'Moral ecology' and 'moral capital': tools towards a sociology of moral education from a South African ethnography

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Research and pedagogy in the field of morality and moral education has long been dominated by philosophical and psychological disciplines. Although sociological studies and theorising in the field have not been absent, it has been limited and non-systematic. Drawing on a study that investigated the lived morality of a group of young South Africans growing up in the aftermath of Apartheid and in the townships of Cape Town, this paper surveys the historical contribution made by sociologists to the study of morality and introduces two sociological notions of importance to moral education research and practice: 'moral ecology' and 'moral capital'. Employing Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory it describes the moral life as an ecology of interconnecting systems, complex antinomies, diverse codes, multiple positionings, discordant processes and competing influences, over time and on multiple levels. Moral capital, draws on Bourdieu's work on capitals and is described in two ways. First, as a dialectic, such that young people living in poverty identify how being 'good' can be translated into economic capital, which in turn enables them to remain 'good'. Second, it asks, what are the necessary elements of moral capital that young people need in order to be good and so attain the economic future to which they aspire? The paper concludes by noting how a sociology of moral education contributes to understanding the relationship between poverty and morality, including the social reproduction of morality; and its relevance for moral education research and practice.

Introduction

How do poor young people who live in impoverished communities develop moral lives? What difference does poor schooling, partial-parenting, a history of dehumanising racial subjugation and the normalisation of violence make to their lived morality? How do they retain their humanity in the midst of filthy environments, struggles for survival, the physiological effects of poverty, the absence of

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recreation and the widespread availability of alcohol and drugs? What tools are there to help us to consider their moral lives beyond linear developmental stages, middle-class definitions of the good life and short-sighted talk of moral choices? These are just some of the formative sociological questions that need to be asked of moral education in impoverished contexts. In order to answer them satisfactorily it is critical to consider what sociological theorising has been done on the topic of morality and moral education and then to explore how some of sociology's insights may best be applied to moral education research and practice.

The sociology of morality

Sociology is concerned with the study of society, human social interaction and the rules and processes that bind and separate people as members of associations, groups and institutions. It is materially interested in the way political, economic and social context affect human social functioning (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1991; Giddens & Birdsall, 2001). More specifically, the sociology of education is concerned with how public institutions affect education and its outcome, including the manner in which school-ing reproduces or perpetuates social class, inequalities and injustices (Bourdieu, 1997; Lauder, 2006).

Historically, sociologists have paid sporadic theoretical attention to the phenomena of human morality. In the nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim (1973a, 1973b), writ-ing in the context of the social and moral crisis following the dictatorship of the Third Napoleonic Republic, understood *society* as the source of morality that begins 'with attachment to something other than ourselves' (Durkheim, 1973b, p. 151). Georg Simmel (1950) held to similar ideas and spoke of the individual being confronted by a 'second subject' and of morality as social norms internalised by individuals that act as a 'collective conscience'. Durkheim further advocated that moral growth could be formally nurtured in schools through focusing on discipline, altruism, the importance of collective interest and 'sacrifice' (Durkheim, 1973b, p. 152). His suggested pedagogy was one which produced a 'critical consciousness' in which justice was paramount, rather than based on moral maxims (p. xi). He further believed that morality was a social fact that needed to be investigated 'attentively' (p. xv). Max Weber (1978, 2002), in contrast, argued for a distinction between facts and values. He saw social life as governed primarily by rational interest (capital) while acknowl-edging the existence of value-rational action—action shaped by commitment to a value that itself could not be rationally arrived at. He concluded that since morality primarily concerned self-interest, the individual was the sole moral authority (Thiele, 1996, p. 7). Other nineteenth-century sociologists, such as Karl Marx (1988), warned that morality is the convention of the ruling classes and is inherently about power, control and subjugation and ought to be viewed with suspicion.

In the twentieth century, important sociologists have commented on human morality, but still in limited rather than systematic fashion. For example, Zygmunt Bauman (1993) and Emmanuel Levinas (1987), largely reflecting Durkheim and Simmel, conclude that moral actions are not driven by normative theories, such as

utilitarianism or deontology, but rather by localised and interpersonal relationships—through 'being for the other' (Levinas) or 'the moral party of two' (Bauman). Jürgen Habermas's (1990) concepts of 'communicative rationality' and 'discourse ethics' (p. 246) have contributed to moral pedagogy through his insistence that universalisable morality is arrived at by rational discussion within a community of solidarity. Thomas Luckmann (1983) draws attention to the importance of institutional environments with *contradictory* normative requirements and advocates a study of moral concepts (the way in which they are produced and can be negotiated) through the observation and analysis of everyday life or 'lifeworlds'. Michel Foucault (2000) extends Marx's 'power' analysis by showing how morality (and talk about morality) has been used in order to control people ideologically and socially. Other sociological contributions to moral theorising include functionalism (Parsons, 1937), sociobiology (Wilson, 1975) and rational choice theory (Abell, 1991).

More recently, a number of *empirical* projects have contributed to a sociological understanding of morality. Robert Bellah's (1996) study of the increasing individualisation of American society and its implications for civic life and human morality adds the notion of 'therapeutic contractualism' (p. 129) to the sociology of morality lexicon. People treat others based, not upon a concern for right or wrong, but rather upon care for others within an immediate circle of concern (p. 112) and with regard to 'what works for me' (p. 129). Other empirical sociological studies include Suttles's (1968) study dealing with the 'social order' and 'provincial morality' of slum neighbourhoods; Baumgartner's (1988) *The moral order of a suburb* and Anderson's (1999) *Code of the street*, looking at the 'moral life of the inner city'. Furthermore, economic sociologists have paid attention to the role moral values play in the marketplace (for example, Granovetter & Swedberg, 2001) and, more theoretically, Fein (1997) elucidates the informal social rules that people create in making moral decisions.

It is only in the past 15 years, however, that a growing call for a *systematic* sociology of morality has emerged (see, for example, Stivers, 1996; Thiele, 1996; Davydova & Sharrock, 2003; Pharo, 2005; Zdrenka, 2006; Abend, 2008; Ignatow, 2009; Swartz, 2009; Kang & Glassman, 2010). Amongst these, Abend (2008), argues for sociological inquiry into morality focused on 'empirical accounts of people's moral beliefs, and their causes and consequences' (p. 120); Pharo (2005), drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1997) social and cultural reproduction theory, argues that the concept of choice, prevalent in conventional moral discourses, be replaced by an analysis of 'social settings [that] do not depend on agents' decisions…[but on] situations like scarcity of goods, lack of political liberty, sexual oppression, restriction of social perspectives' (no page numbers on text); and Thiele (1996) advocates a sociology of morality that investigates the origins and 'disputes' concerning moral authority' (p. 7).

Turning the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959) to a consideration of morality, and answering these questions in a systematic fashion, is especially important when considering morality and moral education in resource-poor contexts. The poor experience poverty not just as economic deprivation but as moral judgement—being poor is often associated with being 'immoral, alcoholic and degenerate…stupid'

(Bourdieu, 1998, p. 43). Sayer (2005) argues that the poor are discriminated against on multiple levels—and such discrimination is a moral issue, worthy of sociological consideration as a *moral*, not merely a *social* phenomenon. In this paper, I propose there are multiple benefits to be derived from pursuing a sociology of morality in general and of moral education in particular. A sociology of morality provides the opportunity to consider lived morality in social context. It invites us to investigate the way in which poverty affects people's moral development and how being morally good reproduces social and economic advantage. A sociology of morality also allows us to evaluate public commentary regarding the moral character of historical and contemporary groups through critical lenses; for example, interrogating calls for 'moral regeneration' (Lu, 2002; Quinlan, 2004) through the lens of 'moral panics' (Cohen, 1980; Ben-Yehuda, 1986). Finally, it challenges the way in which research and practice in the field of moral education has been dominated by philosophical and psychological approaches. In contrast, this theoretical reflection draws upon an empirical study that foregrounds the social and cultural contexts of young people's lived morality in an impoverished environment in South Africa. While I offer some background to this study below, it is reported in detail elsewhere (Swartz, 2007, 2009, see pp. 403–405 for a review) and serves as an example of a social context in which the usual psychological approach to moral development simply cannot apply, due largely to the presence of poverty and the absence of quality education, conditions necessary for linear cognitive development.

Studying the moral lives of poor youth in South Africa

The study upon which this reflection is based explored how young people living in an impoverished South African township understand the concept of morality and how their construction of morality facilitates their processes of moral growth. The term 'township' refers to a black residential area created by the segregationist policies of the former South African government. It is has similarities with a favela in Rio De Janeiro, a slum in Calcutta or Nairobi and a barrio in Colombia or Mexico City. Furthermore, although the levels of poverty are not comparable, in so far as social marginalisation is concerned, it may also be compared with an inner-city urban ghetto in the USA, a banlieue on the outskirts of Paris and a council estate in Glasgow or London. In colloquial terms in South Africa a township is often referred to as *ikasi*.

The study took place in Langa, a periurban township near Cape Town, and follows 37 young men and women aged between 14 and 20, over the course of 16 months. The majority of these youth were in Grade 9 (usually aged 14 to 15) and attended a township school, while a small group commuted to a nearby suburban school. The research design combines the usual elements of ethnography (participant observation, focus groups and interviewing), along with a survey questionnaire and multiple creative methods[1] designed to engage youth over a lengthy period. Overall, the study provides an account of the moral lives of vulnerable young people from within a context of partial-parenting, partial-schooling, pervasive poverty and inequality in the aftermath of the moral injustices of Apartheid. It shows how these young people

exhibit conventional values in some areas (substance use, violence, crime), contested values in others (money and sex), as well as postmodern values, especially regarding authority and self-authorisation. The study identifies young people's social representations of morality as action (what you do), as embodied (who you are and who others are to you) and as located or inevitable (where you are, i.e., in school, at home, off the streets or simply in *ikasi*). Despite self-identifying much of their behaviour as 'wrong', young people located themselves as overwhelming 'good', while making it clear that they hold themselves solely responsible for their 'bad' behaviour. In this sociological reflection, I focus on around 80% of these youth, those who comprise two of the four subcultures of township youth, avoiding the two extremes of those who are sheltered and those who are convicted and hardened criminals.[2] While a comprehensive sociology of moral education is beyond the scope of the paper, I offer two conceptual tools towards such a sociology, that of 'moral ecology' and 'moral capital'.

Lived morality—a social or moral ecology

Viewing young people's lived moral context through a sociological lens as a 'moral ecology' can be realised through combining concepts already in common use. The word *ecology* originates from the biological study of the interrelationships between organisms and their environment (such as climate or soil structure). A 'social ecology' (Swanson *et al.*, 2003) is concerned with the web of human relationships within their environmental contexts. Such a perspective readily acknowledges that contexts are complex with human actions affected by the environment, which in turn shapes 'the actions of individuals and communities' (p. 23). Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986, 1992) 'ecological systems theory' helps to systematise the study of the environment's effects on people's lives by describing these influences as interconnecting systems. Ironically Bronfenbrenner is a developmental psychologist rather than a sociologist but his framework has appealing sociological application.

The components of a moral ecology

Building on social ecological theory, Bronfenbrenner (1992) defines the *ecology* of human development as:

> the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, *throughout the life course*, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p. 188; emphasis in original)

Bronfenbrenner (1992) proposed that human development be considered through a 'hierarchy of systems at four levels moving from the most proximal to the most remote' (p. 226). These four contexts are the *microsystem* (immediate context of work, home and school), the *mesosystem* (interrelationships between microsystems), the *exosystem* (institutions and practices affecting youth) and the *macrosystem* (social and cultural contexts). Later Bronfenbrenner added a fifth context, that of the *chronosystem*

(change over time). At the centre of this ecology is the developing young person—with all his or her 'cognitive competence, socio-emotional attributes, and context-relevant belief systems' (p. 228). In keeping with Bronfenbrenner's taxonomy, I have called this the *endosystem*—analogous with the intrapsychic components of human (and moral) development of which we usually speak, to the neglect of socio-cultural contexts.

Outside of the endosystem, the most immediate context for each individual is therefore the microsystem—'a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by a developing person in a given face-to-face setting' (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 227). The microsystem in this research study comprises the schools, homes, streets and communities of these township youth. Included in these contexts, in my understanding, are relationships young people have with teachers, peers and other school staff (school); their mothers, fathers, siblings, own offspring and extended and blended families (home); friends, peers, gangs, youth from other parts of the township and romantic or sexual partners (streets); and neighbours, street committees, unrelated older peers, unrelated younger children and religious establishments (community).

At the other extreme Bronfenbrenner (1992) describes various macrosystems, which comprise '*belief systems, resources, hazards, life styles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange*' (p. 228; emphasis in original). For the young people who participated in the study, the various macrosystems in which they found themselves included: the political contexts of neoliberal fiscal policies; moral regeneration as an official South African discourse; pervasive poverty and its effects on school quality and unequal access to education; and various manifestations of structural injustice peculiar to the South African context, including gender and racial discrimination. Because a macrosystem refers to the prevailing *attitudes* and *ideologies* of a society, a communal culture of violence and corruption, limited practice and experience of human rights and strong ethnic and religious cultural practices are all included in the macrosystem of township youth.

Between micro- and macrosystems lie the mesosystem and the exosystem. The mesosystem describes the interrelationships between microsystems of which young people are a part. For these township youth, the mesosystem consists of interrelationships between home, school, streets and community. In the South African township context, there are few 'linkages' (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979, pp. 210–216) between these systems, especially between home, school and community. Somewhat more contact exists between community and home and tends to be more established than for those of the suburban middle classes, while interactions between communities and streets are often antagonistic. The exosystem also occupies space between micro- and macro-systems and comprises *institutions* and *practices* of which the young person is not directly a part, but whose 'consequences' (p. 227) s/he experiences. In the context of township youth, the criminal justice system, local government policies, adults' general behaviour in society (for example, substance use practices and the prevailing work ethic), parents' workplace conditions, the economy, including health and social services, and mass media all form part of the exosystem.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner (1986) describes the chronosystem as 'changes over time within the person and within the environment' (p. 724) that alter the relationship between the person and the environment. For these township youth, besides obvious changes such as puberty and increasing cognitive sophistication (arguably covered in the endosystem), the chronosystem also includes the move from tribalism, colonialism and Apartheid to living in a nascent democracy. Given South Africa's distinctive history, over time the relations between and within these various systems have changed. For example, young people became less closely monitored and less integrated into kin or culture systems. More substantially, the end of Apartheid removed the object of resistance for many youth and their families who were politically active in the struggle for a democratic state.[3] Figure 1 summarises
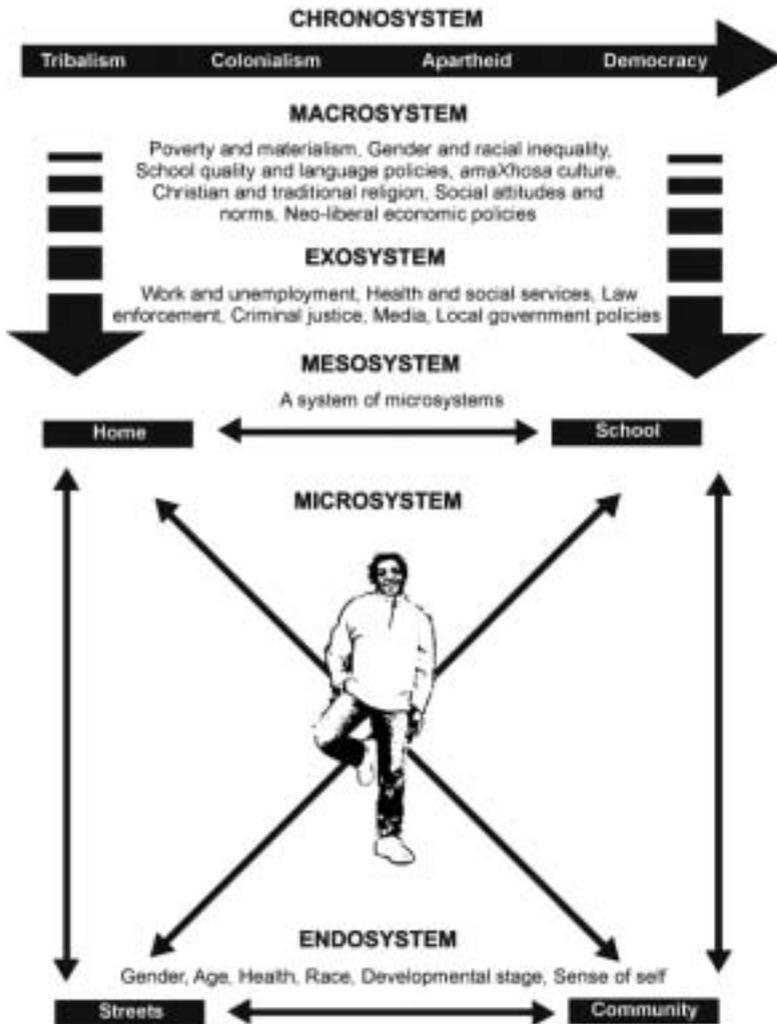

Figure 1.   Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory applied to the moral lives of South Africa's township youth

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as applied to the moral lives of today's township youth.

The relevance of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of youth development to researching lived morality is to foreground the importance of multiple contexts in youth constructions of morality. It challenges the researcher to consider morality beyond the narrow confines of individual choice or even the close influences of family, peers, school and community. It compels us to expand our vision beyond the psychological focus of cognitive development and to recognise broader socio-cultural forces that interact at multiple levels. The concept offers a meaningful way of talking about moral growth as the sum of its contexts, the influences of different kinds of moral knowledge, constructions of right and wrong and the discordant processes of moral decision making, of an individual and of groups of people. These interactional effects are best understood as complex and interconnecting systems in which combined single effects contribute in unexpected ways to the larger system. Applying the notion of a moral ecological lens to a study of young people's lived experiences and understandings of morality results in the ability to describe, in some depth, the systems at work, including young people's multiple moral positionings, competing influences and complex antinomies and how these change over time.

A moral ecology of interconnecting systems and complex antinomies

In order to show how the notion of a moral ecology may be operationalised, I now turn to a description of the moral lives of the township youth among whom I researched, employing Bronfenbrenner's taxonomy in doing so. Space does not allow me to offer the empirical evidence from which I drew these conclusions (see Swartz 2007, 2009), although I will incorporate some examples by way of illustration.

In the *endosystem*, the youth I studied exhibit a strong sense of self, but are unaware of the socio-emotional deficits they experience as a direct consequence of living in poverty. They strive for agency while at the same time relinquishing agency to 'God', 'witches' and other supernatural forces. They display a clear understanding of right and wrong, while acknowledging a chasm between moral beliefs and moral behaviour. They show deep connections to close kin and friends, but have a limited circle of care that seldom extends beyond these relationships. They seem to respond to epiphanal moments that inspire reform, but their attempts at reform seldom result in long-term change. They articulate willingness for mentoring relationships with adults, but have too few adults positively invested in their lives. They live superficially non-reflective lives, but given the opportunity and adult encouragement are able and willing to do the 'moral work' of reflection.

At the level of *microsystems* young people live in a world created by Apartheid in which survival is difficult and death and violence are everyday occurrences. They have enormous amounts of free-time due to frequent school disruptions and adult caregivers who are either permanently absent or busy making a living by informal means or in poorly paid, long-houred jobs. The result is that youth are socialised on

the streets of a community that is at once exciting and caring and violent, retributive and alcohol-sodden. Furthermore, youth, whilst hopeful about their future, seem to be unaware that high unemployment rates and poor education make finding decent work improbable. They profess an enormous desire for education but are disengaged and bored at school and only sporadically attend. They are HIV/AIDS aware and recognise multiple partners as an unacceptable norm, yet succumb to pressure to have multiple sexual partners. Pervasive anger and feelings of loss exist toward 'absent' fathers, while mothers are idealised as moral exemplars (often in the absence of what they consider 'right' behaviour). Young people live in communities that profess collectivism and communalism, but practise harsh retributive justice, selfishness and indifference. They espouse high rates of mobility to escape negative circumstances, yet mobility causes a lack of stability and sheared relationships—both crucial for moral growth. These youth have few recreational and diversionary activities in the township and those they have (e.g. sport and music) are largely untapped as forms of diversion. Television is uncritically consumed in large doses, yet, like sport and music, its educational value remains unexploited. Youth see material acquisitiveness as a means to dignity, yet transgress their own values by stealing in order to acquire drugs, cellphones and clothes. They partake in uncalibrated substance use with little adult sanction and many examples of adult addiction.

At the level of the *macrosystem* young people display a love for beauty despite living in a dirty environment of which they are ashamed. They are not antagonistic to religious faith, but are also not meaningfully engaged in its practices and institutions. They are animated about cultural practices and open to its pedagogic influence, but are waylaid by the excess of alcohol that accompanies many practices. They live in communities that profess an *Ubuntu* ethic of mutual help while at the same time exhibiting community jealousy at individual success. At the level of the *exo-* and *chronosystems* youth see employment as a moral panacea, but harbour unrealistic professional work ideals. They also display an almost crippling sense of personal responsibility and meritocracy, but are unable to articulate the effects of poverty and the causes of current structural injustices.

In the absence of a full account, two stories illustrate how an ecological lens helps to interpret young people's moral lives. Thimna, a tiny 19-year-old young woman, struggled to concentrate at school and showed clear signs of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). She constantly dropped out of school due to her inability to focus on her studies. Thimna told me that she had grown up in a '*shebeen* [tavern] house' with her alcoholic mother selling alcohol and that she (Thimna) had begun drinking at 14. Soon she was involved in a gang, and then incarcerated for stealing a cellphone in order to pay for her alcohol. She dropped out of school permanently after falling pregnant and currently struggles to hold down a job as a street sweeper due to her alcoholism. Thimna's moral ecology included physical manifestations of FASD, parental neglect, poor education and substance use—all of which are interrelated.

Luxolo, a stocky, tough, 19 year-old gay woman with a scarred face was trying for the fourth time to pass Grade 9 when I met her. She described her life as 'going wrong' in 1999 when she started drinking, went to high school and met new friends.

She also related how 1999 was the year her father first got in touch with her and then failed to show up for a appointment she had travelled over 1000 miles to keep. Later she ran away from home, 'to escape my mother's boyfriend' and spent a year on the streets of Cape Town. She described how the streets taught her to defend herself, use a knife and disguise her sexual orientation to avoid homophobic violence. Those she met on the street later became her accomplices in armed 'housebreaking'. Her fear of being caught during these robberies led her to drink heavily and take drugs for 'courage'. Her 'drunkenness', in turn, led to 'being beaten up and robbed when I was drunk' and ultimately missing her mother's farewell phone call. (Her mother had repeatedly tried calling her on the weekend she died of an AIDS-related illness.) Finally, Luxolo's experience of ongoing community violence—including a harrowing experience of watching members of her street committee bludgeoning a man suspected of rape to death with a concrete block before tipping a burning brazier over him—led to emotional blunting. She told this and other stories of violence completely dispassionately. When she told me of the time she 'took a knife and stabbed him [her cousin]…over a little thing—he took my food', she was laughing. Perhaps it was inevitable that violence should become normalised through Luxolo's multiple and sustained contact with it. However, what Luxolo's life story does is provide an ecological explanation for her moral behaviour. In spite of this ecology, she still retained a capacity for deep affection, surprising honesty, concern for her reputation and a genuine sense of remorse over her actions.

What is evident, even from these brief stories and the preceding theoretical summary, is a complex portrait of township youth's moral understandings and lives, or moral ecology. It suggests the presence of competing antinomies: on the one hand there are positive facets to the phenomenon being described, while on the other there is a related negative or constraining feature. So, for example, education is lauded and sought after, but teachers are often abusive and young people frequently truant. Of course, not every paradox is present in each young person's life. What is also startlingly clear is that the moral life of young people living in a context of poverty is neither linear and ordered, nor is their moral development directly related to physical maturation, as is often depicted in existing moral development literature focused on youth living in the Global North (Kohlberg *et al.*, 1983; Damon, 1984). In more stable environments moral growth is largely depicted as a series of deliberate choices within a series of narrow options. In the lives of township youth, while options are far wider, the act of choosing is more limited and immediate.

The usefulness of moral ecology in understanding how poverty and morality are linked

Using an ecological lens also showed how young people's moral reasoning ability, the role of personal responsibility for moral (or immoral) action and the context of poverty were interwoven in complex ways. This interplay was crucial to understanding the chasm that exists between young people's stated moral beliefs and their subsequent behaviour. The study found that young people living in poverty lack not so much the *ability* to engage in high order levels of cognitive reflection, but the

opportunity and resources to do so. If, as various literatures suggest (Yehuda *et al.*, 2001; Evans & English, 2002), poverty results in physical manifestations, such as depression, despair, fatigue (from stress hormone overload), anxiety, apathy, a struggle to delay gratification, emotional blunting, the consequences of FASD and avolition, then it is understandable that youth who live in chronic and pervasive contexts of poverty lack the resources to act on what they know and desire to be right and toward which they aspire. A further example, illustrates this point.

Seventeen year-old Sipho and 19 year-old Vuma, Tapelo and Ingwazi are young men who are members of different street gangs. As is perhaps to be expected, they related accounts of involvement in violence, robbery, hijacking and territorial fighting as a consequence of their gang affiliation. They, too, reflected the normalisation of violence prevalent in *ikasi* when speaking about the pervasive interpersonal violence 'amongst friends' Furthermore, their involvement in petty theft in order to buy drugs and alcohol 'to forget my troubles', as well as designer clothes so they could 'be someone in South Africa', reflects the insidious impact of poverty on human dignity. Frequent runs-ins with the law and near-death experiences resulted in a strong desire to change or reform their lives, but the effect of their environments was often to sabotage these aspirations. These young men wanted to complete school, but failed repeatedly. They wanted to get jobs, but were largely unsuccessful, or only succeeded in getting poorly paid and what they described as 'dirty jobs' (construction work and cleaning). They wanted help to deal with their addictions, but mental health services are not readily available in townships. Consequently, the effects of school drop-out and unemployment resulted in too much free-time to 'do wrong things'; and long-term substance use, especially marijuana, resulted in apathy and physical fatigue—ultimately an inability to act on intentions. These are all sequelae of poverty and prime illustrations of how poverty is complicit in the (im)moral lives of poor youth and why an ecological approach to understanding moral life is essential.

In reflecting on poor youth's lived morality and in answer to the question 'Are poor people more or less moral than their middle-class counterparts?', an ecological lens leads one to conclude that the answer depends largely on what is meant by 'being moral'. If by being moral we mean doing the good, then the answer is yes—some poor youth are less moral than their middle-class counterparts. Poor youth generally report higher levels of risk behaviour than middle-class youth and crime rates are inversely correlated to social class (McCord, 1990). But, if by being moral we mean knowing the good, desiring the good and identifying as a moral self, then the answer is no. The poor youth in this study possessed all three of these facets of morality, but most seemed to lack the resources to act on their beliefs. However, the study showed that meaningful engagement with a caring adult (as I came to be perceived) over the course of a year, being encouraged to reflect on their behaviour and to provide reasons for the 'belief-behaviour' gaps in their lives, their ability (and desire) to reflect grew profoundly. This disconnect between belief and behaviour can therefore be attributed to a resource-poor environment—including poor education (Porteus *et al.*, 2002), a dearth of intermediate associative structures (McLaughlin, 1992) and

normative role models (Hertzke, 1998). Of course, young people's resilience plays a large role in overcoming adverse social and economic contexts (Masten, 2001; Buckner *et al.*, 2003) but from a moral growth point of view further sociological tools are necessary for understanding lived morality and providing relevant moral education.

'Moral capital'

The second useful tool for articulating a sociology of moral education is the notion of 'moral capital'. This construct emerged from the field and by interrogating the current literature on social capital. In the field young people regularly spoke of 'being good' as a form of capital. In other words the act of 'being good' resulted in them regularly attending school, completing their education and accessing the job market. Having a job in turn enabled them to 'do good things', like provide for family members. Being good therefore produces economic capital. In addition, these youth identified the necessary elements that would contribute to them becoming good people, which, in sociological terms, may be described as assets or capital. (See, as a counterpoint to this argument, Ramose's explication of *timocracy* in this Special Issue, pp. 291–303). In the next section, I describe the two ways in which the notion of moral capital emerged in the field, compare it to the concept of social capital and draw some conclusions regarding how morality, poverty and social reproduction are related.

How 'being good' is a form of capital

Bourdieu (1997), in his seminal essay 'The forms of capital', describes three types of capital—*economic*, *cultural* and *social.* Economic capital comprises *physical assets* that produce and reproduce profits upon investment. Cultural capital encompasses the forms of knowledge, skill, education or institutionalised advantages a person possesses that provide them with the symbolic means for obtaining and maintaining higher status in society. Social capital comprises the social obligations and networks of trust based on group membership and relationships that serve to confer advantage on individuals and groups. Ultimately, Bourdieu argues that 'every type of capital is reducible in the last analysis to economic capital' (p. 54). His key argument in elucidating the forms of capital was to show how societies are structurally stratified, not dependent on 'simple games of chance…so that everything is not equally possible' (p. 46). In his formulation, the differential possession of cultural and social capital accounts for the reproduction of class through education.

Throughout the study of these Langa youth, young people made the connection between education and achieving future dreams and goals ('If you don't have any education, no future for you') and recognised school as morally empowering, diversionary, a deterrent to crime and the key to future success: 'School is very good, it takes you out of trouble, so if you don't want to be in trouble this keeps you out of trouble' (Ingwazi). Young people repeatedly made the connection between having a

job and being a moral person. Poseletso, a 17-year-old young woman, summed up this association most profoundly:

> I think education should be free. Some of them they want to be good people but they don't have money to go to university so that they can study and then become good people when they have got their own jobs. So they don't have money, so they end up staying in the street—doing all those [wrong] things.

'Becom[ing] good people when they have got their own jobs' is a key representation of the relationship between poverty and morality. As these young people spoke of their desire to be good people, and of what being a good person might mean to their immediate and longer-term futures, a dialectical notion of 'morality as capital' suggested itself as an explanatory framework in which morality generates capital and capital generates morality. In other words, being good provides young people with the opportunity to embark on the cycle of 'be a good person, complete school, get a job, be a good person'. In this sense, morality is seen as an instrumental good—it produces economic value. Extrapolating from this data I therefore suggest that moral capital refers to:

> those qualities, capacities, intelligences, strategies, and dispositions that young people acquire, possess, and can 'grow' in the pursuit of moral maturity, and where moral maturity (with its goal of 'being a good person') is related to educational, career, and financial success. Moral capital consists of accruing a record of moral stance, enactment, and reputation. It can be possessed, enlarged, increased, invested in, lost, gained, and transferred. It is recognised by others, creating advantages, and comprises a combination of personal, social, relational, institutional, and structural features that ultimately convey (economic) benefit to those who possess it. (Swartz, 2009, p. 148)

If this definition of moral capital is to be accepted, it raises an important question: How is the possession of moral capital, if at all, connected to the reproduction of social inequalities. In my analysis of poverty and morality (Swartz, 2009), I have shown how young people's moral lives are affected by poverty through the absence of normative regulators, the inability of mediating institutions to be effective pedagogic agents and the physical effects of poverty on mental health functioning crucial to moral decision making. On the evidence of this study, poor youth, whilst not verbalising the effects of poverty and structural injustices on their lives, persist in their efforts (somewhat like trying to swim in oil) to become better people by acknowledging responsibility and aiming to work harder in order to escape their lives of deprivation. As serious as these effects of poverty are on township youth's lived morality there is a further economic effect. Poor youth *depend* on turning moral capital into economic capital. They therefore embrace, rather than resist, 'goodness' or conformity, contrary to existing sociological literature on resistance (Willis, 1981; Giroux, 1983; Hall & Jefferson, 1993; Bourdieu, 1998). In addition, these poor youth recognise the elements that will help them, to become 'good' people. They realise the payback that comes if you are seen by others, especially potential employers or life partners, as a good, honest, hardworking, trustworthy person. Conversely they know what prospects await those who are viewed as serial transgressors—'no future for you'.

What 'capital' is needed to be good?

From the research data, four features of moral capital were identified: (1) relational connection; (2) reflective practice; (3) personal agency; and (4) the importance of an enabling environment. Figure 2 provides a summary of these four main elements of moral capital, with constituent components in each category. Below I describe each in turn and show how they operate as 'capital' in the life of a poor young person.
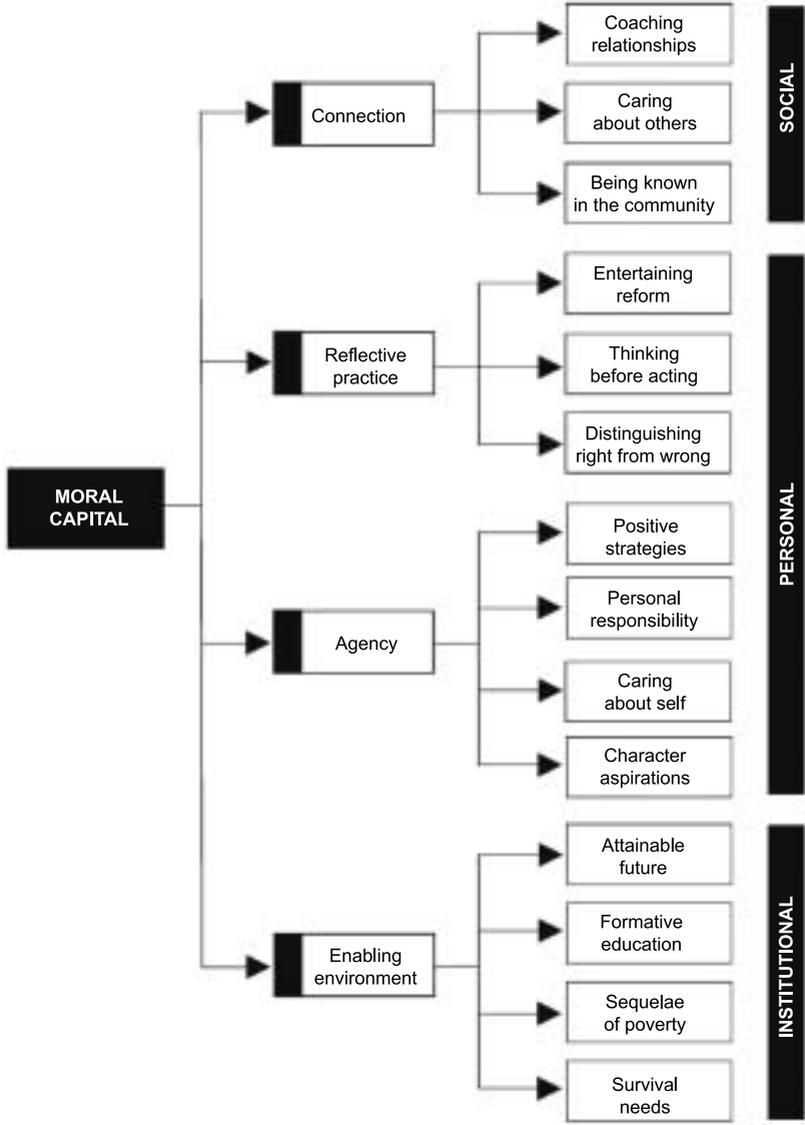
Figure 2.   Schematic representation of the components of moral capital

Relational connection. The first element of moral capital relates to the sense of connection young people articulated as a moral influence. They described at length the importance of mothers and younger siblings as exemplary and inspirational moral influences and referred to friends and romantic partners as central to their moral lives. These *caring* relationships provided youth with strong motivations to make sacrificial moral choices, such as voluntarily parting with money earned, and also to work hard at school in order to maximise the possibility of getting a job. Relational connection acted as a resource or form of capital in young people's quest to become good people for the sake of those people who cared about them.

The young people in my study also spoke of how *being known* in their community was a deterrent to doing wrong. Community members who know them will tell parents of bad behaviour. As a result, those who were involved in crime said they limited their activities to places where they were 'not known' so that community members could not 'hunt me down' or 'beat me'. As Sipho told me, 'I only rob the people I don't know—if you know him, you won't rob him'. So, one strategy to help young people acquire greater amounts of relational connection in their communities is to provide opportunities to widen their circle of connection—of those who know them and are known to them.

Perhaps most surprising of all is young people's overt hunger for adult involvement in their lives, people who could 'talk' to them or 'coach' them. Mothers, other family members, older friends and neighbours featured high on the list of those with whom young people wanted to talk. Young people wanted 'coaching relationships' that were long-term, stable and in which they were 'listened to' and 'pushed' but not 'judged' or 'laughed at' (a frequent complaint against teachers). The need to be connected through mentoring seems to be an important part of acquiring moral capital.

Reflective practice. Related to this sense of connection is reflective practice, another feature of moral capital. Frequently, over the course of the study young people told me they tend to be unreflective at the moment of making moral decisions. In Vuma's words, 'If I think before I did something, I will know that that is wrong.' What young people needed was both the opportunity and encouragement to reflect on moral decisions in a systematic way, *prior* to acting, and then guidance to act in keeping with these beliefs. This reflective ability and practice can be considered a form of moral capital because it modulates behaviour that detracts from being a good person.

Over the course of the study and in various activities, young people distinguished clearly between right and wrong and provided reasons for why they judged each to be so. They were also able to reflect on the dissonance between moral belief and moral behaviour. A number spoke of 'knowing the rules', especially surrounding alcohol, violence and crime. Drinking in a friend's shack without girls one might be tempted to 'force into sex'; not carrying a knife when they knew they were going to be drinking; making amends for drunken violence; using a weapon to scare but not harm someone; and not robbing people they know, or women, illustrate some of these rules. While arguably these rules are still appalling, the fact that young people have

moral aspirations, take pre-emptive steps to curb the possibility of excessive immoral behaviour, and consider *rules* governing behaviour at all, is evidence of moral capital. It points to the existence of reflection even in the midst of morally wrong behaviour.

Perhaps the richest deposit of moral capital is to be found in young people's intense desire and struggles to *reform* that I observed over the course of the year. Accompanying these desires were often significant moments or 'turning points' (Masten, 2001, p. 233) in their lives. Young people constructed these epiphanies as profound influences on their moral character. For young women, epiphanies included becoming pregnant, the death of a parent or relocating from a rural area to the city. For young men it was a stint in jail, a near-death experience or 'becoming a man' (undergoing a traditional initiation ceremony). For both, the arrival of a new girl- or boyfriend provided the motivation for 'changing my footsteps'. In total I documented 12 complex struggles to reform over 16 months. In fact, a key way in which youth represented themselves as moral people was through repeated reference to reforming and changing. This constant desire for *semper reformanda* ('always reforming' or 'always *about* to be reformed') is a form of moral capital. If young people were happy with their current moral context, reflective practice would be absent.

Personal agency. A third element of moral capital is young people's strong sense of agency. Their struggles to reform, as well as the way in which they displayed responsibility for their behaviour, demonstrate moral agency. The majority told me it was they *alone* who were responsible for bad actions, while others included external factors (such as peer pressure and substance use) but only *in addition* to themselves. Along similar lines, when asked about the kind of person they wanted to be in the future, all but two of the young people's character aspirations were to be good or better people.

A further source of moral capital arose from young people's care for themselves, manifest in concern for their *reputation* in the community. For example, Andiswa, a 15-year-old young woman, told me she decided not to have sex with the men who were buying her drinks in a local tavern because her *reputation* was 'good, and especially amongst the old people', and how smoking marijuana while also regularly attending church was ruining both her and her family's reputation. The existence of young people's care for self (Damon, 1984) is thus a form of moral capital. Damon and Gregory (1997) suggest communities should capitalise on these dispositions to goodness by providing youth with common expectations in the form of a youth charter.

Besides young people's sense of personal responsibility, their character aspirations and their regard for preserving a positive reputation, a few displayed agency in constructing positive strategies to avoid moral harm. Mathsufu deliberately chose making music and engaging in sport to keep him from succumbing to the *ikasi* 'style' of robbery, alcohol and drugs. A number of young people spoke of 'not walking' with wrong friends, even if it meant moving neighbourhoods, changing schools or leaving gangs. These positive strategies are limited, but to the extent that they are present at all are evidence of agency—and agency to 'do right' is a crucial form of moral capital.

That there are limited examples of agency points to the difficulty of sustaining agency, reflective practice and relational connection in the absence of an enabling environment.

Enabling environment.   In general, debates about delinquency centre around two opposing poles: 'blame the victim' and 'blame the system' (Giddens & Birdsall, 2001, p. 316). So far, in considering the notion of moral capital, personal and social factors have been taken into consideration. What of systemic, structural, environmental and institutional factors? When I asked research participants to identify factors that might help them to be or become better people, only a few referred to the influence of environmental factors on their lives. For the others, their analysis centred on their own agency in becoming good people. None spoke directly of lacking the resources to act on their good intentions or of the socio-emotional effects of poverty that we now know to impinge on moral decision making. When pushed, however, a number hinted at four enabling factors in the environment that might help them to be better people—and that could therefore be considered a form of moral capital. The strongest was the availability of an *attainable future*, in other words, employment. For most young people, completing schooling and finding a job were the key factors in allowing them to break through the moral glass ceiling imposed by poverty. In the absence of such an attainable future, as youth grow older, they increasingly turn to crime to meet their need for material dignity (Sayer, 2005).

Furthermore, a *formative* education can encourage young people to be reflective and connected and can exemplify democratic processes of living. This would be a form of moral capital. Township schools that are marked by violence, filthy toilets, a lack of recreational space and uncaring, intoxicated and predatory teachers will not achieve these outcomes. Good quality schooling is also likely to contribute to gaining employment. The absence of formative education prevents the acquisition of moral capital.

A third characteristic that thwarts moral capital was the absence of help to cope with the *mental health effects* of living in an environment of poverty. Most alluded to their problems with substance use and Luxolo was amongst only a few who recognised her need to 'commit myself to something else [rather than alcohol and marijuana]'. Few recognised the effects of FASD, the normalisation of violence or the general mental and physical fatigue, depression, apathy, avolition and emotional blunting they experienced as consequences of poverty. Consequently, to deal with these issues as sequelae of poverty requiring mental health intervention, rather than as flaws of character, is to recognise the connection between an enabling environment and moral capital. As Smith and Standish (1997, p. ix) argue:

> [The] insistence on the irreducibility of personal responsibility, not to be shuffled off on the grounds that 'it's all society's fault,' has begun to lead to a denial of the part played by social and political factors: a refusal to accept, for example, that unemployment is causally linked to crime and despair.

Institutional and environmental conditions for the development of moral capital in South African townships are largely absent. Social spending is inadequate given the

high levels of unemployment. Young people come to school hungry and leave early, unable to concentrate. Many complain of being unable to study in the noise of cramped shacklands, where late-night work is impossible due to the cost of electricity and the needs of family members who have to sleep early to begin long commutes before sunrise. Too many young people have unmet basic needs and so are unable to fully engage with the cognitive educational content that could aid their moral growth. To ensure that young people develop moral capital they need an enabling environment at school (basic needs and formative education) and an attainable future (employment opportunities and mental health services).

This focus on an enabling environment is not meant to suggest that dealing with poverty will automatically ensure that a society becomes morally good. This is clearly not the case in the Global North, where, despite an enabling environment, many young people remain alienated and disaffected. What I am arguing, however, is that young people need an enabling environment *in addition* to relational connection with friends, family, neighbours and teachers. They need caring adults who will help them to reflect on their beliefs and behaviours and they need to be helped to convert their strong senses of personal agency into moral agency. In the absence of an enabling environment, relational connection, reflective practice and personal agency, these young people will be limited in their endeavours to acquire moral capital and transform such capital into economic advancement and social mobility.

The usefulness of the notion of moral capital in moral education research and practice

If we accept that the lived morality of young people is best considered as an ecological web (or moral ecology) of interconnecting relationships between the personal, social, institutional and environmental, then the notion of moral capital is a valuable analytical tool, with empirical applications. As an analytical concept moral capital urges us to unravel what is usually considered together. In terms of its ability to address issues of *power* and *social exclusion*, moral capital provides a useful counterpoint to talk of moral panics and moral deficits. If moral capital is linked both to increased schooling and to relational connection, then poor youth are necessarily disadvantaged. By recording youth discourses of morality and suggesting that the term 'moral capital' be employed by researchers, educators and policymakers we allow the focus to be shifted from what is *absent* in the moral lives of youth, to what is *present*. And that, surely, is of benefit to young people, who are animated by discussion of their own capabilities, instead of indifferent to their much-touted shortcomings.

In the context of South Africa's moral regeneration campaign (see Swartz, 2006), the notion of moral capital has perhaps greater theoretical and practical usefulness than that of 'regeneration'. Besides foregrounding young people's current disposition to moral goodness, it also has the capacity to draw attention to the lack of a morally enabling environment. Furthermore, if moral educators adopted the nurturing of moral capital (personally, socially, and in the environment) as their aim, moral

education might be more widely implemented and less contested[4] than it currently is. It would serve to shift the current limited focus away from developing cognitive skills or promoting virtue to include discussions around the implications of a disenabling environment and about strategies for fostering relational connection, developing agency and encouraging reflective practice. If an aim of moral education is to nurture or increase moral capital, then moral behaviour can be analysed with regard to the extent of moral capital already available to an individual or to a group. Youth might be said to be lacking moral capital in *particular* areas, rather than being labelled 'bad', 'delinquent' or 'immoral' overall. This could also result in a more nuanced conversation between the 'blame the victim' and 'blame the system' schools of thought, since *social* and *institutional* factors will become part of the discussion, rather than solely focusing on the *personal* in questions of morality.

Conclusion

This paper has offered two contributions towards a renewed discussion of the sociologies of morality and moral education. First, it has argued that it is productive to study lived human morality as a 'moral ecology'. The overall strength of a notion of moral ecology is to offer an alternative way of seeing and describing the context for moral learning. Considering contexts helps a researcher to see how the usual institutions that might inoculate youth against multiple negative influences exert less influence in resource-poor environments than might be the case in a middle-class context. Such consideration shows how township youth have to choose to opt out of the prevailing *ikasi* culture in favour of moral goodness, unlike their middle-class counterparts, who are protected against harmful moral choices by the presence of normative role models and regulators. This picture of the moral life of township youth, while being morally fraught in many respects, offers insight into how youth construct a moral world in resistance to the prevailing culture. In this study, for example, it became clear that the socio-emotional effects of poverty influence reflective ability and that employment is a moral necessity in the lives of economically impoverished youth. Furthermore, the notion of a moral ecology helps moral educators consider moral life as more complex than only moral action. A definition of what it means to be good must surely include moral knowledge, moral identity and moral desire, in addition to moral action. This has implications for the focus of moral education practice where some elements are stronger than others in young people's lived experience.

Second, the paper has argued that, in contexts of poverty, being a good (or moral) person may be considered a form of capital that is translated into economic and social capital bringing advantage to those who are 'good'. In this sense it offers tentative conclusions regarding the social reproduction of morality and how morality and poverty are related.

Finally, the notions of a moral ecology and moral capital are also closely related to each other as tools in a sociology of moral education. Clearly, the moral ecology of young people in resource-poor communities affects the extent of moral capital they possess and the importance acquiring additional moral capital assumes. In these

contexts especially, moral education practice has the ability, like schooling, to entrench equality and justice, rather than reproduce inequalities and injustices.

The purpose of this paper has been to provide a theoretical reflection on what was a substantial empirical project. In so doing, I have not done justice to the many possible implications of approaching moral education research and practice from a sociological perspective. Indeed, many of the applications, at which I only hint, have yet to be worked out. However, to the extent that this paper foregrounds social context and offers sociological tools and provokes discussion and begins a conversation I shall have succeeded in my aim of trying to further understanding of how institutions and economic and social contexts affect human moral functioning.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Included in these methods are the use of photo-voice, 'free lists', 'mind maps' and a 'rank-ordering activity' (explained fully in Swartz, 2009, pp. 175–181). In the digital documentary (or photo-voice) activity young people were asked to photograph the 'good' and 'bad' moral influences in their lives. In 'free lists' youth were invited to compile lists of what they considered to be 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong'. 'Mind maps' asked for representations of how they perceived themselves to make moral decisions. Finally, the rank ordering invited young people, drawing on their digital documentaries, to rank the moral influences in their lives from strongest to weakest. Each research instrument was used to elicit open-ended data on particular aspects of the research question, such as contexts, constructions, influences and processes, while at the same time overlapping to ensure data triangulation.
2. In Swartz (2009) I describe in detail the four categories of township youth identified by my key informants. 'Mommy's babies' were those who were sheltered and seldom ventured outside their home and families (8% of the sample). Next were 'the right ones'—those who engaged judiciously in township life but whose priority was education and achieving future goals (35%). By far the majority were '*ikasi* boys' and '*ikasi* girls' who comprised 43% of the sample—youth whose substance use was unmodulated and who participated in competitions over sex and fashion, resorting to petty theft in order to achieve the latter. Finally, there were the '*skollies'* (8%) or '*tsotsis*'—young people who had already become criminals, drug dealers and committed gangsters. I estimate that these proportions were similarly reflected in the general township youth population.
3. Two reviewers have pointed out the need to expand on my analysis of the chronosystem by referring to how the moral lives of township youth differed under Apartheid and post-Apartheid. This is a salient suggestion that deserves separate attention. I begin the analysis in Swartz (2009, pp. 17–28).
4. Frequently moral education is not implemented in schools because those responsible are unsure about whose values ought to be taught. In the approach I suggest this becomes a non-issue, and moral education becomes Socratic in nature, with all values being questioned and young people being asked to reflect on how they believe they ought to live.

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