Baker, W. (2020). Moral attitudes of youth in the UK: bringing morality back to the sociology of education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1789845>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/01425692.2020.1789845](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1789845)

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The moral attitudes UK youth: bringing morality back to the sociology of education.

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Forthcoming in the British Journal of Sociology of Education. Please do not cite without permission.

Abstract

This paper argues that the sociology of education would benefit from greater integration with social scientific research focused on morality. This body of research offers a rich set of resources that can illuminate and extend many of the sociology of education's intellectual concerns. In support of this argument, the paper draws on data from Millennium Cohort Study in the UK to empirically examine how a wide range of socio-demographic characteristics are related to young people's moral attitudes. The analysis focuses on the extent to which adolescents state that a range of actions are wrong. In doing so, the paper makes an important contribution to studying the moral lives of young people.

Introduction

In recent years the empirical study of morality has expanded rapidly across the social and behavioural sciences. This has generated new insights into where morality comes from, how people make moral judgments, how morality differs between social and cultural groups, and the centrality of morality to people's identities (Aquino and Reed 2002; Greene 2013; Graham et al. 2016; Haidt 2008 and 2013; Knobe et al. 2012; Stets and Carter 2011; Tomasello 2016; Tomasello and Vaish 2013). Although they are relative late-comers to this vibrant interdisciplinary conversation, sociologists are now giving renewed attention to normative dimensions of social life (Abend 2014; Bykov 2018; Hitlin and Vaisey 2010 and 2013; McCaffree 2016; Sayer 2011; Simpson and Willer 2015). Whilst sociologists of education do at times invoke moral concepts and categories in their work (e.g. Dill and Hunter 2010; May 2008; Shirani et al. 2011; Wallace 2019), the discipline has shown relatively little interest in these broader developments. This absence is particularly noticeable in the UK.

This paper therefore has two interconnected goals. The first is theoretical and synthetic. I make the case for why sociologists of education should rebuild and further develop their engagement with the empirical study of morality: doing so would help the field develop richer and more accurate models of social action that can play a crucial role in explaining what people do and how they think. At a more macro-level, it would to bring into clearer analytical focus how moral categories, concepts and framings create, define, and sustain social groups and how they infuse popular discourse relating to socio-political issues such as educational inequality, racism, social mobility and migration.

The paper therefore offers a range of theoretical tools, concepts and arguments that can contribute to diverse literatures in the sociology of education. This does not mean the flow of ideas should go in one direction – the sociology of education also has distinctive skills, insights, and perspectives that could enrich the social scientific study of morality. The paper builds on, and is heavily indebted to, programmatic statements making the general case for reintegrating the moral into sociological research (e.g. Hitlin and Vaisey 2010 and 2013).

The second goal is empirical and underwrites the theoretical argument: I examine the socio-demographic patterning of moral attitudes of young people in the UK. Given the importance of moral attitudes, values and beliefs to individual and group identities, understanding the extent of differences between youths in this domain is an essential descriptive task; it is also particularly urgent in the current climate of social division, racism and deep inequalities. Although existing studies have identified that a range of demographic factors predict moral differences, this paper significantly advances scholarship by focusing on youth in the UK and by providing a more fine-grained and

precise assessment of variability in young peoples' moral attitudes. This is the first paper of such size and scope. One barrier to sociologically informed analyses of morality has been a lack of high-quality, nationally representative data which is particularly lacking for children and adolescents. I draw on data from the Millennium Cohort Study to help overcome this problem.

Disciplinary legacies and the return of the moral

Historical precedent provides one reason why the relative neglect of morality by sociologists of education, and sociologists more generally, is surprising. It has regularly been noted that the study of moral phenomena was central to the intellectual projects of Weber and particularly Durkheim (Abend 2010; Durkheim 1961/1925; Hitlin and Vaisey 2010; Weber 1965). A rich and important sociological analysis of morality was also provided much earlier by Harriet Martineau (1838) in *How to Observe Morals and Manners*. As Durkheim makes clear in *Moral Education*, education is inextricably tied up with moral socialization, and is central to his account of how social order can be created and sustained (Durkheim 1925). Thus, for Durkheim there was a deep connection between the sociological study of morality and education (Claddis 1998; Lukes 1985). On his view, a key function of education is to integrate young people into the existing moral order - education systems are not only concerned with developing cognitive skills but developing particular moral dispositions and the acceptance of social norms.

This Durkheimian preoccupation also finds expression in some of Foucault's work on power, subjectivity and how 'human beings are made subjects', despite the clear differences between the two thinkers (Cladis 2001; Foucault 1982: 208). Indeed, his work suggests that many institutions, including schools, were concerned with shaping and correcting moral sensibilities – what has been called 'moral orthopaedics' – and this is central to his account

of why people accept the supposed normative authority of powerful institutions (Deacon 2005; see also de Beauvoir 1949/1997). No doubt there are other intellectual currents and traditions that could be invoked to illustrate sociology's historic entanglement with researching moral dimensions of social life.

An appeal to historical precedent, and the intellectual concerns of prominent sociological figures, does not necessarily provide a compelling reason for developing closer links between the sociology of education and social scientific study of morality. You might object that there is nothing particularly worrisome about this lack of dialogue. As I outline below, this is not a position I find persuasive. More broadly, the sociological neglect of the moral has been recognized as a worrying absence because 'Humans are fundamentally social creatures and human interaction is fundamentally shaped by moral concerns' (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010: 9). This lack of disciplinary focus stands in stark although unsurprising contrast to developmental and moral psychology which, going back to at least Piaget, has studied the development of morality across the life course and how people make moral judgements (Cushman and Young 2009; Piaget 1932; Turiel 2002 and 2015).

Before we go any further, it is worth pointing out that morality gets used and defined in different ways both within and across social scientific disciplines. For example, in Moral Domain Theory morality is defined as 'prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other' (Turiel 1983: 3). Haidt argues that this definition should be expanded and that:

Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, practices, institutions, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible (70)

In outlining the various ways morality gets defined, Hitlin and Vaisey (2013:55) state that the moral refers to, 'understandings of good and bad, right and wrong, worthy and

unworthy that vary between persons and between social groups.’ Rather than deciding on the ‘correct’ definition, a productive way to proceed may simply be treat morality as something of a ‘cluster concept’ that refers to a relatively broad range of phenomenon and various definitions may have analytical and practical depending on the object of enquiry.

The argument

I propose that sociologists of education should engage more closely with empirical studies of morality from across the social sciences because it speaks to their core theoretical concerns and can open-up new intellectual terrain for the field. To take one example, a fundamental task for sociologists of education is to describe and explain the actions, beliefs, values, aspirations, identities, choices, and preferences of a pupils, teachers and parents (e.g. Abrahams 2016; Baker and Barg 2019; Barg 2015; Reay et al. 2005; Rollock et al. 2015). Moreover, sociologists of education attempt to understand how beliefs and actions are socially patterned, how people evaluate each other’s skills, dispositions and merits, and how such evaluations feed into educational and social inequalities (Mijs 2019). Taking morality more seriously would help in analysing such phenomenon because it would lead to the development of a more accurate and rounded picture of the things people care about, how they understand themselves and the world around them, how institutions work, and what motivates people’s behavior – why they do the things they do.

To put it another way, it would mean mean we are working with a richer and more adequate model of social action that is grounded in relevant empirical evidence. As many a social scientist and philosopher has recognized, ‘Normativity pervades our lives’ (O’Neill 1996: xi; Sayer 2005). However, research in moral psychology and neighboring disciplines brings this claim more sharply into focus: it shows just how central morality is to people’s

identities (Heiphetz et al. 2017; Heiphetz et al. 2018; Stets and Cater 2011; Stets and Cater 2011). Strohminger and Nichols (2014) show that moral traits are more important to people's sense of self than either their memories or the stability of their preferences. They conclude that 'Moral traits are considered more important to personal identity than any other part of the mind' (168). Developments in the sociology of culture also highlight how moral scripts, frameworks, and ideas undergird people's thinking about the world, themselves and other agents (Fine 2019; Abend 2014). In light of such evidence, and that a goal of the sociology of education is to make sense of people's lives and what matters to them, both as an end in itself, and as a stepping-stone to explaining what they do, paying greater attention to morality, broadly conceived, is warranted on theoretical and empirical grounds.

A possible objection to this argument could be to express skepticism that morality and moral motivation are robustly related to behaviour: research often highlights our failure to live up to our moral and ethical commitments and shows that we use them to justify our actions in a post-hoc fashion (Haidt 2001; Leiter 2019). However, other research shows that such a thorough-going scepticism may not be fully warranted (Miles 2015; Miles and Upenieks 2018; Stets and Carter 2011). Therefore, the relevant question for sociologists of education may not be whether morality always 'matters' but rather when, for whom, and under what conditions. Moreover, even if moral commitments and ideals do not explain what people do, but are in fact mobilized by individuals to justify and rationalize decisions after the fact, explaining how and why this happens is an important empirical task.

A further part of my argument is likely to be more familiar and is to some extent already well established in the sociology of education: morally salient beliefs, judgements, and distinctions play a role in the formation of social groups and intergroup relations (Baker

2017; Green 2013; Haidt 2013; Lamont 2000 and 2012). Moreover, moral identities, beliefs, and attitudes are potentially influenced by institutional settings of primary concern to sociologists of education: the home and schools. Morally evaluative criteria are also often invoked to justify educational and social inequalities; this has long been recognized and is central to analyses of stigma, shame, austerity and class disadvantage (Morris 2016; Skeggs 2005; Tyler 2013).

Lamont's work has been particularly influential in showing how people draw on moral narratives and evaluations to create group boundaries and craft a positive sense of self (e.g. Lamont 2000 and 2012). Her recent discussions of the relationship between stigmatization and inequality, also attends to the importance distinction Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth and many others draw between redistribution and recognition – achieving esteem and respect in the eyes of others - when considering questions of social and interpersonal justice (Lamont 2018).

Linkages between morality, education and group-identity have also been powerfully explored in an important recent paper by Derron Wallace (2019). He shows that, against a background of anti-immigrant rhetoric and anti-Black racism in the US, the high aspirations of Black African and Caribbean boys in his study reflects how 'aspirations for elite higher education are constitutive features of individual moral projects in service of group-based ethnic projects' (Wallace 2019: 252). However, and equally importantly, Wallace also highlights that the moral strategies and claim-making employed by migrant youth, unwittingly buttressed the existing racial order and anti-Black racism. This is because 'With ethnic projects, Black immigrants pursue distinction and success based on another Black group's stigmatization and failure (ibid: 253).

Young people's moral attitudes

In order to foster the intellectual connections proposed above, further empirical research in addition to arguments are required. An important first step is simply to assess and map differences in moral attitudes and judgements between social groups. To this end, this paper evaluates the extent to which young people's moral attitudes are related to a range of socio-demographic characteristics. In particular, I focus on how young people respond when asked about whether certain actions are wrong. This is an important but obviously narrow approach to studying the moral lives of young people. Studies suggest a wide-range of factors may be associated with differences in moral attitudes. Using data from the US, Miles (2014) shows that 'gender, religious affiliation, birth cohort, and (to a lesser degree) education and marital status widely predict differences in morality' (Miles 2014). Moral judgements and behaviours thus appear to vary significantly within and between cultures (Graham et al. 2011; Graham et al. 2015; Longest et al. 2013). Given the diversity of possible influences on morality, this paper engages in a broad assessment of the relationship between moral attitudes and socio-demographic and individual factors.

Key background characteristics

Existing research suggests that gender, religion and religiosity may be of particular significance for understanding variability in moral attitudes. The study of gender-based differences in moral attitudes and reasoning has a long and contentious history. Kohlberg famously proposed that gender-based differences reflected that women were less likely to achieve what he thought was 'moral maturity' – the application of depersonalized and abstract moral codes when making moral judgements (Gibbs 2013; Kohlberg 1984; Turiel 2002). Gilligan developed a powerful riposte to Kohlberg's model of stage based moral-

development (Gilligan 1977, 1982 and 1998). She argued that such gender differences reflected that women were more likely to adopt an 'ethics of care'. On this view, 'Women, in contrast, prefer an ethic of care, involving moral decisions based on relations to and emotional bonds with particularized others' (Freisdorf et al. 2015: 697). What these perspectives do share is an acceptance that there are non-trivial gender differences in aspects of moral and ethical reasoning.

More recent research shows that when faced with various moral dilemmas men are more likely to hold a 'stronger preference for utilitarian over deontological judgements than woman' and this is because women show more aversion to decisions and actions that lead others to experience harm (Armstrong et al. 2019; Friesdorf et al. 2015: 710). Drawing on data from the European Social Survey, Longest et al. (2013: 1519) found that 'Women are much more likely than men to rate values about the welfare of others as important' but with regard to other values the picture is far more mixed. Unsurprisingly, social scientists typically emphasise socialization mechanisms connected to gender roles and social expectations to do with 'caring' to explain such differences. On balance, research suggests that clear-cut and general conclusions about the relationship between morality and gender are hard to make; it does, however, suggest that it would be unsurprising if there was some kind of relationship between gender and young people's moral attitudes.

Religion and religiosity have also both been shown to explain individual differences moral attitudes, orientations, worldviews and behaviours (Beyerlein and Vaisey 2013; Haidt 2013; Miles 2014; Jensen and McKenzie 2016). Bader and Finke (2013) in summarizing existing research suggest that in the US:

More religious people, as measured by frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer, identification with a strict denomination, a literal interpretation of the Bible,

and/or how a religious person consider him/herself to be, tend to hold more restrictive attitudes on moral issues (244)

The relationship between religion and more restrictive or conservative moral attitudes – the classic examples being abortion and homosexuality – has been observed in a range of cultural and national contexts. However, Stark (2002) provides a caveat to broad generalisations about the interconnections between religion and morality by arguing that it is dependent on people's beliefs of whether 'God', or a divine figure, is interventionist and evaluates individual's actions. How else might religion and religiosity help to explain young people's moral attitudes? Religions often prescribe clear guidance on whether actions are 'right' or 'wrong'. This may be reinforced through religious socialisation in the family and social practices that lead individuals to defer to religious texts and leaders who often provide guidance on whether actions are prohibited and the consequences for violating them. As a result, the moral attitudes of religious youth may be more clearly demarcated and less ambiguous than they are for non-religious adolescents.

In addition to gender, religion and religiosity, this paper also examines other markers of social background including parental education and income. High levels of education are strongly associated with more liberal attitudes relating to gender roles and sexual orientation (la Roi and Mandemakers 2018; Stubager 2008). Evans and Tilley stress the particular importance of education and argues that for 'issues of moral 'rights' and 'wrongs', such as attitudes towards homosexuality and child rearing, are almost exclusively driven by education' rather than social class' (2017: 59). This may reflect the socializing influence of educational institutions but also the impact of parental socialization.

Moving away from straightforward socio-demographic characteristics, other potentially relevant influences are also included such as such as the extent to which children are classified as having social and behavioural problems and how parents rate the prosociality

of their child. As a concern for the welfare of others is central to morality, we would expect that higher levels of prosociality are associated with adolescents being more likely to say that actions are wrong if they cause harm to others (Tomasello 2016). There is also a rich tradition in developmental and moral psychology showing that morality develops and changes over the life course; this suggests that age may also be a relevant factor (Gibbs 2013; van Goethem et al 2011). The rich and varied literature just discussed provides a helpful theoretical framework for the analysis below.

Data and analytical strategy

I draw on data from the Millennium Cohort Study which is a longitudinal birth cohort study that began in 2000/2001. Since the initial round of data collection, 6 further sweeps have taken place with the latest one occurring in 2017/18. Each sweep collects a wide range of information on parents and children, including socio-demographic variables relevant for studying child development, educational inequality, the impact of poverty on life chances, family life, and a host of other related topics. Data was also gathered from teachers when cohort members entered the education system. The study is nationally representative and participants were recruited from each of the four countries in the UK. Importantly, certain groups at risk of high levels of attrition were ‘over-sampled’ (e.g. those from ethnic minority backgrounds). For the purposes of this paper, the analysis draws on data from sweep 6 when children were aged 14. As I noted above, focusing on this age group is important because much of the literature focuses on adults and young children rather than adolescents.

Dependent variable

At sweep 6, young people were asked 4 questions relating to moral attitudes and are the dependent variables in the analyses that follow. The questions asked were:

- 1.) How wrong do you think it is for someone your age to start a fight with someone?
- 2.) How wrong do you think it is for someone your age to copy or download music, games or films without paying for them, when they should have done?
- 3.) How wrong do you think it is for someone your age to take something from a shop without paying for it?
- 4.) How wrong do you think it is for someone your age to write things or spray paint on a building, fence or train?

For each question they could respond. 1) Not wrong 2) A bit wrong 3) Very wrong. Table 1 summarises the responses to each question. A noticeable feature of these questions is that they focus on a narrow range of behaviours - damaging property, theft and starting a fight with another person. The question relating to downloading or copying materials - may be rather more distinct from the other attitudes – downloading music and games is a common phenomenon that people may take to be a less morally problematic behaviour. This may track a distinction that has been drawn between moral and more conventional norms (Turiel 1983 and 2002). Survey design and non-response weights are applied in the analyses.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

As we can see, for two of the variables (Take and Spray) the number of respondents in the 'Not wrong' categories are very small – they are therefore collapsed into binary measures whereby the 'Not wrong' and a 'Bit wrong' categories are combined. We are therefore left with two ordinal dependent variables and two binary dependent variables.

Independent variables

The goal of the analysis is to describe how the dependent variables are related to a range of background characteristics. Religion, religiosity and ethnicity are all theoretically relevant. However, there is a significant amount of overlap between them. As a result, entering religion and ethnicity in the model can be problematic on statistical and inferential grounds. As the existing evidence suggests that religion and religiosity may be particularly important predictors, we include ethnicity as a control variable that has been collapsed into a binary measure with 'White' and 'All other' categories. For the religion variable, the information provided by the cohort member rather than the parent is used and has the following categories:

1. Christian
2. Muslim
3. All other (includes Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist)
4. None

Religiosity is defined by how often the cohort member reports attending a religious service. This ranges from 'Never or almost never' to 'At least once a week'. Gender is also included as a dichotomous variable.

The education variable reflects the parent's highest NVQ level or its equivalent. It captures relevant differences in levels of educational qualifications and has the following categories:

1. None of these;
2. Overseas and other qualification.
3. NVQ level 1 (lowest level) – corresponds for instance to GCSE-grades D to G;
4. NVQ level 2 – corresponds for instance to GCSE-grades A to C;
5. NVQ level 3 – corresponds for instance to A-level;
6. NVQ level 4 – includes for instance diplomas of higher and further education;
7. NVQ level 5 (highest level) – includes postgraduate degrees and doctorates;

The economic situation of the child is captured by including a measure that reflects which income quintile the family falls into¹. In order to examine any between country differences,

¹ Education and income are included as measures of economic situation. Social class was not included in the final models as analyses revealed it was not meaningfully associated with the outcome variables.

the models also included whether the child lives in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

A measure derived from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is included; the SDQ is used as a screening tool to identify children's mental health, and behavioural and emotional problems – a higher score indicates greater problems (Goodman et al. 2000). A measure of prosociality, which is a separate sub-scale of the SDQ, is also included because prosociality reflects a concern for the welfare and treatment of others and may therefore be related to evaluations of whether actions are wrong. The prosociality scale is based on parent's responses to questions such as whether their child is considerate of other people's feelings, shares with others, and is kind to younger children. A higher score reflects higher levels of prosociality. Although MCS participants are from the same cohort, there are age differences between the oldest and youngest members. Age is therefore also included in the models and is measured to the nearest 10th of the year. Descriptive statistics for all the independent variables are presented in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Analytical strategy

The relationship between moral attitudes and the independent variables is explored by running ordinal and binary logistic regression models. Ordinal models are used because two of the dependent variables (Fight and Download) have three possible response categories that can be meaningfully ordered but the distance between them is unknown (Long and Fresse 2014). As was noted above, binary variables were constructed for the other two moral attitudes (Spray and Take) due to the small number of cases in the 'Not wrong' category. I therefore also run two binary logistic regression models which are

appropriate when assessing the relationship between a range of independent variables and dichotomous outcomes (Agresti 1996).

Results

Table 3 shows the results for all four regression models. For the ordinal models, the results indicate the odds of responses being in the ‘A bit wrong’ and ‘Not wrong’ categories compared to reference category which is ‘Very wrong’ – the response given by the majority of cohort members for each question. Therefore, an odds ratio greater than one indicates the odds of responding ‘A bit wrong’ or ‘Not wrong’ rather than ‘Very wrong’ holding the other variables in the model constant. Conversely, odds ratios less than one reflect an increased likelihood than the response falls in the ‘Very wrong’ category. For example, if we start with Model 1 (Fight) and look at the odds ratio for gender, we can see that for males, the odds of being in the categories ‘A bit wrong’ and ‘Not wrong’ compared to ‘Very wrong’ are 1.25 higher than they are for female adolescents, holding all the other variables in the model constant. Whilst religious affiliation has been shown to be associated with moral attitudes, in this case no relationship is found between belonging to a major religious group and the outcome variable. However, what the results do show is that it is associated with levels of religiosity: those who attend religious services at least once a week, are significantly more likely than those who never attend to see starting a fight as ‘Very wrong’ (OR=0.62). The results do not show a statistically significant relationship between this particular moral attitude and parental education levels, income and country of residence. Interestingly, those with a high SDQ score are more likely to respond that starting a fight is ‘Very wrong’ compared to those with lower SDQ scores. A noticeable feature of the results – and this is something that we observe across all the models – is a clear relationship between prosociality and moral attitudes. Those with higher prosociality score are significantly more likely to view the actions in question as ‘Very wrong’.

If we turn to Model 2 (Download), we can see that a range of socio-demographic factors are associated with adolescents' responses to being asked whether it is wrong to copy or download music, games or films without paying for them. A similar pattern to Model 1 can be observed with regard to gender in that male youth are more likely ($OR=1.22$) to report downloading music, films and games as less wrong compared to female students. Overall, gender is one of strongest socio-demographic predictors of moral attitudes across all the models. In Model 2, Christian and Muslim adolescents, and those who regularly attend religious services, are less likely to say that downloading materials is only 'A bit wrong' or 'Not wrong' compared to those with no religion and that attend religious services less than once a year, holding the other variables constant. Parental education and age also have predictive power: those whose parents have higher levels of education and older children are less likely to report this action as being 'Very wrong'. It may be the case that this behaviour is more common amongst teenagers as they get older and is less socially stigmatised amongst their peer groups and perceived as a 'victimless' activity. If we look at more psychologically oriented predictors, we find very similar findings to Model 1 with SDQ scores and prosociality both associated with the outcome variable.

Model 3 and Model 4 report the results from the binary logistic regression models. Model 3 allows us to look at the patterning of responses to how wrong young people say it is to take something without paying for it is wrong. Out of all four the responses, this was the variable with the highest level of agreement that the action was very wrong. It is therefore not unexpected that many of the variables have little predictive power. However, we do observe some interesting results. Unsurprisingly, the impact of religiosity and prosociality ($OR= 0.88$) remain. Overall, these two factors are the most robust and strongest predictors across the models. This supports the claim that religiosity is a key marker of social, cultural

and attitudinal difference between youth in the UK. Those with parents with higher levels of education also appear less likely to say that this action was 'Very wrong'.

Finally, Model 4 focuses on the extent to which young people reported that it was wrong to write things or spray paint on a building, fence or train. Given the findings from the previous models, it is somewhat surprising that the relationship between this particular moral attitude and gender runs the other way: male youth have lower odds of being in the combined 'A bit wrong/Not wrong' category. Like all of the other models, high levels of religiosity are a significant predictor (OR=0.66 for those attending religious services at least once a week). No relationship is observed between this moral attitude and ethnicity and income. Finally, prosociality is also positively associated with stating that writing or spray-painting property is 'Very wrong'. Overall, although the responses from individuals in various categories and groups with regard to moral attitudes is not that stark, they are still patterned by a range of socio-demographic and more psychologically oriented factors.

Conclusion

The social scientific study of morality has flourished in recent years and sociology has played an increasingly important role in these developments. This exciting body of research has shed new light onto the origins of morality, its relationship to behaviour, the centrality of morality to personal identity, the fundamental role it plays shaping individual and social life, and how morality can be effectively measured (Heiphetz et al. 2017; Hitlin and Vaisey 2013; McCaffree 2016; Sayer 2011; Strohming and Nichols; Vaisey and Miles 2014). Morality is clearly important for understanding the emergence of social order, culture, identities, learning, institutions, and decision-making – some of sociology's core analytical concepts. Given that sociologists of education routinely draw on them, and are in the business of accounting for how people think and what they do, I have argued that engaging more closely with empirical research on morality would be empirically and theoretically

generative for the field. In particular, this would help the field develop improved models of social action and in understanding the role of morality in creating and sustaining differences between social groups. This is the first paper to systematically make this case.

This paper has attempted to develop these connections by studying the moral attitudes of young people. Drawing on data from the Millennium Cohort Study, this paper contributes to our understanding of the socio-demographic and individual levels factors that predict differences in whether young people say that actions are wrong. Although existing research has already highlighted the demographic patterning of various features of morality, a major strength of this paper is that it draws on high quality, nationally representative data to more precisely and robustly assess the extent of differences in moral attitudes amongst adolescents in the UK. This key contribution is made achievable by the scope and size of the MCS.

Although the results show that between group differences in moral attitudes are not that large, several important findings are worth emphasising. Firstly, religiosity is a robust predictor of moral attitudes across all the models. This may reflect that religions often promote very clear moral distinctions between what is morally sanctioned or proscribed and these may be endorsed particularly strongly by the highly religious. This offers support for the claim that religiosity, and the beliefs underpinning it, are key markers of moral difference amongst youth. The results contribute to research examining gender-based differences in moral attitudes and reasoning. The instances where female students are more likely to say actions are 'Very wrong' may reflect the fact they are linked either directly or indirectly to harming others. However, the results also show the challenge in trying to draw firm and general conclusions about the relationship between gender and moral attitudes. In addition to these socio-demographic factors, prosociality is a particularly powerful

predictor across all the models. This shows that a concern with the well-being and welfare of others is closely linked to morality and moral attitudes (Tomasello 2016; Turiel 2015). The findings also extend research on productive youth development which seeks to understand the drivers of prosociality which is associated with a range of social and cognitive outcomes (Drinkard 2017).

There are of course some potential limitations that should be considered. Clearly there is much more to morality than stating whether certain actions are right or wrong. The limited questions found in MCS lends itself to studying in morality in a rather ‘thin’ way that neglects other important ‘thick’ moral concepts – among the examples Abend (2011: 145) suggests are ‘dignity, integrity’ and ‘humanness...’ Research could be extended by including a broader and richer range of questions regarding morality in major longitudinal surveys in the UK. For example, vignettes or scenario-based questions designed to tap into children and adolescents’ moral intuitions and values would provide valuable new data on the social life of morality. An obvious direction for future research, is also to explore the link between moral attitudes and behaviour.

At the beginning of the paper, I stated that sociologists of education could make an important contribution to the resurgence of social scientific research into morality. The discipline is well placed to study the relationship between morality and formal schooling – in particular how they shape moral identities, ideologies, and ideas. This could be effectively linked to the sociology of education’s rich history of studying the transmission of ideas, dispositions and resources between parents and children and teachers and pupils. The field has also long been concerned with studying the formation and development of peer groups and youth subcultures than can cohere into distinctive moral communities. From a methodological point of view, ethnographic and qualitative researchers are ideally

placed to study how ‘thick’ conceptions of morality emerge from the interactions between peers, friends and family members. This more in-depth and fine-grained approach to the study of moral cultures and communities would complement and extend more quantitative approaches typically deployed in other disciplines. Hopefully, this paper can act as catalyst for such research and the development of a new and exciting body of scholarship in the sociology of education.

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Tables

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of moral attitude variables

	Moral attitude			
Fight	Download	Take	Spray	

‘Very wrong’	35.62 (4008)	34.94 (3,787)	92.52 (10,156)	76.46 (8,518)
‘A bit wrong’	57.31 (6,171)	47.98 (5271)	6.85 (696)	20.21 (2,212)
‘Not wrong’	7.07 (725)	17.08 (1838)	0.63 (62)	3.33 (261)
Total	100% (n=10,904)	100% (n=10,896)	100% (n=10,914)	100% (n= 10,911)

Note: Percentages are weighted.

Table 2: *Descriptive statistics for independent variables*

	<i>Percentages/means</i>	SD	Min.	Max.
<u>Gender</u>				
Male	49.86			
Female	50.14			

<u>Religion</u>				
Christian	36.57			
Muslim	7.20			
All other	2.95			
None	53.28			
<u>Religiosity</u>				
At least once a week	15.98			
At least once a month	6.99			
Several times a year	9.88			
Once a year or less	13.16			
Never or almost never	53.99			
<u>Ethnicity</u>				
White	85.43			
Other	14.57			
<u>Education</u>				
None	11.58			
Overseas	3.18			
NVQ1	7.11			
NVQ2	25.53			
NVQ3	14.31			
NVQ4	29.62			
NVQ5	8.67			
<u>Country</u>				
England	82.81			
Wales	4.84			
Scotland	8.23			
N.I.	4.12			
<u>Income Quintiles</u>				
(SDQ)	-			
Low/normal	56.3			
Medium	21.58			
High	22.12			
<u>Age</u>	14.25	.33	13.1	15.3
<u>Prosociality</u>	5.35	1.74	1	7

Table 3: Results of binary and ordinal regression models (Ref. category = 'Very wrong' for all models)

	M1 (Fight) Ordinal reg.	M2 (Download) Ordinal reg.	M3 (Take) Binary reg.	M4 (Spray) Binary reg.
	Odds ratio (S.E)	Odds ratio (S.E)	Odds ratio (S.E)	Odds ratio (S.E)
<u>Gender (Ref. Female)</u>				
Male	1.25 (0.69)***	1.22 (0.60)***	1.03 (0.11)	0.85 (0.06)*
<u>Religion (Ref. None)</u>				
Christian	0.94 (0.06)	0.85 (0.05)**	0.82 (0.01)	0.83 (0.06)*
Muslim	0.80 (0.11)	0.55 (0.93)**	0.56 (0.16)	0.79 (0.17)
All other	0.84 (0.12)	0.71 (0.16)	0.99 (0.35)	0.96 (0.22)
<u>Religiosity (Ref. Never)</u>				
At least once a week	0.62 (0.05)***	0.82 (0.06)*	0.60 (0.12)**	0.66 (0.08)**
At least once a month	0.80 (0.08)*	1.12 (0.11)	0.82 (0.22)	0.77 (0.09)*
Several times a year	0.73 (0.06)**	0.96 (0.09)	0.57 (0.11)**	0.64 (0.08)***
Once a year or less	0.79 (0.06)**	0.97 (0.08)	0.88 (0.12)	0.99 (0.09)
<u>Education (Ref. NVQ1)</u>				
None of these	1.20 (0.18)	0.92 (0.15)	1.14 (0.31)	1.12 (0.21)
Overseas	1.02 (0.20)	1.02 (0.20)	0.91 (0.44)	1.04 (0.28)
NVQ2	1.05 (0.12)	1.14 (0.16)	1.18 (0.27)	1.05 (0.15)
NVQ3	0.99 (0.12)	1.21 (0.18)*	0.99 (0.25)	0.93 (0.15)
NVQ4	1.10 (0.13)	1.41 (0.21)*	1.75 (0.40)*	1.15 (0.17)
NVQ5	1.15 (0.18)	1.40 (0.21)	1.99 (0.52)**	1.50 (0.25)*
<u>Ethnicity (Ref. White)</u>				
All other	1.11 (0.13)	1.14 (0.15)	1.19 (0.21)	1.08 (0.19)
<u>Income quintiles (Ref. Poorest 20%)</u>				
20-40%	1.10 (0.12)	1.23 (0.11)*	1.21 (0.19)	1.12 (0.13)
40-60%	1.06 (0.12)	1.21 (0.12)	0.74 (0.14)	1.05 (0.12)
60-80%	0.92 (0.10)	1.22 (0.12)	0.69 (0.13)	0.90 (0.11)
Richest 20%	0.82 (0.10)	1.02 (0.10)	0.55 (0.11)**	0.84 (0.12)
<u>Country (Ref. England)</u>				
Wales	0.93 (0.08)	0.87 (0.05)*	0.85 (0.10)	1.02 (0.10)
Scotland	1.00 (0.09)	0.82 (0.07)*	1.11 (0.18)	1.12 (0.11)
N.I.	1.18 (0.11)	1.23 (0.12)*	0.73 (0.16)	1.27 (0.15)*
<u>SDQ (Ref. low/normal)</u>				
Medium	0.91 (0.06)	0.85 (0.05)**	1.07 (0.15)	1.18 (0.10)*
High	0.75 (0.06)**	0.82 (0.06)*	1.04 (0.12)	0.97 (0.08)
<u>Age</u>	1.11 (0.10)	1.44 (0.10)***	0.84 (0.14)	1.20 (0.11)*
<u>Prosociality</u>	0.87 (0.01)***	0.90 (0.01)***	0.88 (0.02)***	0.86 (0.06)***

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.