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How does moral knowledge matter  
in development practice,  
and how can it be researched?

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# How does moral knowledge matter in development practice, and how can it be researched?

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## Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to a more comprehensive and balanced analysis of development practice. It does so by raising a neglected issue, in a perspective that explicitly targets the complexity of interaction in development.

Based on a review of seminal contributions to Anthropology of Development, I suggest that the analysis of development practice needs to take into account the ambivalence of how moral norms and values influence interaction. The review shows how this ambivalence and complexity results from the structural conditions of development practice and the ways in which people relate to these conditions in their agency. To understand how and why development interaction occurs, research needs to capture this complexity.

For this, I suggest conceiving of moral norms and values as a particular kind of knowledge. The paper elaborates this perspective conceptually and in terms of operationalisation. For the conceptual part, I draw upon anthropology of morality to show several aspects of moral knowledge, as well as problems of researching it. I also relate to anthropology of knowledge in order to conceive of moral knowledge in a more systematic manner. For the operationalisation part, I will exemplify some concrete research questions and hypotheses and raise some methodological issues of data collection and interpretation.

The conclusion points to issues for further discussion, including substantive theories that allow for hypothesising about practice, methodological challenges of researching the practice of moral knowledge, and the generalisation of results.

Keywords:

Morality, values, knowledge, development practice, ways of knowing, anthropology

# I. Introduction

## Background and objective

Development may be seen as constituted by the moral purpose to improve the lives of others, in particular of the poor. This may not be the only facet of what underlies development, but it is nevertheless an important one. As a political practice of NGOs, governments, donors and other organisations, it is an endeavour to influence the factual, historical development of a society towards a better, 'more developed' society (cf. Thomas 2000). Consequently, this practice is set up and performed in frames that rely explicitly on moral concepts and terms such as 'sustainability', 'accountability', 'pro-poor' etc. However, it is often performed in ways that contradict these frames. Positions in Anthropology of Development do provide explanations for this contradiction. However, these explanations do not adequately take into account the particular role of morality. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to suggest a framework for systematically addressing how moral norms and values matter in development practice, and to suggest how this may be researched.

The objective is not an ethical, but a sociological one. The paper provides analytical and methodological aspects of researching what people do when they use moral terms and when they handle moral issues, why they do so, and how this influences development practice. The significance of the paper thus lies in understanding better what happens in this practice and why. The grounding hypothesis is that, as morality is an important element of interaction despite all strategising and politicking, development practice needs to be explained also in a moral dimension. This may even serve to improve development, for instance by indicating what allows people to impose their interpretations of moral norms on others, and by suggesting how such imposition may be circumvented. However, practical use is not the driving motivation of this paper.

## Outline

Section II reviews seminal works from the Anthropology of Development. It shows how the moral facet of development practice is characterised by several strands of ambivalence that have structural as well as agency aspects. To capture the resulting complexity, the paper suggests conceiving of moral norms and values as a particular knowledge, which is termed 'moral knowledge' (III). This suggestion is conceptually enriched by drawing on other research (IV). Anthropology of morality helps to characterise morality more precisely as an object of research. Anthropology of knowledge helps to conceive of moral knowledge in a more systematic manner. To some extent, this conceptual part also refers to more substantive theories that would allow for concrete hypothesising.

The conceptual part leads to considerations of how moral knowledge and its practice may actually be researched in development interaction. This involves operationalisation into more concrete questions, as well as methodological issues of data collection. As for the former, I offer a selection of questions and hypotheses that serve as examples (section V). As for the latter, rather than outlining specific methods section VI raises some issues that research will face, in particular regarding access to and involvement into morally problematic situations or structures.

## Terminology

I understand *values* as ideas of what makes something desirable and according to which people evaluate things, situations, options and the like (Friedrichs 2007). A value is a *moral* one when it inheres some 'ought' (i.e. when it relates to how people should act) and when, at the same time, it qualifies relations with others (as opposed to what one ought to do for one's own happiness and good life). A just distribution of aid would be of moral value, while the aesthetic sophistication of a project report may be

of value, but not of moral value. Moral *norms* are concepts and rules of how one should generally act that are based on and realise moral values.

*Morality* refers to two things. First, we can think of it as a social fact. It is a quality of people who are subjects to moral norms and agents of moral action. Second, particular systems of moral norms, or the ensemble of orientations one ought to act in relation to others, constitute *moralities*. Morality as a general aspect of sociality manifests in particular moral norms and values, which thus form a particular morality.

This understanding of morality is narrower than usual. Often, morality is defined as *all* values and norms of how one ought to act that are common in a community or context (Kettner 2002, Rammstedt 2007).<sup>1</sup> Confining the term to how one ought to act towards *others* serves for focusing development as other-oriented moral endeavour. In concrete research projects, the definition needs to be specified even more in order to keep the research object manageable.

Note that assuming morality does not imply that all people (always) act morally in the sense of having (primarily) moral motives. Neither does it imply that people who use moral terms do so for moral motives. In this paper, I conceive of morality as being practiced when agents act according to it, when they deal with it, and/or when they refer to moral terms and concepts. Hence, the practice of morality need not be an ethical, morally motivated practice.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Moral norms and values in development: a literature review

How do moral norms and values matter in development practice according to seminal works from the Anthropology of Development? The common feature of this research is the rather critical ethnography and analysis of 'Aidland' (Apthorpe, n.d.), in particular the interaction between (donor) development agencies and 'beneficiaries', as a field with particular institutions, meanings, life-styles etc. This literature addresses the moral facet of development mainly in a distinction of policy and practice. Policies are normative statements of how and towards which purpose development ought to be done. As they are widely based on notions such as 'accountability', 'sustainability', 'equity' etc., they are explicitly moral and express some official morality. Practice serves as a rather loose term for what people actually do. Making policies and putting them into practice is but one facet of this. In fact, what the literature addresses in particular is deviance from of policy. While the moral facet of policies and discourses has extensively been addressed, the moral (rather than strategic, opportunistic etc.) facet of individual action is less present in the literature.

### Appropriation, brokerage, translation, interfaces: agency in development arenas

A strand of German anthropology of development has developed from the 'theory of strategic groups', a theory on collective agents of societal change (Evers/Schiel 1988). Analyses have shown how aid resources are *appropriated* ('aid as loot', Beck 1990) in the strategic, opportunistic cooperation of actors for instance in development projects (Bierschenk 1992). Bierschenk/Olivier de Sardan (1997, 2002; see also L. Engberg-Pedersen 2003) show how 'participation' is diverted from its official moral intention when actors strike the donor's participation chord by staging participatory practice – in order to secure the influx of aid.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sayer (2005) who describes morality both as conventions etc. of "[...] what constitutes good behaviour in relation to others" and as implying "conceptions of the good or well-being" (quoted in Browne 2009: 2). This paper confines morality to the first part of this quotation. In that it comes close to Williams' (1985) concept of morality as obligation-based ethics, which is but one kind of ethics (ethics being more generally an answer to the Socratic question of "how one ought to live", cf. Laidlaw 2002: 316f.).

<sup>2</sup> Note that these distinctions are analytical ones. They are exogenous to the empirical context. People in development practice and elsewhere may understand moral values as something different, and across communities and individuals they certainly differ regarding which values they consider important.

These analyses point to policy-deviant agency and the undermining of policies. Related to this, another strand of literature has approached development based on the notion of *brokerage* (Bierschenk/Chauveau/Olivier de Sardan 2002; Neubert 1997). This category has emerged from observing how some actors manage to manoeuvre in complex arenas of development and to gain access to resources by mediating between groups and their respective rationalities, interests and practices. More than the perspective of resource appropriation, the category helpfully points to the constructive, functional adaptation or manipulation of policies: the mediation activity helps managing a structurally complex setting of multiple and heterogeneous (moral) communities.

A more recent collection (Lewis/Mosse 2006) has complemented this work by referring to the notion of *translation*. This notion is not so much understood in the sense of mediating between existing arrangements and systems of meanings, norms and values. It rather points to the co-production of these social realities, the mutual enrolment of actors in the creation of the very context in which brokerage and other practices take place. This aspect is important since this dynamic process of co-production also includes the moral framework of interaction. People negotiate which moral values have which meanings and implications. Moral terms like 'participation' and their meanings result from translational processes. At the same time, they also constitute the framework to which people refer when strategising to attain resources as well as when cooperating and brokering across groups.

This perspective on development as translational practice also builds upon the ideas of discontinuity, *discrepancy* and interface. These ideas have been put forward especially by the Wageningen development sociology (Long 2001, Arce/Long 1992, 2000). This school sees development as a constellation of distinct social fields in which knowledgeable agents pursue projects. These social fields are heterogeneous, transitory outcomes of continuous struggles over resources, meanings and (moral) values. Among each other, the fields are considered discontinuous, though in a complex rather than clear-cut way. The approach assumes that there are distinctive points where discrepant knowledge, values etc. intersect. These 'interfaces' are the analytical entry point for understanding social practice as a manifestation of agency, especially across distinct social fields. This perspective on the intersection of different moral systems points especially to how norms and values are *heterogeneous* (in and across social fields), *contested* (by agents when they 'pursue projects') and (therefore) *dynamic*.

The approach has been criticised for seeing agents mainly as strategic pursuers of their own projects – rather than also as moral, socially committed agents etc. While a differentiated appraisal of the approach is needed, and while a moral/strategic dichotomy is too simplifying, to my view the tendency is a general one. Moral motives of development agencies' staff should not be overestimated, but neither should they be neglected. In the case of the Wageningen school, the alleged tendency is probably an effect of the approach's intention to balance an overly structuralist perspective on development by deconstructing development intervention to show its complex dynamics.

Seeing "development as process" (Mosse et al. 1998) is a similar dynamisation of the analysis. It was recognised that in development projects even procedures, rather than being mechanic, are subject to endogenous change. This has led to focusing on the unintended and *unmanageable* side of development. Development is understood as a process in which order (including moral order, as expressed in policies), is created in struggles out of, and despite, the messiness of interaction. There is "contingent struggle between different kinds of knowledge, including the moral" (Quarles van Ufford/Giri/Mosse 2003: 20).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, knowledge of what is morally good competes with knowledge of what is efficient, remunerable etc. Given limited implementability of policy (Mosse 2004), this view sees practice and policy as autonomous of each other (Mosse 2005a). Rather than carried out in practice, policies are created and performed in morally sound representations of practice (for instance in reports, i.e. "after the fact", p. 28), in which a project's success is fabricated in order to maintain support for it.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the

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<sup>3</sup> Several contributions in Saleminck et al. (2004) address religious aspects of the morality of development, in the sense of having particular moral aims and frames ('development as ideology') and of the impact of development on moral-spiritual practice.

<sup>4</sup> This is similar to public policy analysis' recognition of 'backward' moves: policies are first adopted ('practiced') and *then* problems are (re-) formulated accordingly (Hill 2005: 89).

aspect of *creation* of (moral) order, this perspective points to the orderly *representation* of ('unordered') practice.

## Discourses and other moral structures in development practice

Agency related to moral norms and values, as portrayed above, is situated in contexts shaped by situational and structural elements. Agents draw upon, manage, resist to and change structures of interaction, including policies and other moral structures.

This structural side has been addressed particularly in a Foucault-inspired perspective, seeing development as a Western-modern hegemonic discourse that construes its objects to submit it to its interests. By such construction of societies as objects of policies, the Western 'development' machinery would structure power relations and interaction (Ferguson 1990, Escobar 1995, Sachs 1992, Hobart 1993, Crush 1995). In that perspective, the 'development machine' imposes particular systems of norms and values – including moral ones – on other cultural and moral contexts. Considered an overly monolithic, mechanic and one-dimensional picture of development, this approach was differentiated by pluralizing the notion of discourse ("Discourses of Development", Grillo/Stirrat 1997), and scholars have pointed to the differences among actors, the internal heterogeneity of 'Western thought' (e.g. Crewe/Harrison 1998), and to actors' reflexivity and agency. Nevertheless, Rossi's (2004) reconsideration of the Foucauldian perspective underlines that a dominant discourse may still "impose itself *in spite* of the interests and negotiations of different [...] actors" (p. 9) and needs to be taken seriously, despite all context-specificity, heterogeneity and agency. Similarly, in their recent analysis of development buzzwords, Cornwall and Brock (2005) show how dominant vocabulary continues to restrictively frame practice. Recognising that "words make worlds" (p. 17), they renew the call for attention to language.<sup>5</sup> Discourse analysis of environmental politics has shown how nature and its moral status are constructed discursively for policy argumentation (Dingler 2005). Combining the two fields, work carried out at IDS shows the discursively structured, though negotiated and contested character of institutions and practice in natural resource management.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the inextricable interdependence of structure and agency continues to be an issue.<sup>7</sup> While development may be a process of continuous negotiation of meanings and values, at each point in time there *are* normative references that, however contingent and transitory, do influence – i.e. restrict and make possible – the agency of individuals. Note that how and to what extent discourses and other structural elements concretely shape practice and/or are ignored, overcome and re-shaped by practice, is an *empirical* question. This general observation may be assumed to hold as well for the more specific case of moral structures (discourses) and their practice, in which it is about what is good and right to do unto others.

Some studies address how development agencies are themselves stricken into (their own) moral frameworks. Hanke (1996) shows how a development bank struggles with contradictory expectations of its environment, namely to lend money to debtors with limited credibility and, at the same time, to make sure that this money is invested effectively, in a morally good manner and with morally good outcomes. Needing to act (in that case: to invest), organisations thus undercut their own policies, or simply ignore deviance from policy (Quarles van Ufford 1993).

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<sup>5</sup> See also the discourse analyses in Gouge (2003), *Ethnography* 2001(2), especially on the production of authoritative knowledge, and Gould/Marcussen (2004) with some contributions focusing on methodology (see also Apthorpe/Gasper 1996). The post-structuralist critique has been criticised as empirically weak (at least the earlier work, Watts 2001: 286; Olivier de Sardan 2005 and most recently Bierschenk 2008) and for being a self-referential 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Quarles van Ufford/Giri 2003: 10f.). A balanced review and helpful differentiation of this post-development debate is provided by Ziai (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Leach et al. (2002), Fairhead/Leach (2003), Keeley/Scoones (2003). M. Goldman (2001) has analysed how 'green knowledge' is 'fabricated' in the World Bank.

<sup>7</sup> Another example for reminding the structural factors of interaction is Webster/L. Engberg-Pedersen's concept of 'political space', taken to be more comprehensive than Clay/Schaffer's actor-based concept of 'room for manoeuvre' in that it also considers the "broader conditions for political action" (2002: 19) that are sources of constraints of individual actors.



Underlying such incompatibilities of moral frameworks with real conditions, there are also incompatibilities in frameworks themselves. An example is the double-bind to a legitimising egalitarian rhetoric of partnership vs. to a constitutive asymmetric idea of (Western) progress<sup>8</sup>: officially it is up to the target groups/partner countries, but aid remains conditional to their decisions being 'the right ones'. In this context, Rottenburg (2002) has reconsidered the staging of development as a 'technical fix'. He interprets it as a shift to a 'neutral' discourse that is necessary to manage this moral double-bind: the technical discourse maintains the moral idea of the partner countries' autonomy, but also allows for inducing donors' (at least presumably moral) ends – the political character of which is hidden in the technical rationality of 'solutions'. The technical discourse functions as a meta-code that enables negotiation; it is a means to handle the ambivalent moral environment in which development practice takes place.

In some literature, not only technical but also moral discourses are understood as functional (rather than simply imposed and restrictive). Similar to Mosse's (2005b) argument of the representational function of moral-laden policy discourse, Kühl interprets development organisations' excessive use of buzzwords like 'accountability', 'capacity building' etc. as means to achieve and secure public legitimacy for the organisation's practice (Kühl 2004). Moreover, moral notions may work as 'intellectual boundary objects' between different communities that need to make their respective ends, means and terminologies compatible (cf. Mollinga 2008). This strand of analysis complements the restrictive side with the constructive side of 'given' moral concepts and of discourses that give these notions and concepts meanings and order). Considering agency along with this structural aspect, changes in these moral notions, concepts and discourses can be seen not only as caused by their undermining, but also to their co-creation, as was pointed to by the notion of translation.

## Result: the ambivalence of the moral in development practice

To sum up this overview, it seems appropriate to characterise development as highly complex and ambivalent with regards to moral norms and values and their practice:

(1) Most generally, development is, or at least represents itself as, a moral enterprise. It is structured by notions like participation, accountability etc. On the other hand, its practice is highly political. It is characterised by interests and strategies and, for instance and more specifically, the contestation and undermining of policy.

(2) However, this general ambivalence needs to be seen in the light of the limited manageability of practice: it may not so much be some strategic bad will of actors, but especially the complexity of interaction that impedes the realisation of (moral) policies – which, on the other hand, were to legitimate this interaction.

(3) Adding to the policy/practice gap, policies themselves result from processes of mediating interests and are often contradictory themselves. For instance, policies as well as practice need to respond to a moral double-bind to an egalitarian rhetoric of partnership and, at the same time, to an asymmetric rhetoric of (Western) progress.

(4) One way of managing contradictory moral rhetorics is to try to mitigate the moral-political character of development by performing development as a merely technical fix. The ambivalence of conditions of moral practice is then perpetuated in the efforts of agents to deal with these conditions, because conflicts between different moralities or between morality and practice, and more generally the 'real' morality of development practice are concealed rather than addressed.

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<sup>8</sup> See also Moore (2001: 183). In their analysis of the international development system, Degnbol-Martinussen/P. Engberg-Pedersen (2003: 1) point to this double-bind and a "tendency to obscure actual power relations by using words [...] that make it appear [...] collaboration between equal partners".

### III. Norms and values as moral knowledge

#### Conclusions from the literature review

How do moral norms and values then matter in development practice? Let me draw some preliminary answers from the review. Firstly, 'the moral' seems to be *pervasive*. At least as a hypothesis it seems justified to assume that development practice is constantly somehow related to moral norms and values, or that there is a moral side to all that people say and do – because development is about something moral and has a moral terminology and framing. Morality as a system of norms and values matters, and should be researched, as a facet of *any* development practice.

Secondly, however, morality as value-orientation seems rare. Development hardly appears to be an overly ethical practice. The review raises the question if moral values matter at all, given their regular instrumentalisation. But this would be too fast a conclusion. The fact that norms and values are instrumentalised does not mean they are not effective anymore. Much of what happens cannot be explained without referring to this instrumentalisation and to the norms and values involved. These may not be effective in their 'actual' orientative sense, but they matter nevertheless.

Thirdly, if people do not act according to what is morally demanded, there may be other reasons to it than non-ethical motives. People may have quite moral or ethical (i.e. reflected moral) motives when instrumentalising a policy like participation. Maintaining their family's livelihood could be one such motive. Thus, while some moral norms and values may not matter in a moral sense, others may well do so.

Moreover, the general diagnosis of limited manageability of development practice should hold for moral issues as well: the complexity that results from ambivalent or contradictory moral demands may make ethical practice impossible – be it because it is not clear what is morally right, be it because ethical demands drive people into dilemmas.

#### Implications for research

What follows from this regarding research? Firstly, since it is open which motives people actually have when they refer to moral norms and values, or when they deal with moral issues, a research concept has to embrace different (and dynamic) motives, rather than assuming some *homo sociologicus*, *oeconomicus* or the like. Even the opposition 'moral/ethical vs. self-oriented' is a simplification: conformity to moral norms based on social pressure or the internalisation of "core beliefs" (Sabatier/Jenkins-Smith 1999: 122) differs both from reflected ethical dedication to morality and from self-oriented strategising. It is only to say the least, then, that people should not be seen only as strategic, but also as *moral* subjects that are at least partly embedded into a context of norms and values, and that are potentially ethically motivated.

Secondly, we can qualify the case for research made in the introduction. I do not argue that morality is important because much of what people do in development is ethically motivated. It may not so much be the morality of people (in the sense of an attitude) which matters, but rather the pervasiveness of morality in development (its moral setup and the fact that people constantly deal with moral claims, expectations, standards etc.), the ambivalence of this morality (as shown above), and the particular system of moral norms and values (the context-specific morality). This qualification implies a cold-headedness and a strongly contextual approach to empirics.

Thirdly, research needs to take into account complex relations between structure, agency and different motives. Formulated more systematically as a heuristic, an analysis has to take into account at least the following aspects:

(1) As people are moral subjects, moral structures

(1.1) *restrict* people in that they allow or even prescribe certain actions and prohibit others (whether or not people act in accordance to these structures). 'Participation' is a value and norm that restricts policy and practice to those that involve the 'beneficiaries' of development.

(1.2) they also have an *enabling* effect. They provide moral agents with orientation and allow them to decide upon alternatives. 'Participation' serves as orientation, namely towards participatory policies, procedures, or behaviour.

(2) As people are also agents with individual interests, they make use of moral norms and values as a repertory. This use may be

(2.1) *strategic* in a rather self-centred sense, for instance when they 'strike the donors' participation cord' (as was mentioned in section II);

(2.2) it may also be *constructive*, for instance when certain broad normative concepts are used as 'boundary concepts' to mediate different interests and rationalities. The term participation is flexible enough to embrace views and interests from very different actors. At the same time, its moral weight may foster some agreement across actors that would not come about otherwise.

## Towards a knowledge approach

In a dynamic perspective, this heuristic involves the idea of **structuration**. Structuration theory assumes a recursive co-constitution of structure and agency. The concept of structuration has been introduced in particular by Giddens (1984). For this paper, two facets of his concept are relevant. One is that moral structures are in an ongoing process of realisation, affirmation and contestation through agency. **Moral frameworks become structural by (!) being practiced affirmatively or in adaptation to changing ideas, constellations of actors and others. This is why the translational, creative co-constitution of moral order in development arenas, as mentioned in the literature review, effectively results in structures, however transitory these are.**

More importantly, in this process agents are conceived of as *knowledgeable*. As for agency, they know 'how to go on' and pursue their projects in socially structured contexts. As for structure, "outside the moments of reproduction social structure exists as social knowledge [...] which they use to order their own actions and make sense of the actions of others [...]" (Haugaard 2002: 148). Knowledge is practiced with 'practical' or 'discursive' consciousness. Practical consciousness tacitly applies in particular "knowledge of rules with constitutive and regulative characteristics" (ibid.). Discursive consciousness uses knowledge in a more explicit and reflected manner. For example, **workers of a forest conservation NGO may practice the concept of sustainability unconsciously in daily work, for instance when planting trees to prevent biodiversity losses. While sustainability is a very orientation of their work, they do not think about it much: 'practical consciousness' is at work. This may change when they campaign for further donations. They may use sustainability more reflectively and explicitly as moral argument, be it for the sake of the forest or of securing donations that finance their salary. In that case, practice is driven by discursive consciousness. Note that the distinction should be understood in gradual terms: in reality, people do not use moral terms either consciously or not, but they do so more or less consciously.**

## Reasons for the concept of moral knowledge

Moral norms and values should then be *conceived of as knowledge*. As outlined above, the concept of knowledge covers the structural aspect, for instance of beliefs of how to deal with others (used with practical consciousness) or of moral discourse about what counts as development and what not. At the same time, it covers the agency aspect of agents knowing and using the moral structures consciously and explicitly, be this in an affirmative, critical or other manner. Seeing moral norms and values as institutions in the sense of rules instead would not cover sufficiently the aspect of agency and of its impact on structure. Seeing them in a mentalist approach as internalised beliefs would miss the aspect of discursive consciousness and the aspect of actively disposing of norms and values. Another reason is that a most basic way of people relating to and operating with moral norms and values is to *know them*. Acting in accordance with moral norms, instrumentalising them, contesting them etc. presupposes knowing them. Of course the knowledge of norms and values is also changed by these operations and

'follows' them. Nevertheless, the cognitive fact of people actually knowing what is considered to be right or good underlies how these people act in relation to such ideas.

More precisely, the suggestion is that moral norms and values should be seen as a *particular kind* of knowledge, namely as moral knowledge. The reason is a conceptual one. Morality is not all that matters in development interaction. Seeing it as a particular knowledge would allow for relating it to other cognitive elements of interaction that may be addressed in terms of knowledge as well. For example, at least at first sight technical knowledge would be about the functionality of devices for given purposes. It would consist in knowledge of causalities, material and other characteristics of devices, processes and the like, and it may be practiced off of social interaction, 'between man and machine'. Distinct from that, moral knowledge is about how one ought to act with regards to other persons. It is explicitly normative, as opposed to other kinds of knowledge that are also value-laden, but which are only implicitly so (Rydin 2007). It is an essentially interpersonal, socially practiced knowledge.

### Moral knowledge: defining the term

Moral knowledge would denote the ensemble of moral norms and values that people relate to in thinking and interaction in a given context. This positive definition will gain some more flesh below. For now, let me negatively distinguish the concept from two alternative terms or uses. First, **why not call it *ethical* knowledge?** One could argue that ethics, understood as the deliberate reflection of morality, corresponds more to the cognitive activity of knowing what is morally good and right. However, 'ethical knowledge' would confine the perspective. We would lose sight of how people relate to moral norms and values unconsciously and for non-ethical motives.

Second, the term moral knowledge is used in *moral philosophy*, with a different intention. Comparing moral, empirical and legal knowledge, A. Goldman (1991) holds that "moral knowledge is typically knowledge that one morally ought (or ought not) to do something" (p. 181). This corresponds to the definition above. However, his point is not what people empirically know in terms of what they ought to do, and how they know this. Rather, he asks "whether there is moral knowledge" (p. 1), in the moral-epistemological sense of how moral beliefs can be held to be *true*, and how we can *know* this truth. Moral epistemology is about "whether and how anyone can know or be justified in believing that something is morally right or wrong" (Sinnott-Armstrong 1996: 3) and if morality is "knowable in any objective sense" (Paul et al. 2001: vii).

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this paper is a sociological, not an ethical one. Neither is it an epistemological one. The paper is about what people in development factually do when they use moral terms and when they handle moral issue. It is not about whether their beliefs are or can be taken to be true; if at all, it would be about why these people they know that their beliefs are true (which would be descriptive epistemology). When people believe something to be morally right or good, this does constitute an element of their (moral) knowledge. In this sense they do know it, and it does influence their interaction. In the end, people having moral arguments in daily life do just what ethicists do: they argue about what is right and good to do, why this is so, and how they can be sure about it. In that sense, people in development arenas may actually be considered ethicists in practice who handle moral issues, though they may have other motives and criteria than ethicists.

## IV. Insights from the anthropologies of morality and of knowledge

### Towards empirical research of how moral knowledge 'really' matters

So far the paper has offered two things. Firstly, it has suggested some preliminary answers to the question of how moral norms and values matter in development. These answers were literature-based and general. Therefore, secondly, the paper has taken a step towards conceptualising empirical research of how moral knowledge matters in fact, in specific cases. How may such research look like and how may

it be operationalised into concrete questions? Some questions can be derived from the concepts of knowledge and structuration as discussed above. To prepare operationalisation further, this section takes up insights from anthropology of morality and of knowledge.

### Anthropology of morality: what do people do when they practice moral knowledge?

Giddens' distinction of 'practical' vs. 'discursive' consciousness concerns to what extent people reflect their moral knowledge and their practice of it. Accordingly, some (inter-) action would reveal moral knowledge more explicitly. How can we identify and conceptualise situations that allow us to find out about which moral knowledge is relevant and how? More generally, how can we conceive of what people actually do when they put moral knowledge into practice? Recent work from social and cultural anthropology, in particular by J. Zigon (2007, 2008), sheds light on this issue. Zigon not only provides an informative overview on anthropology of morality to date, but also connects well with the perspective developed in this paper.<sup>9</sup>

According to Zigon, anthropology has taken two ways of addressing morality. One is the study of local moralities (Howell 1997). This perspective focuses on how individuals reason morally and make moral choices in a particular context. Broadly, this corresponds to discursive consciousness. Zigon holds that this perspective may miss non-moral motives and reasons that people have for choices. This also relativises the importance of morality. It is but one aspect of action. The other approach looks more at how "one becomes a moral person primarily by means of developing certain dispositional capacities" (p. 133). This relates to the internalisation of moral knowledge and its unconscious practice. Regarding both approaches, Zigon suggests that some Durkheim heritage comes into play, considering society or culture "a kind of moral legislator [that] determines what counts as the moral for all persons [...]" (ibid.). The Durkheimian approach conflates morality with society or culture, considering both as the value system that regulates individual action. The problem with this is that social structure is overestimated at the expense of agency (or that agency is considered only as an epiphenomenon of structure, thus missing the aspect of freedom that is a condition for self-determined ethical action; cf. Laidlaw 2002: 315), and that the moral becomes indistinguishable. If all action is moral and only moral, the moral cannot explain action.

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<sup>9</sup> Both (cultural-/social-) anthropological and sociological research on morality and its practice is surprisingly scarce. Stivers (1996) even holds that "the absence of a sociology of morality has to be one of the major weaknesses of academic sociology, and a mysterious one at that." (p. 1) Similarly, Laidlaw (2002) holds that anthropology "has not developed a body of theoretical reflection on the nature of ethics" (p. 311). Partly, these authors as well as Zigon (2007, 2008) attribute this to the 'Durkheimian' conflation of culture/society and morality, equally understood as the social structure of (moral) norms. In a system-oriented perspective based on N. Luhmann, Thome (2003) calls for a closer cooperation of empirical and theoretical sociology with regards to social values, which would include moral values. While there is a large body of empirical literature, theory is lacking.

Most recently, several publications have put an end to the alleged scarcity. In sociology, a collection of Niklas Luhmann's publications on this issue was published in late 2008 and still awaits appraisal. In anthropology Schmidt (2007) interprets her observations of a religious movement in the Brazilian Amazon region in a perspective of "morality as practice", in order to emphasise that "morality is here far more than a code or a set of dispositions that governs what people do in everyday life. Instead it is a way of being in the world [...]" (p. 231). Contributions to Browne/Milgram's collection on Economics and Morality (2009) address how "moral norms embedded in a given system are thrown into sharp relief through the economic interactions across systems with profoundly different histories", how multiple, coexisting moralities operate in the economic realm and provide the source of [conflicts], and how moral assertions and practices of corporations and governments promote "identifiable standards of economic behaviour regarded as 'ethical'" (p. 4). Browne (2009) holds that "new anthropological scholarship is emerging [...]", showing "how attention to moral worldviews can help explain the local meaning and cost of moral action" (p. 32f.). Finally, Barker's collection on "Morality in Melanesia and Beyond" (2007) addresses how people "experience and deal with moral dilemmas", focusing on "public situations and types of persons that exemplify key ethical contradictions for members of moral communities". Barker holds that moral or "ethical dilemmas [...]" provide a strategic entry for the study of the key value orientations of a culture" (p. 1). Note that this heuristic of crisis, important as it is, limits the perspective to the unusual and eventually misses the usual, daily practice of moral knowledge.

Similar to the present paper, Zigon aims to conceptualise the moral as an object of study (p. 134). His main point lies in *integrating ethical choices and moral dispositions*. Drawing in particular on Heidegger, he distinguishes morality as unconscious moral dispositions from the conscious performance of ethics. Ethics are tactics that people perform when a breakdown occurs, i.e. when a situation poses an ethical conflict that pushes people out of everydayness and of “morality as an unreflective mode of being-in-the-world” (p. 137). A breakdown causes that something that “is usually ready-to-hand becomes present-to-hand” or, quoting Foucault, that “an everyday, unreflected state, such as behaviour, is presented ‘to oneself as an object of thought’ [...]” (ibid.). This means a shift from practical to discursive consciousness. The moral knowledge that is involved becomes disconnected and present. In such breakdown a person finds an ethical demand placed on her, namely to react to the crisis, and it is to this unconventional demand that people respond in order to “get out of the breakdown” (p. 139), to move back into a comfortable unconscious being-in-the-world and to “keep going” (p. 138f.). Of course the breakdown depends very much on the situation and on the moral dispositions that people had developed so far, and the “return from the ethical moment is never a return to the same unreflective moral dispositions” (p. 138). This corresponds to structuration as a back-and-forth movement between structure (moral dispositions in some accordance with the social context) and agency (for instance in managing a conflict) that also changes structure.

According to Zigon’s perspective, to find out about moral knowledge one should look at moments of crisis. Crises reveal to us what makes issues moral ones, which moral knowledge ‘applies’ (how they are phrased and understood) and what are ways of handling them when they turn into conflicts. This heuristic is of much help for finding out which moral knowledge is actually present and relevant in a situation of practice, especially when looking at an intercultural, highly political field like development practice where value conflicts are usual, and often on moral issues. Still, there are some issues that his perspective does not cover.

First, insofar as moral knowledge is almost constantly deployed in development practice, the moral is mostly not only ‘ready-to-hand’, but also ‘present-to-hand’: people constantly frame in moral terms what they do and respond to ethical demands by stakeholders of all kinds. To overstate it: if explicit reference to moral terms indicates that a breakdown made morality become ‘present-to-hand’, then there is maybe more moral breakdown than morality. This affects the heuristic value of Zigon’s approach. How do we know that we are witnessing a breakdown, so that we can interpret the observed explicit reference to moral knowledge as management of a crisis?

Secondly, unconscious rather than ethical performance of moral knowledge may be missed. Focusing on crises tells us about how people manage disruption; focusing on explicit reference to moral knowledge tells us about moral knowledge that has become ‘present-to-hand’. But probably this is only half the battle. How do we learn about moral knowledge that is relevant in interaction driven by practical consciousness? How can we draw conclusions from the exceptional to the usual, however dynamic and fluid it is? Maybe it is the relation of the exceptional and the usual, and the ways how this divergence is managed, that tells us most about how moral knowledge matters. We need to find about the usual, too.

Finally, Zigon rightly points to the problem of motivation – how do we know why people perform ethics? His suggestion follows from the concept of breakdown and his view of people as moral agents who perceive an ethical demand. He attributes their ethical, i.e. reflected performance of moral knowledge to the motive of solving the moral-cognitive dissonance resulting from being pushed out of everydayness. However, when people explicitly perform moral knowledge (in breakdown situation or others) they may also have other motives. Even if a breakdown is a good indicator for a consciously moral involvement and the related motive of dissonance reduction, strategic rather than ethical motives may be as important and may lead to different outcomes. As Laidlaw insists (2002: 315), to include ethical action, agency needs to be understood not only as related to structure, but also as an expression or even “exercise” (p. 326) of the freedom of the subject. How can we identify and distinguish motives beyond ‘dissonance management’, and how can we capture how different motives are related and how they change during interaction as well as in the long run?

The points that Zigon helpfully raises, as well as the concerns added above, need to be reflected in the research operationalisation. Before starting this, let me add another input. It relates to finding out about the ‘usual’ moral knowledge that people refer to and use in interaction and which may reveal to some

extent in a crisis. Barth's (2002) suggestion for an Anthropology of Knowledge paper provides a basic systematic for inquiring the moral knowledge of a particular context.

## Anthropology of knowledge: stocks of knowledge, ways of knowing, and practice

F. Barth (2002) has advocated "a comparative ethnographic analysis on how bodies of knowledge are produced in persons and populations" (p. 1). As knowledge he understands "what a person employs to interpret and act on the world" (ibid.). "Knowledge provides people with materials for reflection and premises for action, whereas 'culture' too readily comes to embrace those reflections and those actions" (ibid.). Where Zigon avoids the conflation of morality and culture, Barth avoids the conflation of knowledge and culture. He does so by drawing a line between reflections and actions that are based on knowledge (and that are part of culture) and knowledge itself (of which these are not part). He also distinguishes sociality and knowledge. Social organisation is based on knowledge, for instance of social statuses and associated rights and duties, and provides the pattern of action, which is also based on knowledge.

Barth suggests three interconnected faces of knowledge. First, "any tradition of knowledge contains a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about the world" (p. 3). In the case of moral knowledge, this relates to moral structures that prescribe how people ought to deal with others, and referring to which people constitute themselves as moral persons (the second line of anthropology of morality). Second, knowledge "must be instantiated and communicated [...] in to form of words, concrete symbols, pointing gestures, actions" (ibid). As a third element, knowledge is "distributed, communicated, employed and transmitted within a series of social relations" (ibid.).

The last two categories are not clearly distinguishable. Both refer to "ways of knowing" (cf. Harris 2007), i.e. to what people actually do when they 'know'. The second category is epistemological: it points to how the corpus of knowledge – assertions about what is the case, about causal relations, about what is morally good or right etc. – becomes available to people. The third relates to how this knowledge is (then) practiced and transformed (which actually comes close to what Barth wants to distinguish from knowledge, namely action and reflection that are part of culture). In the case of moral knowledge, this category embraces the aspect addressed by the first line of anthropology of morality, namely how individuals reason morally and make moral choices in their respective context.

Barth emphasises that "these three faces appear together [...] in every event of the application of knowledge, in every transaction in knowledge, in every performance" (2002: p. 3). He holds that we may indeed discover regular relations between them: "To the extent that we can identify repetitive, persistent effects of mutual constraint and influence in these particular realizations of knowledge, we have identified processes of mutual determination between the three named aspects of knowledge." (ibid.)

Barth suggests several issues that may be researched within this framework. First, there is the *agency* or "acts of knowers – the people who hold, learn, produce and apply knowledge" (p.3). Barth underlines that agency is both based on and results in the corpus of knowledge, and that a dialectical approach may serve to capture this interdependence (p. 17). This corresponds once more to the structuration movement between moral knowledge as structure and its practice in agency. Secondly, there are elements of knowledge *governance*, for instance criteria of validity, which are strongly connected with social structures of power. This refers in particular to 'what is known (as true)', i.e. the corpus of knowledge. It is also influenced by "determinants of the forms of coherence", which involves rules of legitimate *configuration* of the corpus that "ensure continuity [...] and consistency within that corpus" (2002: 7). Analysis may be directed to *trajectory* of the knowledge corpus, caused by its dynamic 'being known'. Finally, Barth concedes that analysis would need to consider *external factors* apart from knowledge as well – material circumstances, relations of power etc. (p. 4).

How does this framework help us researching moral knowledge and its practice? First, it broadens the range of the research object. What we have to take into account is not only the corpus of moral knowledge that is available and relevant in a context (which includes in particular the moral norms, values, concepts etc. that stood at the beginning of this paper). We also need to include the processes in which such concepts are formulated and distributed in Aidland – for instance how a concept like

'accountability' is made up, disseminated and locally appropriated in aid organisations. We have to include the mechanisms and criteria that help and allow to configure different elements into a coherent, continuous knowledge – for instance by integrating new knowledge into the existing corpus or by interpreting potentially contradictory claims (like 'ownership' vs. 'accountability' of aid-receiving countries) so that they may co-exist. For short, the analysis of moral knowledge needs to include most explicitly *how exactly this moral knowledge is actually known by its knowers*.

Secondly, however, as the two last "faces of knowledge" have illustrated, the knowing and the practicing (using, implementing) of knowledge are very difficult to separate. *All practice is already a way of knowing*. Moreover, some ways of knowing are also part of the corpus of knowledge that is known. In the end, all categories are not only interrelated, but maybe even congruent. For instance, take the distinction by G. Ryle (1949) between 'know that' (sustainability is just) vs. 'know how' (to make use of this 'know that'): know-how is both part of the corpus and a way of knowing some know-that. This reminds us of the fact that framework suggested here is an analytical device. We do not 'find' in observed interaction that an activity 'is' a way of organising rather than applying knowledge. We rather consider it as the one or the other.

Thirdly and related to this, the framework illustrates the danger over becoming overly broad. In the end, anything that people as cognitive agents do can be understood as a 'knowing'. *Anything that they utter could be viewed as knowledge*. More specifically, since we hardly ever communicate free of value and of moral implications, a practice *moral* knowledge can be detected in any action. Research has to make sure two things: for one, it has to be clear about what it takes into consideration as moral knowledge and knowing and practicing. Second, it needs to focus. If all practice in development is one of moral knowledge, the concept does not help at all.

### Which substantive theories could be added to the general framework?

The last subsections have drawn upon work in anthropology that allows for conceptualising moral knowledge beyond the slim definition suggested by the end of section III. A more explicit conceptual framework would need to be derived in accordance with the respective research issue and context. The addition of more substantive theories of social action to such framework mainly becomes due in analysis 'after' or during data collection. As long as used in a heuristically manner, substantive theories may even be added before data collection, but this also needs to be research-specific.

Still, does the general subject itself – the practice of moral knowledge – already indicate possible theories? Take the example of game theory, which interprets interaction as succession of strategic, pay-out-oriented decisions that may be explained with the surrounding incentive structure. Firstly, this theory of action seems far off from the issue of morality. However, this depends on how broad the interests of actors are taken to be. If the concept of interests includes ethical and conformist compliance of moral norms, and if it does not conflate such motives with utility-maximisation, thus nullifying their explanatory potential, game theory may indeed be helpful in mapping and interpreting decisions as weighing moral trade-offs. Similarly, when drawing upon political economy that explains interaction with observed power inequalities, analyses need to embrace different motives and related theories of action. Theories that allow for this breadth without becoming inconsistent are possible candidates.

Secondly, however, these theories do not cover the less conscious momentum of complying with norms. Affirmative practice of norms as well as reactive 'muddling-through' moral issues, both of which result from 'practical consciousness' rather than from decision-taking, need to be covered. Theories from social psychology should be useful complements – as long as they do not picture people only as subject to psychological processes, but consider their capability of choice. To relativise reflected decisions and to link them to the less conscious, the 'solving moral-cognitive dissonance' hypothesis as suggested by Zigon could be taken up. A theory based on this would interpret interaction as a less conscious effort of people to solve cognitive tension from a moral issue present-to-hand (not necessarily a breakdown), and to realise, at the same time, their more conscious interests (in all the breadth mentioned above) – again, in a manner that does at least not fortify the manifest moral issue. Note, however, that this hypothesis only will be helpful as long as it does not conceive of ethical performance as solving dissonance *only*.



Thirdly, theories will be useful which explain processes of constituting and revising meaning – in this case: of components of the moral knowledge corpus. This aspect invites social theories such as Symbolic Interactionism and Pragmatism (e.g. Wimmer 2004, Joas 2001) that explain how meanings are created and values are constituted in interaction, as well as theories of classification that shed light on how knowledge undergoes re-configuration, coherence-making etc. (Bowker/Star 1999).

## V. Researching moral knowledge: operationalisation methodological issues

### Instead of a complete research outline: examples of research questions

Which questions would serve to operationalise the framework outlined above for a concrete empirical research? How would research hypotheses look like that guide data collection and analysis?

Let me sum up the issues to be covered. First, there is moral knowledge itself, consisting of a corpus of knowledge, of ways of knowing, and of ways practicing it, in discursive 'or' practical consciousness. Second, there is structuration as the dynamic interdependence of moral structures and agency, which, along with using the knowledge corpus, includes ways of knowing that affirm, contest, enrich and (re-)organise that knowledge corpus. Third, the practice of moral knowledge ranges from the ethical to the strategic, from conformity to the constructive and mediatory, from the usual to crisis. Fourth, there is other than moral knowledge to be considered, and it needs to be clear what is considered moral knowledge and what not. The following heuristic questions exemplify how some of these issues may be covered (Box 1).

#### **Box 1: Operationalising the approach into concrete research questions**

##### Stock-taking and sources of moral knowledge

- Which moral notions and concepts are used frequently, with considerable emphasis, or in decisive moments in the context under research? Which meanings of these can be identified as common, recurring and even authoritative? How are these different terms systematically related to each other, according to common understanding as manifest in use or told by informants?
- How can these terms and concepts be attributed or attached to official policies, to informal rules in aid agencies, to local discourse apart from (though not independent of) development interaction, to higher-level discourse (like the most recent global anti-greed discourse triggered by the financial crisis) and to other sources of moral knowledge?

##### Differentiating the stock of moral knowledge by users and in other dimensions

- How are these terms and concepts linked to particular types of situations, to particular forms of use and to particular 'user groups'? Which moral-epistemic sub-communities exist?
- What are interests of the different 'knowers', what are their backgrounds and the trajectories of the moral knowledge with which they enter interaction? At which interfaces do these knowers meet, and which moral knowledge is particularly relevant and thus privileged at these interfaces?

#### Structure and management of the stock of moral knowledge

- Which recurring arguments relate different elements of moral knowledge, in an argumentative manner? How invariable are these arguments across different contexts of interaction?
- How do meanings of concepts, their systematic and argumentative relations etc. change – as a result of exogenous influence (e.g. new policies) or of local competition of interpretation, brokerage across interpretations etc.?
- Which agents and momentums of knowledge governance are there? Who governs the changes of meanings, relevance etc., and how?

#### The practice of moral knowledge: consistency and motives

- How coherently do actors take moral stances in on particular issues in different contexts – and are inconsistencies a result of opportunistic, forced or adaption to situational conditions? In particular, how does the level of 'crisis', the importance of the issue and the intensity of moral conflicts etc. influence this?
- Which motives for observed practice of moral knowledge do actors deliberately admit, which impossibilities of ethical performance do they themselves see?
- How do actors handle insolvable moral dilemmas, for instance when different human rights are in conflict? How does their moral knowledge change across several such situations that reveal the moral uncertainties of interaction? How do hierarchies of moral values develop?

#### The broader context

- Which are the most important structural conditions and driving forces of interaction that set the limits to the practice of moral knowledge (in particular: the limits to ethical practice) and that raise the very issues that are dealt with under reference to moral knowledge?
- How do actors relate moral concepts and arguments to non-moral ones? How do they solve tensions between moral and other concerns?

### How could concrete research hypotheses look like?

Let me offer two fictitious examples of research hypotheses. The use of morally sound representations of practice by agencies points to a growing need to legitimize development as an expensive, interventionist etc. practice (cf. Kühl 2004). Legitimacy claims are increasingly related to effectiveness, as the recent debate on aid effectiveness illustrates. A first hypothesis could be that (i) the pressure towards effectiveness generally increases the rather *instrumental* element of the practice of moral knowledge – i.e. moral terms are increasingly instrumentalised in order to achieve goals; (ii) this, however, results in a growing confusion in relation to the moral *structure* of interaction, which loses its effect of framing and smoothing interaction; (iii) this again affects effectiveness and may even constitute a 'morality-effectiveness-trap'.

A second hypothesis could relate to the diversity of moral knowledges involved. Actors in development arenas differ regarding which moral concepts they use and prioritise, and how they interpret these concepts. However, contrary to what may be assumed, given the intercultural setting of development, the hypothesis would be that (i) actors differ in this more according to their socioeconomic position (for instance, a grass-root NGO worker vs. a development banker) and their instrumental interests related to these concepts (pro-poor distribution means access to resources vs. increased market regulation) than according to their cultural affiliation. Therefore, (ii) successful interaction depends more on the flexibility, and the resulting cross-actor compatibility, of moral concepts than on the cross-cultural congruence. Development succeeds if moral concepts are used as loosely integrative boundary objects rather than as carriers of unequivocal moral consent.

## VI. Researching moral knowledge: methodological issues

Researching moral knowledge and its practice will involve methods that are quite usual in anthropology. For instance, for stock-taking of the corpus of moral knowledge that is relevant in a context, one needs to read, ask, discuss and observe which moral terms are considered relevant, how they are understood, and how they are used for instance when actors argue about the moral implications of certain development strategies. However, there are several challenges that are specific for looking at moral rather than for instance technical knowledge.

The first challenge lies in accessing *informative* interaction. This includes situations of breakdown and crisis that Zigon and others favour (for instance when a development agency finds out about internal corruption) as well as situations of explicit ethical negotiations (for instance when weighing different strategies and their moral implications). Neither of these will easily be opened to scrutiny by a researcher. One reason is obvious on the background of what the literature review has revealed regarding the conditions of ethical practice in development. Development actors cannot want their pragmatic manoeuvring under the ethical curtains of policies and reports be detected and exposed. Morality is generally a “sensitive topic” (Lee 1993), and it is particularly so in an environment where moral expectations and conditions for fulfilling these expectations often diverge in an untenable manner. ‘Studying-up’, for instance in donor agencies, certainly exacerbates this problem.

Even if one manages to access situations of explicit practice of moral knowledge, or if one limits observation to daily, ‘usual’ interaction, a second challenge lies in accessing what lies *behind* such practice. One cannot readily expect that an informant will openly admit that he or she just instrumentalised the moral norm of “solidarity with the weak” in order to bypass the moral norm of “balanced reciprocity” that would have imposed a stronger conditionality of the targeted aid resources. The strategy of ‘following the person’ across situations to check how principled and context-independent some moral posture is seems plausible, but raises again the problem of accessing situations. Another method would be to inquire the agents’ own interpretations of their (and maybe also of others’) behaviour. Depending on how trustful the situation of interview or discussion is and depending on how much sympathy for understanding is offered for deviation from moral standards, this may bring about substantial insights.

A problem that is common in participant observation, but which is particularly important in the case of moral knowledge is the *distortion* of practice through the presence of the researcher. In the case of researching technical or managerial knowledge, after some time the observed may not care much anymore about someone witnessing their efforts to manage a waste management facility. In the case of moral knowledge, while watching them argue about an ethical issue would be highly informative, people can be expected to keep feeling under scrutiny, and to act accordingly – i.e. to act more ethical, or at least to pretend more to do so, than they would otherwise. One may not care overly much whether one is perceived as technically competent by the project anthropologist. Being perceived as morally bad is a different matter.

When discussing these issues with a staff member of UNDP, he recommended to set up the whole research as cooperative one, built on the researcher’s understanding for the limits to ethical practice in development and on the interest of the partners in understanding better how this affects their work – not only in ethical terms, but also in terms of effectiveness (‘so that there’s something in for them’). It is a case-specific problem how well this would work out, how much both the moral and the strategic side of practice are made accessible, and how distortion of behaviour is reduced by accepting the researcher as ‘one of us’. A general problem related to this is the *involvement* of the researcher. It may be impossible anyway to conduct ‘value-free’ (or even ‘judgement-free’) research. It is certainly impossible when the issue is values. One aspect of this is interpretation of data: how to avoid for instance that observed behaviour that does not respond to one’s own values is systematically attributed to strategic or otherwise morally ‘bad’ motives? Another aspect is that already in the situation of data collection, the researcher is involved. To paraphrase Watzlawick, it is impossible not to position one-self – even not taking a stance in a moral conflict means taking a stance, at least towards the parties involved. The distortion that this causes may not be too serious a problem since there are always different views

involved in moral arguments. It may even be a fruitful trigger for more explicit, more reflected or otherwise more informative practice. For instance, when people go into overt disagreement with the external researcher, this may reveal particularly well context-specific moral knowledge. The problem of involvement may rather be that the researcher is not researching anymore, but arguing. This risk is particularly high when moral stakes are high, for instance in medical setting where people weigh decisions over life and death. It will be hard only to record arguments on this. Moreover, development researchers are often not overly neutral to their subject, especially in organisations of applied research.

## VII. Outlook: remaining issues

The framework presented here specifies and relates important components of researching how moral knowledge matters in development – structural and agency aspects of practice, practical and discursive consciousness, stocks of knowledge and ways of knowing, ethical, strategic and other motives of practice, etc. As such, it helps for *conceptualising* research. To use it as *theoretical* framework, more substantive theories are needed for interpreting practice and building hypotheses. Section IV has indicated how such theories may be identified; further discussion is needed. A second group of issues was raised in section VI. Researching how moral knowledge is practiced involves methodological challenges. Discussion of how access to and interpretation of such practice is possible – and legitimate – is needed, too.

One problem of micro-sociological, context-specific research is *generalisation*. This may be even more important insofar as the practice of moral knowledge relatively strongly involves free will or at least choice. How people deal with concrete moral dilemmas depends not only on the situation, but also on the individual judgement, which will be more subjective than for instance in ‘merely’ technical operations. Still, empirical research may reveal more systematically for instance which options people have in Aidland to handle the moral ambivalences that the literature review has revealed.

Finally, this paper has started with how moral knowledge matters in development practice according to the literature; this lead to a more systematic conceptualisation of moral knowledge as such and of how it may be researched. What is missing is the leap back to development practice more general, i.e. the question how moral knowledge thus conceived and thus researched influences how interaction in development takes place, and what the outcomes of this interaction are. However, conceptualising this leap presupposes first results of a research as suggested in this paper.

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