



CGAP

Centre for Charitable Giving
and Philanthropy

Moral Judgements, Ethics and Social Class: The Moral Economy of Giving

A Preliminary Analysis

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Research Questions

- How do individuals make moral judgements about giving money and time?
- What is the relationship between social class and moral judgements?
- The topic of 'giving' cuts across disciplinary boundaries

Research Focus

- Recently morality has been conceptualised as ‘moral boundaries’, where working and middle classes have distinct moral values
- Sociologists tend to emphasise unreasoned subjective preferences, self-interest or collective values
- While rationality, habits and norms are necessary in explaining moral behaviour, moral sentiments are also important
- Moral judgements on giving involve fellow-feeling, self-reflexivity, irrationality (*akrasia* and self-deception) and ultimate moral concerns:
 - ethical practices not always as a result of systematic deliberation but also fragmented and subconscious ethical thinking
- A puzzle: people may volunteer a lot of time, but donate little!

Theoretical Framework

- Individuals are needy, vulnerable and evaluative beings, who have to dovetail various ultimate moral concerns and commitments facing particular social constraints and opportunities
 - not rational, autonomous nor over-socialised beings
- But to assume a highly reflexive critical self reduces the importance of habits and irrationalities in everyday life (*akrasia* and self-deception)
 - everyday morality involves both critical self-reflexivity and semi-/ unconscious thinking
- Everyday normativity embraces reflection and habituation and is embedded in social relationships in which we monitor and evaluate things, partly unconsciously through emotional responses and partly consciously through reflection (focused and fleeting thoughts)

- Moral judgements require sympathy for others, and involve different moral sentiments:
 - generosity, care, compassion, self-interest, prudence, pity, condescension, integrity, anger
 - not just a single sentiment, such as altruism or self-interest
- Individuals more concerned with social values have intense and focused self-reflexivity about giving money, involving mixed moral sentiments:
 - individuals are more political and engaged with the world
- Individuals more concerned with family and career are less reflexive:
 - individuals are either apolitical or not political (inhabit 'micro-worlds')

Moral Economy

- Being reflexive about ultimate moral concerns affects social practices and class structures

e.g., an individual's concern for social justice or family obligations can undermine her social mobility and career aspirations

- Social structures can corrupt moral sentiments and judgements

e.g., a market system tends to nurture a feeling of valuing money and commodities as a sign of moral worth and social esteem

- individuals are likely to disguise their intentions for economic advantages (a deliberate mis-recognition of the economic)

- How can social class distort moral judgements on giving?
 - class *habitus* need not be in harmony with wider discourses or abstract reflections, so resulting in anomalous and inconsistent behaviour
 - a) *akrasia* - although an individual knows that it is good to give to a street beggar or a charity, she doesn't because she isn't motivated enough:
 - e.g., lacking symbolic capital, recognition and status, a working class individual is cautious of losing symbolic power imbued in money – a thrifty upbringing shapes her spending patterns
 - it is easier for a middle class individual to give up some symbolic power by donating to others

b) self-deception – an individual semi-consciously deceives herself into thinking that she is giving, or that she doesn't need to give:

e.g., a middle class individual perceives paying her son's fees to a public school as charitable giving, though she is actually passing her cultural capital onto her son

- a lecturer feels that she doesn't need to give money because she is already contributing to society through her public service

- a soldier donates to UK armed forces charities, but his army training has made him suspicious and distrustful of foreign charities

Research Design

- 41 semi-structured interviews conducted between July 2008 – July 2009, each interview lasted on average about 2 hours
- About 25% in upper middle income, 25% in lower middle class and 50% in working class (based on occupation, education and family background)
- More female than male interviewees
- Participants had life experience
- Interview format: life history, then focus on giving time and money

Some Questions for Discussion

1. In what other ways do you think akratic and self-deceptive behaviour can be important in charitable giving?
2. Do you think there are distinct class moral boundaries?
3. How does this relate to your studies?