

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN CRIME AND SOCIETY

Collective Morality and Crime in the Americas

Christopher Birkbeck



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This study examines the ways in which the moral community is “talked into being” in relation to crime, and the objects of concern that typically occupy its attention. It explores collective morality with particular reference to the unease about rising violence, guns and gun control, gangs, and hate crime in North America; and the deep anxiety about crime and violence, organized crime, and drug trafficking in Latin America. Its source materials are commentaries about crime and criminal justice appearing in selected newspapers across the hemisphere.

Research on social problems, moral panics, and the sociology of morality has largely overlooked the type of moral discourse studied here. While emphasizing the culturally contingent nature of the findings, the conclusion reflects on their significance for understanding the nature of morality, the artifacts of talk, and the construction of identity.

Given its focus on the Americas, this book will be of great interest to students, researchers, and non-specialists in both Canada and the United States, especially those interested in criminology, cultural studies, social problems, and social movements.

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Para Marlene
And for Chris, John, and Howard

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Preface

The collective morality examined in this book is of a particular kind. It is not the *conscience collective* so influentially discussed by Durkheim—that constellation of deeply held sentiments which, possibly, bring the notions of crime and punishment into being. It is a collective morality that materializes in text and talk, through which people write or say things that not only have moral significance but also communicate the idea, often insistently, of a moral community. And in their episodic, frequently offhand, sometimes dramatic, and often clichéd utterances, people give off a much untidier and less robust image of the moral community than that evoked by Durkheimian mechanical solidarity.

Nor is this collective morality concerned with all of the possible phenomena that might attract social concern; it is studied here—perhaps rather artificially—in relation to the matter of crime and the “responses” to it. Neither is it a collective morality that might be found in TV studios, lecture theatres, legislative debates or street protests; it is studied as it appears in the commentary published in newspapers. Finally, it is not necessarily a collective morality with universal characteristics, independent of space and time; it is the collective morality that can be observed in commentary published in three Anglo-American and three Latin American newspapers during 2006 and 2007.

But for all its apparent specificity, this kind of collective morality is very interesting to study. Morality is, after all, expressed only through words or behavior; so a focus on words is always likely to bring rewards. Not only does this book explore the discursive creation of a moral community in relation to crime, it also examines some of the features of moralizing (moral talk) that are associated with that enterprise. It seeks to understand how moral matters are typically handled, and to examine their significance for identity and experience. Indeed, some of the characteristics of this moralizing seem so pervasive and important that it would not be surprising if they were also found in other media, other societies and, perhaps, the recent past.

Some social commentators allege a decline in morality, while the few sociologists that write explicitly about morality comment on a contemporary lack of interest in the subject among their peers. These alleged trends may look to be related, but the claims themselves may be questionable. If the exploration undertaken here is at all indicative, moral talk is a frequent ingredient in commentary

on crime; and one result of this is that other ingredients of that commentary often become morally significant as well. It may not be that morality has declined but that its discursive appearance has changed, making it less obvious. And, where evident, perhaps the content of this moralizing does not please those who, nostalgic for the social critics of yesteryear or concerned to defend a particular ideological programme, dismiss it as of inferior quality. As for the marginal status of “the sociology of morality,” it is the label that blinds. True, there are not many studies that explicitly orient and advertise themselves under this heading, but moral matters keep bubbling to the surface in numerous other specialisms within the field of social studies. Thus, the present inquiry has found itself particularly engaged with the literatures on social problems, moral panics, and social movements. Indeed, one of its intended contributions is to highlight the tangential manner in which morality has been treated in previous work and to suggest some benefits that can be gained by studying it more directly. If this book encourages readers to examine, and reflect on, the morality embedded in the largely unedifying talk that characterizes much of the public sphere, it will have served its purpose.

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1 Collective moral discourse

In its December 19, 2006, edition the *Los Angeles Times* carried an item about rising rates of violence in the United States.¹ The trigger for this article was a recently released report by the FBI that gave crime rates for the first half of 2006. Not surprisingly, a few of the numbers in that report made it into the text. Thus, readers were informed, for example, that “violent crime increased 3.7% compared with the first six months of 2005,” while “the number of robberies increased 9.7%.” In addition, three “criminal justice experts” were consulted about the figures. Their responses focused on plausible explanations for the increases in violence and, in particular, on the possibility that a national preoccupation with terrorism, combined with budgetary cutbacks for the police, had allowed violence to creep up again. This item was a typical example of routine news production: a government report about something of social interest or concern provided the core subject matter, and one or more experts were asked to comment on it. Indeed, at least one of the experts quoted in this article—the criminologist James Alan Fox—was regularly called on by newspapers in the United States to give comments about crime and criminal justice.

Embedded in this routinely generated item of news were the following segments:

Fourth paragraph:

Though criminal justice experts were cautious about drawing conclusions from six months of data, they found the report worrisome and said the country could be in a new period of slowly rising crime...

Final sentences:

They [the police] are having an increasingly difficult time in effectively trying to combat crime and provide for safer communities. It has been a struggle.

That the FBI report was found to be “worrisome” looks unexceptional. Rising crime rates would be seen by most people as a cause of concern, and very few indeed might try to argue that they were of no concern at all, or even to be welcomed. But it is interesting to see how the sentence begins: “criminal justice

2 Collective moral discourse

experts were cautious about drawing conclusions from six months of data.” Here, they were focused on uncertainty: did six months represent a blip or a trend? Yet, within the same sentence, the article had them putting caution aside and entering a different terrain: that of morality. To say that rising crime is worrisome is to offer a moral perspective; it is, obviously, to declare that crime should not happen.

Mention of the “struggle” to “combat crime” at the end of the article similarly looks unexceptional. It brings in terms which are widely used, drawn from a narrow inventory of words and phrases that denote conflict with crime (the “war on crime” and the “fight against crime” being two other examples). But these terms also carry moral overtones because they cast the police as adversaries of criminality, as a force for good. Thus, a 694-word article that is mainly about numbers and explanations—about what is (or might be) known—also carries a moral dimension. In scarcely 13 words, it communicates a censure of violence (the “worrisome” trend) and imputes virtue to the police (who combat crime).

Critical readers of this same article, and the comments that have just been made about it, might question the validity of the moral word count. Some might bring it down to three (“worrisome,” “combat,” “struggle”); most would probably argue that it should be much higher. After all, the article is replete with words which, while obviously describing crime types, also carry a clear moral valence: “murder,” robbery,” “aggravated assault,” “forcible rape,” and “violent crime” are terms that designate highly objectionable behaviors. Could not the whole article be seen as a brief report on the nation’s moral health, in which the numbers and explanations merely provide information for the more important reflections about progress or decline?

There is no doubt that it could; but this is precisely because of the handful of words highlighted above, which give the text that possibility. Morality seems largely to be called up by specific kinds of utterance. There are countless tracts that deal with crime (and its varieties) in a clearly amoral manner, that is, with no attention to its moral significance, yet full attention to what is (or is not) known about it, or to what might (or might not) be done about it. And while moral crusaders might take up the unassuming FBI report and weave it into a denunciation of the nation’s ills, they would probably find themselves wanting to add some judgmental text—about “disturbing figures,” “the threat to personal safety,” or governmental “complacency,” for example—as accompaniment.

Of course, with a topic such as crime, the possibility that commentary might wander into the moral domain is always present, which is precisely what happened—in a quite limited way—in this *Los Angeles Times* article. And just as this article included a couple of sentences of explicit moral significance, many others do exactly the same, whether it be through recourse to routine words and phrases (in a sort of “slippage” into normativity) or the conscious stride to a moral standpoint that is presumably felt to be necessary. Thus, an opinion column about crime prevention in Venezuela’s *El Nacional* mentioned “the brutal magnitude of our crime problem” (seven words out of 774) in its second sentence;² while an editorial in Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* began, very simply,

with, "The problem is crime" (four out of 483 words).³ In other cases, the moral perspective is dominant, as in another *Globe and Mail* editorial, this time on school safety, of which about 337 words of the 535-word text were given over to criticisms of the crime, disorder, and victimization that were claimed to exist in a Toronto school.⁴ Similarly, an editorial in Mexico's *El Universal* was almost entirely devoted to denouncing the problem of juvenile alcoholism, sometimes with dramatic language.⁵ At the opposite end of the spectrum, although quite difficult to find in these newspapers, are texts that are entirely devoid of moral comment, such as a brief item in the *New York Times* that reported on falling crime rates,⁶ or an article from *La Nación*, in Argentina, about the use of computer technology in the criminal justice system.⁷

Newsprint has a markedly ephemeral quality, lasting only until it has been read and generally destined to be cast aside as attention moves on (although electronic archives are constantly growing). Yet this sometimes hastily assembled, and often skimpily read, material is shot through with morally significant utterances, at least in relation to crime. Along with information, knowledge, ideas, and blueprints for action, newsprint also conveys the moral stances of those who comment on this subject.

It is not, of course, the only site for moralizing about crime. Commentary on crime materializes in many different discursive domains. A political speech about rising crime, a police report on the latest crime statistics, a research paper on the causes of crime, an op-ed piece on juvenile delinquency, a neighborhood meeting about a recent spate of burglaries, a conversation between two acquaintances about unsafe areas of the city; all represent commentary about crime. Even private thoughts about these topics could be considered as a sort of commentary, although the only access to them is through words. And, just like newsprint, any of these commentaries could start from, or slip into, the moral domain.

Newsprint shares evident characteristics with other mass media, in its mechanical reproduction and wide dissemination.⁸ It also shares commonalities with other kinds of public discourse, which may not be mechanically reproduced or widely disseminated (such as speeches, meetings, pamphlets, and specialist books), in that they are all understood to be accessible or potentially accessible to anyone. They stand in opposition to private comment, which is reserved for the self, or the few. Newsprint, therefore, offers a readily accessible route to the realm of public moral discourse, and that is the way in which it is used in this book.

The following study is an exploration of morality as it materializes in public commentary on crime. It is not a study of crime, nor a study of the way in which newsprint about crime is generated, disseminated, or consumed. Both of these latter fields, obviously, have been, and continue to be, amply researched, with criminology and media studies providing the respective disciplinary supports. In contrast, the following study uses public commentary on crime as a case study, as a means to access a particular kind of moral discourse. Commentary is one type of what linguists call "natural discourse," that is, discourse which has not

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been generated for the purpose of measurement. Its counterpart is what might be termed “experimental discourse,” which materializes when a researcher elicits verbal or written responses to questions or requests for information. Morality also exists as experimental discourse when, for example, a sample of people answers a survey question measuring whether or not they are in favor of abortion, subjects give their opinions about hypothetical moral dilemmas, or a focus group discusses the pros and cons of health care reform.

Natural discourse is, obviously, often used as a source of data in the social sciences, particularly by linguists and discourse theorists (who are interested in understanding language and discourse), and ethnographers (who, except for linguistic ethnographers, are interested in something else). The ethnographic focus has often included natural moral discourse, but it is generally of the private sort, that which, for example, articulates the “code of the street” in Philadelphia,⁹ or the dynamics of the *brigas* (violent encounters) during Carnival in São Luís, Brazil.¹⁰ Public moral discourse has been drawn on by scholars from diverse specializations—cultural sociology,¹¹ moral panic studies,¹² and social problems¹³—who are interested in the role played by morality in collective life. It has, however, been drawn on in a particular way, conveniently expressed through the notion of “framing.”

In Entman’s useful definition of the concept:

Framing essentially involves *selection* and *salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described.¹⁴

Frames have been invoked, directly or indirectly, to characterize ideational clusters that not only communicate meaning but also have consequences—measurable effects on social action and social life. Scholars have expended a great deal of effort on the identification of frames in relation to many social “issues” (including crime) and an exploration of their links to the decision-making process in public policy.¹⁵ Frames have been an attractive concept for examining the big issues of the day: they touch on weighty matters of morals and politics, they highlight the public uses and misuses of research (of particular interest to researchers, obviously), and—very importantly—they signify conflict (a perennially popular topic for study).

Frames, however, are one step removed from public discourse. They exist first as abstract models in the minds of researchers, made up of such things as “roots,” “consequences,” and “appeals to principle,”¹⁶ or “diagnostic,” “prognostic,” and “motivational framing,”¹⁷ which are then populated with relevant bits of text selected from the discourses of interest. In this process, the natural quality of the discourse is broken down through dissection. In addition, as Entman’s definition correctly contemplates, frames not only include morality but also other things, such as “causal interpretation;” hence, these sorts of discourse are as

equally likely as morality to be cited and discussed in any given study, and there is often a corresponding failure to make sufficient distinction between them all. Thus, while studies of framing draw on public moral discourse, they do not reveal much about it.

Benford's study of the "vocabularies of motive" (or types of argument) used to mobilize action in favor of nuclear disarmament provides a pertinent illustration from work that makes explicit use of the notion of framing.¹⁸ He identified four frames that represented the discursive tactics aimed at getting others involved in the movement: appeals to the *severity* and *urgency* of the nuclear danger, and claims about the *efficacy* and *propriety* of action to deal with it. Severity was mainly constructed through descriptive accounts, such as "statistics regarding the size of the superpowers' nuclear arsenals and the number of casualties expected in the event of a nuclear war."¹⁹ Urgency was based on predictions about the imminence of a nuclear holocaust or, at the least, the impending development of a new generation of nuclear weapons. Efficacy involved claims that campaigning was capable of averting disaster and producing positive changes, while propriety addressed the duty to get involved for the sake of defending life, both immediately and for future generations. Propriety was, therefore, the moral component of the frames. While there are important linkages between each frame—severity and urgency, for example, give depth and immediacy to the repudiation of nuclear violence—Benford did not explore them or develop a comprehensive portrait of campaigners' moral stances in relation to nuclear war. He was much more interested in the discursive props and prompts to movement participation.

Benford's method involved the analytical extraction of his vocabularies from hundreds of pages of field and interview notes and more than 1,000 movement documents. Short quotes were included in the article as illustrations of each kind of motivating discourse. To the extent that it is present, morality comes alive in those quotes—"I'm here because I choose life over death," "We're concerned about what's going to happen to our families," and so on²⁰—but just as quickly slips from view. A more systematic study of moral discourse would have required extensive exploration of the utterances contained in the source materials. It would have required a change of focus.

Similar comments (and others) apply to research on moral panics, a line of work which, on the face of it, might look to be particularly relevant for the study of morality. The literature on moral panics makes no explicit reference to the concept of framing and, in consequence, its ideational clusters of interest take on a fuzzier form. But the common roots of moral panics and framing studies in the social constructionist perspective mean that frames are identified in both, even if they are not so-named or clearly delimited in the first of these. For example, Cohen's classic study of events that happened in some English seaside towns in the 1960s described in considerable detail the portrayal (by the press, politicians, and other public figures) of youth subcultures as violent and unruly, the threats that these subcultures were perceived to pose to mainstream values, and the actions that were called for (some of them, in fact, taken) in response to the

phenomena that were thus portrayed.²¹ Moral discourse was obviously involved here—“grubby hordes of louts and sluts,”²² “You have to deal strongly with this lot,”²³ and so on—but, once again, it appeared in snippets, extracted from a wide variety of texts for the purposes of illustrating particular points. Cohen was evidently more interested in panics than in morality. He developed some very insightful and influential analyses of collective behavior, the workings of the media, and the emotiveness and unreason that sometimes prevail in public discourse, all of which were taken up as themes in subsequent research.²⁴ However, when interrogated in relation to its own, rather idiosyncratic, rendering of morality, the moral panics literature is largely silent. How is indignation invoked and sustained? Is demonization the right word to describe the censure directed at deviants? How does moral discourse intersect with knowledge claims? What ethical stances underlie moral discourse? No systematic analysis or meaningful answers emerge.

Discursive morality is arguably one of the two directly observable forms that morality takes, the other being what might be termed “corporal” morality (physical behaviors with a moral content, such as a scowl, a slap, applause, an embrace, or avoidance). This does not mean, however, that either exists as a crudely objective phenomenon, waiting to be grasped by the researcher. Whether a slap is meant to calm down a hysterical person or degrade them is a matter of intent, which may not be clear to the slapper and even less so to the observer (although the person slapped may quickly formulate an interpretation). Whether calling juvenile violence “senseless” is an empirical observation about the meaninglessness of crime, or a particular type of censure (implying that crime committed for a reason is bad enough but that senseless crime is even worse), depends—again—on the speaker’s intent and the observer’s interpretation of it. Even natural moral discourse is mediated by the researcher; and experimental moral discourse obviously more so.

The study of natural moral discourse does not, therefore, stand entirely apart from the study of framing: both involve the selection and interpretation of text.²⁵ The difference between them lies in their focus. Framing involves the extraction of text for the purposes of illuminating and explaining social processes such as mobilization, political conflict (or political consensus), policy developments, and so on. The study of natural moral discourse involves the analysis of text for the purposes of illuminating morality itself.

Within the broad field that takes a sociological look at morality,²⁶ work on social problems, social movements, and moral panics has paid the closest attention to public (and therefore natural) moral discourse. Other studies have either drawn on that discourse in a much more schematic way through the interpretive construction (i.e., more abstract framing) of a particular “ethic,”²⁷ or have stimulated moral discourse through the careful measurement of values and normative orientations.²⁸ These diverse renderings of morality—the “capitalist ethos,” “American values,” “conformity,” and so on—imbue it with greater gravitas than the routine, and sometimes dramatic, utterances—“bad news,” “shocking development,” “line in the sand,” and the like—that are found in natural moral

discourse. And, in addition, they work quite well as things that are to be explained, or which can be drawn on for the explanation of other phenomena, tasks which are rightly seen as essential to the social scientific enterprise. Public moral discourse is untidy in appearance, often trivial in content and seemingly irrelevant for understanding. What can be gained by examining it?

A first answer is that its pervasive presence indicates its social significance. That people routinely include morally tinged utterances in their public statements is further confirmation of what social scientists already grasp: that morality is a fundamental dimension of social life. A second answer is that, despite their episodic, imprecise, and frequently offhand textual character, public moral utterances can fruitfully be treated as a discourse with its own identifiable idioms and characteristic ways of feeding off, and feeding into, other types of discourse. To claim that moral utterances constitute a discourse is to assert (and demonstrate) continuities, duplications, and links between instances of these utterances that appear in a set of texts.²⁹ It is also to claim that moral discourse can be distinguished from other types of discourse, such as those comprising aesthetics, description, explanation, or technique.

In the present study, an utterance is considered to be morally significant if it communicates or implies a putative obligation or prohibition (a strong form), or desirability and undesirability (a weaker form), in relation to behavior. Obligations and prohibitions are expressed most strongly in the verbs “ought” and “ought not,” but can also (along with desirability and undesirability) be communicated in a myriad of other ways: the “troubling” trend in crime (because crime ought not to occur); the “grubby hordes of louts and sluts” (who, as the antithesis of virtue, ought not to do what they are said to do); to “combat crime” (combat being a virtuous stance towards something which ought not to occur); “you have to [ought to?] deal strongly with this lot” (dealing strongly being a virtue); and so on.

Among the different lines of inquiry that can be developed in relation to public moral discourse, the focus of this study is on the imagined social world that it brings into being.³⁰ This is a world populated by morally significant actors (who can, therefore, be mapped) and its history is that of the relations between them (which can, therefore, be deciphered). It is a world that exists in newsprint and other public texts, but it is a world whose existence has not been recognized by those who, so far, have drawn on public moral discourse for data. It is a world centered on “the good,” although necessarily inhabited as well by the unvirtuous. To chart its terrain and chronicle its history is, in fact, to explore morality rather than immorality. In the present case, it is to study moral virtue—or perhaps (and more precisely) the pretension to virtue—rather than criminality.

According to one of its meanings, virtue denotes efficacy, the power to get things done. Partly congruent with this meaning, morality has often been examined as a determinant of other social phenomena, which is precisely the way it has been treated in studies based on framing. Arguably, the greater the interest in the social process, the lesser the interest in the discourse itself—which would explain why frames are fuzzier in the moral panics literature than they are in the

social problems literature. And, arguably, the greater the focus on the discourse itself, the more challenging it becomes to delineate its causal effects. In fact, the following study makes no attempt to study the role of public moral discourse in influencing other social phenomena. This is not simply an exercise in bracketing, in placing the lens on one bit of the social world as a prologue to exploring its relations with other bits. Instead, the imagined social world constituted by public moral discourse is treated as important in its own right. It is seen as playing an important role in the construction of identity and experience, irrespective of any other effects that it might have.

Most basically, public moral discourse affirms (or continually re-affirms) the existence of morality itself. The varied modes (speeches, essays, reports, etc.) and settings (politics, the media, community, and so on) in which this discourse materializes represent sites for morality—public social “spaces” in which the latter can be performed, legible, or aural reassurance that morality is, as it were, alive and well. Thus, for example, a report that labels crime trends as “troubling” is not simply (or perhaps even mainly) a cue for action, it is also a demonstration (however unobtrusive) that morality exists; seemingly called forth by the immorality that is crime. The symbolic importance of these sites for morality is not only reflected in the routine inclusion of morally significant language and the stylized, repetitive, forms that it often takes. It is also reflected in the fact that these sites are heavily policed (through censure, including self-censure, and sanction) to avoid the intrusion of immoral discourse—that which challenges or inverts the commonly affirmed order of virtues and vices. At these sites, no one declares themselves in favor of robbery, fraud, rape, or murder—it would be considered “unthinkable”—and even those who have committed these, or other types of crime, must deem that behavior unacceptable (through repentance, regret, apology, and so on) in order to participate as commentators.

A related characteristic of this discourse is its affirmation (or re-affirmation) of the existence of a moral community; its declaration that civil society is a moral society, made up of “right-thinking”³¹ individuals who are on the side of the good. Whether or not this group is imagined to be the majority, it is always located at the center of the morally constituted universe, with immorality at the margins, somewhere else. Morality has to be strong because immorality is always perceived as a challenge, as threatening to weaken or replace it.³² The notional existence of the moral community is, therefore, an affirmation of the strength of morality, derived from the putative sharing of similar values by its members.

And a third characteristic of public moral discourse is that it provides a means for the construction of individual identity, by allowing people to align themselves with this notional moral community through the use of appropriate vocabularies. To articulate public moral discourse is also to affirm one’s own identity as a moral person. This strategy even includes individuals who may be highly critical of selected aspects of what they perceive to be the prevailing morality. They are often labelled as “moralists” or “moralizers,” in explicit (and perhaps consciously sought) recognition of the particular attention that they pay to

morality. The only danger for them is that, if their critique is too radical, they will be seen less as moral crusaders³³ and more as moral renegades.

These characteristics of public moral discourse are explored here through the imagined social world that it constitutes in relation to crime. Mapping that social world proceeds first by looking at the ways in which collective morality is “talked into being”³⁴ through the materialization of collective concern about crime. This is the subject matter of Chapter 2, which explores the ubiquitous and routine discursive orientation to a collective dimension (punctuated occasionally by criticisms of individualistic apathy and indifference), and the typical objects of collective concern (which can be varied). This is followed, in Chapter 3, by an examination of the identity of the moral community—an identity which does not simply emerge as a counterpoint to that of “criminals” (or whatever other word is used to designate those who commit crimes), but is also fashioned out of appropriate sentiments and significant virtues. It is an identity which is always implied to be that which is occasionally proclaimed as “we the good.”

The coexistence of a moral civil society with the pole of immorality represented by criminals gives a history to this imagined social world, which is written in terms of their respective trajectories and the relations between them. It is this moral outlook which is explored in Chapter 4. Because any history has an empirical foundation, public moral discourse must draw on knowledge to build its account of the world. The inherent challenge is to do this in the face of uncertainty (understood as the necessarily contingent and provisional nature of knowledge), because it is difficult to formulate a convincing evaluation of a state of affairs which might not exist. Public moral discourse must, therefore, assume a certainty that is belied by other discourses, particularly that of science. How it does this, and how it utilizes empirical, poetic, and hyperbolic language to map the moral world, are also explored in Chapter 4.

Public moral discourse also writes history of a special sort, looking only occasionally to anything beyond the very recent past, and focusing instead on the present, and on some likely scenarios for the immediate future. It is a history which provides context as much as narrative, and which calls for moral agency, for morality as a seemingly necessary (and desirably potent) force in shaping the course of human affairs. This latter role is examined in Chapter 5, which looks at the incessant calls to action and the routine formulation of prescriptive statements within the apparently commonsensical framework of problems and solutions. Those prescriptive statements are not studied here as precursors to action (although they might be such), but as visions of moral agency, symbolic interventions in the history of the imagined social world, affirmations (or hopes?) that the moral community is endowed with power.

Cumulatively, the discourse presented in Chapters 2–5 reflects a melodramatic conception of the world, in which evil is pitted constantly against good. This was the discourse to be found in the sources used for this study: a set of 853 items published during 2006 and 2007 in six broadsheet newspapers across the Americas—the *Globe and Mail* (Canada), the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* (United States), *El Universal* (Mexico), *El Nacional* (Venezuela),

and *La Nación* (Argentina).³⁵ Chapter 6 uses melodrama as a metaphor in order to look at some of the differences in moralizing that emerge when the two major cultural regions of the hemisphere—Anglo-America and Latin America—are compared. It notes important contrasts in the locus of concern, the salience of research, and the conspicuousness of moral talk,³⁶ which can be related to broader cultural processes in each region. And it underlines the need to see public moral discourse, wherever it might be found, as a combination of the general and the particular.

Chapter 7 continues the reflection on variability; first, in a methodological vein, by identifying some relevant correlates of the potentially differentiated character of moralizing: the type of medium conveying the discourse, the object of social concern, the cultural context, and the passage of time. It then moves on to consider some key dimensions of potential variation in moral outlook and moral agency: a tragic, as opposed to melodramatic, vision of criminality; moral agency based on something other than the virtue of determined action and the utility of positive results; and narratives built around empirical perplexity rather than certainty. These possibilities highlight the significant contributions of collective moral discourse to the construction of identity and experience, at least in part, through the artifacts of talk.