

Between Durkheim and Bauman A Relational Sociology of Morality in Practice

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As the chapters in this book attest, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in morality as an object of study in various disciplines in the social sciences, notably anthropology, sociology and also social geography (see for example Hitlin and Vaisey 2013; Lambek 2010; Smith 1997). In sociology, after being out of favour for several decades, there have been renewed attempts to provide properly sociological theories of morality (Abbott 2020; Joas 2000), while empirical sociological research is increasingly willing to address topics of family relationships, social movements, political participation and contestation, inequalities, and even social practices themselves, in moral terms (Abend 2013). Such sociological approaches take morality to refer to ‘understandings of good and bad, right and wrong, worthy and unworthy that vary between persons and between social groups’ (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013: 55). This resurgence has coincided with ‘relational’ approaches to sociology becoming the dominant paradigm for understanding social life and social phenomena (Prandini 2015). The ascendancy of relational sociology has much to do with its capacity to undermine both holist and individualist modes of thinking simultaneously. It is able to cut between these traditional dualistic stances of social theorizing by conceptualizing social phenomena not as substances external to interaction, but as being relationally produced and dynamically unfolding in the interdependent practice of relationally-moulded individuals. Likewise, relational sociology does not reduce social phenomena to the actions of detached subjects, but rather sees individuals and their agency as being the product of the relations in which they are embedded. However, the value of relational sociology to sociological approaches to morality is so far underexplored. In this chapter, I argue that relational sociological approaches are of specific value to social scientific studies of the good for two main reasons.

Firstly, such approaches allow us to conceptualize morality in terms that avoid the dualistic tendencies towards holism and individualism that have often seeped into sociological conceptualizations of morality. As will be discussed through critiques of Emile Durkheim's (holist) and Zygmunt Bauman's (individualist) attempts to formulate sociological approaches to morality, such bifurcating accounts become problematic for understanding moral action in a way that coheres with how morality is engaged with in practice. This brings us to the second contribution relational approaches can make to understanding morality sociologically. Namely, an interactionist relational sociology allows us to understand morality as a social phenomenon that is enacted, sustained and transformed in interactional practice. By conceptualizing social phenomena as being produced and dynamically unfolding in the interdependent interaction of relationally-entangled individuals, relational sociology provides a theoretical framework that avoids the dualistic separation of the individual and social context in how morality is conceptualized, and it provides a basis for viewing morality as being principally engaged with in the relationally-entangled doing of social life.

Relational Sociology

Relational sociology argues that the 'most appropriate analytic unit for the scientific study of social life is the network of social relations and interactions between actors' (Crossley 2011: 1). The language of relations is used to explain social phenomena on both a micro and a macro scale in a way that subverts the necessity of reverting to outmoded sociological dualisms (holism-individualism, structure-agency), which have inhibited the capacity of social theories to explain social phenomena in a way that coheres with how social practice is actually lived in the interactional realities of everyday life.

The success of relational sociology lies in its capacity to undermine both sides of dualistic assumptions in social theorizing simultaneously. Against theories oriented towards individualism or subjectivism, or which designate agency in terms of individualistic agentive capacities, it is argued that individuals, their agency, and their action, are necessarily constituted in social relations (Burkitt 2016). Against perhaps stronger 'holist' conventions in sociology of referring to 'society' in terms of substantive social structures, relational sociology postulates that 'society' and 'social structures' should be understood as continually emergent relations that exist between interdependent interactors (Dépelteau 2008). That is, the relational view conceptualizes 'both individuals and larger formations in which they participate (like collectivities, institutions, and social systems) as belonging to the same order of reality, a relational order' (Powell and Dépelteau 2013: 3). This manoeuvre posits the individual as inextricably constituted by social relations, while concurrently seeing 'social structures' as being comprised of the relations that

exist between interacting individuals, and thus argues that social phenomena, at all levels of analysis, are constituted by nothing more than interdependent social relations (Powell 2013).

Broadly construed social phenomena, including moral phenomena, are reconceptualized as being constituted and maintained across vast, historically-emergent networks of interaction, which manifest features of our social environments such as languages, institutions, cultural practices and so forth (Crossley 2011). Such phenomena are conceptualized in processual terms, as being produced through ongoing interaction, and thus as being ever in the making (Schatzki 2016). Yet this is not to imply that social phenomena are thus the result of individual action, because it is within these networks that individuals and their actions are themselves constituted. Relational approaches deliver this argument on several grounds. Firstly, individuals, their subjectivities, dispositions and also their 'higher' faculties for social and moral evaluation and judgement are fundamentally moulded within the relational interactions that comprise their socialization, which also embeds the individual within the practices and networks that make up their social world (Mead 1934). Secondly, individual action is given form and course by the orders of practice and institutional arrangements within which it is enacted (Elias 1991). Significantly, relational approaches also emphasize how actions emerge intersubjectively in interaction between actors who 'profoundly affect each other as they interact' (Barnes 2000: 64). The malleability of conceptualizing phenomena in terms of relations, rather than static 'structures', allows relational approaches to facilitate explanations that recognize that the subjectivities and actions of reflexively-capable individuals are formed, moulded and enacted across a multitude of emergent, variable and indeterminate interactional settings, which are engaged with by actors from very different social positions.

In addressing the question 'where is the good in the world?', I argue that the processual picture offered by relational approaches enables us to see how moral phenomena – including values, obligations and understandings of the good – are shared and sustained, but also remoulded, as they are variably engaged with and enacted by individuals in practice. Such a view thus allows plural and intersecting understandings of the good to be depicted as fundamentally socially constituted, but also as being variably engaged with by differentiated individuals in relation to the specific and intersubjectively emergent situations in which they are acting. This perspective thus coheres with increasingly common arguments for conceptualizing morality in terms of practice. Such arguments emphasize morality as a phenomenon that is constituted and enacted within intersubjective practice by individuals whose moral understandings, values and actions are likewise conceptualized as being moulded and engaged with in relationally-entangled interaction. This then extends the argument already engrained in revived sociological (e.g. Sayer 2005), anthropological (e.g. Lambek 2015) and some philosophic (e.g. Herman 2000) stances on morality that suggests that 'everyday moralities' are an

ordinary and integral aspect of participation in social life, and that it is at the level of ordinary practice that the majority of moral action occurs.

Dualistic Moral Theorizing

The dualistic separation of society and the individual that relational approaches criticize in social theory in general has also played out in dominant sociological accounts of morality, with the sociologies of morality developed by Durkheim and Bauman exemplifying holist and individualist accounts respectively (Shilling and Mellor 1998). The shortcomings of these accounts for providing a picture of morality that coheres with how it is engaged with in practice not only point to the need for a relational approach to moral theorizing, but also demonstrate why ordinary practice should guide how sociology conceptualizes of morality.

We begin with Durkheim, whose work established many of the arguments for studying morality as a social phenomenon. For Durkheim, morality expressly exists as a 'social fact', and it should be studied as such. He contended that morality exists as binding 'rules that in effect determine behaviour' (Durkheim 1982: 69), and sociology should thus analyse the concrete forms that 'moral reality' takes at a societal level (Durkheim 1979a: 92). This reflects Durkheim's broader ontological and epistemological arguments regarding what social phenomena are and how they should be considered, which 'rests wholly on the basic principle that social facts must be studied as things, that is, as realities external to the individual' (Durkheim 1979b: 37–38). 'Moral facts' are accordingly conceptualized by Durkheim as consisting of definite 'rules for action' (1984: xxv) that constitute 'the totality of ties which bind each of us to society' (1984: 398). Societies are comprised of the binding force of moral rules, and individual consciousness is formed as a product of the social and moral facts that encompass the society of which the individual is part (Durkheim 1984). Consequently, for Durkheim, moral rules have authority over individuals and command their action not necessarily because of positive or adverse consequences, but because individuals are compelled to adhere to them as a result of their existence in a society in which these rules take an institutionalized form (Hookway 2015).

Durkheim's recognition that morality cannot be understood in abstraction from the societal context from which it takes its force was comparatively radical for its time, and this recognition provides the basis for sociological approaches to morality still (Junge 2001). Yet, the position he assumes is archetypical of a holist position on morality: it depicts morality as existing as binding rules of conduct that are set over and above the consciousness and interaction of individuals, and which individuals are obliged to follow as a result of their social existence. This basis has several problematic implications. Firstly, Durkheim's objectivist picture of society, coupled with the

functionalist conceptualization of morality in terms of binding rules that are imperative to social cohesion, falters on 'assumptions about universal internalization and unproblematic consensus' (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013: 53). His depiction of morality as the obligatory and binding rules of conduct of a society looks past the diverse, contested and shifting nature of moral beliefs, values and understandings of the good within a social context, in which quite profound differences and deep-seated contestations of what a society is and what it should be coexist (Sayer 2005).

Further, because Durkheim's (1982: 70) position sees the moral realities of a society as existing 'independent of their individual manifestations', moral difference and contestations to the prevailing order must necessarily be seen as a product of structural social change, and this obscures the role individual moral consciousness and action play in this process. For Durkheim, individual moral consciousness exists as the social assimilation of the individual into the obligatory rules of conduct in their society, meaning that these moral realities determine the consciousness and action of individuals. Durkheim's 'top-down' functional determinism thus annuls individual consciousness as being a potentially efficacious force of differentiated moral action and moral transformation (Hookway 2015: 278).

Durkheim consequently offers an unwieldy perspective on how moral action occurs in practice because the morality of an action is conceptualized as being external to the interactions of individuals. Durkheim for example argues that 'when I perform my duties as a brother, husband or citizen ... I fulfil obligations which are defined ... external to myself and my actions' (Durkheim 1982: 50). It is of course true that general moral expectations of what it is to be a good brother or a good spouse are socially constructed. But Durkheim's externalist position reifies such obligations as having a reality and form that exists in abstraction from the specific interactional realities through which they are enacted and reconstituted. Obligations associated with brotherhood and marriage do not just hang there as objective forms, either to be actuated or not. Not only does the meaning of such obligations differ significantly between individuals and social groups, but also how they are understood and enacted emerges interpersonally between actors (Finch 1989; Smart and Neale 1999). Indeed, Benhabib (1992) exemplifies this point through a situation in which a brother finds himself in financial trouble, and in which there is an obligation on older brothers to help. Benhabib argues that it may transpire that not fulfilling this obligation might prove to be the morally 'correct' decision; while financial aid may in some instances be benevolent, in others it may lead to continued dependency, or be provided in order to maintain an oppressive power imbalance (see also Smart and Neale 1999).

As will be discussed below, obligations and the 'right thing to do' emerge intersubjectively (Finch 1989), and the enactment of values and moral expectations varies considerably in relation to individual dispositions and subjectivities on the one hand and the practical realities of the social situation in which they

may be enacted on the other (Smart and Neale 1999). By characterizing morality as external to the interdependent practice of individuals, Durkheim not only presents moral obligations and values as having a life of their own beyond such interaction, but also overlooks how in the dynamics of social life 'vague values must always first be translated by individual effort into concrete orientations, balanced with other considerations, and possibly revised on the basis of the consequences of action' (Joas 2000: 18). It is not clear how such transformation and variance in action would be possible when such obligations are conceptualized as external to actors and their interactions. The relational approach thus argues that it is in the course of intersubjective interaction that moral meanings and obligations are sustained and transformed, and this is possible only insofar as they are brought into the experience of relationally-moulded individuals and enacted in interdependent interaction.

At the other end of the spectrum, Bauman (1989) critiques Durkheim for discounting the individual as a source of morality, and for equating morality with the authoritative dominance of social structures. For Bauman (2005), Durkheim's position undermines the characteristic feature of morality, namely the personal assumption of responsibility for the other, often in the face of prevailing social influences. It also means that society is presumed to be the arbiter that engenders and secures the individual's capacity to act morally. This in itself overlooks how society can be 'morally silencing' and oppressive of individual moral consciousness (Bauman 1989: 174; Hookway 2015). Bauman's (1989) classic *Modernity and the Holocaust* resoundingly argued that the horrors of the holocaust exemplify how obligated deference to the collective can expropriate individual moral responsibility to the demands of authority while repressing alternative moral voices and precipitating intolerance towards moral variation. These are the beginnings of Bauman's complete departure from, and inversion of, Durkheim's arguments regarding the source of moral action (Shilling and Mellor 1998).

Where Durkheim reduces morality to the following of rules and norms, Bauman contends that morality exists as the autonomous assumption of responsibility on the part of the individual, undertaken irrespective of, and often in opposition to, dominant social prescriptions of conduct (Crone 2008). Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Bauman presents morality as existing as an 'infinite' responsibility, which the individual must bear in the face of the other (Bauman 1998: 15). It is driven by a spontaneous and unordered impulsive responsiveness to the other, which provokes within the person the demand of boundless responsibility. The indubitable call towards 'being for the other' that is instigated by the 'face' of the other is based on a moral impulse that Bauman (1993: 35) explicitly argues is 'primal' and prior to social influence: 'well before we are told authoritatively what is "good" and what "evil" (and sometimes what is neither) we face the choice between good and evil; we face it already at the very first, inescapable moment of encounter with the Other' (Bauman 1995: 2). In stark contrast to Durkheim, Bauman

(2008) argues moral impulse and moral concern is prior to social norms and rules; the moral impulse derives from the 'original' encounter with the other 'at the birth of subjectivity' (Bauman 2008: 40), prior to the imposition of the social, and it is in fact rule- and norm-laden sociality that hinders moral impulse. Put simply, the impulse of which Bauman talks is not a consequence of socialization; in fact, he argues that the '*process of socialization consists in the manipulation of moral capacity* – not in its production' (Bauman 1989: 178, emphasis original).

On this basis, Bauman builds a very particular view of what morality entails. Because the individual's subjectivity is constituted through responsibility to the other, our moral impulse 'is triggered off by the mere presence of the Other as a face', which elicits within us the demands of an unbounded responsibility to that other, and action is moral to the extent to which this responsibility is actuated (Bauman 1991: 143). Such is the extent of the demands of this responsibility that moral action is conceptualized by Bauman (1993: 48) as being necessarily non-reciprocal: the 'indispensable, defining trait ... of a moral stance' is 'one-sidedness, not reciprocity; a relation that cannot be reversed'. Quite the opposite of Durkheim, Bauman's perspective contends that 'moral action is connected with the ultimate and indispensable responsibility of the person' (Junge 2001: 109), a responsibility that springs from 'the primal and primary "brute fact" of moral impulse' (Bauman 1993: 35).

Bauman's (1990: 33) express intention was to advance an 'inherently consistent sociological theory of morality'. However, it is hard to see how this is possible on a basis of pre-social impulse (Crone 2008; Junge 2001). Not only are notions of pre-social moral impulse and demands of infinite responsibility sociologically problematic (Morgan 2014; Shilling and Mellor 1998), but Bauman's subsequent argument that action is moral when innate moral impulse is enacted to the extent that our boundless responsibility to the other is fulfilled establishes an unachievable degree of 'moral sainthood' as the basis of properly moral action (Hookway 2017).

Locating the source of moral action upon pre-social impulse also fails to account for the role of complex social relationships in the constitution of what moral action entails and in how it is enacted (Shilling and Mellor 1998). Bauman does argue that moral impulse is intersubjectively triggered, but by conceptualizing morality as the boundless and non-reciprocal response to the stimulation of our primal impulse by the other, acts that suitably satisfy Bauman's conditions of moral action are presented as being in some way beyond the social, beyond the cultural historicities that constitute and define a moral action as such, as well as beyond specific interpersonal relations that orient the course of what moral action entails. This means that normative expectations, socially-moulded values, and acquired wisdom cannot play a constitutive role in guiding moral action or understandings of the good. A sociological perspective must surely rest on the argument that moral understandings and moral action, rather than being dependent upon a pre-social

impulse, are shaped within 'histories of networks of interaction that have generated the morals' in question (Crossley 2011: 2), and that our capacity to understand and enact our moral responsibility is 'unavoidably contingent upon our habits, traditions, customs, and the means of justification and resolution accepted in the communities we recognize as our own' (Morgan 2014: 136).

Bauman's individualist conception of the source of moral action is also unable to appreciate how moral actions and the form they take are to a certain extent constituted within the intersubjective situations in which they ensue. We can return to Benhabib's (1992) exemplification of how understanding the 'right' or 'good' course of action in the giving of financial aid to one's brother is contextually tied to the relationships between the relevant parties. Of course, Bauman did not argue that moral impulse decrees what the right course of action should be for all people in all circumstances, and he would not argue that actuating one's moral impulse necessitates providing financial relief to a sibling in need. Yet, by designating morality as being prior to social relationships, social discourse and reflective rumination, Bauman overlooks that our brothers' situation may indeed provoke an overwhelming urge to give alms, but upon deliberation we may decide that doing so is not the right thing to do. Perhaps we have learnt from experience that our brother has a habit of expecting to be bailed out after bad choices, while social discourse surrounding interventions and dependency relationships has taught us that the 'moral' thing may be to let our brother struggle now so that they learn to stand on their own in the future, being 'cruel to be kind', as it were. The point is not just that this course of action is unlikely to adhere to the boundless conditions of responsibility that Bauman asserts but also that what the 'moral' course might be does not sprout from primal impulse, but rather is moulded within a nexus of interpersonal relationships and situational circumstance, which interact with variably held and enacted social discourses.

While Bauman (1993) occasionally exalts the ordinary moral capacity of ordinary people, the severity with which he designates the 'defining traits of a moral stance' as 'one-sidedness, not reciprocity; a relation that cannot be reversed' (Bauman 1993: 48) means that much of ordinary moral practice cannot be conceptualized in moral terms, because such practice tends to be bound up with ordinary expectations of behaviour, such as reciprocity, mutuality and respect (Crone 2008). Such is the purity of Bauman's conceptualization of the moral that most ordinary moral practice is excluded. He describes morality in terms of the unattainably abstract, and thus turns attention away from morality as an ordinary aspect of everyday practice.

Relational Sociology and Morality in Practice

Albeit in opposite ways, the accounts given by Durkheim and Bauman both characterize morality as being constituted in abstraction from social practice,

and consequently, neither approach aligns cogently with descriptions of how morality is lived and engaged with in intersubjective life. Conversely, a relational approach to morality would see the good not as either contained in social structure or based on individual consciousness or impulse, but as being constituted, sustained and transformed in relational interaction. Relational perspectives glide between Durkheim's holism and Bauman's individualism by contending that moral phenomena are 'of course held by individuals, but they do not originate with the individual. They are intersubjectively constructed in communicative interaction', and this shapes the consciousness and action of individuals, meaning that moral phenomena are sustained and shared as they are variably enacted within complex networks of interdependent interaction, which produce and uphold social forms and figurations of moral meaning, understandings and conduct (Luckmann 2002: 19).

This approach is beneficial because it is able to conceptualize morality as an essentially social phenomena, as with Durkheim, without defining morality in externalist terms, as something that has a reality beyond the relationally-oriented interactions of individuals. This then discards the static structural determinism of Durkheim's arguments and facilitates a view of morality as something that is variably and intersubjectively done by individuals in the course of interdependent interaction.

In order to make the claim that this relational stance provides the most appropriate frame through which moral phenomena can be understood, it needs to be shown that morality is something that is precipitated in interactional practice. It happens to be the case that sociological interest in morality has resurfaced as 'fixed, substantive definitions of the moral' have been repealed in favour of reconceptualizing morality as being ordinarily and disparately enacted in routine participation in everyday life (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013: 54). Indeed, when duly considered, it is evident that many aspects of everyday practice are entrenched with moral bearing in how they are enacted and understood. People regularly espouse moralized standpoints towards a multitude of social issues – sexism, lying, how children should be disciplined, charitable giving – and they enact their moral understandings through encouraging children to learn and to travel, keeping in regular contact with parents, volunteering for a political party, avoiding certain shops or activities that they consider to be morally dubious, or holding their tongue in order to avoid offending a relative even if they disagree with them (Sanghera 2016; Sie 2015).

In recognizing that morality is an ordinary and integrated facet of routine social life, it becomes apparent that acting morally 'is thus not about duty for its own sake, nor about the ends or purpose of morality', but instead stems from 'the open-ended texture of everyday moral life' (Herman 2000: 30–31). From this viewpoint, attention shifts from conceptualizing moral understanding and behaviour in abstracted terms, and towards a depiction of 'moral competence as it is revealed in practice' (Hermann 2015: 121), which is exhibited, for example, in caring practices of parenting (Bowden 1996), in the

well-documented boundary work of grandparents to support their child's parenting without interfering (May and Lahad 2019), in tactful decisions made in the delivering of bad news (Maynard 1996), or as we make time for a friend in need (Hermann 2015).

Emphasizing morality as a phenomenon that is principally engaged with in ordinary living has directed sociological consideration towards the notion that it is in everyday interactional practice that moral orders and understandings are enacted, maintained and remoulded (Emirbayer and Maynard 2010). Goffman's (1959, 1967, 1968) work is instructive here, as it highlights the myriad of nuanced actions that are routinely conducted in order to align performances of self with ordinary moral expectations of behaviour that define an interactional context. For example, Goffman (1959) analysed how orders of conversation are followed to avoid rudeness, how distance is kept between individuals in public to prevent discomfort, how 'tactful blindness' is shown to avoid causing embarrassment to others, and how sanctioning and corrective practices are enacted in response to transgression. These analyses reflect how social interaction flows between ritualized social niceties we enact to maintain face on the one hand, and morally-oriented actions taken in the moment of practice on the other (Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015). For example, in *Stigma* (1968), Goffman illuminates how ordinary expectations of expressive control are amplified as people set their face and divert their gaze when they encounter a person with a marked physical abnormality to avoid causing offence. Likewise, Donnelly and Wright (2013) apply Goffman's work to show how careful tactful blindness (as opposed to sanctioning glances and cursory challenges) are favoured when disturbances to the interactional order of a church service are caused by a churchgoer with a disability.

A key aspect of Goffman's arguments, and the arguments of practice theories more generally, is that such performances are not conducted in isolation; they are the product of, and only make sense in relation to, a 'more or less stable background of other performances' (Rouse 2007: 505–6), which engenders the 'impression that there are proper ways to go about the business of everyday life' (Warde 2016: 152). Such orders of practice show how moral orders, obligations and expectations are socially held, yet as Goffman and ethnomethodological research has shown, an externalist picture of social structure is unable to account for how such orders are maintained. While Goffman sought to illuminate the ritualized nature of routine patterns of interaction that mean orthodoxies of practice are generally available, he also saw that the intersubjectively emergent and contingent circumstance of interactional performances means that order is 'ever in a process of being achieved' (Emirbayer and Maynard 2010: 239). This includes not just the enactment of appropriate conduct, but also small-scale practices such as the sanctioning of untoward behaviour through expressive challenges and apologies for transgression (Donnelly and Wright 2013). Although interactional orders are 'predicated on a large base of shared cognitive' and 'normative' presumptions

(Goffman 1983: 5), in practice they also need to be coordinated and calibrated through the continual 'correcting, sanctioning, criticizing [and] approving' of others (Frega 2015).

Indeed, Goffman (1959: 141) details the interactional work undertaken in the maintenance of tact and the avoidance of 'destructive information' that is liable to 'discredit' fellow actors in a way that is morally problematic. For example, the tactful 'under-communication' of certain facts often reflects a concerted moral concern for protecting the 'face' and welfare of others (*ibid.*). This has been exemplified in research into the moral significance of family secrets (Smart 2011). Such secrets are common in nearly every family in some form, and while secrets are often maintained for self-interested reasons, secrets are also kept to allay judgement, stigma and ostracization: 'keeping illegitimacy secret could be a means of defending from outside scrutiny and adverse judgement'; but likewise 'the telling or not telling of secrets can defend an individual against other family members ... e.g. keeping secret one's sexual orientation in order to maintain relationships' (Smart 2011: 540; Barnwell 2019). Such secrets often provide a means for maintaining relationships in their current form or for preventing damage to others because unearthing adoption or criminality, for example, can cause the narratives, identities and welfare of a family and its members to be rewritten (Smart 2011).

Maintaining such secrets can thus often reflect concern for the well-being of affected others or the desire to avoid conflict within complexly intertwined relations. We are largely able to comport ourselves appropriately to such situations through embodied moral experience: 'I sense the embarrassment of a person, and turn the conversation aside' (Mandelbaum 1955). Yet, it is not always the case that each person in an interactional setting shares the same knowledge of what is off-bounds, or the same tactful appreciation of the situation, or indeed the same willingness to uphold a secret. As Goffman (1959: 88) argues, 'any member of the [performance] has the power to give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct'; so the maintenance of the current order will often require some degree of 'teamwork' in the flow of practice; for example, through 'pretending not to hear', diverting conversation, cautionary glances, the challenging of awkward questions, and indeed reprimanding the tactlessness of those who bring up risky subjects.

Such situated responsiveness to interpersonal interactions is part and parcel of the maintenance of personal relationships in situations that confront us in everyday life, and it is illustrative of how morality is often engaged with in practice. Indeed, research into personal lives has provided a catalyst for the emergence of the renewed brand of sociological consideration of morality precisely because this realm of social life regularly necessitates everyday moral concern, often in a way that reflects socially-orientated expectations and obligations on the one hand, and the intersubjective emergence of action on the other (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007). Importantly, evidence from this field challenges both Durkheimian arguments for seeing moral meanings and obligations

as contained by social structure while also showing, contra Bauman, that moral decisions, even when taken at an individual level, are not describable in terms of unaccompanied individual consciousness or impulse; instead, such decisions are deeply entangled in relations and are moulded intersubjectively.

Research has illustrated that while family life is 'animated by and linked to wider notions of right and wrong' (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007: 405), which are drawn from 'ideas about moral obligations derived from wider culture' (Finch 1989: 143), interpretations of one's own responsibility and obligations towards one's family vary considerably in reflection of the circumstances and expectations of familial relationships, with subjective interpretations of responsibilities and obligations developing and emerging interpersonally between family members, often in relation to unfolding situational contexts, which mould assessments of what the 'proper thing to do' is in practice (Abbott 2020).

'Even in situations where rights and duties seem more fixed' (Finch 1989: 143), such as obligations of care for elderly parents, how these obligations operate in practice is 'a matter for negotiation' within families, which are weighed up in relation to practical and interpersonal factors such as proximity, gender,¹ quality and history of relationships, other caring responsibilities such as parenting, availability of and willingness to use professional care services, changing needs and wishes of the cared for parent, and the extent to which each party is perceived to be 'pulling their weight' (Finch and Mason 1990: 151). Contrary to Durkheim's assessment, in practice obligations and their enactment are far from clear-cut (Finch 1989). Rather than determining conduct, shared normative obligations provide touchstones that are woven into the emergent moral decisions and negotiations undertaken within personal relationships, which themselves develop intersubjectively as mutually entangled actors mould the directionality of the decisions that are taken (Smart and Neale 1999).

Elsewhere, research into moral decisions associated with moving away from home have challenged Durkheimian notions of the structural determination of moral consciousness by illustrating how such decisions are reflexively negotiated at an individual level, often through very personal consideration of one's own responsibility towards others. However, such research also illustrates how these decisions cannot be properly understood from the stance of isolated individual moral consciousness, let alone pre-social impulse (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007; Jones 1999). Such decisions have been shown to be framed by social realities, such as local youth employment rates, as well as being situated within more nuanced interpersonal relations that mould subjective senses of acceptance and belonging (Jones 1999). And while decisions to move away from hometowns are faced at a personal level, Holdsworth and Morgan (2007) detailed how their participants' processes of reflexive consideration drew on perceived expectations of both specific and generalized others, which were navigated and capitulated against as considerations of responsibility and potential to cause pain to loved ones were weighed up

alongside feelings of belonging, practical realities and desires to prosper and give meaning to their lives. The perceived expectations of others were brought into their moral decision-making in order to construct what is 'normal' for their family, friends and community more broadly, to negotiate perceived expectations and sensitivities that friends and family may hold towards their departure, and to weigh these up in relation to personal desires and acutely felt discourses and experiences of opportunity and deprivation, all of which were operationalized and negotiated in the course of arriving at a position on what 'the right thing to do' is (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007: 405). Moral decisions of this kind are indeed taken from an individual perspective, yet in Bauman's interpretation considerations of generalized social expectations, practical realities, and personal wants obscure the extent of our responsibility, rather than being seen as constitutive of the context in which moral action occurs, and of what moral behaviour might be. Moral decisions about what is 'good' or what the 'right' course of action is cannot realistically be unravelled from the relational context in which they are constituted; understanding how moral decisions and actions are taken in practice means taking seriously that moral perspectives are socially situated, and that the enactment of moral judgements occurs and is moulded within the messy entanglements of social life.

Conclusion

Both the immeasurable individual responsibility of Bauman and the reified externalism of Durkheim conceptualize of morality in terms abstracted 'from the practices in which [it] become[s] operative' (Joas 2000: 18). Not only does this mean that their approaches are able to contribute little to the question of how morality – whether conceptualized as the assumption of personal responsibility or the enactment of social values – is applied in interaction (Joas 2000), but it also means that they are unable to accurately conceptualize of the inter-subjective constitution and sustainment of moral phenomena. The contention of a properly sociological theory of morality is that moral phenomena are, like all other social phenomena, constituted through the doing of social life within complex networks of interdependent interaction. As exemplified above, our senses of obligations to our family are derived from wider culture, but they are learnt and continue to emerge through interactions and in relation to the particulars and circumstances of our own family relationships. What constitutes a moral action does not derive from the extent to which demands of an infinite responsibility have been attained, but neither do moral expectations and obligations just hang there with a meaning that exists outside of interactional relations. A relational approach allows us to conceptualize how moral action and the 'good' or 'right thing to do' are moulded in unfolding interactional practice between actors, through which broader moral understandings and expectations are drawn on, and thereby are upheld and transformed in interactions.

This perspective, then, argues that it is through relational interaction that different understandings of the good – for example of what considerate conduct involves, of what the expectations of care in a particular relationship entail, of how terms of moral evaluation and judgement are used, and even our broadly construed understandings of what is just – are sustained, moulded and remoulded. Complex social formations produced by vast historical networks of interaction engender broadly shared moral meanings and expectations, normative restraints, and cultural and legal frameworks of permissibility and value that fundamentally mould the consciousness, understanding and action of individuals. All these frame what moral action entails. But it is through interaction that these are brought into the experience of individuals, and they are brought to bear and sustained insofar as they are engaged with in practice.

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Note

1. Gender is significant not only because research has shown that women tend to provide more care for elderly parents overall, but also because gender has been shown to become significant to how responsibilities for caring are divvied up, with it often being assumed between siblings that men will do more of the caring for fathers and women for mothers, especially when it comes to intimate care such as bathing (Grigoryeva 2017).

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