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Summary of working paper

Charitable giving, everyday morality and a critique of Bourdieusian theory

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This paper aims to explain the nature of people's moral judgements about charitable giving and volunteering. Following Margaret Archer, it identifies three positions on everyday morality and giving: moral conventionalists, moral individualists and moral critics. In exploring these, it takes issue with Bourdieu's view that giving is purely a means to an end, reinforcing the prestige, influence and economic power of the giver. Bourdieu goes on to suggest that the whole of society conspires to ignore this real motive and feigns to believe in the disinterestedness of the gift.

Based on interviews with 41 people from different occupations and backgrounds, my research suggests that Bourdieu's view is wrong in several ways. First, it ignores the complexity of the motives for charitable activity. Across all three categories, motives are seldom clear-cut, compassion mixing with self-interest, enlightened or otherwise. Second, where charitable activity is concerned, the rewards are as much about the satisfaction of being seen to perform a task well as about the social or material advantages that might accrue. Third, where giving and volunteering is largely a matter of calculated self-interest, those involved are open about this and make no pretence of disinterestedness.

Moral conventionalists

For moral conventionalists, involvement with charities is very much subordinate to their commitment to family and friends. Charitable giving is likely to be short-lived, local and convenient. While moral conventionalists recognise that a charitable event is worthwhile, their chief motive is often a social one. James, an estates supervisor, goes

to Open Garden events organized on behalf of Macmillan nurses every summer. He is happy that some of the proceedings go to Macmillan, but this is not his main reason for going. Mary, a mature student, who often takes part in charity runs with friends, admits that 'it's an excuse really to do something quite fun'.

Self-interest and altruism blend in ways that can change. Madeleine, an estate agent, explains that, while she initially organised the local Scouts group to boost her career prospects, she now feels impelled to help other children:

> 'I genuinely think I can give children other experiences that they wouldn't necessarily have and be a benefit to them . . .'

They will be moved by disasters or other such emotive appeals, but this spontaneous burst of compassion is unlikely to translate into giving unless it is made easy. As Jane, a mature student, remarks:

> 'Like with the tsunami, there were pots in Tescos and in every bank, so it was easy.'

Donations reflect a general concern for good causes, rather than an assessment of their relative importance and impact.

Moral individualists

On the face of it, this group comes closest to conforming to the Bourdieusian view. Peter, a prison officer, and Phoebe, a postgraduate mature student, both see volunteering as a career move. However, contrary to the Bourdieusian view, there is no pretence of disinterestedness. Both are openly self-interested.

Moral individualists often engage with charities on a reciprocal basis, contributing in the belief that they will gain from the transaction. Patrick, a part-time special constable, donates to an ambulance charity because, one day, he may need it. Mandy, whose son suffers from autism, relied on a local support group of the National Autistic Society to which she donated money. She stopped donating when she no longer needed the charity's support.

Those in this category who are retired or semi-retired will often use charitable activity to preserve and to demonstrate their skills. Terry, for instance, a former naval officer, manages a local naval museum that allows former and retired naval officers, mechanics and engineers to restore decommissioned sea vessels for public view. For those involved, this is a means of reaffirming the worth of their skills and experience. In other words, intrinsic value – something that the Bourdieusian analysis fails to take account of – matters as much as external goods and instrumental value.

While they carefully consider their voluntary efforts, however, they often don't give much thought to monetary donations. Patrick's attitude towards his small change, for instance, is 'I didn't care . . . what charity it was . . . I'm just getting rid of the money at the end of the day', while Jackie, a financial administrator, remarks of her giving, 'It's just very *ad hoc* . . .'

Moral critics

Ethical considerations carry a great deal of weight with this group and are more likely to inform their behaviour. They have a strong sense of compassion and justice and consequently are deeply committed to charitable causes, investing time and energy. Kamela, an information technology manager, insists that:

'We're not gonna have the best society we can, unless people are prepared to give.'

Eve, a part-time hospital porter, gives to Shelter, a homeless charity, because:

'. . . a lot of the people who are homeless, it's just bad luck that's befallen them and so they need help really . . .'

There is more fellow feeling than enlightened self-interest here. Although Eve has been homeless herself, her attitude is distinct from Patrick's (above). She gives to Shelter not because she fears that she may again be homeless but out of a compassion informed by the fact that she knows what it's like to be in that position. She is also critical of the existing system. She is angry that the government does not provide sufficient emergency accommodation or financial assistance.

Generally speaking, moral critics devise their own stance, often derived from various traditions of thought, which can fly in the face of accepted canons of social behaviour and can also offer an alternative vision of society. Geraldine, a postgraduate mature student, draws her views from anarchism and Catholicism. She is 'uncomfortable' with the idea of doing things for money:

'. . . volunteering means that you can be sure that you're doing it for the right reasons . . .'

Moral critics are also likely to be thoughtful about their charitable donations. William, a lecturer, and his wife decide which charities working in the areas they donate to 'are most effective so that our money will actually make the most difference and which have policies and beliefs that we also subscribe to'.

Summary

Moral conventionalists' main loyalty is to their family and friends. Their giving of time and money is likely to reflect this and be concentrated on local groups. Where it's not, it is often provoked by a spontaneous upsurge of compassion for, say, the victims of a disaster. However, they are unlikely to put much thought or effort into their giving. Their participation in charitable activities is often as much to do with their own enjoyment as with the worthiness of the cause.

Moral individualists tend to be more calculating in their charitable activities, often using them to further their own purposes at the same time as undertaking some task that is seen as worthwhile. Their voluntary activity also often includes an element of performance, taking satisfaction from the exercise of their skills or knowledge. There is often an almost contractual element in their giving, giving to causes of which they either are or might in future be the beneficiaries. Where there is no self-interest at stake, their giving tends to be haphazard and not thoroughly considered.

Moral critics, by contrast, initiate projects and donate purposefully. They have a highly developed sense of compassion and conviction of their responsibility to others and will be guided even against the canons of social behaviour by their own ethical codes.

All contribute to the development of civil society in different and important ways. Moral conventionalists help to sustain families, neighbourhoods and social networks; moral individualists promote hobbies, sports and cultural activities in the community; and moral critics foster social movements and causes.

Five consequences for social theory

I believe these findings have five important implications for social theory.

First, social theory needs to take into account how personal reflexivity and everyday morality affect social structures and practices. Social sciences tend to neglect the extent to which moral sentiments, judgements and responsibilities shape social practices.

Second, class and religious affiliation are not necessarily the dominant factors in ethical reasoning. Often, a mix of cultural and political values from different moral traditions dictates people's views.

Third, contradictions between moral ideals and actual practices deserve more attention. For instance, individuals may passionately believe in redistributing wealth from rich to poor countries but then fail to make any donations or lobby governments for greater international aid.

Fourth, individuals participate in civil society in different and important ways depending upon their moral concerns and commitments. Social and political theory cannot assume that individuals want to actively engage with others in the public sphere.

Finally, there is an artificial and unhelpful distinction between sociology and moral philosophy. Often, sociology does not adequately address how ethics contributes to social practices, focusing instead on power relations, vested interests and social conventions, while, in moral philosophy ethics tends to be overly rationalistic, detached from everyday concerns and practical reasoning.

About the author

Balihar Sanghera is director of graduate studies (taught) and senior lecturer in sociology at the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent. His main interests are political economy and ethics. He examines how moral sentiments, judgements and responsibilities shape and are shaped by economic and social structures. In particular, his research explores how class, inequalities and poverty affect everyday morality and politics. His research projects focus on the post-Soviet 'moral economy', philanthropy and social justice. He has published in *Theory and Society*, *International Sociology*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* and *Europe Asia Studies*.

About CGAP

The ESRC Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy (CGAP) is the first academic centre in the UK dedicated to research on charitable giving and philanthropy. Three main research strands focus on individual and business giving, social redistribution and charitable activity, and the institutions of giving. CGAP is a consortium comprising Cass Business School, University of Edinburgh Business School, University of Kent, University of Southampton, University of Strathclyde Business School and NCVO. CGAP's coordinating 'hub' is based at Cass Business School. CGAP is funded by the ESRC, the Office for Civil Society, the Scottish Government and Carnegie UK Trust.

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