

Habits of the Heart Revisited: Autonomy, Community, and Divinity in Adults' Moral Language

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The intent of this article is to raise anew the question of the extent to which individualism prevails in the moral vocabulary of Americans. The present study affirms the observation of Bellah and his colleagues that a language of individualism is common among middle-class Americans. However, it departs from their conclusion that this language has become preponderant. Analyses of thirty in-depth interviews about a variety of moral issues revealed that the moral language of young middle-class adults indeed centered on the rights, interests, and feelings of the individual. However, this was not the language of midlife and older adults. They spoke of community and divinity considerations as much as individualistic considerations.

KEY WORDS: moral discourse; individualism; suicide; incest.

"Who are we, as Americans? What is our character?" Robert Bellah and his colleagues asked in their now famous study of the moral "habits of the heart" of middle-class America (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). In answer to those questions, Bellah *et al.* argued that Americans have wholeheartedly adopted a language of individualism. Americans primarily speak of their individual goals, desires, and happiness and only secondarily of their social and religious obligations. Bellah and his colleagues saw American individualism as having spread to a point of being dangerous. It has grown "cancerous," they warned.

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The intent of this article is to raise anew the question of the extent to which individualism prevails in the moral vocabulary of Americans. The research to be presented here suggests that a discourse of individualism is common but only among younger middle-class Americans is it primary. Detailed analyses of thirty in-depth interviews about a variety of moral issues revealed that the moral language of young middle-class adults indeed centered on the rights, interests, and feelings of the individual. However, this was not the language of midlife and older adults. Their moral discourse centered on community and divinity considerations as much as individualistic considerations.

The thesis that the voice of individualism becomes pronounced with modernity has been given considerable attention during the last several decades (though it was also explored much farther back by writers such as Tocqueville (1840) and Durkheim (1893, 1897, 1898)). In the 1960s, Luckmann (1963) and Berger (1967) argued that individuals increasingly are left free to choose their own ways of looking at the world. In fact, they argued society expects individuals to construct their own systems of meaning. Luckmann held that people's worldviews still incorporate traditional Christian concepts but that these have become redefined to an extent where they only vaguely resemble the ideals of traditional Christianity. Instead, people bestow "something like a sacred status" on individual autonomy. The new ideals are to become liberated from social and traditional norms, to give expression to one's inner self, and to obtain self-realization.

Berger likewise proposed that the systems of meaning that people construct and maintain increasingly center on their individual therapeutic and psychological needs (see also Rieff, 1966). Berger wrote that people's religions "no longer [prefer] to the cosmos or to history, but to individual *existence* or psychology." In a kind of inverse take on the issue, Parsons in his 1963 article on "Christianity and modern industrial society" argued that the modern world represents a culmination of Christian concepts of individualism. Individualism flourishes in modern industrial society. We have indeed become free to choose what to believe. We do indeed reject traditions and social constraints, and instead seek equality and autonomy for every individual. To Parsons, however, these developments represented not the emergence of a new religion of individualism but rather the climax of the ethic of individualism inherent in Christianity and, particularly, in Protestantism.

It is the individualism of modern society that Bellah *et al.* set out to explore empirically. They interviewed more than two hundred middle-class Americans seeking to assess their moral character. The authors interviewed more younger than older Americans; many were residents of California,

and a significant part of the interviewees appear to have been employed in areas related to psychology. Through their talks with these Americans about topics such as love, family, politics, and religion, Bellah and his colleagues concluded that not only is individualism present in modern American society, it is preponderant.

They claimed that Americans have a "first language" of individualism. That is, Americans easily use a vocabulary of modern *utilitarian and expressive individualism*. The goal of the utilitarian individualist is to maximize her interests. She regards society as an arena in which she is free to pursue her interests. She views it as her prerogative to engage in this pursuit with minimum interference from other people. To the utilitarian individualist, the social good is a by-product of individuals maximizing their self-interests. The goal of the expressive individualist is to express her inner identity to the fullest. She seeks to break through the confines of society in her quest for a life rich in emotional, sensual, and intellectual experiences. She upholds her license to express herself free of social constraints and conventions.

Bellah *et al.* hold that "second languages" which draw upon older biblical and republican traditions also tend to be available to Americans but are not as commonly and freely used. These are traditions that define the person less as an individual and more as a member of religious, social, and political communities. The biblical tradition emphasizes building a society that is conducive to an ethical and spiritual life. The republican tradition emphasizes the active and vigorous involvement of citizens in political life. According to Bellah and his colleagues, even when Americans speak of their communal commitments and religious obligations, the language of individualism is still on the tip of the tongue of Americans if they are pressed to explain their views in more detail.

In Bellah *et al.*'s view, Americans have become more concerned with the pursuit of their own well-being and self-esteem than with the observance of traditional and societal moral imperatives. They warn against this preponderance of individualism. They fear that it will leave people detached from the community and political involvement. In their warnings against individualism, Bellah *et al.* are in the company of a host of other authors. Writers from diverse backgrounds have criticized the ethos of individualism as causing a falling away from public involvement (Sennett, 1974) and the emergence of an unencumbered (Sandel, 1982), minimal and narcissistic self (Lasch, 1978, 1984). (Though see also, for example, Hewitt (1990) and Wuthrow (1991) for arguments that individualism and self-absorption do not predominate in America).

While Bellah *et al.*'s study of the American moral character is extensive and impressive, the results of the study to be presented here raise anew the question of the extent to which adults actually speak in terms of individualistic considerations as opposed to religious and community considerations. The participants in the present study were middle-class and in this respect comparable to the adults in Bellah *et al.*'s study. They had all attended an elite university, were very well-educated, and the majority identified themselves as politically liberal. As a group, the participants thus represents those who are most likely to be immersed in a culture valuing individualism (Roof & McKinney, 1987). In contrast to Bellah *et al.*'s approach, the present study included participants representative of the entire adult lifespan. Adults from nineteen to eighty-five years of age were included in order to represent the moral discourse of adults of different ages. The present study consists of in-depth interviews but is nevertheless a smaller study. As such the results should be subject to further exploration.

THE PARTICIPANTS

A total of thirty adults who were past and present students of the University of Chicago participated. They were recruited for the study by asking for volunteers in classes taught at the university and by sending letters to alumni. The participants were divided equally into three age groups representative of the adult life-span: 19-24 (mean age of 22 years), 33-56 (mean age of 45 years), and 63-85 (mean age of 72 years). The groups consisted of equal or almost equal numbers of women and men. All but three of the participants were Caucasian.

All participants were well-educated relative to the general American population (the mean number of years of education was 17). In their family and work situations, the three groups were predictably different. The ten young adults were all single and had no children. They were currently students. The majority of midlife and older adults had married, though some had subsequently divorced or become widowed. The majority of the midlife and older adults had children. Most of the midlife adults held part- or full-time jobs, while a few were students. In the older group, a slight majority were retired while the rest worked part- or full-time. The employed midlife and older adults occupied positions in areas such as journalism, education, business management, law, and social work.

The three groups were quite similar in their political affiliations and interests. Each group had a majority of adults who described themselves as liberal. In each group, a distinct majority also described themselves as

"very much" or "quite a lot" interested in politics. In terms of religious affiliations and interests, the study included a somewhat higher proportion of adults who were Jewish compared to the general American population. Few of the adults attended church or synagogue on a weekly basis, a majority attended every month or every other month, and about a third never went to church or synagogue.

THE INTERVIEW

The adults participated in an interview involving six moral issues — four general issues chosen by the author and two personal issues chosen by each participant. The four general issues were suicide in general, suicide in the case of terminal illness, incest between consenting adults, and incest between an adult and a child. The author picked the issues on the expectation that they would promote a discussion of numerous important aspects of a person's worldview. It was anticipated that the issues would allow for discussions of the value of human life and of the accountability of the individual to herself, her family, her community, and a transcendent authority. The issues were also expected to lead to discussions of sexuality, and the purpose and significance of family life. Furthermore, the author chose the issues such that some of them might seem familiar to the participants on the basis of being frequently discussed in the media (incest between adults and children, suicide in the case of terminal illness) while others might be less familiar (incest between consenting adults, suicide in general).

Of the two personal moral issues, one was a recent issue and the other was the most memorable issue that each adult had experienced. Personal issues were included in the study in order to ensure that the participants could relate some of the moral issues discussed directly to their own lives and experiences. The author contacted the participants approximately three days in advance of the interview to give participants a brief description of the nature of the interview, and to ask them to consider one recent moral issue as well as their most memorable one to be discussed at the time of the interviews.

The interviews took place at the homes of the participants. The interviewer (in all cases the author) asked each participant to evaluate whether the issues were morally right or wrong, and then to elaborate and provide justifications for their view points. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and three hours with a median length of approximately one-and-a-half hours. They were tape-recorded, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes.

THE ANALYSES

Each moral justification that participants provided was classified as falling within one of three possible ethics: autonomy, community, and divinity (Jensen, 1993; Shweder, 1990; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, in press). Shweder (1990) has delineated these three types of ethics as involving different conceptions of the self. Moral discourse within the ethic of autonomy defines the person as an autonomous individual who is free to make choices, with few limits. What restricts a person's behavior is mainly a prohibition on inflicting harm to oneself and others, and encroaching upon the rights of other people. Discourse within the ethic of autonomy is similar to a language of utilitarian and expressive individualism. It is the discourse that Bellah *et al.* see as coming first in contemporary America.

Moral discourse within the ethic of community describes the person in terms of her membership in groups, such as the family, the community, or the nation. Persons are defined by their social roles, such as mother, scout leader, or American. Our roles bind us to one another in intricate relations of differing obligations. The republican tradition that Bellah *et al.* describe and identify with Thomas Jefferson and his time forms part of an ethic of community.

Moral discourse within the ethic of divinity envisions the person as a spiritual entity. A person's behaviors are to conform to the guidelines rendered by a given spiritual or natural order. Thus the person avoids degradation and comes closer to moral purity. The biblical tradition discussed in *Habits of the Heart* and exemplified by John Winthrop is representative of an ethic of divinity.

In categorizing participants' moral justifications into the three ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity, the criteria listed in Table I were used. The author coded all interviews. In order to obtain a measure of the reliability of the coding, a second rater coded nine interviews, three from each age group. The agreement between the author and the second rater for coding the justifications into the three ethics was 93.8%.

The classification of each adult's moral justifications into the ethics of autonomy, community and divinity revealed that many adults employed the language of autonomy but only among young adults was it a first language. More young adults provided justifications falling within the ethic of autonomy for most of the moral issues, particularly as compared to the ethic of divinity. In contrast, middle and older adults used the three types of ethics in roughly equal proportions. These results are summarized in Table II.

Table I. Justification Categories Within the Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity

| Ethic | Justification categories |
|-----------|--|
| Autonomy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interests of individuals • Physical and psychological harm to individuals • Fairness and equality • Individual rights • Virtues involving respect for individuals and freedom of choice • The conscience represented as a psychological part of a person |
| Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interests of collective entities (e.g., family, country, society) • Harm suffered by collective entities • Duties and role related obligations • Virtues referring to familial and communal relationships (e.g., love of kin) • Obtaining social rewards and suffering social sanctions • The goal of social order and harmony • Social traditions |
| Divinity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duties and obligations to a divinity • God's authority • Scriptural authority • Natural law • Avoidance of God's punishment and seeking of God's reward • Virtues referring to spiritual matters (e.g., honoring a vow taken in front of God) • The conscience represented as a part of the soul |

THE DISCOURSE: INCEST

The young adults' first language of individualism emerged strongly, for example, in their responses to the issue of incest between consenting adults. A striking majority of the young adults (eighty percent) did not regard consensual incest as morally wrong. They answered the question of whether consensual incest is wrong by considering whether the activity brings harm or happiness to individuals and whether it is a prerogative of individuals.

One 23-year-old man maintained that consensual incest is an individual right:

This is, you know, people making a decision which probably will lead to their own harm, but which is within their right to make — to dispose of their lives and their sexual affairs. It's not our place to interfere with imprudent, even radically imprudent, forms [of behavior], assuming the parties are of an age [and] mental capacities that they can make reasonable judgments about this.

A 24-year-old man held that consensual incest is not harmful to others:

Table II. Use of Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity by the Age Groups (Percentage Using Each Code)

| | Ethics | | | |
|-------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|---------------|
| | Autonomy | Community | Divinity | Within groups |
| Young adults | | | | |
| Suicide, general | 60 | 30 | 30 | ns |
| Suicide, terminal | 70 | 20 | 20 | ^a |
| Incest, consent | 100 | 10 | 10 | ^d |
| Incest, adult-child | 90 | 60 | 20 | ^c |
| Most memorable personal | 80 | 60 | 0 | ^c |
| Recent personal | 100 | 70 | 10 | ^c |
| Midlife adults | | | | |
| Suicide, general | 50 | 60 | 50 | ns |
| Suicide, terminal | 50 | 40 | 50 | ns |
| Incest, consent | 80 | 30 | 40 | ^a |
| Incest, adult-child | 80 | 70 | 50 | ns |
| Most memorable personal | 70 | 60 | 30 | ns |
| Recent personal | 70 | 70 | 30 | ns |
| Older adults | | | | |
| Suicide, general | 50 | 50 | 60 | ns |
| Suicide, terminal | 80 | 40 | 40 | ns |
| Incest, consent | 50 | 40 | 50 | ns |
| Incest, adult-child | 60 | 50 | 50 | ns |
| Most memorable personal | 60 | 60 | 30 | ns |
| Recent personal | 40 | 60 | 20 | ns |

Notes:

I. The rows do not add up to 100% because participants often provided more than one justification for each issue. Each justification was coded only once.

II. Cochran Q test were used to determine whether different proportions of adults within the groups used the three types of ethics.

III. As determined by ANOVA tests, no statistically significant between groups differences occurred for number of justifications provided.

^a $p < 0.1$

^b $p < 0.05$

^c $p < 0.01$

^d $p < 0.001$ d.f. = 2

I don't think it's wrong . . . I guess I have almost the libertarian view. You know, two consenting adults can do almost anything as long as it's not hurting other people. And if it were the case that two consenting adults were having an incestuous relationship, I don't think they would be hurting anyone else.

Another 24-year-old reasoned that consensual incest does not harm the individuals involved:

Despite the fact that it may a taboo, I can't think of any harm . . . you know . . . there is nothing that is going to impact upon either one of those people.

Still another 24-year-old suggested that consensual incest might be justified if it provides satisfaction to the individuals involved:

Well, you know, if you are doing what makes you happy, then, that's okay.

In spite of their affirmation of an individual prerogative to engage in consensual incest, many of the young adults expressed revulsion at the idea. A full seventy-five percent of the young adults who judged consensual incest to be an allowable behavior expressed aversion. They made comments such as, "I have a certain visceral antipathy to it," "it just doesn't sit right with me," "it gives me a kind of squeamish feeling," and "it just doesn't pass my stomach test." However, they dissociated their feelings from their moral judgments. As one participant succinctly put it, "there's sort of a gut feeling that this isn't right, but there doesn't seem to be any sort of intellectual basis for it." The young adults' language of individualism did not provide them with a sufficient set of concepts and arguments with which to assert that consensual incest is morally wrong. Their moral discourse, instead, centered on the right of individuals to express their desires without regard for social taboos and norms.

In contrast to the young adults, the majority of midlife and older adults (seventy-five percent) judged incest between consenting adults to be morally wrong. Their moral vocabulary was not confined to an ethic of autonomy but drew upon ethics of community and divinity as well. One seventy-one-year-old man, for example, gave voice to all three ethics in addressing the issue. He voiced an ethic of autonomy, in that he feared that consensual incest ruins the psyches of those involved such that they cannot have normal future relationships. "It seems to psychologically affect [the persons]; [they] get psychologically goofed up And I think they might develop such a strong affection for each other [that it] might damage their relations to somebody else."

In addition to being concerned with the consequences to the individuals engaging in incest, the older man held that consensual incest "destroys the family." He viewed this as a grave consequence. He spoke of his own family and explained that the family is a primary source of meaning in life and of social support. Thus he voiced an ethic of community:

I'm a great believer in family and I think that [consensual incest] destroys the family My five children are really the support of my life. I really am interested in them and the changes in their lives And that makes a difference, because without the [family], this would be a lonely and dead end type existence.

Consensual incest, in short, destroys the family. This is unacceptable because the family is a necessity of human social life.

Apart from undermining the individual and the family, the seventy-one-year-old man also regarded consensual incest as undermining nature's laws. He gave voice to an ethic of divinity by holding that we must live in accordance with laws that transcend us and that we cannot change. He regarded consensual incest as running counter to the natural order which all human beings are subject to.

It seems to me that the normal way of life is that people grow up, they learn to be independent, they separate from their family, and they go on their own way. Almost everything in nature seems to uphold this idea. I mean, nature's trying to constantly reproduce . . . and that's kind of what we are here for.

Thus, this older adult voiced all three ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity.

Other midlife and older adults offered different forms of community and divinity oriented discourse. Some spoke of the customs of society, saying about consensual incest that: "It is an affront to societal norms," "It is against a basic building block value in our society," "there is a social, cultural taboo," and "society teaches that it is wrong." Others spoke of their religious traditions. One sixty-six-year-old man explained: "In our own religion, which would be Christian-Judaic, incest is morally wrong. I think that is a moral code that we all subscribe to." In sharp contrast to the younger adults, this man held that we must follow the laws of the religious tradition, even if we would rather do otherwise and even if we agree with each other to do otherwise.

Interviewer: What if it's two consenting adults who are engaging in an incestuous relationship? What do you think of that?

Participant: I think it's bad whether they consent or not. I don't subscribe to the fact that whatever consenting adults wish to do is quite alright morally. I think there's an absolute moral code.

When Luckmann argued that individual autonomy and self-realization were becoming the central tenets of the modern worldview, he predicted that sexuality would be foremost among those areas subject to autonomous choice and self-realization. We become free to choose what sexual behaviors to engage in, as our sexual conduct becomes an expression of our identity. "[S]exuality is 'freed' from external social control, it becomes capable of assuming a crucial function in the 'autonomous' individual's quest for self-expression and self-realization" (Luckmann, 1963).

Luckmann's prediction bore out for the young adults' view of and discourse about consensual incest. In their view, adults are free to choose the kind of sexual behavior that "makes them happy" as long as it brings

no harm to others. In other words, they asserted a right to virtually unbounded sexual self-fulfillment. The discourse of the midlife and older adults, however, focused much less on the desires of individuals. They saw sexual behavior as bound by the exigencies of the family, society, nature, and religion.

THE DISCOURSE: SUICIDE

The discourse of the young adults went beyond Luckmann's predictions. They applied the language of individualism not only to sexual life but even to life itself. Half of the young adults argued in almost identical words and phrases that suicide is not wrong because it constitutes a personal choice that every individual has a right to make. A 22-year-old woman explained:

I don't think suicide is wrong. I don't think that people really take suicide lightly either. I think people who actually commit suicide aren't just doing it on a whim. I think they really thought about it, and that it's a choice for them.

A moment later, she elaborated: "I think each individual life is important. But I still think it is your individual life, so that you should be able to make a decision about it So I don't think [suicide] is wrong because I think you should be able to make that decision." When asked whether she could think of any cases in which she would be inclined to regard suicide as wrong, she again emphasized how an individual's decision, choice, and feelings should not be overridden.

I still don't think I would call [suicide] wrong. I think that it might be unwise. You know what I mean? Like you hear about these things; you see it on TV. You know, this young couple locks themselves in the garage and die from carbon monoxide asphyxiation, because they have made some strange kind of suicide love pact. Or like twelve students at one high school committed suicide. But I think that I would call those acts of suicide unwise. I really couldn't say that it was wrong, because to those people it's very real. That's like saying: "Your feelings are wrong, or the way you look at the world is wrong."

The young woman's moral axiom was intoned by numerous other young adults. A 24-year-old man asserted, "you can commit suicide, it's your prerogative to ultimately make your own decision." "Ending one's own life is one's own decision," a 23-year-old man declared. Still another young woman said, "I think every person has a right to determine the course of their life. If they've decided to take their life into their own hands, I think it's perfectly acceptable. I've heard all the arguments about why it's wrong. I don't agree with it."

These young adults were well aware that suicide might be viewed from other perspectives, but they were not swayed by these. A young man stated, "I suppose there is the issue of how your loved ones and friends are going to feel after you kill yourself . . . but that concern doesn't carry enough weight for me to say suicide is wrong." Another young person refuted a different argument, "Some people say when you commit suicide, that [you] could be the next great person in the world But I think that's silly. There are just so many people in the world. I mean, the way that I feel, it's a personal, individual decision."

Even among some of the young adults who regarded suicide as morally wrong, the language of individualism also emerged. One 21-year-old man explained that suicide is wrong because it hinders personal growth. The person is not giving herself a chance to develop. "I don't tend to do it, but if I were to apply my outlook on life to someone else, I would say: Yeah, [suicide] is immoral in the sense that there is *so much* to do, and *so much* to grow for." A little while later, he reiterated, "there's a feeling that the more I grow, the more I become [and] the more I know who I am. And I want to do it more!" Suicide, in his view, abruptly ends the journey of personal growth and self-discovery. It runs counter to an ideal of self-realization. The young man was speaking what Bellah *et al.* label a language of expressive individualism.

In contrast to the young adults, the midlife and older adults spoke of suicide in terms of all three ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity. These three modes of moral discourse were articulated by midlife and older adults who regarded suicide as wrong as well as by midlife and older adults who regarded suicide as allowable. For example, a 53-year-old woman who was a social worker discussed the "immorality" of suicide in terms of all three ethics. She explained that even if a person is facing grim and hard circumstances, it is not in the person's best interest to end her life because friendlier times may come.

I think everybody has [to be] hopeful For example, I deal with a lot of people who have very painful emotional situations. They may have come from very dysfunctional families, and lived dysfunctionally all their lives and in all kinds of places. However, there is still hope there, as far as I'm concerned And all of us are in some pain. Certainly, I don't think anybody has everything exactly as they would like it to be. I certainly don't. So I think hopefulness is always present and we must learn how to be hopeful. So I would consider [suicide] immoral because they're not giving themselves a chance.

This middle-aged woman went beyond the discourse of individualism. She elaborated on her view that suicide is wrong by voicing an ethic of community. She discussed the interrelations that exist between people. In her view, we must seek to obtain a better life for ourselves, but we are

also obligated to try to help others obtain better lives. People who commit suicide are interfering with the social dynamic of mutual responsibility. They are not contributing to the lives of others, and "they are not giving all the other people in their repertoire or realm a chance to correct whatever it is [that] has affected them."

The woman applied her ethic of community to herself. She was explicit that "I am certainly willing to help somebody." She was also clear that she would intervene to prevent a suicide attempt, "I would not stand by and permit them to do it." Her view that she is compelled to step in to prevent a suicide contrasts sharply with the view of the 22-year-old woman quoted above who regarded no cases of suicide as wrong. This young woman described a college friend who had attempted suicide and was still suicidal. "She said she wouldn't put it past herself to try again. But actually . . . she didn't want to talk about it. She felt it was an extremely personal issue. It was really none of my business I [left] the subject alone, because I [didn't] feel like I was compelled to interfere." The young woman's ethic of individualism allowed for no breaking of the boundaries of autonomous decision making. The middle-aged woman's ethic of community, however, required it.

The middle-aged woman also held our desires and choices to be subject to divine law. She spoke in a clear and unwavering voice of God's commandments.

Because of my religious basis, I think [suicide] is a sin It's killing. In the Ten Commandments it does state—and I try to abide fairly closely to those—that "Thou shalt not kill." And that's killing, regardless of whether it's yourself or someone else.

Discourse within the ethic of divinity was virtually absent among the young adults. Just on occasion did a young adult make reference to our spiritual nature but never was the name of God uttered. Midlife and older adults, however, were as likely to speak of the divine as of the social or the individual. Moreover, midlife and older adults' divinity considerations did not appear to be shallow. They did not switch into a language of individualism when asked to elaborate on their considerations but continued to articulate an ethic of divinity. Here is an example of another way in which an ethic of divinity was expressed in response to the issue of suicide. A 48-year-old man explained:

Every day I read in the newspaper about another exception to the prohibition or sanction against suicide. There's a lot in the newspaper about health problems and aging problems, but I guess I'm still underneath possessing a value that suicide should not be an option. It's a non-option. So I guess despite the climate of the times, I would still hold to the belief that people should take other options . . . than self-destruction.

Interviewer: Why would you say so?
Participant: I believe in the sanctity of human life. I believe that there's a precious character to being alive and that one should view life in whatever level as essentially a good

Interviewer: Can you elaborate?
Participant: Well, I do believe in a Supreme Being. And as a religious believer, it would seem to be against the idea of some supernatural force to then say that I allow people to kill themselves. I believe that in some way there's something beyond our lives greater than ourselves. And just as we did not create our life, I feel we have no right to end our life—consciously and deliberately end our life.

Several of the midlife and older adults who did not object to suicide reasoned that it is an individual decision, as did the young adults. Some of the midlife and older adults, however, also brought up community considerations. For example, one older man maintained that a person who has turned his back to life will not take part in community life nor contribute to it. He said:

I think a person who is bent on suicide [and] who really sees no purpose in life, you're not going to be able to change him. He's going to go through life constantly thinking of ending it all When life gets so impossibly hard and you see no way out, I think the person is justified. He is not likely to contribute much to . . . his family, his friends, or the world.

Almost one hundred years ago, Durkheim (1897) described how modern society increasingly fails to integrate the individual into society and fails to regulate the activities of individuals. In his view, incidents of suicide and acceptance of suicide increase as a consequence of the individual being left to her own devices. He wrote: "But how could society impose its supremacy upon [individuals] when they refuse to accept this subordination as legitimate? It no longer then possesses the requisite authority to retain them in their duty if they wish to desert; and conscious of its own weakness, it even recognizes their right to do freely what it can no longer prevent. So far as they are the admitted masters of their own destinies, it is their privilege to end their lives." Durkheim anticipated the discourse of the many young adults in the present study who indeed regarded humans as masters of their own destinies. To these young adults, however, the individual's prerogative to determine the course of her life reflects not an unravelling of the social fabric, but the liberation of the individual from social constraints.

CONCLUSION

The present study affirms the observation of Bellah and his colleagues that a language of individualism is common among middle-class Americans. However, it departs from their conclusion that this language has become

preponderant. Only the young adults spoke a first language of individualism in the present study. The midlife and older adults did not. The moral discourse of the young adults repeatedly centered on an individual's choices, decisions, and included many concepts from what Bellah *et al.* refer to as utilitarian and expressive individualism. The young adults repeatedly spoke of an individual's rights, interests, and feelings.

The midlife and older adults balanced their individualistic considerations with community and divinity considerations. They voiced concern with the interests and feelings of individuals, but they also described people's behaviors as subject to the constraints and demands of the community, nature, and God.

As the young adults in this study conformed to Bellah *et al.*'s depiction of the American moral character, the warnings that the authors issued about the consequences of an exclusive or primary reliance on an ethic of individualism may apply to these young adults. The extent to which warnings are in order depends at least in part on the permanency of the young adults' first language of individualism. This, in turn, depends on what the causes are of their individualism.

The present study leaves open several explanations of the young adults' individualistic discourse. The discourse can be explained in terms of the young adults' cohort, age, and environment, or some combination of these three factors. The young adults may form part of a cohort who will continue to speak a first language of individualism even as they grow into middle-age and late adulthood, in which case Bellah *et al.*'s warnings are applicable. However, the discourse of the young adults may change as they grow older. With age, they may become more concerned with the goals of the community and with integrating the self into a natural and sacred order (for example, see the theories of Erikson, 1963; Kohlberg, 1973; Kohlberg & Power, 1981). The young adults' first language of individualism may also be a product of their immersion in the university environment. It is an environment in which a discourse of individualism flourishes (Haidt, 1993), and the young adults may cease to speak a first language of individualism once they leave that environment behind. The extent to which the factors of cohort, age, and environment contribute to young adults' individualism remains to be answered.

In conclusion, it is worth keeping in mind that all the adults in the present study were middle-class, very well-educated, politically liberal adults. As mentioned earlier, one would expect such adults to be particularly likely to speak a language of individualism (Roof & McKinney, 1987). Yet only the young adults had a first language of individualism. This suggests that more explorations are necessary of the way that middle-class

adults and Americans of other social and ethnic backgrounds speak of the moral self and the moral world.

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