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If It Feels Right ...

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During the summer of 2008, the eminent Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith led a research team that conducted in-depth interviews with 230 young adults from across America. The interviews were part of a larger study that Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, Patricia Snell Herzog and others have been conducting on the state of America's youth.

Smith and company asked about the young people's moral lives, and the results are depressing.

It's not so much that these young Americans are living lives of sin and debauchery, at least no more than you'd expect from 18- to 23-year-olds. What's disheartening is how bad they are at thinking and talking about moral issues.

The interviewers asked open-ended questions about right and wrong, moral dilemmas and the meaning of life. In the rambling answers, which Smith and company recount in a new book, "Lost in Transition," you see the young people groping to say anything sensible on these matters. But they just don't have the categories or vocabulary to do so.

When asked to describe a moral dilemma they had faced, two-thirds of the young people either couldn't answer the question or described problems that are not moral at all, like whether they could afford to rent a certain apartment or whether they had enough quarters to feed the meter at a parking spot.

"Not many of them have previously given much or any thought to many of the kinds of questions about morality that we asked," Smith and his co-authors write. When asked about wrong or evil, they could generally agree that rape and murder are wrong. But, aside from these extreme cases, moral thinking didn't enter the picture, even when considering things like drunken driving, cheating in school or cheating on a partner. "I don't really deal with right and wrong that often," is how one interviewee put it.

The default position, which most of them came back to again and again, is that moral choices are just a matter of individual taste. "It's personal," the respondents typically said. "It's up to the individual. Who am I to say?"

Rejecting blind deference to authority, many of the young people have gone off to the other extreme: "I would do what I thought made me happy or how I felt. I have no other way of knowing what to do but how I internally feel."

Many were quick to talk about their moral feelings but hesitant to link these feelings to any broader thinking about a shared moral framework or obligation. As one put it, “I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But different people feel different ways, so I couldn’t speak on behalf of anyone else as to what’s right and wrong.”

Smith and company found an atmosphere of extreme moral individualism — of relativism and nonjudgmentalism. Again, this doesn’t mean that America’s young people are immoral. Far from it. But, Smith and company emphasize, they have not been given the resources — by schools, institutions and families — to cultivate their moral intuitions, to think more broadly about moral obligations, to check behaviors that may be degrading. In this way, the study says more about adult America than youthful America.

Smith and company are stunned, for example, that the interviewees were so completely untroubled by rabid consumerism. (This was the summer of 2008, just before the crash).

Many of these shortcomings will sort themselves out as these youngsters get married, have kids, enter a profession or fit into more clearly defined social roles. Institutions will inculcate certain habits. Broader moral horizons will be forced upon them. But their attitudes at the start of their adult lives do reveal something about American culture. For decades, writers from different perspectives have been warning about the erosion of shared moral frameworks and the rise of an easygoing moral individualism.

Allan Bloom and Gertrude Himmelfarb warned that sturdy virtues are being diluted into shallow values. Alasdair MacIntyre has written about emotivism, the idea that it’s impossible to secure moral agreement in our culture because all judgments are based on how we feel at the moment.

Charles Taylor has argued that morals have become separated from moral sources. People are less likely to feel embedded on a moral landscape that transcends self. James Davison Hunter wrote a book called “The Death of Character.” Smith’s interviewees are living, breathing examples of the trends these writers have described.

In most times and in most places, the group was seen to be the essential moral unit. A shared religion defined rules and practices. Cultures structured people’s imaginations and imposed moral disciplines. But now more people are led to assume that the free-floating individual is the essential moral unit. Morality was once revealed, inherited and shared, but now it’s thought of as something that emerges in the privacy of your own heart.