged, and given their increasing reach and influence in human life, it is imperative to study the moral implications of media technologies.

Peifer et al. (2020) examine the relationships between scientists' moral values and their perception of market as either civilizing or destructive, focusing on patents as an example of "contested commodity" that could be evaluated differently in terms of their general impact on society. The enactment of patent law, in this sense, is of ambivalent nature (Pila 2020): some would argue that the commercialization of scientific knowledge, especially that related to medicine, is essentially immoral, while others think that the market logic of profit-making allows concentrating large recourses for facilitating the spread of new technologies, which, in turn, benefits the entire society, although in an indirect way. Considering this issue from the scientists' perspective, the authors found that those professional biologists and physicists who share the value of universalism (Schwartz 2007) tend to support the idea of the market as a "destructive" force by demonstrating anti-patenting attitudes. This study illustrates an important contradiction between traditional universalistic scientific ethos that emphasizes free exchange of knowledge and disinterestedness (Merton 1973) and increased commercialization of scientific research, which could lead to certain tensions within both academic and business spheres. Future research need to further specify the relations of the normative complex, associated with the role of a scientist (as well as others in the world of academia, including, for instance, university administrators) with the exogenous factors that affect and challenge traditional moral infrastructure of scientific institutions, which would significantly contribute to the sociology of morality, the sociology of science, as well as the literature on moral markets.

In the article by Branicki et al. (2020), the authors consider the morality, character, and efficacy of CEO activism—a phenomenon increasing in frequency. In revisiting two recent "moral episodes"—The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and the Fetal Heartbeats Acts—the authors specifically account for how CEO activism is framed in terms of morality. While a number of implications from their study is identified, the one that appears most troubling is the potential for CEO activism to render invisible the myriad socially irresponsible acts that corporations, led by CEOs of course, commit on a regular

basis. Thus, the authors do not uncritically accept CEOs as moral leaders and, instead, encourage readers to scrutinize the motives underlying CEO activism—especially on ostensibly moral issues. This position complements the extant literature in critical management studies that has called into question corporate actors' participation in social and moral debates that are largely or wholly outside the scope of their business operations (e.g. Banerjee 2008; Bloom and Rhodes 2018; Fleming and Jones 2013; Prasad and Holzinger 2013).

Directions for Future Research

We hope these contributions will play an important part in further integration of business ethics research and the new sociology of morality, but they, of course, do not exhaust all the possibilities for fruitful discussions between the two fields. As such, in this section, we outline four domains where future research can form promising dialogues between business ethics and the new sociology of morality.

Dialogue 1: Boundaries Between Moral, Immoral, and Nonmoral

A focus on moral phenomena is as fundamental to the distinct academic identity of business ethics research as it is for the new sociology of morality. Accordingly, a distinction between moral and nonmoral phenomena necessarily undergirds all research in both fields. The moral territory is further divided into two sub-territories of moral (i.e. good, right, just) and immoral (i.e. bad, wrong, unjust). While every study presupposes some sort of map that distinguishes the territories of moral, immoral, and nonmoral, very few studies make their presuppositions explicit let alone subjecting them to problematization and disciplinary debate (Shadnam 2014). This is unfortunate because how we conceive of the boundaries between moral, immoral, and nonmoral have significant implications for how we understand the organizational and social world. Are these boundaries objective, subjective, or inter-subjective? Are these boundaries different for different groups of people and different contexts? Are these boundaries fixed or dynamic? How do people discover, imagine, or construct these boundaries under different circumstances? How do power relations play a role in drawing lines between moral, immoral, and nonmoral? These questions can guide a lively dialogue between the two fields ultimately furthering some of the classic debates regarding the fact-value distinction (Putnam 2002, 2013) as well as some recent debates on the potential of performativity research to transcend descriptive-prescriptive tensions (Marti and Gond 2018; Shadnam 2019).

With respect to the philosophical foundations of this dialogue, the new sociology of morality has brought forward

the concern with moral truth. For instance, Abend (2008, 2010) sheds light on how the arguments of some moral philosophers for existence of real, factual boundaries between moral, immoral, and nonmoral could make a significant difference in our scientific understanding and explanation of moral phenomena. While this does not mean that there is any consensus among moral philosophers, or sociologists, regarding the question of moral truth, the current discussions have highlighted the importance of ontological presuppositions with respect to boundaries between moral categories. On the positivist side of the spectrum, some scholars in organization studies have built upon this thread and argued that "accepting at least a limited form of moral objectivity, namely, an epistemic orientation that seeks objective moral reasons, can benefit management research" (Kim and Donaldson 2018, p. 5). On the post-positivist side of the spectrum, some business ethics scholars have argued that moral, immoral, and nonmoral are socially constructed labels, and their boundaries are drawn differently depending on context (Shadnam et al. 2020; Shadnam and Lawrence 2011).

Apart from philosophical discussions, researchers in sociology and organization studies have a shared interest in the variation (across different contexts) and dynamics (over time) of the boundaries between moral, immoral, and nonmoral. In terms of variation, comparative research has established that people in different contexts understand moral categories in starkly different ways (Lamont 1992, 2000, 2012). A notable feature of this literature is explicit attention to boundaries and boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002), and consequently several sets of practices and processes underlying the creation, maintenance, and disruption of moral boundaries are delineated. In terms of the dynamic character of moral boundaries, the literature of morals and markets in economic sociology has documented and analyzed several dramatic transformations in the territories of moral categories (Fourcade and Healy 2007, 2017; Macekura et al. 2016). For instance, such dynamics are explicated with respect to the notion of "good death," where the shift of boundaries led to the creation of a market for life insurance (Quinn 2008; Zelizer 1979). These streams of sociological research can inform and be informed by the parallel works that have been ongoing in business ethics and organizational research. The literature of cross-cultural business ethics, for instance, has identified and partly explained the variation of moral categories across different cultures (Husted and Allen 2008; Keim and Shadnam 2020; Robertson and Crittenden 2003). Organization research streams of institutional theory (Haveman and Rao 1997; Thornton 2002) and sensemaking (Reinecke and Ansari 2005; Sonenshein 2006, 2007, 2009) have also documented shifts of moral boundaries in various organizational settings. For instance, Lawrence and Phillips (2004) have shown that tremendous changes have occurred in our collective moral boundaries with respect to animals—e.g. whales—during the last century and half, shifting our understanding of whales from dangerous monsters to be hunted and killed, to natural resources to be preserved and protected, to now intelligent individuals to be watched and admired. This macro change has facilitated the emergence of whale watching industry, which was not conceivable before the last redrawing of moral boundaries.

Finally, there are some scholars who have developed comprehensive conceptual toolkits for understanding how moral boundaries are drawn and redrawn. For instance, Andrew Sayer (2005, 2007, 2011) forcefully argues that these boundaries are grounded in people's practical reasoning and reasonableness and how they view social arrangements and practices as leading to human suffering or flourishing. While his arguments may not encompass the entire terrain of morality (Smith 2013; Vaisey 2012), business ethics researchers can build upon and engage with Sayer's work (2007, 2011) for studies on ideas related to harm, fairness, and dignity in work settings. The existing work on dignity in business ethics (e.g. Lucas 2015; Lucas et al. 2013, 2017) has cited but not really engaged with Sayer's comprehensive conceptual oeuvre that includes moral sentiments, socialization, virtues, character, norms, stories, reasonability, social relations, social structure, and power.

Dialogue 2: Automaticity or Reflexivity of Morals

The problem of the acquisition and the implementation of moral norms and standards also deserves special attention from both sociology of morality and business ethics research. Perhaps, one of the key distinctions here is between automatic, unconscious processes of making moral judgments, and more reflexive, deliberative evaluations of norms, principles, and situations. This opposition is well-known, perhaps most conspicuously, within moral psychology (Ellmers et al. 2019), where many experimental studies were conducted in order to clarify the relative salience of these two mechanisms in human moral cognition (e.g. Paxton et al. 2012). Yet, we suggest that this perspective could be enriched by a more thorough consideration of the organizational factors that affect the extent to which moral judgments are produced in an automatic or a reflexive way.

Generally, what both the sociology of morality and business ethics could add to the existing generalist psychological models of moral cognition is giving close attention to the social context in which moral decisions are made by people playing different roles and occupying different positions. A number of abstract sociological theories emphasize reflexivity (as opposed to the unproblematic internalization of the external norms) as one of the key capacities of social actors (e.g. Decoteau 2016; Giddens 1984), but they lack more specific elaboration in terms

of both substantive focus on morality and organizational context. Some such theories, however, contain valuable ideas concerning the phenomenon of moral reflexivity, and are potentially appliable to the sphere of business ethics. For instance, Boudon (2010), developing his cognitive theory of axiological feelings, argued that people base their normative judgements on what they see as valid reasons, endorsing certain lay "theories" of what is right and wrong based on more or less explicit considerations. He also pays special attention to contextually "bounded" axiological rationality (referring mostly to cultural differences), suggesting that these normative reasons "can be context-dependent but also context-free" (Boudon 2010, p. 19). This theory allows linking reflexive perception and evaluation of the ethical principles with specific organizational factors that could trigger, alter, or hinder this kind of deliberative thinking, but more analytical and empirical work is needed to clarify these relations.

As for the business ethics side of this dialogue, there has recently been a certain movement towards analyzing the role of moral reflexivity in organizational context. Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015) argue for a more explicit consideration of moral reflexivity in teaching responsible management, stressing the importance of questioning the existing organizational practice. Shadnam (2020), in a more theory-driven manner, uses the conceptual means derived from the sociology of culture and sociology of morality for developing the metaphor of the "scene" of moral reflexivity, and applies it to the organizational context: from this perspective, moral reflexivity is viewed as an important component of the evolution of one's self-concept. This work suggests a basis for developing a more advanced comprehension of the relations between conformist organizational behavior and a more critical reception of the workplace norms and practices.

We believe that further investigation of the factors, forms, and outcomes of the reflexive appropriation of moral norms within business sphere would be fruitful for those scholars across a wide range of fields who are interested in studying the dynamics of modern organizations. This is largely because moral reflexivity of organizational members, which is documented among top managers (e.g. Anderson 1998), regular employees (e.g. O'Mahoney 2007), and other professionals such as consultants (e.g. Gond and Moser 2019) is one of the important sources for the transformation of organizational normative culture that have received so far relatively little attention. Complementing and broadening the existing psychological concepts in this domain, this promising dialogue between the sociology of morality and business ethics studies would shed new light on the subjective perception of morality in the real world of organizational relations.

Dialogue 3: General Concepts and Models in Relation to Morality

As we discussed earlier, the resurgence of research in the sociology of morality has been in part a reaction to the acceleration of work on morality in disciplines of psychology and philosophy (Bykov 2019). To highlight the unique contribution of sociology, researchers have been paying special attention to the role of context (Abend 2013, 2014; Shadnam 2015). This has proved to be an accurate and successful differentiation strategy because the social and cultural forces of real-life contexts are often missing in pristine lab experiments of psychologists and abstract thought experiments of philosophers. However, this focus has resulted in a body of research work that is dominated by studies that are highly context-dependent (case studies, ethnographic inquiries, etc.). Consequently, limited attention has been paid to developing general concepts and models that can stand above the idiosyncratic features of particular contexts and help us understand morality and moral phenomena in generalized terms—which is, perhaps, one of the key distinctive features of the new sociology of morality, compared to the classical one that was heavily influenced by "grand" social theory (Durkheim 2003; Parsons 1991). Nevertheless, there are few exceptional attempts at general classification, which offer useful toolkits for researchers in the field of business ethics. A classic example is provided by Bellah and his colleagues (1996) and later Hunter (2000) whose work was focused on contemporary United States, and identified four different moral cultures, namely, expressive individualist, utilitarian individualist, civic republican, and biblical. Other notable examples are the work of Lamont (1992, 2000, 2012; Lamont and Molnár 2002) on moral boundaries, which we mentioned in the first dialogue, and the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006) who offer a typology of six (later extended to seven; see Thévenot et al. 2000) orders of worth. The stream of research on orders of worth is of particular importance as it proved to offer a robust framework for analyzing agreement and discord in a wide variety of social contexts including organizational settings (Cloutier et al. 2017; Demers and Gond 2020; Patriotta et al. 2011).

On the contrary, in business ethics research there are far too many concepts and models, some of which are borrowed from other disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, education, and communication, and there are others that are developed indigenously by business ethics researchers. The problem is that this plethora of concepts and models has "largely remained amorphous, fragmented, and scattered under several banners" (Shadnam 2014, p. 23). As a result, the general concepts and models that capture important and interesting aspects of moral phenomena and can lead to generative frameworks for other disciplines are not sufficiently visible in the existing literature even to fellow

researchers in the field of business ethics. Among the concepts and models in the literature of business ethics that can make contributions to the sociology of morality, there is a psychological model that has attracted a sustained stream of research: the moral decision making process. This process model was originally envisioned as comprised of four logical stages—moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intention, and moral behavior—but has undergone significant revisions in recent years (Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe 2008; Treviño et al. 2014). Another example in this vein is the constellation of concepts—such as misconduct, corruption, deviance, scandal—that are used to refer to moments of failure to adhere to morals (Castro et al. 2020; Shadnam et al. 2020).

There are also few concepts that have attracted the attention of researchers in both fields of sociology of morality and business ethics. A particularly salient one in this category is the concept of moral self and some related concepts such as moral identity and virtue. In the sociology of morality, Taylor (1989) forcefully shows that morality must be at the heart of any understanding of the self, because the self is constituted in and through moral choices. More recently, Stets and Carter (2011, 2012) offer a theory of the self, based on continuous processes of identity verification, to explain individual variation in moral behavior and emotion. In business ethics research, researchers have paid special attention to how certain morals are adopted into an individual's sense of self and how the adopted morals influence the moral functioning of the individual (Jennings et al. 2015). For instance, researchers in the field of business ethics have extensively studied ethical leadership, and how the moral identity of a leader influences the moral identities of the followers (Wang et al. 2019; Zhu et al. 2016). Each of these parallel streams of research on the moral self can benefit from serious engagement with the other to further refine and elaborate general concepts and models for explaining moral phenomena.

Dialogue 4: Homogeneity or Heterogeneity of Moral Regulations and Practices

Moral regulation of organizational behaviors is derived from multiple normative sources, ranging from general moral standards, such as prohibiting harm and expecting helping others, to more specific rules and codes, such as those associated with professional and business ethics. And, although psychologists conducted comprehensive work on clarifying the mechanisms of universal, innate moral dispositions, the latter kind of morality, which varies depending on the structure of complex social relations, remains relatively unexplored. We believe that another promising dialogue between the sociology of morality and business ethics research should concentrate on the role of different normative systems in shaping organizational practices—focusing, especially, on the conflicts caused by competing formal, moral, and ethical requirements.

Classical sociologists provided certain theoretical accounts of professional ethics as opposed to general moral norms (Durkheim 2003), as well as conceptualization of the rules associated with particular professional roles and positions. Parsons (1991), for instance, suggested that different social roles are characterized by somewhat different normative expectations that regulate social interactions— yet, these norms are coherent to the most general societal values of a given society. This perspective emphasizes the normative sources of social consensus, but pays virtually no attention to the instances of discrepancies between normative systems of different genesis—a problem that deserves a more thorough consideration, especially in relation to the organizational sphere. To mention one example, relevant to the academic peer-review procedure: Lamont (2009) reports that there is a certain tension between the principles of grant applications assessment that are based on, on the one hand, the application's merit (which is one of the key principles used in academia), and, on the other, the applicant's minority status (which is important in terms of promoting diversity and combating systematic inequality). We suppose that situations of this kind, when one faces contradictory moral norms and ethical requirements, are not uncommon within organizations of any kind, and there is a need for further investigation of such instances and theorizing on their role in organizational practices.

Another illuminating example where the heterogeneity of moral regulations and practices is particularly evident is the pornography industry, because it "combines different aspects of the social world that are typically separate" such as "condoms and contracts," "sex and career strategies," and "nakedness and employment" (Schieber 2019, p. 1). This unique heterogeneity of normativity is notable given the dramatic growth of this industry over the last few decades into a huge global industry with sizable economic features and significant societal penetration (Berg in press; Tarrant 2016). It also shows a notable transformation of the relations between moral norms and rational market logic, as with this example one can witness a dramatic shift in the relative power of the two normative systems, which deserves further comprehension.

Although there is hardly any generally recognized classification of social and moral norms that proposes meaningful distinctions between different kinds of normativity (yet, see Thévenot 2001; Turiel 1983) it is clear that business organizations are places where one can witness the intersection between different—formal, rational, legal, conventional, and moral/ethical—normative standards. This fact, we believe, provides valuable material for further attempts to disentangle the basic forms of the norms that regulate interactions in organizational settings.

Scott (2002), for instance, identified five specific organizational moral values that correspond to basic organizational goals (honest communication, justice, respect for property, life, and religion), but this framework shows little connection to contemporary sociological accounts of morality. In contrast to philosophers and psychologists, who seek to discover the fundamental principles of what morality is, or should be, based (e.g. the principle of justice; see Rawls 1971; and its applications in business ethics, see Prasad 2018), sociologists consider moral phenomena in relation to their social context, relying on both individualistic and holistic explanations, as well as their integration (Powell 2010). The sociological perspective is, usually more relativistic, as it tends to emphasize different visions of morality that illuminate its complex nature, suggesting that moral norms and worldviews are often a function of social and historical context (Bykov 2019; Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). A more direct and substantive dialogue on the relations between different normative systems in shaping organizational behavior would both advance the conceptual understanding of normativity and clarify the multiple mechanisms of moral regulations in organizations, especially those associated with modern cultural transformations and value change.

Another, related problem that could be of interest to the new sociology of morality and business ethics researchers is the effect of explicit norms (including ethical codes and declarations of values) on real organizational practice. While the classical functionalist sociology emphasized the ultimate effect of values on social behavior (Parsons 1991), lately this view was substituted by a more subjectivist and less deterministic approach to the role of culture in action (Swidler 1986). Nevertheless, modern sociologists acknowledge the causal effect of culturally acquired values on behavior; although culture is often understood in an extended sense, including nondiscursive elements (Vaisey 2009).

Putting these abstract theoretical considerations into organizational context and applying them to the problem of the norm-oriented behavior (Bykov 2017) would serve, at least, two goals. First, this would allow verification and clarification of such general models of culture at the meso-level of organizational relations, which is important for further development of the sociological theories of values and morality (e.g. research on economies of worth has gained admirable momentum in this direction; see Cloutier et al. 2017; Demers and Gond 2020). And, second, this would give a more solid theoretical foundation for business ethics research, which, in turn, could provide rich empirical material for advancing our knowledge and fostering the interdisciplinary dialogue on human moral capacity.

Conclusion

Business ethics research has always been a pluralistic domain where insights from multiple disciplines enrich one another (Brenkert and Beauchamp 2010; Prasad and Mills 2010). At this juncture, it seems timely for researchers of business ethics to take note of recent developments in the new sociology of morality. As the articles in this thematic symposium show, making more explicit connections between the sociology of morality and business ethics would significantly advance both fields, as well as facilitate the ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue about the role of morality in organizational and social life. As recent events, most notably the global pandemic of COVID-19 suggests (Brammer et al. 2020; Prasad and Zulfiqar 2020; Wasdani and Prasad 2020), the debates raised in this editorial will become only more pressing and timely. We invite fellow scholars from business ethics, the sociology of morality, and beyond, to join this conversation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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