‘The good child’: Anthropological perspectives on morality and childhood

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‘The good child’: Anthropological perspectives on morality and childhood

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Currently, there is no clearly delineated field that could be described as ‘the anthropology of morality’. There exists, however, an increasingly visible and vocal interest in issues of morality among anthropologists. Although there has been a lack of explicit study, it has become clear that anthropologists have, in fact, been concerned with issues of moralities all along. The purpose of this special issue is to bring this interest to ethnographic studies of childhood, and explore how and why children or young people act in a particular way and are making certain choices, how these are valued or contested by their families, peers, and communities. The papers in this special issue highlight the contestations that arise as multiple moralities collide, and the effects this may have for the persons involved. Collectively, the papers illustrate a notion of moralities as multiple, contested, and mobile, and the consequences this may have in a globalising world.

Keywords: anthropology of morality, childhood, ethics, cross-cultural

Introduction

The aim of this special issue on ‘the good child’ is to bring into view recent work which has emerged from the intersection of two overlapping areas of research, namely the anthropology of morality and childhood. The anthropology of morality is a relatively recent and constantly evolving field, featuring a wide range of ideas on how to conceptualise the role of morality in social life. The anthropology of childhood, in comparison, has grown steadily since the 1990s into what is now a well-established subfield. Its core interest is to understand children and youth in their own right—that is, not to see them as incomplete adults, but to take their experiences and agency seriously, and place these at the centre of methodological and theoretical inquiry. While anthropological work on morality potentially...
engages with any aspect of social life, anthropological studies of childhood are specifically concerned with issues as they arise in children’s lives. While morality matters for people at all stages of the life course, anthropological studies of morality and childhood, despite their productive affinities, have so far not been systematically brought into dialogue. This special issue aims to contribute to this endeavour.

Areas such as morality and childhood are by their nature the object of interdisciplinary study. Therefore, while the anthropological case studies presented here arise from and are rooted in particular cultures or societies, they also speak to broader social theories. Some of the key themes include, for example, children negotiating demands of moral behaviour made by their parents, the role of peers in shaping young people’s ethical decisions or, indeed, how individuals address the conflict of multiple moral systems that co-exist in their life spheres. In order to provide a broader framework in which the contributions can be located, this introduction will briefly sketch the trajectory of anthropological interest in morality and ethics before discussing more specifically some parameters shared by the papers presented here, and will highlight some of the arguments and challenges they raise.

**Anthropology and morality**

It is perhaps fair to say that at this moment, there is no clearly delineated field that could be described as ‘the anthropology of morality’. There exists, however, an increasingly visible and vocal interest in issues of morality among anthropologists (see e.g. Fassin, 2012). Over the past decade or so, this has burgeoned to the extent that it has sparked critical comments on this theme, becoming a ‘free-for-all’—a relatively unstructured area to which, in the absence of canonical texts, a range of occasional and more systematic contributors add their views (Robbins, 2012). One indication of the current malleability of this area might be the oscillation between ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ as the focus of inquiry—which, incidentally, is also mirrored by the papers in this collection. As Michael Lambek (2010a, p. 9) has argued, the fluid use and interchangeability of morality and ethics need not be a particular hindrance to further debate. Indeed, while initial work such as that of Faubion (2011) and Laidlaw (2002) took ethics in the Foucauldian tradition as its reference point, other authors, such as Howell (1997) and Heintz (2009), have endeavoured to establish ethnographic and anthropological approaches to ‘moralities’. Summarising these developments, Cheryl Mattingly even considers them as an ‘ethical turn’ in anthropology (2013, p. 301).

In this evolving debate, one question is why, in the past, there has been no explicit, systematic study of morality within anthropology. One frequently cited response is that moral issues have indeed always been among the topics that anthropologists are concerned with, such as kinship, economics or religion; the apparent neglect of ‘morality’ as a separate area of study is attributed to the influence of Durkheimian thinking, which declared that all things moral were essentially social (Robbins, 2012; Yan, 2011). As a consequence, the study of ‘the
moral’ became subsumed under the broader field of ‘the social’. Subsequent research has often addressed fundamentally moral issues, but in a more incidental and implicit manner. In contrast, however, Didier Fassin maintains that the influence of the Durkheimian approach may have been overstated; instead, he suggests that one reason why anthropologists have apparently been hesitant to address morality is that studying other people’s morality requires developing a critical awareness of one’s own moral preconceptions (Fassin, 2008). This aligns, however, with a wider necessity in ethnographic research to reflect on theoretical and other preconceptions which researchers bring to their object of study—therefore, as Fassin also notes, it should not prevent anthropologists from researching morality. Instead, he suggests we ought to ‘consider our anthropological discomfort with morals as heuristic rather than paralyzing’ (2008, p. 342).

Whichever of those reasons one might ultimately hold responsible for the comparative lack of explicit study, the debate seems to have arrived at a point where it becomes clear that anthropologists have, in fact, been concerned with issues of moralities all along. One might accept that ‘the moral cannot be defined without the social because morality, like culture, must be learned and shared among a group of people’ (Yan, 2011). It is important, though, to note that even if ‘the moral is indeed inseparable from the social’, this does not mean the moral cannot be studied as an analytically independent problematic, as it shares the trait of being social with virtually every other topic on which anthropologists are working. One might thus conclude that this is certainly a worthwhile field of social inquiry.

Neglect of ‘immorality’?

Expanding on this debate, Yunxiang Yan (2011) has proposed that what is problematic about the emerging study of the moral is not whether it can be analytically separated from the social, but rather the way in which it has been carried out. In particular, he contends that anthropologists have consistently neglected to explain people’s immoral behaviour in favour of foregrounding individuals’ desires and actions aimed at being or becoming a ‘good person’ (Yan, 2011). This diagnosis appears to be validated by the fact that there is indeed a substantial body of work within anthropology and related disciplines concerned with the process of ‘moral selving’, which can be understood as ‘the work of creating oneself as a more virtuous, and often more spiritual, person’ (Allahyari, 2000, p. 4). In addition, given the extensive literature on volunteering, charity and philanthropy more generally, it appears that being and doing good more readily attracts research interest and is seen as in greater need of explanation than being bad or immoral. On reflection, though, Yan’s challenge seems less convincing: there is of course substantial work on people intending to harm others, although this is not necessarily couched specifically in emerging debates on im/morality. David Parkin, for example—in an admittedly rare account—has addressed the issue of ‘evil’ and individual malevolence across cultures (Parkin, 1991), and there is substantial literature on the anthropology of violence and conflict. It is true, however, that in the context of
morality, there is (arguably) a greater emphasis on people as they are striving to do the ‘right’ rather than the ‘wrong’ thing.

Beyond this, however, lurks the more intractable issue of what is considered as immoral. In Yan’s view, this is defined as ‘an intentional violation of the prevailing ethical values in a society and/or purposeful damage to other people’s interests’ (Yan, 2011). Surely, though, it is not always clear what the ‘prevailing’ values are in a society, or indeed what constitutes damage, and it even may be considered ethically justified. Part of the reason why anthropology has been careful in debating ‘morality’ is that such discussions soon risk turning ethnocentric. In contrast, the papers gathered in this collection paint a more nuanced and complicated picture. What matters in the situations they describe is that the same attitude or practice is considered deeply moral according to one individual’s conviction or prioritised set of values, but wrong and immoral according to another’s. One aim which underlies the papers is therefore to understand what is perceived or constructed as moral and immoral, by whom, and in the context of which systems of thought. The difference from Yan’s approach is thus constituted by shift from an individual’s intention or purpose, which appears to be central to his understanding of immorality, to how a particular mindset or behaviour is variously understood by different actors. This includes the central actors—in this case, children and adolescents—but also their peers, parents, educators, NGOs, the state or wider society. The focal point of analysis is to explore how and why a child or young person acts in a particular way and is making certain choices, how these choices are valued or contested by others involved and what effects these contestations have.

Moral breakdown and ongoing contestation

This particular analytical interest of the papers leads to a further point of debate—namely, how researchers can gain insight into a person’s moral reasoning and decision-making process, which is arguably a valid and central issue for any anthropology of morality. One heuristic model that has been developed in this context is that of a ‘moral breakdown’ (Zigon, 2007). This term refers to a moment of crisis in an individual’s life course, where their former unreflective moral state becomes brittle and they find themselves in a situation where they need to respond to an ‘ethical demand’. As Zigon states, they are ‘forced to step-away from their unreflective everydayness and think-through, figure out, work on themselves and respond to certain ethical dilemmas, troubles or problems’ (2007, p. 11). This moment then becomes an opportunity for the ethnographer to engage with and explore the conscious moral deliberations offered by one’s interlocutor.

A model of ‘moral breakdown’ may be particularly appropriate for the kinds of ethnographic scenarios that Zigon is examining, such as participants involved in HIV/drug rehabilitation programmes run by the Orthodox Church in Russia. In several of the papers here, however, the ‘breakdown’ as a heuristic tool turns out to be less suitable for understanding the moral processes that are at stake (though Qureshi, in this volume, productively employs it in her study of transnational
Punjabi schooling). One disadvantage of a strategy used to prise open the black box of moral reasoning in this way is that it relies on a marked case, an exceptional moment of conscious deliberation in which the researcher is invited to participate. One might argue, though, that the nature of moral sentiments and practices is often an unmarked and continuous part of a person’s life experience.

Rather than relying on moments of breakdown and crisis, I therefore argue that—as illustrated by the papers in this volume—being attentive to ongoing contestation and constant friction between different regimes of values can be a way of exploring individuals’ moral attitudes and decision-making. It may be a moot point as to whether these processes take places subconsciously, with full deliberation or in a combination of modes. The point is that since morality is an inherent and continuous dimension of human life, one appropriate way of capturing it is through recognising it as a dimension of everyday life rather than an exception to it. In this sense, the approach used here takes inspiration from Michael Lambek’s view of ethics as ‘an intrinsic dimension of human activity and interpretation’ (2010a, p. 42). He understands the ethical as enacted—both through the performance of specific acts and through the deliberate judgement of them. This foregrounding of the relevance of everyday ethical acts aligns with Mattingly’s claim that ‘what is especially undertheorized is the complex role the moral plays even in everyday engagements’ (2013, p. 306). Stafford, drawing on Lambek, shares the basic assumption that ethics is observable not only in exceptional situations, such as a ‘breakdown’ or ‘moral dilemma’, but also in ‘routine and everyday ones’ (Stafford, 2013, p. 5).

In this vein, Zigon’s focus on the situation of ‘breakdown’ has been criticised by Mattingly, for example, for being out of the ordinary and separate from the everyday. Like Zigon’s, though, Mattingly’s interest is still focused on an instance of personal change: a moment of moral transformation. This, however, ‘is not something that occurs apart from everyday action in a moment of moral crisis or a thematical break, but accomplished in the midst of the everyday as the expected or the normative, becomes subject to experiment’ (Mattingly, 2013, p. 322). She thus draws on the image of the ‘moral lab’ to capture the possibility of change or transformation as a person tries out different moral possibilities.

In contrast with, and in addition to, the scenario of the laboratory, the case studies in the papers here fit less comfortably with a narrative of moral transformation. In several cases, the children do not strive to turn themselves from ‘bad’ into ‘good’ persons. Rather, they are engaged in constant negotiations of what it means to be good, as different value systems that feature in their lives grate and compete against each other. This friction, and the ways in which children respond to it, is of a thoroughly everyday nature, and does not necessarily entail or envisage a transformation from one moral state into another. Furthermore, the arenas in which this is played out are often the mundane and the unobvious. This becomes especially evident when compared, for example, with the sites at the centre of some of Fassin’s recent work (e.g. http://morals.ias.edu/project), which foregrounds state institutions and their interactions with members of society as a
key stage where such moral contestations are enacted. In what is arguably a Foucauldian tradition, these institutions include prisons, mental hospitals, the French asylum seeker system and urban policing.

While these provide stark and powerful examples, the attention of the articles included here is trained on more subtle dimensions, which are less spectacular but which nevertheless bear the imprint of interventions by institutions such as governments, international NGOs, schools and religious groups. The sites include a slum community, family homes, streets in urban Vietnam where children work and live, religious boarding schools and the corridors and backyard of a secondary school in the UK. In this sense, the collection makes a case for considering how practised moralities become manifest in mundane and micro-contestations, while being mindful of the broader structural forces which may influence, though not fully determine, them.

**Moralities: multiple and mobile**

Finally, two further issues emerging from the papers here need to be highlighted. One concerns the idea of a ‘totalising morality’, which is predominant in a particular society and to which people feel compelled to adhere. As Zigon states, though, ‘as modern societies have become increasingly mobile, open, pluralistic, and individualized, the power of a totalising morality is declining rapidly; consequently, it is not uncommon that several value systems may compete with one another within a society’ (Yan, 2011). Taking this as a starting point, I would go further to suggest that it is in fact quite common for competing value systems to exist. As Charles Stafford reminds us, although it is convenient to invoke one, there is no single ‘collective morality’ which comprehensively characterises a whole society (Stafford, 2013, p. 4). This is notwithstanding the fact that there are moral systems which are shared by certain regions. Instead of thinking of a hegemonic or totalising morality, though, it is more appropriate to recognise the multiple moralities which co-exist and sometimes contest each other in any given society. Zigon captures something similar as he refers to the ‘multiple moral possibilities’ that are available to individuals; the process of negotiating and making moral choices between them then takes the form of ‘moral assemblages’ (Zigon, 2010).

The existence of such moral multiplicity is further underscored if one considers, as a second point, the mobility not just of people but of moral value systems, as they move with the people or are left behind. In fact, it emerges that a situation of migration can become a catalyst for intensified moral evaluation and decision-making, as hitherto established moralities might lose—or increase—their prominence and jostle with other, different ones, which might be considered attractive or, conversely, dangerous and undesirable, as demonstrated in the papers by Qureshi and Zeitlyn in this volume. In such a situation, the intersectionality—and sometimes conflict—between different value systems comes to the fore again, and it may become evident that young people and their parents may have very different views of what they understand to be a ‘good’ child in the context of migration.
attention to the effects of mobility on moralities is not the least of the contributions that anthropology might be able to bring to these debates.

The moral anthropology of childhood

Before turning to the themes that emerge from the articles, it is useful to briefly consider the intersections of anthropology, morality and childhood. As suggested above, since the beginnings of the discipline, anthropologists have been interested in moral issues and have explored them among people at different stages of their life course. As with adults, though, studies of morality among children have not necessarily been positioned within a clear, established framework of moral anthropology. This special issue is therefore also an attempt to relate such work more systematically to emerging debates within an anthropology of morality, while at the same time considering what they might add to them. In the following, I identify some of these possible contributions.

Perhaps as might be expected, some of the early work by anthropologists concerned the inculcation of the ‘right’ social values into children in different cultures and how parents’ child-rearing practices made visible relevant ideas of what it meant to be a good child or person. In her study of a Canadian Inuit community in the 1960s, entitled Never in Anger, Jean Briggs documented in great detail how, through continuous adult–child interaction, the children of her host family were taught how to manage the expression of their emotions, and especially avoidance of anger and lack of violence, which were among the most deeply held values in the community (Briggs, 1970). In a related manner, Schieffelin (1990) and Ochs and Schieffelin (1986) investigated how children, in Schieffelin’s case among the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea, learn what is ‘right’ and socially accepted behaviour. Schieffelin demonstrated this through fine-grained analysis of linguistic interactions between Kaluli children and their family and community members, thus foreshadowing Lambek’s recent conjoining of ethics and linguistic acts (2010a).

Generally, questions about what is considered a good child, and the best way to raise such a child, underlie many of these works. This may be in the context of particular political movements, such as disciplining children in accordance with Hindu nationalist values (Froerer, 2007b). Subsequently, children might be confronted with competing moral systems: rural North Vietnamese children, for example, find themselves needing to weigh up Confucian rules which value boys over girls with the discourse of a socialist state which propagates gender equality (Rydstrom, 2003). Furthermore, children’s morality is also explored through the prism of labour, as in Mayblin’s study of a rural community in Northeast Brazil where performing physical labour is considered beneficial to children, as it helps to accumulate valuable moral knowledge (2010). Morality also plays a role, as with adults, in the understanding of health and attribution of illness as related to morally good (or bad) behaviour (Froerer, 2007a). Most recently, several contributors to Stafford’s volume (2013) explored what is considered ethical behaviour among children and youth in contemporary China (Fang, 2013; Johnston, 2013; Wang,
as well as the particular dilemmas of migrant parents—an issue to which I will return below. As a consequence of parents leaving their children behind, an increasingly important theme are the moral and emotional dimensions of transnational parenting, especially the demand and expectations placed on migrant mothers (Parrenas, 2005; Åkesson, Carling, & Drotbohm, 2012).

Before considering some of the articles’ themes in more detail, it is useful to highlight a few methodological and conceptual features shared by the papers in this special issue. First of all, even though the title of the special issue highlights the ‘good child’, several articles here are concerned with adolescents or young people. As definitions and understandings of what a child is vary significantly between societies and cultures, there is no single, clear-cut definition underlying the articles here, apart from their generally not being considered adults. In terms of age range, this includes children of primary school age (even if they are not attending school), such as in Burr’s and Montgomery’s papers, up to and including those in the later stages of their secondary school education, as in Winkler Reid’s and Qureshi’s contributions. This also means, though, that while most papers relate to issues of child-rearing, others, especially Winkler Reid’s, foreground ethical discourses and contestations as they play out between peers. Here, the questions are less about how to make children behave in a certain way and more about how young people debate among themselves what is acceptable or ethical behaviour.

What further unites these papers is that they foreground or include the experiences of the children themselves. This relates to a now well-established agenda in childhood and youth studies which calls for an emphasis on child-centred perspectives, rather than adults’ views on them (James & Prout, 1997). With regard to methodology, most of the papers here employ ethnographic approaches, including long-term participant observation and interviews, as well methods specifically tailored for research with children, such as participative and visual methods. Foregrounding children’s experiences does not imply the exclusion of other viewpoints, of course. As mentioned above, a key purpose here is to make visible the friction and intersectionality involved in the different ideas of what constitutes a ‘good child’, and practices adopted in order to raise or become one. As is apparent, these empirical, ethnographic approaches are not prescriptive or normative, but seek to develop an understanding of what constitutes and contextualises certain moral beliefs and acts and what consequences these have for children, their peers, their families and communities.

Emerging themes

One, perhaps obvious, thread which runs through several of the articles in this volume is the role of the family in contestations about what a ‘good child’ is, and how to raise or become one. This is particularly evident in Burr’s and Montgomery’s contributions, located in Vietnam and Thailand respectively. In both cases, the papers focus on socio-economically disadvantaged children, who aim to financially support their families—an attitude which is aligned with their strongly held
notions of filial duty. The children’s methods of earning money conflict with other influential notions of what it means to be good. The Vietnamese children working on the streets described by Burr, for example, are considered deviant by the police and the government, as by living in the city they contravene the household registration system, according to which they should remain in their rural areas where their families reside. The children’s actions also run counter to children’s rights NGOs’ efforts to prevent them from living and working in the street. By moving illegally from the countryside to the city in order to earn a living, they are deviant in the eyes of the authorities and NGOs, but are conforming to the demand to put their families’ survival first, even at the risk of being held in a youth detention centre. In Montgomery’s case, under-age girls engage in sex work in order to support their families, driven by similar notions of filial duty, even though their activities are deemed immoral and illegal by child protection agencies and the Thai state.

At the same time, it becomes apparent that filial piety can also be a fundamentally gendered notion, as well as being variable according to birth order. Thus, for the Vietnamese children, the right behaviour is not only about being a ‘good child’, but also about being a good daughter, son, first-born or second-born. Burr’s chapter in particular is a reminder to pay attention to the multiple demands made of children; as they are conflicting, the children have to decide for themselves which demands to prioritise and adhere to. But as Montgomery’s case shows, the people in the slum community she studied had comparable expectations of both boys and girls—that is, to be a good child meant to unselfishly support their family and siblings, and boys who did not act appropriately received collective criticism.

In both Montgomery’s and Winkler Reid’s papers, sexuality—or, rather, the appropriateness of certain sexual acts—is subject to debate and justification among children and young people, albeit in starkly different socio-economic contexts. Some of the children who engaged in sexual acts with foreigners in exchange for money in the Thai slum community, for example, refused to consider themselves as prostitutes, rather presenting their clients as boyfriends and foregrounding the purpose of their activities, which was to ensure their families were financially supported. The latter rendered them as ‘good children’ in their own reckoning, as well as in the eyes of their families and local community. In Winkler Reid’s case, the ethics of sexual acts were intensely debated in the informal realm of a London secondary school. In a highly gendered discourse, it emerges that what is considered appropriate or good sexual behaviour is highly malleable and depends not only on whether it pertains to girls or boys, but under what circumstances, when, and for what reasons young people engage in such behaviour. Some of the young people themselves recognise and comment on the double standard of sexual judgement, which accords respect and normality to boys’ sexual activities almost irrespective of context, whereas girls’ actions are subject to critical scrutiny and sanctions if they are seen to deviate from a collective, implicitly agreed but mutable, standard of sexual ethics.
While in Winkler Reid’s case the school is a site where such ethical debates are conducted, she also highlights the role of the informal realm, as well as the influence of peers, in shaping young people’s views and practices regarding sexual ethics. This serves as a useful reminder of the informal and formal dimensions of ‘school’ as a site of moral and ethical deliberation. Conventionally, much attention has been paid to tangible ways of shaping children in schools and through curricula, and instilling certain values in them through instruction and training. This more formal schooling, the perceived bad influence of local peers and the resulting quandaries faced by British Asian migrant parents are at the heart of Zeitlyn’s and Qureshi’s contributions. Zeitlyn’s paper, like Winkler Reid’s, is based on research carried out in a London school. The moral issues that move the participants in his study, though, are fundamentally shaped by issues of ethnic and religious identity among an immigrant community of British Bangladeshis and their second generation children. In the view of some parents, there is significant friction between their idea of a ‘good’ child and Muslim and the perceived threats to this status that arise through the moral corruption emanating from manifestations of western modernity. These threats present themselves in multiple forms encountered in everyday London life, including habits such as drinking and smoking, as well as the presence of urban gangs. As one antidote, several parents chose to send their children to a locally organised Qur’an class, which their children attended after their day in a secular state school. The aim of these sessions was the explicit inculcation of Muslim values, literally incorporated through physical practices such as collectively reciting Qur’an verses. Even though in several cases the children’s responses were less than enthusiastic, the parents considered this important and a necessary means to help shape their children into good Muslims in what they felt to be an adverse and immoral environment.

The vagaries of migration, and the frictions of divergent value regimes that they bring about, also constitute the main theme of Qureshi’s paper. Here, Punjabi Sikh parents living in the UK are, similarly to the parents described by Zeitlyn, concerned about the moral welfare of their children. Especially in the case of teenagers, corrupting influences from peers are seen as highly problematic. In attempts to reconnect these teenagers with their cultural and religious heritage, they are sent to schools in Punjab for a limited time period in order to furnish them with the moral fundamental values which their parents feel they themselves had had instilled. As Qureshi argues, these parents are encountering ‘multiple moralities’, and their migration situation necessitates conscious deliberation about how they want their children to grow up and the type of people they wish them to become. Again, a gendered dimension becomes visible: in Qureshi’s examples, boys are the target of intervention more often than girls, hinting at a broader theme worth exploring—namely, the intersections of gender, morality and migration.

Both Zeitlyn’s and Qureshi’s contributions demonstrate how migration can be a catalyst as well as a context for conflicts between differing regimes of value, or ‘multiple moralities’ (Zigon, 2011). Mobility may prompt the dissembling of existing moralities and trigger the need to re-assemble them—especially, in these cases,
in the view of parents. As such, migration offers particularly productive ground for making visible moral contestations within and between individuals and generations, and allows for charting their strategies and responses to unsettling developments. The problematic outcomes these strategies can have for individual children becomes evident in Qureshi’s study, where the boys returning from their time in Punjab appear more lost and disoriented than they were before they left.

Finally, Sleeboom-Faulkner’s contribution takes the innovative form of a film review of a documentary made by the Chinese director Weijun Chen, Please, Vote for Me (2007). This film focuses on a social experiment conducted in a primary school, where a class of eight-year olds are invited to hold an election for the position of ‘class monitor’. In the unfolding events it emerges that, contrary to ideals of fairness and democracy, the parents of some of the candidates encourage them to engage in behaviours such as bullying, bragging, intimidating or bribing their classmates in order to gain votes. The film, however, not only shows the parents’ actions; it also includes the children’s interactions among themselves and documents the often painful struggles and efforts some of them undertake to reconcile what they perceive to be the right behaviour in such an election with the often contrasting advice they receive from their parents and peers. Linking values from ‘adult’ society with ‘democratic competition’ in the children’s classroom, it further underscores the theme of clashing moralities, as well as acknowledging children’s valiant efforts to orient themselves within intensely fraught scenarios.

Conclusion

What emerges, then, from a collection of anthropological approaches that are brought to bear on morality and childhood? I have outlined above that the rapidly emerging, if somewhat divergent, ‘anthropology of morality’ has yet to systematically incorporate questions of childhood and morality into its key debates. At the same time, there has been consistent interest among anthropologists in cross-cultural ideas about what constitutes a good child and how to rear one, and relevant work on this has been part of the discipline from its earliest stages. One purpose of this collection is to bring existing ethnographic and more recent conceptual innovations into dialogue. From the anthropology of morality, it takes the emphasis on ordinary ethics (Lambek, 2010b; Stafford, 2013); the recognition of ethics as a feature of everyday acts is a key perspective that is applied fruitfully in many of the papers here. At the same time, a consistent foregrounding of children’s and young people’s own experiences and agency in moral decision-making is brought to this intersecting field by the anthropology of childhood.

More specifically, the papers adopt a number of assumptions, and raise conceptual issues that are worth further exploration. In line with a focus on ordinary ethical acts, their ethnographic lens is trained on the ongoing, rather than the exceptional. That is, rather than highlighting moments of breakdown, they often describe continuous struggles within and between participants about what might constitute ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ behaviour. The cases presented here thus also go to
show the heuristic value of recognising friction and conflict between different regimes of moral value. As one purpose of this collection is to be attentive to children and youth in a field of contestation between different moralities, the papers highlight where these conflict zones are situated—which often turns out to be micro-settings such as the street, school corridors and within family homes.

Rather than relying on a drive toward or occurrence of moral transformation of an individual, they assume that at any given moment there are multiple moralities that matter for people, and they do not always point them in the same direction. In this situation, all participants have to, more or less consciously, constantly evaluate and make decisions about possible courses of action. This includes parents, children, peers and communities. Overall, therefore, this volume is concerned with making visible the social nature of these deliberations, as well as the agency of children who are at the centre of analysis.

Finally, in addition to conceptualising moralities as multiple, small-scale, ongoing, contested and enacted in the everyday, this volume underscores the lack of stasis. That is, in several cases the mobility of people and moralities brings together often competing moralities that exist within places, communities and individuals, as well as between them. In sum, this collection therefore hopes to demonstrate how the mobility and modification of different moralities, their intersections and contestations and the ways in which individuals grapple with them characterise the assemblages and dissemblages involved in what it means to raise or to become a ‘good child’ in a globalising world.

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Introduction

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