

## **Liberty and Obligation**

*The Moral Lifeworlds of White Middle-Class Americans in Northeastern and Southern US*

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# **LIBERTY AND OBLIGATION**

THE MORAL LIFEWORLDS OF WHITE MIDDLE-CLASS  
AMERICANS IN NORTHEASTERN AND SOUTHERN US

BY  
**JACOB DIDIA-HANSEN**

DISSERTATION SUBMITTED 2022



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK



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Jacob Didia-Hansen



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK

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## CV

Jacob Didia-Hansen holds an MA in Social and Political Theory from the University of Birmingham (UK) and an MSc in Sociology from the University of Copenhagen (Denmark). Jacob's research seeks to develop concepts and theories for understanding how social actors navigate complex moral issues such as welfare redistribution, family obligation, neighborhood commitment, and work ethics.

## Dansk resumé

Det store fokus på individets eget ansvar i amerikansk socialpolitik har betydet, at lokalfællesskaber og storfamilie historisk set har været vigtige kilder til tryghed i det amerikanske samfund. Siden 1950'erne har kritiske røster imidlertid anset den hvide amerikanske middelklasse som repræsentanter for en individualiseret mainstream-kultur, som underminerer lokalfællesskabets og storfamiliens moralske betydning. Den hvide amerikanske middelklasse fremstår således som særligt *individualiseret* og uden moralske forpligtelser overfor hverken medborgere, lokalfællesskaber eller storfamilie.

I 1980'erne opstod et teoretisk perspektiv, som jeg i afhandlingen refererer til som *The Sociology of Situated Judgement*. I denne afhandling udforsker jeg, hvorvidt dette teoretiske perspektiv kan udfordre det endimensionelle billede af den individualiserede hvide amerikanske middelklasse. Er de gennemførte individualister, eller indtager de et mere nuanceret standpunkt, hvis de spørges om deres moralske forpligtelser over for hhv. medborgere, lokalfællesskaber og storfamilie? Disse overvejelser udmøntede sig i følgende forskningsspørgsmål:

**Hvordan definerer hvide middelklasseamerikanere deres moralske forpligtelser over for deres medborgere, deres lokalfællesskaber og deres storfamilie?**

I forlængelse af ønsket om at udfordre det endimensionelle billede af den hvide amerikanske middelklasse foretog jeg et komparativt



casestudie. Jeg interviewede 45 hvide middelklasseamerikanere – 19 fra den liberale, nordøstlige by Boston i Massachusetts og 26 fra den konservative sydstatsby Knoxville i Tennessee.

Afhandlingens fund udfordrer det endimensionelle billede af en individualiseret og ydrestyret hvid middelklasse. Selvom interviewpersonerne fra Boston er mere individualistiske end interviewpersonerne fra Knoxville, så har deres moralske livsverdener rødder i regional kulturhistorie. Deres moral er ikke bare produkt af strukturelle kræfter som bureaukratisering og forbrugerkapitalisme. Disse moralske livsverdeners fundamentale principper synes at forme måden hvorpå interviewpersonerne definerer deres forpligtelser overfor medborgere, lokalfællesskaber, og storfamilie.

Fundene udfordrer imidlertid også situationismen i *The Sociology of Situated Judgement* ved at påvise, at den regionale moralske kultur udstyrer interviewpersonerne med en sammenhængende moralsk livsverden. Disse fund kalder på mere forskning i betydningen af regional kultur i synet på moralske forpligtelser sammenlignet med andre indflydelsesrige faktorer som for eksempel klasse og racetilhørsforhold.

## Abstract

The focus on individual responsibility in American social policy has meant that communities and extended family have historically been important sources of security in American society. However, since at least the 1950s, critics have considered the white American middle class as a proponent of an individualized mainstream culture that undermines the moral force of communities and extended families. The white American middle class thus appears exceptionally *individualized* with no sense of obligation towards fellow citizens, communities, or extended family.

In the 1980s, a theoretical perspective emerged, which I in the thesis refer to as the *Sociology of Situated Judgement*. In the thesis I explore if this theoretical perspective might challenge the one-dimensional image of the white middle class in America. Are they individualists through and through, or do they take a more nuanced position if asked about obligations towards fellow citizens, communities, and extended family respectively? These reflections led to the following research question:

**How do white middle-class Americans define their moral obligations towards their fellow citizens, their community, and their extended family?**

In continuation of the wish to challenge the one-dimensional image of the individualized white middle class, I conducted a comparative case study. I interviewed 45 white middle-class Americans—19 from the

liberal Northeastern city of Boston, Massachusetts, and 26 from the conservative Southern city of Knoxville, Tennessee.

The findings do challenge the one-dimensional image of the individualized and outer-directed white middle class. Although the Boston interviewees appear more individualized than the Knoxville interviewees, their moral lifeworlds are rooted in regional cultural history. They are not simply the product of structural forces such as bureaucratization or consumer capitalism. The fundamental moral principles of these moral lifeworlds seem to shape how the interviewees explain their obligations towards fellow citizens, communities, and extended family.

However, the findings also challenge the situationism of the sociology of situated judgement by demonstrating that regional moral culture provides the interviewees with a coherent moral lifeworld. The findings call for more research on the influence of regional culture on perceptions of moral obligation compared to other influential factors such as class and race.

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Writing a Ph.D. thesis is a journey with long and laborious climbs, terrifyingly steep slopes, dull stretches of even ground, and exciting sprints downhill. Naturally, there are times in such a journey where one gets lost. Fortunately for me, there have been many generous people to help me rediscover my tracks.

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## Introduction

In terms of social policy, the US has historically been characterized as a liberal welfare regime, which only reluctantly supports a stigmatized and means-tested residual of citizens, unable to survive without government support. Literature on American welfare policy has confirmed that the governmental skepticism towards people in need of support mirrors a general skepticism among the American population towards those who are unable to remain independent and self-reliant. Consequently, the civil society, the market, and the family have played a much more prominent role in the US than in many other Western countries with more extensive and generous welfare states. However, since the 1950s, several American social scientists and public intellectuals have lamented the decline, and even collapse, of American civil society. Critics often consider the cause of this collapse to be the rise of an individualized and career-oriented suburban middle class that emerged in the 1950s, which they find has no obligations towards their local communities. With few obligations towards their fellow citizens and their communities, members of the American middle class seem to be left with obligations only towards their families. In American minority cultures, family caretaking plays a prominent role, and minority women often struggle to meet their obligations as family caretakers. However, literature on family caregivers demonstrate that family caretaking seems less prominent in the culture of white Americans. Consequently, the white middle class Americans appear exceptionally liberated from nearly all moral obligations—whether



towards their fellow citizens, towards their communities, or towards their extended family. The only obligating relationships they have left seems to be towards themselves and, to the extent possible, towards their spouses and children. In other words, the white middle-class American appear exceptionally *individualized*.

However, the literature that portrays the middle class as exceptionally individualized rarely explores how white middle class Americans themselves define their moral obligations in different contexts. Sociologists from both the United States and Europe, which I in this thesis group together under the title *The Sociology of Situated Judgement*, has argued that individuals navigate a plurality of moral ideals in a plurality of social spheres. These sociologists argue that individuals often apply their moral ideals inconsistently by applying one moral ideal in one context and a different moral ideal in another context. This idea of a plurality of moral ideals and of social spheres opens for a potential nuancing of the image of an individualized white middle class in the singular. Do they consider liberation from all moral obligations a moral ideal *per se*, or is the prevalence of the individualist ideal of liberation from moral obligation dependent on the context and type of relation? As demonstrated above, the white middle class seems individualized in relation to societal obligations, community obligations, and obligations towards extended family. However, the potential for nuancing this one-dimensional image makes the following research question relevant:

## **How do white middle-class Americans define their moral obligations towards their fellow citizens, their community, and their extended family?**

To answer this question, I interviewed 45 white middle-class Americans. In continuation of the wish to challenge the image of an individualized white middle class in the singular, I sought to compare two cases of white middle-class Americans. Therefore, the interviewees were recruited from two culturally very different case cities that represent the cultural diversity between the American Northeast and the American South. The first case is the white middle class of Boston, Massachusetts, located in the morally liberal New England in the American Northeast. The second case is the white middle class of Knoxville, Tennessee, located in the more conservative American South.

By answering this research question, the thesis aims to explore if the image of an individualized white middle class culture in the singular needs to be updated with a pluralist conception of white middle-class cultures. Furthermore, by comparing two similar cases, the findings will potentially also demonstrate whether and how regional moral culture influences perceptions of moral obligation.

### **Structure of the Summary**

In Chapter 1, I will conduct a review of the cultural and political literature that paints a picture of a very individualized white middle class. In Chapter 2, I will introduce the theoretical framework of the

thesis, which I argue challenges the one-dimensional image of an individualized white middle class. Theoretically, I will draw on a tradition that, inspired by French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2000), I have referred to as the *Sociology of Situated Judgement*. Boltanski and Thévenot themselves build on the theory of judgement and taste developed by Bourdieu (2010). However, as I will demonstrate, this tradition—which also includes prominent American cultural sociologists such as Jennifer Hochschild, Ann Swidler, and Michèle Lamont—traces its roots at least to the phenomenology and ethnomethodology that became prominent in American sociology in the 1960s. Central to this tradition is the study of how ordinary social actors draw on different abstract moral ideals when creating, negotiating, and maintaining order in the different spheres of social life. Furthermore, a shared feature of this theoretical tradition is the recognition of the fact that, in practice, social actors often shuffle between these ideals. This means that they form worldviews that are theoretically inconsistent or self-contradictory, but which appear legitimate to the social actors themselves.

Having introduced the theoretical framework of the thesis, in Chapter 3 I will introduce the methodological framework and provide the reader a detailed account of the recruitment process, of the interview guide, and the interview situation. I analyzed these interviews in four empirical articles and, in Chapter 4, I will present a summary of the articles and their findings. In the first two articles, I analyzed how the interviewees defined their obligations towards their fellow citizens—first in the form

of benefits for the unemployed and second in the form of K-12 public education. In the third article, I analyzed how the interviewees defined their obligations towards their local communities, and in the fourth I analyzed what obligations the interviewees felt towards their ageing relatives. In Chapter 5, I discuss how the empirical findings add new knowledge about how white middle-class Americans define their moral obligations within the spheres of society, community, and extended family. Finally, in Chapter 6, I will sum up the findings in a conclusion and discuss prospects for further research.

Together with this summary, the four articles make up the submitted thesis, which in turn make up a part of an extensive qualitative and comparative study of conceptions of social justice in Scandinavia, the US, and China entitled “Just Worlds” (cf. Frederiksen, 2018). Being part of the “Just Worlds” project has provided a unique platform for designing an independent project with its own distinct profile within the overall framework. Where the “Just Worlds” project focuses on conceptions of social justice in relation to welfare, social policy, and distributive policies across welfare regimes, this thesis has sought to penetrate deeper into the moral culture of the white American middle class by also including the spheres of community and extended family.



## **Chapter 1 – Literature Review: The Individualized White Middle-Class American**

In this first chapter, I will review the historical and sociological literature on American social policy, American civil society, and American middle-class families. I will through this review demonstrate how it leaves the reader with the impression of an exceptionally individualized white middle class. First, however, I will define the concept of individualism as well as the process of individualization by revisiting some of the classics of early sociology.

### **Individualism in Classical Sociology: The Dangerous Liberation from Moral Obligations**

During his travels in the still very young nation of the United States, French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville (2012) became fascinated by its ideals of liberty and democracy. However, he also saw potential dangers in the democratic form of government that was replacing monarchs and emperors across Europe. Tocqueville was concerned that, when an individual no longer belongs to a feudal social order where his position is determined by birth, he will no longer feel morally obligated towards a larger cultural and historical collective. Such an individual grooms only his personal interest rather than the interest of society (Tocqueville, 2012, p. 882). However, in America Tocqueville also finds hope that individualism might be restrained by the promotion of a republican form of political liberty rooted in a sense of civic virtue (Tocqueville, 2012, p. 893). Through political engagement, according

to Tocqueville, Americans would learn the benefits of cooperation and eventually develop a sense of benevolence towards their fellow citizens.

The sense of a radical shift in the social fabric of society does, soon after Tocqueville, develop into the pivotal theme of the emerging science of sociology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among the classical sociologists, Durkheim and Tönnies were perhaps most concerned about modern individualism. They both echoed Tocqueville's concern over the moral consequences of the weakening of traditional, or pre-modern, communities as a moral force that kept the individual in place (Mazlish, 1989, p. 196ff; Delanty, 2003, p. 36ff). Durkheim (1964) talked of a potential shift from mechanic solidarity to organic solidarity, that is, a solidarity based on mutual dependency and business contracts rather than social homogeneity. In his later article 'Individualism and the Intellectuals' from 1898, Durkheim expressed his concern about this new liberal "cult of man" since "if all opinions are free, by what miracle will they be in harmony?" (1973, p. 49). A similar concern over the emergence of a modern individualist morality is found in Ferdinand Tönnies's 1887 work *Community and Society* (1964), where he contrasts the pre-modern "Gemeinschaft" to a modern and industrialized "Gesellschaft." According to Tönnies, the Gemeinschaft represents the traditional and authentic community where relations among community members resemble those found in the family unit. In the liberal and marketized Gesellschaft, on the other hand, every interaction is based on calculations, and assistance is only provided in return for money (Tönnies, 1964, pp. 39, 65). Where

Durkheim shares Tocqueville's hope of a new organic form of civic solidarity, Tönnies has little hope for the future of a modern and individualized *gesellschaft* (Mazlish, 1989, p. 174; Fernandez, 2003, p. 45).

The concern over individualism, defined as the liberation from moral obligations towards fellow citizens, family, and community, played a defining role in the forming of sociology as a discipline, and none the least in the United States (Calhoun, 2007, p. 3). In pre-modern society, Tocqueville, Durkheim, and Tönnies saw individualism to be effectively strained from within by the moral force of family and community. In modern, democratic societies Tocqueville and Durkheim hoped that individualism would be strained from within through a sense of civic solidarity between fellow citizens, although this was only a hope. In the remainder of this chapter, I will review the literature on the history of American culture and politics that either documents or critically engages with the liberal and individualized culture of the United States.

### The Absent State: Individualized Responsibility in American Social Policy

In his landmark comparative study of welfare states, Esping-Andersen (1990) situates the American welfare state within the cluster of liberal welfare regimes, which also includes countries such as Canada and Australia (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 26f; Myles, 1996). Welfare states within the cluster of liberal welfare regimes emphasize individual responsibility for security via savings and private insurance. The



welfare programs of the liberal welfare state are means-tested and reserved for the residual of citizens who are unable to survive without government support. However, liberal welfare regimes also emphasize a strong work ethic, and welfare recipients are often stigmatized for seeking welfare provisions because they are said to be too lazy to work. Welfare states situated within the cluster of liberal welfare regimes are based on a liberal ideology, which considers the commodification of the market as a liberating force because it enables the individual to gain wealth regardless of social background via industriousness and thrift (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 42). Consequently, the liberal emphasis on individual liberty has meant that the American welfare system operates as a means-testing welfare state whose benefits “are reserved for those who are unable to participate in the market” (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 43).

Historical sociologists have shown how this idea of individual liberty as well as individual responsibility throughout the history of American social policy has led to a very skeptical welfare state, which only reluctantly provided support for its citizens (Jansson, 1993). The earliest form of government support was disaster relief in the 18th century, where each new claimant was expected to prove “that they, like those who had previously received aid, were innocent victims of fate rather than irresponsible protagonists in their own misery” (Dauber, 2012, p. 24). As Katz (2013) argues, this distinction between those who are innocent victims of fate and those who have themselves caused their poverty has always served as an important distinction between the

deserving and the undeserving poor in American social policy. Throughout the history of American poverty relief, there has been very little sympathy for poor persons other than “children, widows and a few others whose lack of responsibility for their condition could not be denied” (Katz, 2013, p. 3). However, not all children and widows were worthy of sympathy; only those who after careful investigation were judged worthy. Theda Skocpol explains the following about the “Mothers’ Pensions” of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

To be sure, public aid would go only to mothers deemed—after careful investigation—to be able and willing to keep good homes. Yet for such worthy impoverished mothers, public aid was intended to be honorable and adequate, a predictable salary of sorts for public service, and certainly not a demeaning form of charity or poor relief. (Skocpol, 1992, p. 465)

Early American welfare programs were introduced to support worthy widows who, with the support of the government, were able to keep good homes for the innocent children and, in the Southern states as well as in certain Northern states, criteria for “good homes” were implemented that favored white mothers over Black mothers (Quadagno, 1994, p. 119). The distinction between worthy and unworthy found here reflects an ideal of moral purity in the sense that the person seeking support from the government must have had no influence over his or her situation and must, instead, be the innocent victim of exogenous circumstances. Disaster victims and widows alike

were to convince the skeptical welfare state of their innocence to be considered worthy.

Under the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Roosevelt administration implemented its New Deal social policies, which only led to an increased skepticism in society towards the growing number of welfare recipients. The general atmosphere in the American population in the time following the New Deal was that recipients of welfare programs “were getting something for nothing” (Fraser and Gordon, 1994, p. 321). Over the years, the skepticism towards welfare recipients in society increased until, in the 1970s, it led to the construction of the stereotypical image of the “welfare queen” (Gordon, 2001; Katz, 2010; Abramovitz, 2017, p. xxvii; Romano, 2017, p. 67), which portrayed “lazy, sexually promiscuous (typically African American) women who shirk both domestic and wage labor” (Kohler-Hausmann, 2015, p. 757). The stereotypical welfare recipient was no longer the innocent white widow but the lazy African American woman, who could blame only herself for her dependency on government support. Because of this stereotype, the concept of “welfare” became synonymous with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program aimed at families in temporary need of welfare benefits. The African American welfare queen stereotype was still highly prevalent in the 1990s, especially in the media, and according to Giles (1999), it is the main reason that contemporary Americans “hate welfare.” Consequently, the welfare policy programs underwent a major revision from “welfare” to “workfare”—first through President Reagan’s “workfare” programs in

the 1980s, and later through President Clinton's "welfare-to-work" programs in the 1990s, which put increasing pressure on recipients to find jobs and regain self-sufficiency as quickly as possible (Handler, 2004, p. 25; Katz, 2010, p. 511).

In sum, American social policy demonstrates an inherent skepticism towards people who are unable to maintain an independent living, and research has documented that this skepticism is rooted in an idealization of individual liberty and self-reliance in American culture (Larsen, 2006). Americans have historically never felt part of a strong national community but are tied together by a shared liberalist ideology of individual liberty (Kohn, 1944; Walzer, 1974). Those who are innocent victims of fate deserve some help, but only to the point where they can reasonably be expected to have regained independence. Such skeptical and reluctant social policy is based on a very limited sense of moral obligations among fellow citizens and, historically, civil society has consequently played a more prominent role than the government in providing security in American society (Skocpol, 2000; Skocpol, Ganz and Munson, 2000; McCarthy, 2003). However, as we will see below, several sociologists and social historians have challenged the idea of a strong American civil society and linked its decline to the emergence of a new middle class in the 1950s.

## The Individualization of American Civil Society: Bureaucratic Massification and Post-modern Consumerism

Although the Chicago School had already explored the negative consequences of “social disorganization” in urban centers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (see e.g., Burgess, 1925; Park, 1925), the sociological concern over a general individualization of American civil society reached new heights with the emergence of a new middle class in the 1950s. The concern was perhaps most extensively expressed in David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* from 1950, C. Wright Mills’s *White Collar* in 1951, and William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* in 1956 (Horowitz, 1983, p. 226; Brookeman, 1984, p. 106; Sennett, 2020, p. xi).

Common to all three works was a critical approach to the morals of this new middle class of managers, technicians, factory supervisors, and public bureaucrats. This new career-making class left the communities of both the inner city and the small towns scattered across the US behind and moved to the newly built suburbs surrounding the larger cities. The three authors considered this shift from independent and self-reliant entrepreneurs and farmers of the “Gilded Age” to the conformist mass of white-collar bureaucrats as a threat to the moral culture of local communities. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Riesman (2020, p. 18) argues, a new character type became dominant in Western societies—the other-directed type. The other-directed character type lacks the internalized moral gyroscope of previous generations. Instead, he seeks affirmation among his peers. He is no longer able to draw on

age-old traditional knowledge or morals and is, therefore, very receptive towards the over-simplified reality created by capitalist mass media (Riesman, 2020, p. 85).

C. Wright Mills provides in his *White Collar*, published one year after Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, the second prominent critical examination of the new American middle class. According to Mills, the extensive bureaucratization in both private businesses and public institutions in post-war America had two major implications for American society. First, these new and massive organizations needed an army of middle managers, technicians, and supervisors who together formed a new white-collar middle class. Second, the interpersonal relations that the small businesses and administrations had with their customers and clients were bureaucratized, standardized, and impersonalized to a degree where it had a negative impact on individuals' sense of moral obligation to those other than themselves (Mills, 2002, p. 351). They became cogs in a machine rather than individuals in their own right, which resulted in a state of alienation and apathy (Mills, 2002, p. 224). However, instead of mobilizing resistance and organizing in unions, the white-collar middle class was too preoccupied with their own individual social status, which they sought to manifest through job titles and modes of consumption (Mills, 2002, pp. 254f, 302).

The third book published on the new middle class in the 1950s was William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (2002). Like both Riesman and Mills, he points to a shift in the fundamental values and

organization of American society during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whyte argues that the increasing industrialization of American society brought with it a new ideology. Before the industrial revolution, the protestant ethic supported the American Dream where anyone could make their own fortune through thrift, entrepreneurship, and hard work. However, as organizations and companies grew, there was less need for rugged and entrepreneurial individuals rooted in local communities. Instead, the need increased for “organization men” who would be in compliance with the needs of the bureaucratic organization (Whyte, 2002, p. 18ff). The result, Whyte argues, is a generation of bureaucrats who, already from their earliest encounters with the American educational system, are trained to become organization men and women (Whyte, 2002, p. 78ff).

As it becomes clear, all three authors emphasize how a rational and bureaucratic ideology, along with a vain and individualist “status panic” manifest in new modes of consumption, has flushed out any sense of obligation towards a social and political community. In their own time, the ideas of Riesman, Mills, and Whyte were not left unchallenged. Inspired by the Freudo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School as they were, their concerns were seen by many as a radical and marginal critique (Horowitz, 1983; Brookeman, 1984; Geary, 2009). In contrast, the political establishment saw the rise of a new middle class and the general rise in living standards it represented as the redemption of the American Dream (Samuel, 2014, chap. 2). Furthermore, the same politicians considered the rise of a post-war consumer culture, which

allowed Americans on all levels of society unprecedented access to mass-produced consumer goods, to be a demonstration of the strength of democratic capitalism compared to Soviet planned economy (Mullins and Nassaney, 2011, p. 114ff). Nevertheless, the sociological critique of middle-class culture and of its lack of obligations towards community and civil society persisted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1985, Robert Bellah *et al.* (1985) publish *Habits of the Heart*, in which they re-actualize the concern over American individualism first voiced by Tocqueville. Like the post-war sociologists, they identify a societal shift during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of what they refer to as a managerial society with an increased focus on economic efficiency, mass marketing, and consumer choice. Consequently, the “older social and moral standards became in many ways less relevant to the lives of those Americans most directly caught up in the new system” (Bellah *et al.*, 1985, p. 46). Chapter by chapter, they document how old institutions matter less and less to Americans living in the “culture of utilitarian and expressive individualism” (Bellah *et al.*, 1985, p. 47). In private life, Americans put less emphasis on their hometowns or local communities and become increasingly mobile when searching for education, jobs, or partners. The new generation is less involved in local volunteering, and it matters less which church they attend if they attend church at all. Bellah *et al.* (1985, pp. 251, 270) conclude that, although many Americans have a romantic ideal of the homogenous and quiet small-town community, village, or



congregation, contemporary American culture is highly individualized and leaves little room for a shared public space or for civic virtue.

A similar conclusion is reached in Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* from 2000. Putnam identifies a shift from "the civic-minded World War II generation" who, he argues, was engaged in local communities across the country to a state of contemporary "civic malaise" (Putnam, 2001, pp. 17, 25). Like Bellah *et al.* (1985), Putnam documents, chapter by chapter, how the old institutions and traditions of American society were undermined in the second half of the twentieth century. Americans generally participate less in political life, are less in organized civic and voluntary organizations, and participate less in religious activities and sermons than they used to. They are less likely to be members of a union and less likely to feel a long-term obligation towards their employer. The number of informal family dinners is declining in favor of fast-food meals, people visit their neighbors less, and they prefer watching sports rather than participating.

Although both Bellah and Putnam imply that their findings are representative of American culture, they have both been criticized for basing their general conclusions on data on white middle-class culture (Hegy, 1987; Arneil, 2006). Indeed, this critique strengthens the premise of the current thesis, as it confirms the individualization of the white middle class in particular. Furthermore, the general decline in American civil society has been confirmed by Skocpol (2003), and the link between individualism and middle-class consumer culture has also been made in culture and media studies. In the 1980s, sociologists and

public intellectuals began to refer to the post-industrial society as a post-modern society (Kumar, 1995, p. 137). In their 1987 book *The End of Organized Capitalism*, Scott Lash and John Urry argued that the new disorganized capitalism produced a new service class “which is the consumer par excellence of post-modern cultural products” (Lash and Urry, 1987, p. 292). They argued that the new and well-educated service class of the 1980s became able to consume in a way that liberated them from class-bound modes of consumption. Riesman, Mills, and Whyte were concerned with the pacifying consequences of a standardized mass society. Lash and Urry (1987, p. 296ff) are, on the other hand, concerned with the pacifying consequences of a fragmented, hyper-individualized, and decentralized consumer culture where individuals become so self-absorbed that they are unable to formulate collective critique.

Richard Sennett (1999) homes in on the negative consequences of what he refers to as the “new capitalism.” In *The Corrosion of Character* from 1998, Sennett argues that the keyword of the new capitalism of the post-industrial information age is “flexibility,” and that flexibility is required of both workers and organizations (Sennett, 1999, chap. 3). This new, individualistic, and flexible character type is, as Leinberger and Tucker (1991) argue, in many ways the opposite of Whyte’s Organization Man rooted in hierarchies, bureaucracy, and structure and fixed at one geographical location. The new character type who feels at home in the post-industrial information society no longer wants to fit into an organization. Rather, he wishes to “make” his own identity

through work by realizing his “creative potential” (Leinberger and Tucker, 1991, p. 226ff). He is not bound by time or place but is capable of navigating the global network of information, business, and money (Sennett, 1999, p. 59). Furthermore, the individual of this new capitalism inhabits a consumer culture where cheap goods are readily available in mega stores such as Wal-Mart (Sennett, 1999, p. 134). Huge shopping malls, or “Cathedrals of Consumption,” as Ritzer (2010, p. 211) calls them, have become spectacles or extravaganzas that overwhelm the consumer and prevent collective critical thinking. The unstable and shifting work life—combined with a numbing consumer culture where the consumer “zaps” between an overwhelming amount of cheap consumer goods, information, and entertainment—results, according to both Ritzer (2010, p. 150) and Sennett (1999, Chapter 3), in a catatonic individual with no sense of moral culture and no sense of a coherent character or identity.

In sum, engagement in civil society has according to the American sociologists mentioned above been declining in the United States since the 1950s, at least among the white middle class, and many social theorists and cultural sociologists ascribe this decline to a middle-class culture of bureaucratization, individualized career-making, and consumer capitalism. This decline, or collapse, of American civil society seems to leave especially middle-class Americans without any sense of traditional obligation towards their local communities. Consequently, this lack of ties to local communities seemingly leaves the American middle class with obligations towards themselves and

their families. However, as I will demonstrate in the section below, the white middle-class Americans also appear untied from this last bastion of traditional obligation—at least if we consider obligations towards extended family and not towards spouse and children.

### The Individualized White Middle-Class Nuclear Family

In the 1950s, the traditional American family ideal of a nuclear family with a working father, a stay-at-home mother, a house in the suburbs, and a car in the garage was popularized via radio and television (Rholetter, 2014). As mentioned above, American politicians across the political spectrum celebrated the rise of a substantial middle class as the “revolution of the Joneses” and a redemption of the American Dream at a structural level (Samuel, 2014, p. 45ff). However, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it became increasingly normal not only with dual-earner households, but also with two-career parents, to accommodate both the women’s rights movement and the rising financial insecurity (Frank, 2013, chap. 5; Rholetter, 2014). This trend of two-career households was criticized by, among others, Christopher Lash (1991 [1979], pp. 68, 176ff), who argued that insecurity, unpredictability, and instability in two-career white-collar families diminished the role of parents, which resulted in a generation of highly narcissistic children. Where the family was once the “Haven in a Heartless World,” it was now slowly corroding under the drive towards self-realization and with the introduction of so-called experts on family life (Lash, 1977).

In 1997, Arlie R. Hochschild published her much acclaimed *The Time Bind*. In the book, she conducts field work at a Fortune 500 company in the American Midwest and interviews a wide range of employees, from factory floor to top management. She discovers that many of the employees, regardless of position, find it more satisfying to be at work among pleasant colleagues and a structured workday than at home with a nagging spouse, spoiled children, and a pile of dishes to do (Hochschild, 1997, p. 51f). This perception of family life at home as stressful and unpleasant is perhaps only enforced by financial pressure, as many contemporary American middle-class families struggle to maintain their middle-class lifestyle, especially after the 2008 financial crisis (Hacker, 2012; Frank, 2013; Leicht and Fitzgerald, 2014).

In an extensive field study of everyday life among Los Angeles families, the Sloan Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) at UCLA documented how “dual-earner families are extraordinarily busy”—not only because of long hours at work and long commutes, but also because parents are trying to “cram more activities into limited windows of nonwork time” (Graesch, 2013, p. 42). The children are often the epicenter of planning, but parents also spend much time on their own leisure and sports activities. The study concludes that it is very rare to find both parents and children at home at the same time on weekdays.

This picture of a stressed-out American middle class where parents hardly have time for their own children seems to have a strong impact on especially the middle-class women of American minority cultures.

Since American minority cultures often have a more traditional family culture, minority women, and especially African American women, often suffer from stress and mental hardship due to the cultural expectations to act as family caregivers (McCallum, Spencer and Goins, 2007; Epps, Rose and Lopez, 2019). However, since white Americans do not have the same strong family culture, they feel less obligated to care for their parents, and consequently less stressed-out due to family obligations (Dilworth-Anderson *et al.*, 2004; Dilworth-Anderson *et al.*, 2005; Clay *et al.*, 2008; Bekhet, 2015). This demonstrates a difference in the family cultures of white Americans and minority Americans. Although both white and minority middle-class Americans must feel the pressure to maintain a middle-class lifestyle, the white middle class seems to have one concern less, as they seemingly worry less about their ageing relatives. However, this also leaves one with the impression that extended family does not represent a sphere of reciprocal moral obligations to the white middle-class American. In this sphere too they appear individualized.

In sum, the white middle class appear individualized in the sphere of society due to their limited legal obligations towards their fellow citizens. They appear individualized in the sphere of communities because of their idealization of career-making and consumerist lifestyle. Furthermore, they appear individualized in the sphere of family obligations, since the ideal of the nuclear family leaves little room for extended family, and because family caretaking has never been a prominent feature of white middle-class culture. However, as I

will demonstrate in the following chapter, a certain theoretical tradition might challenge this one-dimensional image of an individualized white middle class in the singular. I will present this theoretical tradition in the following chapter.

## Chapter 2 – Theory: American and European Sociology of Situated Judgement

As mentioned in the introduction, several sociologists in both the United States and Europe have argued that moral ideals are contextual, and that social actors move between different moral ideals dependent on the situational and cultural context. In other words, moral actors do not have a consistent or coherent moral life world but can apply one moral ideal in one context and another moral ideal in another context. I will in this thesis refer to this theoretical position as the *Sociology of Situated Judgement*. This title is borrowed from French sociologists Boltanski and Thévenot, who use Bourdieu's (2010) sociology of judgement and taste as their point of departure. Although their approach was, in the early 1990s, received as in opposition to Bourdieu's structural sociology (Lemieux, 2014), I will argue that it seems more correct to consider it an actor-oriented supplement. Where Bourdieu studied the making and upholding of moral distinctions at a structural level, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, p. 44) zoomed in on the "moral grammar" that individuals drew upon when negotiating distinctions at the practical level. This is also why the approach is named the sociology of "situated judgement," as it seeks to study the practice of making judgements made by social actors *in situ*. What Boltanski and Thévenot find at the micro-level is a blurring of the structuralist picture painted by Bourdieu. So-called "ordinary people" move between a plurality of "worlds," each constituted by distinct moral ideals, and sometimes they compromise or shuffle between these moral ideals in ways that appear



theoretically inconsistent (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 277f). However, it has often been pointed out that Boltanski and Thévenot's theory can trace its roots both to the emergence of American phenomenology and American ethnomethodology of the 1960s, as well as to the even longer tradition of American pragmatism (Bogusz, 2014; Lemieux, 2014). Furthermore, I will argue that their approach has many overlaps with what I refer to as an American Sociology of Situated Judgement, which includes sociologists such as Jennifer Hochschild, Ann Swidler, and Michèle Lamont. At the end of the chapter, I will explain how the sociology of situated judgement might challenge the idea of an individualized white middle class by allowing us to analytically distinguish between definitions of obligations in the spheres of society, community, and family. First, however, I will look at the theoretical roots of the position.

### [The Theoretical Roots of a Sociology of Situated Judgement: American Pragmatism, American Phenomenology, and American Ethnomethodology](#)

To fully understand the interest in how ordinary social actors pass judgement in different spheres, it is necessary to start with American pragmatism. According to American pragmatism, as represented by key figures such as Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, and John Dewey, science and philosophy should abandon abstract deliberations on metaphysics and focus on solving problems that appear through lived experience (Hildebrand, 2013, p. 59f; Hookway, 2013). When the purpose of philosophy and science is problem-solving rather than abstract speculation, the method of enquiry must, according to Dewey,

meet a strict adherence to empiricism. When all available data is considered in solving a problem, the best solution perceivable will appear—and not only in the mind of the scientist or the philosopher, but also in the mind of the self-governing citizen of an enlightened democracy (Hildebrand, 2013, p. 73; Dewey, 1954). Although this perception of the social actor as a puzzle-solver had some influence on American social science in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially through George Herbert Mead (Huebner, 2019), it lived for many years in the shadows of Parsonian structural functionalism and of a general turn towards quantitative methods in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American sociology (Steinmetz, 2007). However, in the 1970s, two micro-oriented sociological approaches challenged the dominance of macro-oriented sociology in the US: phenomenology and ethnomethodology. Both of these new approaches sought to reintroduce the idea of the social actor as a puzzle-solver rather than a passive reproducer of an existing structure (Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2018, p. 217f).

In *The Social Construction of Reality* from 1966, Berger and Luckmann argue that it is the task of sociology to study “Everyday life [...] as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world” (1991, p. 19). In other words, sociology must start with the premise that the social world somehow makes sense to the social actor—that he is able to explain why things are the way they are. Berger and Luckmann (1991, p. 23) do not seek a social reality outside the minds of social actors but wish to study the continuous construction of a relatively stable and harmonious inter-subjective reality. They argue

that the social order of the intersubjective reality and the institutions that uphold this order must seek to integrate the individual by appearing legitimate. To appear legitimate, “the totality of the institutional order should make sense, concurrently, to the participants in different institutional processes” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 92). They refer to such a meaningful and legitimized totality as a “symbolic universe,” which provides an individual with a coherent intersubjective reality that precedes him, and which will remain after he is gone (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 103). Prohibitions must make sense and the institutions that uphold them must be able to legitimize themselves. By being located in a symbolic universe, moreover, institutions become part of the mythology of the symbolic universe, which “itself does not require further legitimization” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 104). The totality of the symbolic universe represents a harmonious totality of self-referential legitimacy and there is no external position from where it can be judged whether one symbolic universe is more legitimate than another.

In *Studies in Ethnomethodology* from 1967, Harold Garfinkel too seeks to break with the structural perspective on social actors and to establish a position that takes seriously the reflexive ability of social actors to navigate a complex social life. In fact, he believes that, apart from Alfred Schütz, this perspective is neglected by sociology in general, which tends to consider social actors as “judgmental dopes.” The problem with sociology, according to Garfinkel, is that it neglects the many implicit norms and rules of common-sense knowledge that the

individual takes into consideration when choosing an action (Garfinkel, 1996, pp. 37, 68). Instead, Garfinkel argues that social actors can reflect on the social practices that they act out. Their actions are not determined by structures but result from the internal process of reflexivity. They use this reflexivity to “produce, accomplish, recognize, or demonstrate rational-adequacy-for-all-practical-purposes of their procedures and findings” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 8). In other words, social actors know how to navigate the different rules that apply in different situations they encounter in everyday life, and they apply this knowledge when deciding how to act.

Although Garfinkel, inspired by Alfred Schutz, operates with a vague concept of an inter-subjective common culture, his intense focus on what people do and why they do it means that he remains on the micro level. Unlike Berger and Luckmann, who seek to unite the macro and the micro perspectives, Garfinkel does not develop a theoretical concept equivalent to “symbolic universes.” However, the later Goffman, in his *Frame Analysis* from 1974, develops such a macro-oriented extension of Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology.

In his later years, Goffman felt the need to respond to and revise some of the arguments made by phenomenologists and ethnomethodologists (Collins, 1981, p. 250; Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015). In particular, Goffman (1986, p. 6) finds it problematic that both Schütz and Garfinkel are “faced with the embarrassing methodological fact that the announcement of constitutive rules seems an open-ended game that any number can play forever.” Goffman argues that Garfinkel lacks a

concept that would explain why every individual does not invent his or her own reality but lives within a shared inter-subjective reality. In response to this theoretical deficiency, Goffman introduces the concept of a “primary framework,” which very much resembles Berger and Luckmann’s concept of a symbolic universe:

the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture, especially insofar as understandings emerge concerning principal classes of schemata, the relations of these classes to one another, and the sum total of forces and agents that these interpretive designs acknowledge to be loose in the world. (Goffman, 1986, p. 27)

Where Berger and Luckmann introduced the idea of a rather harmonious symbolic universe, and where Garfinkel introduced a micro-perspective on the complexity of cultural practices, Goffman seems to merge these positions. The result is a theory of frames that operates both with the idea of a primary framework that captures the “central element” of a culture, as well as a focus on how this primary framework is differentiated in a plurality of frames that fit the different situations social actors encounter.

These ideas seemed to inspire an empirical tradition of American cultural studies in the 1980s. Jennifer L. Hochschild (1981) talked about how Americans used different principles of distributive justice in different domains of life to determine “what’s fair.” Michael Walzer (1983) advocated a pluralist and contextual conception of justice, rather

than a universal conception of justice, to capture how cultures constructed different conceptions of justice applicable to different spheres of life. Ann Swidler (1986, 2003) wrote of culture as a set of repertoires that guide “strategies of action” in different social contexts, and Michèle Lamont (1992, 2000) studied how social actors used culturally embedded moral ideals to draw boundaries between morally righteous in-groups and immoral out-groups. This theoretical tradition was less prominent in Europe, but was promoted by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) who, in 1992, published a theory of how ordinary individuals draw on different orders of worth to mobilize justification and critique. More recently, I will argue, the idea of social actors as able to convert abstract moral principles into classifications, valuations, and evaluations is found in the work of Dutch political sociologist Wim van Oorschot (2000, 2006), who studies how European citizens use different conceptions of deservingness to distinguish between deserving and undeserving recipients of welfare. In the following section, I will make a more detailed presentation of the two theorists that I draw upon in the empirical analyses of the articles—Ann Swidler and Michèle Lamont.

### [American Sociology of Situated Judgement: Swidler and Lamont](#)

In the 1980s, Ann Swidler (1986) developed a theory of culture as repertoires, which she applied and further refined in a later qualitative study of conceptions of love and love relationships in the US (Swidler, 2003). Inspired by Erving Goffman’s (1986) concept of frames, Swidler

(2003, p. 31) referred to cultural repertoires as selections of “cultural resources” or cultural perspectives that social actors can draw upon when making sense of their social world. The repertoires are available to the social actor “like the pieces a musician has mastered or the plays an actor has performed. It is in this sense that people have an array of cultural resources upon which they can draw” (Swidler 2003, p. 25). Drawing on the ethnomethodological idea of studying how culture is used, Swidler (2003, p. 5) decided in her book *Talk of Love* to study how white middle class Americans draw on different cultural repertoires of love culture when talking of love relationships. The most prominent American cultural repertoire of love, Swidler (2003, p. 112) argued, is a derivative of the European bourgeois “romantic love mythology,” often found in contemporary romantic novels and Hollywood movies. It is the idea of love as unique and exclusive, embodied in the idea of the one and only, of soulmates, or of the one true love.

Swidler (2003, p. 128) argued that, although many of her interviewees principally disavowed the cultural repertoire of romantic love, they still used it as an important point of reference when defining their own more complex and pragmatic repertoires of love. The multiplicity of cultural repertoires may appear contradictory and confusing to the social researcher but, according to Swidler, “people are better equipped for life if they have available multiple approaches to situations, if they can shift justifications for their actions, and if they can mobilize different meanings to organize different lines of action” (Swidler 2003, p. 183).

The multiplicity of cultural repertoires available in any given culture is an advantage when encountering the complex social world. The cultural repertoire of romantic love helps Americans navigate the situations and dilemmas that arise from the emotion of love, from relationships, and from marriage, even though they do not accept the love myth as the whole truth about love.

Interestingly, Swidler seemed to take Goffman's concept of frames back into an ethnomethodological focus on practice. Consequently, she seemed to leave Goffman's idea of primary frames behind in favor of a focus on the plurality of frames, or repertoires, within the sphere of love. A similar approach is found in the work of Michèle Lamont, who in 1992 published her study of "boundary work" in the white upper-middle classes of the US and France (Lamont, 1992, p. 220). Lamont found strong meritocratic principles among her white, male, American upper-middle class interviewees in relation to work and career-making. The Puritan work ethic defined the interviewees' distinction between the morally righteous and the morally wrong. Those who failed to turn their ambition into success or at least into the ability of maintaining an independent living only had themselves and their laziness to blame.

Lamont demonstrated that this individualistic attitude of her interviewees was not only the result of structural or cultural processes outside the individual, but that it also rested on a shared moral culture that her interviewees were able to mobilize and explain. She sought to challenge structuralists and poststructuralists such as Foucault, Derrida, and especially Bourdieu, since they presumed that social hierarchies



were always the result of structural power and domination (Lamont, 1992, p. 177). Rather, the moral boundaries and distinctions that she found were processual and fluctuating due to constant negotiation between many different groups in society (Lamont, 1992, p. 182). She did not abandon the concept of power but argued that it was much more complex and fluctuating than in the structuralist perspective. Echoing Harold Garfinkel, she argued that “we need more specific knowledge concerning the conditions under which cultural differentiation can lead to hierarchization and have political effects, i.e., effects on structures of power relations” (Lamont, 1992, p. 177f). The moral reasoning of social actors might have unintended consequences. Nevertheless, their actions and valuations are not simply the product of power, discipline, or repression, but of an elaborate common-sense morality.

Where Swidler empirically focused on frames within the sphere of love among the white middle class, Lamont empirically focused on frames within the sphere of working life and career-making among the upper-middle class. Although Lamont seemed slightly more aware of how the frames found within the sphere of working life spill into other spheres of life, her focus was on the practice of boundary work rather than statements about primary frames or more general symbolic universes. In the tradition of American sociology of situated judgement, the focus is on the ways in which specific social actors empirically draw on a multiplicity of frames in specific spheres, or domains, of social life. In the next section, I will argue that this is a feature that American

sociology of situated judgement does not share with its European counterpart.

### European Sociology of Situated Judgement: Boltanski & Thévenot and Wim van Oorschot

In Europe, the focus on the social actor as capable of abstract moral reasoning was introduced by the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) in their *On Justification*, published in French in 1991. The perception of the social actor promoted in *On Justification* has been linked to the competent individual of American pragmatism (Bogusz, 2014), but it also has many similarities with that found in ethnomethodology. In fact, part of the popularity of *On Justification* was due to the proliferation of ethnomethodology in France in the 1980s (Lemieux 2014, p. 155). The emphasis on the critical capacities of social actors shares Garfinkel's call to stop perceiving individuals as "judgmental dopes" and to see them instead as critical co-creators of the social order. Where Garfinkel's statement was aimed at the structural functionalism of Talcott Parson, Boltanski and Thévenot's project was received as a break with the structuralism of Bourdieu (Lemieux 2014, p. 154). While Bourdieu's structuralist perspective on judgement and taste explores how the structures are acted out on the micro level, Boltanski and Thévenot remain exclusively at the micro level and zoom in on the very situation where the social actor actively makes and justifies his judgements and distinctions. This is why the

approach is sometimes referred to as a “Sociology of Situated Judgement” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000).

Furthermore, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, p. 14) themselves explain how their approach is inspired by the pluralism developed by Michael Walzer (1983) in *Spheres of Justice*, at the same time as they seek to steer clear of the relativism they see in Walzer’s work. They do this by discovering that the conceptions of justice they find empirically in their French data must live up to certain criteria if people are to accept them as convincing and just. In their data, which covers both focus group interviews (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1983) and text analysis (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), they find six so-called orders of worth that live up to these criteria. Within each order of worth, Boltanski and Thévenot find a “higher common principle” that social actors use to hierarchize everything from people and objects to organizations, social institutions, and abstract ideas. The six orders of worth, also referred to as “worlds” because they offer a way of ordering the social world of the actor, are the following:

- The market world: High worth is ascribed to that which represents high monetary worth.
- The inspired world: High worth is ascribed to that which has access to a mystical source of inspiration.
- The domestic world: High worth is ascribed to that which represents traditional values or hierarchies.
- The world of fame: High worth is ascribed to that which appears attractive, famous, or popular.

- The civic world: High worth is ascribed to that which represents the common will of the community.
  - The industrial world: High worth is ascribed to that which contributes to an efficient and bureaucratic mode of production.
- (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, chap. 6)

The purpose of developing these “imagistic reductions” in the form of schematized worlds is to offer analytical “tools” for sociologists and non-sociologists alike, which enable them to “recognize the presence of one of the worlds in the entanglements of a complex situation” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, p. 153). Although Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) refer to focus group studies and readings of management literature, from early on they seek to link their theory to abstract ideas of Western philosophy. Context and culture seem to matter little to their theoretical aspirations. Instead, they seem to seek the fundamental “principles” and the fundamental “grammar” of moral justification throughout Western history. As they argue at one point, there were of course market logics before the writings of Adam Smith, but “it is in Smith’s work that market relations make it possible, for the first time, to establish a universal principle of justification and to construct a polity based on this principle” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 71). In this way, Boltanski and Thévenot constantly allude to a validity of their “orders or worth” that, if not universal, is at least close to it.

A similar search for the fundamental moral principles of social hierarchies is seen in the theory of Dutch sociologist Wim van Oorschot

(2000, 2006), who seeks to develop a theory of which criteria of deservingness citizens of Western welfare states use when they decide how to distribute limited welfare services. Van Oorschot (2000, p. 34) argues that, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, “citizens’ individual responsibilities have been stressed more explicitly” in Western industrialized countries. Consequently, the provision of welfare has become dependent on whether the public considers a given group of individuals deserving. Drawing on existing historical and empirical literature on attitudes towards welfare and poverty relief in Western culture, van Oorschot has developed five criteria that citizens use to distinguish between deserving and undeserving individuals. The five criteria are as follows:

- The control criterion: “the less control, the more deserving”;
- The need criterion: “the greater the level of need, the more deserving”;
- The identity criterion: “the closer to ‘us,’ the more deserving”;
- The attitude criterion: “the more compliant, the more deserving”;
- The reciprocity criterion: “the more reciprocation, the more deserving” (van Oorschot, 2000, p. 36, 2006, p. 26)

Van Oorschot and his colleagues and associates have tested the criteria in various European welfare states and found them corroborated (see e.g., Blomberg *et al.*, 2017; Esmark and Schoop, 2017). Although van Oorschot does not directly argue that the criteria are universal, he implies that they are rooted in a fundamental cognitive mechanism,

which makes it plausible that they are also found “in all other non-European countries” (van Oorschot, 2006, p. 38; see also Laenen and Meuleman, 2017).

Where the American sociology of situated judgement seeks to study frames applied by a specific segment (for example, the middle class or the upper-middle class) in a specific context (for example, love life or work life), the European sociology of situated judgement seems decoupled from specific contexts and situations. The European tradition seem more focused on developing a list of universal frames, or repertoires, while the American tradition seems more focused on the use of frames in specific cultural contexts and spheres. To explain why we see this difference will most likely require a thesis of its own. Part of the explanation might be that the American sociology of situated judgement is rooted stronger in the anti-metaphysical tradition of American pragmatism, while the European sociology of situated judgement carries a cargo of continental idealist philosophy. In any case, I will leave the issue of internal differences behind and in the rest of the thesis consider the sociology of situated judgement as a single theoretical perspective. Both the American and the European tradition share the idea of pluralism and the perception of the pragmatic worldviews of ordinary social actors as sometimes inconsistent and self-contradictory. In other words, both the American and the European sociology of situated judgement seem closer to ethnomethodological situationism, where the social actor is studied as he or she navigates a plurality of spheres and repertoires, than to the phenomenological focus

on symbolic universes or primary frameworks. Although the practical ordering of repertoires may appear inconsistent and self-contradictory to the social scientist, the sociology of situated judgement finds that the ordering makes sense to the social actor.

### How the Sociology of Situated Judgement Might Challenge the Image of an Individualized White Middle Class

As it should now have been made clear, the sociology of situated judgement is defined by its wish to break with the structuralist idea of a one-dimensional social actor, whose entire lifeworld is defined by discourses, powers, or structures. Michael Walzer, Jennifer Hochschild, Michèle Lamont, Ann Swidler, Boltanski and Thévenot and Wim van Oorschot all perceive the social actor as someone who moves between spheres, or domains, and who uses a plurality of cultural and moral repertoires to navigate these spheres. The design of the social world is not only created and upheld by power but is also constantly debated, negotiated, criticized, and justified on the micro-level, and not always in a theoretically consistent manner. The sociologists of a sociology of situated judgement accepts empirical inconsistency by accepting that a moral argument made in one domain might conflict with the moral argument made in another domain. They accept that social actors are theoretically inconsistent and does not seek to present them as social actors with coherent personalities and firmly established attitudes across all spheres of life. Exactly this ability to accept inconsistency in

moral attitudes, makes the sociology of situated judgement a challenge to the image of an individualized white middle class. The sociologists mentioned in chapter 1 often take a critical and structuralist position by identifying the social forces that promote individualism in the sense found in classical sociologists such as Tocqueville, Durkheim, and Tönnies. They talk of capitalism, modernity, bureaucratization, and mass-consumerism as shaping the minds of middle-class Americans. However, the sociology of situated judgement makes it possible to ask if they consider liberation from all moral obligations a moral ideal *per se*, or if the prevalence of the individualist ideal of liberation from moral obligation dependent on the context and type of relation. These reflections have, as mentioned in the introduction, led to the following research question:

**How do white middle-class Americans define their moral obligations towards their fellow citizens, their community, and their extended family?**

To answer this question, I conducted a comparative case study based on interviews with 45 white middle-class Americans. In chapter 3, I will elaborate on the methodology of this empirical study.





## **Chapter 3 – Methods: Comparing Northeastern and Southern White Middle-Class Americans**

As it became clear in Chapter 1, the American white middle class appears as an exceptionally individualized segment with little sense of moral obligation towards fellow citizens, community, and extended family. As it also became clear, many critics have argued that this individualization springs from the suburban middle-class culture that emerged in the 1950s, which is more preoccupied with career-making, social status, and consumption than with moral obligations. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, the sociology of situated judgement makes it possible to study how white middle-class Americans define their moral obligations in a much more nuanced way. It enables a study of liberty and obligations within separate spheres, and as presented earlier, the three spheres selected for this study are the spheres of society, community, and extended family.

In continuation of the wish to challenge the one-dimensional image of an individualized white middle class, I sought to capture a potential pluralism within white middle-class culture. I did so by choosing two comparable case cities—one in the Northeast and one in the South—and recruited white middle-class Americans in each city to conduct a comparative case study (Yin, 2014, p. 16; see also Stark and Torrance, 2005). The comparative dimension allowed me to conduct in-depth studies of the social obligations of the white middle class in two different moral cultures. In other words, it enabled me to focus on variations in local moral culture.

## The Cultural and Historical Divide between the American Northeast and the American South

Historically, the American South has been identified as the “other” in relation to the more dominant Northern US in many different cultural aspects such as food, music, public opinion, and politics (Cobb, 2005, chap. 1; Cooper and Knotts, 2017, p. 21f). In the antebellum South, the white plantation owners growing cotton and tobacco took the place of a quasi-aristocracy and dominated the cultural and political landscape. The plantation owners developed a distinctive conservative culture that they perceived as a continuation of the codes of chivalry of the Old World, which gave the antebellum Southerners the nickname of “Cavaliers” (Cooper and Knotts, 2017, p. 22). The very narrow focus on cotton, sugar, and tobacco farming and the dependence on slave labor gave the South its long lasting rural image (Cobb, 2005, p. 15). Furthermore, its culture and economy were in stark contrast to the northern colonies that, because of less generous soil, “were obliged to pursue a more diversified approach to agricultural and industrial development” (Cooper and Knotts, 2017, p. 10). Focusing more on manufacturing and industrialization, the urbanized and more democratic New England colonies quickly became the cultural opposite of the rural and quasi-aristocratic South (Ibid.). The tension between North and South grew gradually and so did the stereotyping of backward-looking Cavaliers and progressive “Yankees,” as the Northerners were called (Cobb, 2005, p. 26f). The tension culminated in the American Civil War of 1861–1865, which ended with the defeat

of the Southern Confederation and the abolition of slavery in the entire US.

The very one-sided focus on plantation farming proved a very fragile base for the Southern economy and, with the abolition of slavery, the primarily rural economy of the South lost ground to the more dynamic and industrialized economy of the North (Cobb, 2005, p. 67f). While maintaining the image of being rural and backward-looking, the South also became a poorer part of the US compared to the more prosperous North. Still today, women of the South have children at a younger age and are less educated compared to women in the Northeast, and poverty rates are generally higher in the South than in the Northeast (Lopoo, 2007; Baker, 2020). In terms of religion, moreover, the South stands out not only by being more religious than the rest of the US, but also by having a more homogeneous religious culture, centered on Christian Evangelicalism (Wilson, 2004, p. 238f; Putnam, Campbell and Garrett, 2012, p. 24). Politics is yet another point in which the North and the South differ. Historically, the South has been more religiously conservative than the rest of the US, which is also reflected in political debates and voting behavior (Slocum, 2011; Flanigan *et al.*, 2018, p. 110), whereas the North, and especially the Northeast, has been more secular and morally liberal (Reiter and Stonecash, 2011, chap. 7). The Southern self-awareness of being the “other” in relation to the more mainstream Northern US, which predates the Civil War, still influences Southern identity and self-awareness today (Cobb, 2004; Cooper and Knotts, 2017, p. 73ff). In the following two sub-sections I will present

the two cases cities from where I recruited white middle-class Americans for the interview study. Each case city is, as I will argue, ideal cases on the cultural divide between the American Northeast and the American South

### Case I: Boston, Massachusetts

The history of Boston dates to the very earliest days of American history, and the city was originally founded as a temporary settlement in 1630. Under the influence of the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop—who, like many of the other early settlers, was a follower of the strict Christian doctrine of Puritanism—it turned into a key trading city of the colony (Bremer, 1995, p. 59f; Allison, 2015, p. 14f). The Calvinist Puritanism and its Protestant work ethic that the settlers had brought with them from England and the Netherlands strongly influenced life in the colony. The culture was characterized by a negative view of flashy dress and public display of wealth and by a strong pastoral encouragement to work hard and avoid sinful behavior (Miller, 1983, chap. 3). The perception of New England as an opportunity for redeeming a paradisiacal world permeated the minds of these early Puritan settlers (Bremer, 1995, p. 55).

In the ensuing centuries, the harbor city of Boston became a hub of industry, trade, education, literature, and innovation (Krensky, 2008; Allison, 2015). From the 1790s, the New England area was the first in the US to industrialize as it became the center of a growing cotton mill industry. The economic and industrial growth lasted for over a century.

The cotton mill industry produced several supporting industries such as metalworking and the production of cotton and wool clothing and leather shoes. Up until the First World War, the manufacturing industry secured New England a place among the wealthiest regions in the country (Koistinen, 2013, p. 11f). The financial success was accompanied by a strong position in the intellectual landscape of the US. Authors, poets, public intellectuals, and artists grew out of the expanding cities of New England, and, in the early 19th century, Boston also became the center of opposition to slavery (Allison, 2015, p. 56ff).

Today, Boston's industry is primarily based on service-sector jobs and information technology, supported by the private academic powerhouses of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Apart from being the main city of the prosperous and innovative region of New England, Boston is also rated as one of the most liberally minded cities in the US (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014, p. 601). With its successful service and technology sectors, its rich intellectual history, and its predominantly liberal culture, Boston is the ideal case of a northeastern liberal city.

## Case II: Knoxville, Tennessee

In the 19th century, southern Appalachia—the area of eastern Tennessee where Knoxville is located—was scarcely populated and, despite the relatively mild climate, local farmers struggled with the hardships of rural farm life (Banker, 2010, p. 52). In June 1861, Tennessee voted in favor of secession from the United States and joined the side of the Southern Confederacy in the American Civil War

(Banker, 2010, p. 66). Southern Appalachia was politically marginalized even before the war and, since the rural area was the scene of movements of both Unionist and Confederation troops as well as of several battles, it suffered from damaged infrastructure and a ruined economy long after the war (Banker, 2010, p. 68f). In the second half of the 20th century, Knoxville's economy gradually recovered from the Great Depression and today the city has a diverse and robust economic base with many thriving businesses in sectors such as manufacturing, metalworks, electronics, and media. Furthermore, the city hosts the main campus of the University of Tennessee, which also contributes to the area with a well-established research industry (Sharma, 2013, p. 141).

However, despite Knoxville's growth into a modern city with all its amenities, it also retained its reputation as a strange and peculiar city amid the rural, remote, and rugged southern Appalachia (Banker, 2010, p. 99). Since the emergence of this stereotypical image of southern Appalachia as somewhat backwards-looking and rural in the late 19th century, the city of Knoxville has had a rather ambivalent relationship to it. On the one side, it has sought to embrace it by turning it into a romantic and nostalgic image and, on the other, it has sought to reject it by branding the city as urban and dynamic (Banker, 2010, p. 153ff; Markley and Sharma, 2016). Despite its attempts to modernize, Knoxville, Tennessee, with its rural, religious, and conservative image, is an ideal case of a conservative southern city.

As it becomes clear, the two case cities have both structural similarities and cultural differences. They are both university cities with a diverse industry of manufacturing, service, and research jobs. However, they clearly differ in terms of culture. Where Boston has a long history of liberalism and civil rights, Knoxville, despite its recent attempts at “rebranding,” has been a city with a primarily conservative culture. Consequently, they represent typical cases of a city with a predominantly Northeastern, liberal culture and a city with a predominantly Southern, conservative culture, respectively. Consequently, the interviewees recruited from each city represent cases on white middle-class Americans living in the liberal culture of the northeast and the conservative culture of the south respectively.

### The Semi-Structured Interview

I collected empirical data on each case via qualitative interviews, more specifically via semi-structured face-to-face interviews (Matthews and Ross Liz, 2010, p. 219ff; Galletta and Cross, 2013). The benefit of the interview was that it allowed me to closely examine the way the interviewees talked about their social obligations and relationships in different contexts. Such in-depth cultural explorations are close to impossible in quantitative studies, which is also why many of the qualitative studies within the sociology of situated judgement build their analyses on qualitative interviews (Hochschild, 1981; Boltanski and Thévenot, 1983; Lamont, 1992; Swidler, 2003). Wim van Oorschot bases his theory on qualitative analyses, but even he has recently recognized the need for qualitative studies to nuance his theory (Laenen



*et al.* 2019). The choice of interviews as the method for data collection also has obvious implications for the generalizability of the findings. One of Hochschild's (1981, p. 24) arguments for conducting qualitative interviews with white Americans in New Haven, CT, in order to identify American norms of distributive justice sounds as follows: "They [qualitative interviews] can fill in gaps left by opinion research through providing data that surveys are unable to produce." Qualitative studies of attitudes and opinions do, in other words, have an independent contribution to make. They can capture the irregularities, paradoxes, and nuances of everyday life in a way that quantitative studies never can. Consequently, an interview study provides a much more nuanced and multifaceted view of the moral ideals that shape the way Northeastern and Southern white middle-class Americans talk about their moral obligations in different spheres of life.

When conducting qualitative interviews it is important to be aware that, through the interview process, the interviewee gradually develops his or her own position (Barbour and Schostak, 2005, p. 43; Galletta and Cross, 2013, p. 84ff). Conducting an interview is not an extraction of knowledge already present in the mind of the interviewee. Rather, the interviewee's own position on abstract concepts such as liberty, obligation, and responsibility become visible to both interviewer and interviewee during the interview process. The processual nature of forming an opinion about abstract principles is not linear and, as I experienced during the interviews, the interviewees often considered various positions before arriving at the one they found applicable in a

given situation. This experience matches, for example, Hochschild's (1981, p. 81) experience with qualitative interviews on abstract concepts of distributive justice. In this regard, the interview also proved a valuable tool since it allowed me as researcher to probe and to ask follow-up questions in cases where the interviewee was him- or herself in the process of forming an opinion.

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis is part of an extensive, qualitative study of conceptions of social justice among citizens in the US, Scandinavia, and China titled "Just Worlds" (see Frederiksen, 2018). Consequently, part of the interview guide had to be similar to the interview guides used in Scandinavia and China. The "Just Worlds" project focuses primarily on conceptions of justice in relation to redistributive social policies, and four out of the six themes of the interview guide were drawn from the interview guide previously used in the project. These themes were equality and taxation, unemployment, education, and health insurance. Furthermore, I added two additional themes for the US study to capture the spheres of family and of community. The questions often sought to make the interviewees draw lines between those to whom they felt obligations, and those to whom they did not. For example, the interviewees are asked if there is a limit to the help that can be expected within their community, or if anyone should not have the right to unemployment benefits. Such questions were to make the interviewees draw boundaries—both in terms of help within the community, and in terms of more abstract boundaries, such as that between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Furthermore,

it was an objective of the “Just Worlds” project to probe the interviewees for justifications for the boundaries they drew, to obtain insight into the cultural repertoires or orders of worth they drew upon to justify their boundaries. In this thesis, I have focused less on the so-called boundary work of the interviewees (cf. Lamont and Molnár, 2002) and more on the moral ideals that can be derived from the interviewees’ talk of social obligations. For the full interview guide, please see Appendix 1.

### Recruiting White Middle-Class Americans

Following the procedure of the “Just Worlds” project, I defined “middle class” with inspiration from Svallfors’s (2006) class theory, based the works of John Goldthorpe (see e.g., Goldthorpe and Hope, 1974). The middle class is, in this thesis, defined as “service class I (higher grade professionals, administrators and officials, managers in large industrial establishments, large proprietors) and II (lower grade professionals, administrators and officials, higher grade technicians, managers in small industrial establishments, supervisors of non-industrial employees) as well as self-employed individuals with or without employees” (Svallfors, 2006, p. 14). With this definition in mind, the plan was to repeat the recruitment method applied in the Scandinavian part of the “Just Worlds” project and to interview via the phone (Frederiksen, 2018), which is a recruitment method originally inspired by Lamont (1992, p. 217, 2000, p. 252).

Inspired by Lamont’s (1992) approach, I selected specific white middle-class neighborhoods in Boston, MA and Knoxville, TN based

on data from the US Census Bureau. Methodologically, it is important here to point out that with the term “white Americans” I refer in this thesis to the part of the American population that the US Census Bureau refers to as “white alone” (i.e., not including Latino) (Jones *et al.*, 2022). Accompanied by a female Danish research assistant I started the recruitment process in Boston, MA, in March 2019 via telephone. Through paid access to the online phone directory [www.whitepages.com](http://www.whitepages.com), we initially collected cell phone and landline numbers for 85 households and called them after normal working hours. In most cases, the phone was never picked up. In such cases, we left messages and tried the following day at a different time, often with the same result. In 26 cases, the phone was picked up but, when presented with the study and asked to participate, the person at the other end told us not to call back—some aggressively, others lethargically. The skepticism that met our attempt to recruit interviewees via the phone reflects the general skepticism towards “cold calls” in the United States (Baek and Morimoto, 2012).

During the attempt to recruit via the phone, we decided to try to offer each potential interviewee \$50 for participation, but the phone conversation never lasted long enough to present this offer. Instead, we decided to shift strategy and recruit by going door-to-door in the selected white middle-class neighborhoods of Boston, MA. We rang the doorbell or knocked on the door, presented ourselves as a Danish researcher and research assistant, explained that we were studying the values and morals of ordinary Americans, and asked if they would like

to help us by sharing their opinions on a number of social justice issues in return for a \$50 compensation. The door-to-door approach proved more successful than the phone recruitment method. Although the general tendency was that the residents did not open the door, those who declined usually did so politely. After recruiting six white middle class interviewees in Boston, we decided to abandon the laborious and inefficient door-to-door method of recruitment and switch to snowball sampling (Matthews and Ross Liz, 2010, pp. 162–164) via the six persons we had already interviewed.

Through this combination of door-to-door and snowball recruitment, we conducted 19 interviews in Boston, MA, with white middle class Americans. In Knoxville, TN, we also started out with a door-to-door approach in a predominantly white middle class neighborhood. In many ways, the recruitment process resembled the one in Boston, MA. However, we intensified the snowball sampling by asking our interviewees earlier if we could accompany them to their leisure activities such as yoga class or rowing club. We also accompanied some to their workplace to recruit their colleagues and others to church to recruit from the congregations. Via this method, we collected 26 interviews with white middle class citizens of Knoxville, TN. All interviewees accepted the \$50 for participating, although many did so reluctantly and argued that their primary motivation was to contribute to the study. This might indicate a certain middle-class pride among the interviewees and a need to state that they do not need the money but wish to help visitors to their country or to contribute to research.

As mentioned earlier, the choice of semi-structured interviews naturally limits the scope of generalization. However, the case selection and the recruitment process also ensure that the findings have an important theoretical contribution to make. By recruiting among the white middle class in two different parts of the US it is likely that any differences in social relations and obligations can be ascribed to variations in regional moral cultures. In the same way, any similarities that may be found across the two cases are likely to be characteristic of white middle-class culture across the US. I will return to a discussion of the scope of the findings in Chapter 5. For a full list of interviewees, including their gender, age group, occupation, and number of children, please see Appendix 2.

Those who agreed to be interviewed via the door-to-door approach told us after the interviews that they were indeed suspicious towards us and agreed to participate only reluctantly. One female interviewee told us that she had let us into her house only because a female research assistant accompanied me, as it “lowered the risk of you being a serial killer” (IP-503, field notes). Some also told us that they were surprised that we were researchers, as they initially expected us to be religious missionaries. However, the fact that both the female research assistant and I were white, dressed in a business-casual style of clothing, and talked with a European accent, along with the fact that we explained that we were doing a university research study, most likely had a positive effect on the educated, white middle class. Some of the

interviewees were even familiar with Danish culture or had visited Denmark during holidays in Europe.

### The Interview Situation

Most of the interviews were conducted in the interviewees' own homes, but some preferred that we conducted the interview at their office or at a local café. The interviews lasted around an hour, and the fact that they were often taking place at the interviewees' own homes or offices, with spouses or colleagues in the next room, seemingly made the interviewees feel a sense of security. First, the interviewees were introduced to the study and were told that we would like to hear their opinion on matters such as family life, taxation, healthcare, and education. Most of the interviewees quickly warmed up and they often enthusiastically engaged in exploring their own opinions and beliefs before open and non-judging listeners.

After the interviews, many interviewees also expressed that it had been a positive experience and that, after the interviews, felt more aware of their own opinions. This also confirms that the opinions of the interviewees that we seek are not necessarily clear to the interviewees before the interview, but that, instead, they construct their positions during the interview by seeking to apply different moral principles to different situations. The interviewees did, as expected, often end up contradicting themselves and having to go back and correct a statement made about a previous topic. Almost all interviewees stated that they had difficulty forming an opinion and often ended a reflection with

expressions such as “I don't know, it's a tough one” (IP-501), or “I don't know; there's a lot behind it” (IP-503).

In her studies of French and American upper-middle class culture, Lamont (1992, p. 20) finds it an advantage that she as a French-speaking Canadian both knows French and American cultures and, at the same time, appears as an outsider. The outsider position of the research assistant and myself occasionally appeared in the interviews, such as through references to Denmark or through questions about Danish culture and politics. However, it was our impression that this outsider situation had a positive effect on the interviewees' willingness to explain their attitudes and opinions, because we seemed genuinely interested in learning about American culture and politics through them.

All interviewees signed a letter of consent in compliance with the European Union GDPR law and agreed to the interviews being recorded in full. Furthermore, all interviews were fully transcribed and coded via the coding software NVivo. I will explain the operationalization of the theory presented in Chapter 2 in the summaries of articles in the following chapter.





## Chapter 4 – Summaries of Empirical Articles

In this chapter, I will present the four empirical articles that, together with this summary, make up the thesis. For each article, I will focus on the purpose and research question of the article, the operationalization of the theory presented in Chapter 2, and the main findings of the articles. Consequently, this chapter is relatively descriptive. Any discussion of how the articles might provide a more nuanced picture of how white middle-class Americans define their obligations is saved for the discussion in Chapter 5.

- The first article is titled ‘The importance of moral culture in questions of welfare deservingness—the case of the US.’ It applies the notion of deservingness of Wim van Oorschot and has been published online before print in *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*.
- The second article is titled ‘Civic virtue, meritocracy, or opportunities for the poor—How white middle-class Americans justify or criticize public education.’ It applies the French pragmatism of Boltanski and Thévenot and has been revised and resubmitted to *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*.
- The third article is titled ‘Friendly and tolerant or close and caring? Community ideals and community repertoires among white middle-class Americans.’ It draws on the theories of

Lamont and Swidler and is submitted to the journal *City & Community*.

- The fourth article is titled ‘Cultural repertoires of family caregiving—How white middle-class Americans in northeastern and southern US distribute responsibility for senior care among family, government, and individuals.’ It applies the theory of Swidler and has been submitted to the *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*.

### Article 1 – ‘The Importance of Moral Culture in Questions of Welfare Deservingness: The Case of the US’

*Published online before print in International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*

The first article of the thesis takes as its point of departure the fact that Wim van Oorschot’s Deservingness Theory has primarily been applied in a European context, although it was partly developed with inspiration from the history of American social policy. As mentioned earlier, van Oorschot seeks to theoretically develop the five criteria that citizens in Western welfare states apply when distinguishing between those who are deserving of welfare benefits and those who are not (van Oorschot, 2000, 2006). Although both van Oorschot himself and several other social scientists test the validity of the criteria primarily in a European context (see e.g., Jeene, van Oorschot and Uunk, 2013; Blomberg *et al.*, 2017; Esmark and Schoop, 2017; Senghaas, 2021), he suggests that they might be universal (van Oorschot, 2006, p. 38; see also Laenen and Meuleman, 2017).

However, recent qualitative studies applying the deservingness criteria suggests that they are unable to capture all the reflections that citizens make when deciding on a fair distribution of welfare (Larsen, Frederiksen and Nielsen, 2018; Nielsen, Frederiksen and Larsen, 2020; Knotz *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, van Oorschot and colleagues themselves recognize that there are distributive criteria that fall outside the deservingness framework. These criteria are rooted in the morals of local culture, which is why they refer to them as “context-related criteria” (Laenen, Rossetti and Oorschot, 2019, p. 191). Consequently, the purpose of the first article of the thesis is to explore what happens if deservingness theory is applied in a qualitative study of American perceptions of deservingness.

In the article, I operationalized van Oorschot’s deservingness criteria by developing five analytical codes in the coding software NVivo. I then read the transcripts to code the statements of the interviewees as belonging to one of the five criteria. However, I quickly saw that the only deservingness criteria the interviewees applied was the control criterion. This finding matches the few previous studies that apply deservingness theory in the American context (Doorn and Bos, 2017; Larsen, 2013, chap. 9; Reid, 2013). However, with my qualitative approach, I was able to paint a much more complex picture of how Americans distinguish between what’s fair and what’s unfair in terms of social policy, to borrow Hochschild’s (1981) phrasing. Through abduction, I both nuanced the use of the control criterion and added context-related criteria unique to American culture.

Findings demonstrate that the interviewees across the two case cities apply the control criterion in a similar fashion. They use it to define the undeserving poor as those who have themselves caused their misfortune, and the deserving as those who need temporary support due to circumstances beyond their individual control, such as a recession or mass layoffs. However, the findings also demonstrated cultural differences between the two cases. To provide a better overview of the results, empirical variations were expressed in percentages. The use of percentages is purely for illustrative purposes and is not meant to imply statistical generalizability. In Boston, one third of the interviewees mentioned the disadvantaged youth as deserving of government support because they are not offered an “even playing field,” while this view appears among only 15% of the Knoxville interviewees. The Boston interviewees are seemingly more prone to consider structural disadvantages such as racism and poverty as factors that inhibit meritocratic competition for individual success.

An equal number of interviewees across the two cases refuse to distinguish between deserving and undeserving poor but, instead, argue in favor of a universalist principle where everyone who meets the formal criteria of need deserves support. I refer to this context-related criterion as American universalism, as it differs from the social investment-oriented idea of universalism found in Scandinavian countries (Frederiksen, 2018). The cultural differences between the cases reappear in the two other context-related criteria found in the article. Of the Boston interviewees, 58% consider the structural

consequences of poverty when deciding who is to be provided benefits, compared to only 23% of the Knoxville interviewees. Again, this implies that the Boston interviewees consider what personal consequences structural problems such as homelessness and poverty might have for their own liberty, while this occurs less among the Knoxville interviewees. I refer to this criterion as the cost-benefit criterion: the interviewees who apply it seek a balance where the right amount of help keeps as many people out of poverty, homelessness, and chronic disease as possible, since such problems become a societal expenditure to which they themselves have to contribute. The Knoxville interviewees, on the other hand, seem more prone to take the family situation of the needy individual into consideration, with 15% of them applying what I refer to as the breadwinner criterion. These interviewees seem very focused on preserving the family as the guarantor of individual security. Therefore, they argue that social benefits should be directed towards those with a family to provide for, regardless of deservingness.

The findings of article one paint a picture of an individualized conception of responsibility in the societal sphere in Boston. The Boston interviewees generally wish to remain independent from obligations towards their fellow citizens unless their fellow citizens become innocent victims of forces beyond their control such as mass layoffs or recession. If their fellow citizens do fall victims of outside forces, the Boston interviewees tend to believe that these victims should receive support as it might contain the problem of poverty and prevent

it from becoming a structural problem that might restrain the independence and liberty of the interviewees. Many Knoxville interviewees also support the idea that only fellow citizens who fall victim of forces beyond their own control deserve temporary social benefits. However, a minority of Knoxville interviewees argue that dependents is an important criterion for the reception of social benefits, which indicates the presence of a more conservative and family-oriented culture in the South. Theoretically, the findings demonstrate that deservingness theory needs to remain open to the importance of moral culture when studying the use both of deservingness criteria and of context-related criteria.

## Article 2 – ‘Civic Virtue, Meritocracy, or Opportunities for the Poor: How White Middle-Class Americans Justify or Criticize Public Education’

*Revised and resubmitted to European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*

The second article takes as its point of departure a paradigm shift in American public education. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1980s, public education in the US was justified primarily by its promotion of civic virtues and meritocratic equality (Belfield and Levin, 2005, p. 555; Johnson, 2014, p. 28ff; Hirschhoff, 1986, p. 34; Labaree, 2016, p. 44; Bellah, 1967; Kaestle, 1983; Urban and Wagoner, 2013). However, in the 1980s, this paradigm was challenged by a neoconservative paradigm that sought to liberalize public education to promote parental choice (Hirschhoff, 1986, p. 40ff; Apple, 2006, p. 30ff; Herbst, 2006, p.

10f; Labaree, 2016, p. 55ff). The Reagan administration considered public education a bureaucratic monopoly and sought to introduce a voucher system, in which parents were provided a voucher to redeem at either a public or a private school of their own choosing. This voucher system soon developed into the system of charter schools, which gains increasing success across the US. These schools are principally private schools with their own independent boards but, as long as they maintain a certain academic standard, tuition fees are publicly funded by the local school authorities (Finn, Jr. and Vanourek, 2007, p. 12; Herbst, 2006, p. 107; Belfield and Levin, 2005). This new and competitive educational system often puts the traditional American public schools under pressure, and many public intellectuals have criticized the privatization for undermining civic virtue and meritocracy (Lieberman, 1995; Boyd, 2007; Nussbaum, 2009; Baltodano, 2012; Ravitch, 2013). Considering this paradigmatic shift and the ongoing discussion among American public intellectuals, the purpose of the second article is to explore how ordinary Americans navigate the conflicting paradigms of public education.

In this article, I operationalized the French pragmatism of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006). I deductively coded the sections of each interview related to the topic of public education through the six orders of worth developed by Boltanski and Thévenot. It became clear that a small group of Boston interviewees justified public education by its promotion of civic virtue and by its structural efficiency, and a medium-sized group of Knoxville interviewees held the conservative view on



public education that it should relieve the suffering of the poor. However, a large group of interviewees spanning the two cases sought to make a difficult compromise between the liberty of parental choice and the equality of meritocracy.

The compromise between an idealization of civic virtue and the value of structural efficiency demonstrates the presence of an idea of public education as something that ensures structural stability by producing solidary citizens and taxpayers among a small minority in Boston. To some extent, this ideal matches the ideals of the pre-1980s paradigm of American public education, although it lacks the idealization of meritocracy. Instead, this position considers public education as part of a symbiosis where the working population contributes towards the education of future citizens, who in turn can continue the tradition of public education. For this group of interviewees, contributing to public education is both an act of solidarity and a way of ensuring structural stability and efficiency. In some ways, this compromise between the civic and the industrial worlds resembles the compromise that justifies more traditional and comprehensive welfare states, such as the ones found in Scandinavia (cf. Frederiksen, 2018).

Findings also demonstrate the presence in Knoxville of a perception of public education as something that everyone is welcome to use, but that is primarily meant as a base of support for those who cannot afford to seek education elsewhere. These interviewees have a conservative justification for public education as something that provides the poor an opportunity to provide for their family and, in rare cases, provides the

poor an opportunity to realize hidden potentials for great inventions. This compromise between a sense of obligation towards poor families that is rooted in the domestic world and an idealization of the poor individual with secret talents of the inspired world fits well with a conservative-religious world view.

Finally, a large group of interviewees across the two cases, although larger in Boston than in Knoxville, seek to find a difficult balance between the ideal of fair and meritocratic competition and the ideal of parental choice of education. At this point in the analysis, it also becomes clear that the ideal type of the market world, as it appears in the French pragmatism of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), is struggling to capture both the ideal of meritocratic competition and the liberty of parental choice. According to Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, p. 193ff), individuals and objects of high worth are, according to the principles of the market world, those that have achieved a high market value. In terms of objects, this includes expensive and exclusive goods, and in terms of humans this includes those who have transformed their desire into wealth. Consequently, I had to distinguish theoretically between the idealization of parental choice clearly belonging to the ideals of individual liberty rooted in the market world, and the ideal of meritocratic competition rooted in the ideal of competitive fairness also rooted in the market world. The latter, thus, becomes a nuancing of Boltanski and Thévenot's concept of the market world, fitting the American ideal of a competitive but fair (in the sense of equal) meritocracy. These interviewees solve the tension between parental

choice and meritocracy by defending parental choice and calling for more redistribution of resources between rich and poor public school districts, to improve the meritocratic effect of tuition-free public schools.

The findings confirm the picture, painted in the first article of a larger awareness of individual consequences of structural developments such as inequality in educational resources among school districts in Boston compared to Knoxville. Where a small minority of Boston interviewees sees this inequality as having negative consequences for the solidarity of future taxpayers, the majority sees it as a challenge to the ideal of meritocracy. The majority of Boston interviewees wish to promote meritocracy by redistributing resources among public school districts, but they never consider restricting the liberty of parental choice. The ideal of meritocracy is also found in Knoxville, but it occurs alongside a predominant Christian-conservative view of public education as an act of charity towards the poor. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that, although the French pragmatism of Boltanski and Thévenot are good analytic tools, they also have difficulties capturing the complexity of cultures outside a French and European context. Consequently, Boltanski and Thévenot would benefit from being much more contextual, like the American sociology of situated judgement, instead of seeking a quasi-universal grammar of justifications.

### Article 3 – ‘Friendly and Tolerant or Close and Caring? Community Ideals and Community Repertoires among White Middle-Class Americans’

*Submitted to the journal City & Community.*

The third article takes its point of departure in a sociological concern over a decline in community participation across the US, and the fact that many sociologists have criticized the individualized and suburban middle-class for causing this decline. However, I also argue that very few community studies have explored the community ideals of middle-class Americans by asking them directly about their own communities and community ideals. The purpose of article three is thus to explore the community ideals and community repertoires of white middle-class Americans living in the suburbs of the two case cities of the study—Boston, MA and Knoxville, TN.

In this article, I applied Swidler’s (2003) concept of cultural repertoires to place the community ideals of the interviewees in a larger frame of cultural history. Furthermore, I drew on Lamont’s (2012) concept of evaluative practices to capture how repertoires were actively used to evaluate the interviewees’ own communities. The actual coding process was therefore much more inductive in article 3 than in the two previous articles, where van Oorschot’s deservingness criteria and Boltanski and Thévenot’s orders of worth represented the starting points of abductive analyses. Instead, I used the existing structure-oriented literature to guide the analysis to develop codes and themes. Based on existing literature I started out with a code representing a pre-industrial and village-like repertoire of communities, a code representing a repertoire

of civic republicanism, and a code representing a multiculturalist/melting pot repertoire. The codes were only vaguely defined and were revised and developed abductively throughout the coding process.

Findings demonstrate clear differences in types of community, community ideals, and community repertoires between the two case cities. The type of community that the Boston interviewees most often referred to was neighborhood community. Many of the Boston interviewees evaluated their community against a romantic repertoire of a pre-industrial village, and either praised their neighbors for their friendly greetings and small acts of friendliness such as snow shoveling or criticized their neighbors if these were absent. However, the Boston interviewees were also clearly aware that there was a limit as to how much neighbors can ask of one another. They did not expect anything beyond snow shoveling or friendly greetings from their neighbors and found it inappropriate if their neighbors asked anything more of them. The romantic repertoire of the pre-industrial village was in Boston seemingly bounded by a repertoire of rugged self-reliance and individualism in the neighborhood community.

Some Boston interviewees highlighted their work community as examples of good communities, because they and their co-workers often pulled together to get the job done if a teammate experienced an emergency, such as hospitalization. This is not an expression of a socialist repertoire of solidarity, I argue, because the employees are not considered in opposition to the employer. Rather, it is an expression of

the Protestant work ethic, with historical roots in New England, with a focus on getting the job done despite hardships or resistance. A few Boston interviewees also mention their communities of leisure and volunteering. Whether these interviewees volunteer in political organizations or engage in sport activities, they promote how their communities promote diversity or manifest the ideal of diversity in the diversity of the community members. These interviewees draw on the classical American melting pot repertoire, where cultural differences are preserved in a community with low levels of mutual obligation.

In Knoxville, the interviewees also refer to their neighborhoods as communities, although less often than the Boston interviewees. The Knoxville interviewees who talk of their neighborhood communities praise them for resembling the romantic ideal of a pre-modern village. Furthermore, the Knoxville interviewees do not seem to have the reservations of the Boston interviewees who also draw on the repertoire of self-reliance and individualism. The Knoxville interviewees who mention their neighborhood communities engage more wholeheartedly in the lives of their neighbors and offer both practical and emotional support in times of crisis. This pre-modern community repertoire is also present among the interviewees who talk of their communities of friends and family, which for some of the interviewees also include friendships among work colleagues. They talk of a reciprocal relationship of support, where they provide aid with an implicit agreement that they can receive similar support if they should ever need it. This reciprocity further corroborates the presence of a pre-modern

community repertoire in Knoxville, as this ideal resembles the idea of “barn raising” in rural America, where households historically helped each other with tasks that were too extensive for a single household, with an implicit agreement of having the support returned when needed (Linn, 1990).

The volunteering communities in Knoxville, which were often church communities, were praised by the interviewees for being a place where they perform acts of charity. This charity is directed both inward, within the congregation in the form of, for example, music classes, and outward, in the form of fundraising to provide food or money either to impoverished youths in Knoxville or to the poor in Third World countries. This ideal of charity fits well with the Evangelical tradition of charity as an expression of a neighborly love that does not explicitly expect to be returned, but which comes with an implicit expectation of salvation (Shah and Shah, 2010). Furthermore, the charity networks also appeared as networks where members could expect some form of support if needed.

We once again see radically different cultural repertoires between the two cases. The Boston interviewees were more individualistic and influenced by an ideal of self-reliance, a Protestant work ethic, as well as the melting pot ideal of diversity and multiculturalism. They idealize culturally diverse neighborhood communities with friendly and tolerant neighbors, but they do not want to engage any further than small acts of friendliness or courteous greeting. The Knoxville interviewees expressed a much more traditional worldview, where geographical

neighbors as well as family and friends ought to help each other out both physically and emotionally, with an explicit expectation that the favors are returned if ever needed. There were few traces of the Tocquevillian repertoire of civic republicanism in Boston, but generally it was generally absent from both the Boston and the Knoxville cases. This finding confirms the image of an individualized white middle class in the northeast, but it also demonstrates that their individualism is not unconscious. Rather, it aligns with their liberal moral ideals. Furthermore, the findings challenge the general image of the white middle class by demonstrating how community ideals seems linked to local moral culture rather than class affiliation. Individualization is consequently not a process that takes place on a structural level irrespective of individuals, but a process that is acted out by individuals because it is in alignment with their liberal ideals or that is criticized by individuals if it is in conflict with their conservative ideals.

[Article 4 – ‘Cultural repertoires of family caregiving – How white middle-class Americans in northeastern and southern US distribute responsibility for senior care among family, government, and individuals’](#)

*Submitted to the Journal of Comparative Family Studies*

The fourth article takes its departure in the fact that existing literature has described how family caregiving is an important part of the culture of American minorities, especially among African Americans. However, white Americans are often referred to as a group where family caregiving is less prominent, and studies have rarely engaged exclusively with cultures of family caregiving among white Americans



(see e.g., Mitra, 2017; DeFreitas, 2019, chap. 4; Epps, Rose and Lopez, 2019). With respect to cultures of family caregiving, the white middle class is furthermore interesting because it is often portrayed as representing an individualized American mainstream culture (see e.g., Bellah *et al.*, 1985; Lamont, 1992; Swidler, 2003). Consequently, the fourth article asks what cultural repertoires white middle class Americans, often portrayed as individualist and career-oriented, draw upon when distributing the responsibility for senior care among family, government, and individuals.

As in article 3, I operationalized Swidler's (2003) concept of cultural repertoires. However, instead of looking for repertoires of community as in article 3, I looked for repertoires of family caregiving. In her *Talk of Love*, Swidler (2003, chap. 6) discusses the way her interviewees talked about love against the cultural repertoire of the romantic love myth rooted in Medieval Europe but often also found in Hollywood movies and romantic novels. In a similar fashion, I use the traditional repertoire of family caregiving often found in studies of American minorities where family, and often female family members, are expected to act as primary caregiver, and where government and individual is considered as having little, if any, responsibility. This traditional repertoire acted as a point of reference when I coded the interviewees' statements about "who they believe should take care of people when they get old," as the question is phrased in the interview guide. Furthermore, I also used the image of white middle-class Americans as representatives of an individualized American

mainstream culture in the coding to represent a modern perception of family as less important than individual liberty.

In this article, we once again see cultural differences between the two case cities, but we also see differences in how the genders are distributed within the different repertoires of family caregiving. In Boston, we once again see a tendency towards an idealization of self-reliance and independence that is completely absent from the Knoxville interviews. Of the Boston interviewees, 37% find that the individual ought to make sure that he or she has saved up and purchased insurance that guarantees them security in old age. Only if the individual fails to provide for him- or herself in old age should the family step in and provide support, primarily in the form of financial support for private care. The main argument for this individualist position is that ageing parents should not restrain the possibilities of their children, since contemporary society demands flexibility and dedication to work. I refer to the cultural repertoire found among these interviewees as the *repertoire of self-reliance and independence*.

A large proportion of interviewees in Boston (42%) and a small proportion of interviewees in Knoxville (19%) found that family has the main responsibility for caregiving, but that the government should be ready to provide means-tested support, either as a supplement to family caregiving or in cases where the family is absent or unable to redeem the obligation of family caregiving. The interviewees taking this position often drew on a repertoire of human dignity, where the main thing is to secure the dignity of ageing Americans. Furthermore,

where the four male interviewees of Boston who took this position seemed content that the current system sufficiently secures the dignity of the elders, all female interviewees across the two cases find that the level of support offered by the government is insufficient to guarantee a dignified old age. It is likely that this dissatisfaction among the female interviewees is due to the fact that American women often are the ones who perform the lion's share of family care work (Hochschild, 2012; The National Alliance for Caregiving [NAC], 2020). I refer to the cultural repertoire found among these interviewees as the human dignity repertoire.

Interestingly, a large proportion of the Knoxville interviewees, including all eight male interviewees from Knoxville, found that the family holds the entire responsibility to take care of people when they get old. These interviewees had a very traditional and reciprocal idea of family caregiving and often argued that they were obligated to care for their ageing parents, partly because their parents took care of them when they were growing up, and partly because they see no alternative. Only family, according to these interviewees, was qualified to provide a loving form of care. Interestingly, some of the eight male interviewees of Knoxville implied that the daughters or daughters-in-law should act as the primary caregivers. Although they do not state so explicitly, this view fits well into the conservative view of family roles. These findings contribute new knowledge about cultures of family caregiving among white Americans to a field of study primarily focused on cultures of family caregiving among American minority cultures.

This fourth article once again confirms the cultural gap between white middle-class Americans of the Northeast and of the South. The Boston interviewees seemingly live in a culture that makes it more legitimate to place the responsibility for senior care with government and the individual before placing it with the family. In Knoxville, many interviewees are not even able to conceive the idea that anyone but family should have the responsibility for senior care. Although they occupy similar positions and live in similarly homogenous and well-off neighborhoods, they have very divergent definitions of obligations towards society, community, and family. In the following chapter, I will discuss how the findings of the four articles shed new light on the feelings of obligation in the supposedly individualized white middle class of America.



## Chapter 5 – Discussion: The Moral Lifeworlds and contextual ideals of White Middle-Class Americans

As demonstrated in Chapter 1, existing sociological literature on individualism in the US often present the contemporary white middle-class American as exceptionally individualized. This individualization is manifested in its relative liberty from obligations towards fellow citizens, fellow community members, and extended family. However, we also saw, in chapter 2, that this image of an exceptionally individualized white middle class is potentially challenged by the theoretical perspective that I refer to as the *Sociology of Situated Judgement*. The sociologists that I include in this perspective argue that individuals often apply their moral ideals inconsistently by applying one moral ideal in one context and an opposing moral ideal in another context. This idea of a plurality of moral ideals and of social spheres opened for a potential nuancing of the image of an individualized white middle class in the singular. Since existing literature often promotes white middle-class Americans as individualized in relation to fellow citizens, communities, and extended family, I have in this thesis sought to explore if taking the approach of the sociology of situated judgement might contribute towards nuancing the image of an exceptionally individualized white middle class. This exploration has been guided by an attempt to answer the following research question:

**How do white middle-class Americans define their moral obligations towards their fellow citizens, their community, and their extended family?**

In continuation of the wish to challenge the prevalent image of the white middle class, I designed the empirical study as a comparative case study. The first case was the white middle class of selected white, middle-class neighborhoods in Boston, Massachusetts. The interviewees of this case were selected to represent a case on white middle-class Americans living in the morally liberal culture of the American Northeast. The second case was the white middle class of selected white middle-class neighborhoods of Knoxville, Tennessee, who represented white middle-class Americans living in the more conservative culture of the American South. By choosing a similar segment of interviewees, white middle-class Americans, from two culturally different parts of the US it became possible to explore how regional moral culture influences the perceptions of liberty and obligation.

As I will explain in the following two sections, the findings contribute both to the literature that criticizes white middle-class Americans for being individualized from a structural point-of-view, and to the sociology of situated judgement. The fact that the regional moral culture seems much more defining of perceptions of moral obligation than class affiliation, it seems necessary to talk of white middle-class cultures in the plural. Furthermore, the comparative dimension of the study seems to have revealed that the interviewees have moral ideals linked to their

regional moral culture, which stretch across contextual spheres. This challenges the situatedness and contextuality of the sociology of situated judgement and suggests the necessity of introducing the idea of a coherent moral lifeworld with separate contextual spheres. In the first sub-section I will discuss the implications that the findings have for the structural image of the individualized white middle class and in the second sub-section I will discuss the implications that the findings have for the sociology of situated judgement.

### The Need for a Pluralist Conception of the morally conscious White Middle Classes

First, the findings of the empirical studies seem to challenge the idea of a mainstream, white, individualized middle-class culture in the United States, defined by bureaucratization, career-making, and consumer capitalism. The comparative dimension of the study has revealed that the Boston and the Knoxville interviewees seemingly live in what I, with inspiration from Berger and Luckmann (1991), conceptualize as different *moral lifeworlds*. Furthermore, the interviewees could apply fundamental moral ideals across different spheres. In Boston, the moral lifeworld of the interviewees was based on a fundamental moral ideal of individual liberty, which seemed to shape their definition of obligations towards fellow citizens, communities, and extended family. In other words, there seemed to be a hierarchization of moral ideals, where the contextual moral ideals within each sphere was subordinated a fundamental moral ideal that defined the moral lifeworld of the



interviewees. In the societal sphere, the Boston interviewees wished to promote equality and meritocracy if it did not conflict with their fundamental ideal of individual liberty. For example, they wished to help those who temporarily lose their jobs, but they often considered this to be a way of preventing unemployment from growing into a structural problem and, thus, threatening their own liberty. Similarly, they wished to ensure all children a “level playing field” by redistributing resources between rich and poor public-school districts, but they did not wish to restrict the liberty of parental choice. In the sphere of civil society, the Boston interviewees wished to promote status equality by appearing tolerant and friendly towards their neighbors, but they did not wish to go beyond, as such extensive obligations would restrict their individual liberty. In the sphere of extended family, many Boston interviewees felt an obligation to provide care for their ageing parents, but often only if the latter had been unable to protect the liberty of their children through their own savings and private insurance.

In Knoxville, the interviewees seemed to experience far less conflict between fundamental moral ideals that defined their moral lifeworld and contextual moral ideals that were present in the individual spheres. This might be because the moral lifeworld of the Knoxville interviewees was based a conservative fundamental ideal of traditional, or pre-modern, obligation. In the abstract societal sphere, the Knoxville interviewees felt an obligation to ensure that they themselves or their fellow citizens were not suffering from poverty due to a sudden loss of

employment but felt little obligation to redeem the abstract ideal of meritocracy in education. Rather, they accepted that family and community play an important role in the social status of individuals. Consequently, they considered unemployment benefits and public education as acts of charity that should end when families are no longer suffering from poverty. In the close and concrete spheres of community and family, the Knoxville interviewees felt no conflict between fundamental and contextual ideals since these were coinciding. The Knoxville interviewees felt strong moral obligations towards friends, neighbors, and family, and this obligation seemed not to be bound by ideals of individual liberty.

The heterogeneity across the two cases challenges the idea of an individualized white middle-class culture in the singular, as presented in much existing literature on the American middle class (Bellah *et al.*, 1985; Sennett, 1999; Putnam, 2001; Mills, 2002; Whyte, 2002; Ritzer, 2010; Riesman, 2020). The white middle class of Boston, MA, corroborates the image of a liberal, but also individualized, white middle class. They do not seem to have developed what the classical sociologists saw as an internalized sense of civic solidarity to replace the moral force of family and community found in the traditional society (Durkheim, 1964; Tönnies, 1964; Tocqueville, 2012). Nevertheless, their individualized morals are a product of their regional moral history that has historical and pre-modern roots. In contrast, the white middle class of Knoxville challenges the image of an individualized white middle class by subscribing to the conservative

culture of the South, despite their middle-class status. Their moral lifeworld seems relatively unchallenged by the modernity that the classical sociologists saw as an unstoppable structural force.

Consequently, regional moral culture and its deep historical roots seems to overrule class affiliation and class culture when it comes to definitions of social obligation and the level of individualization. We must therefore, at least, distinguish between a northeastern and a southern white middle-class culture in the United States. Furthermore, the importance of regional moral culture with deep historical roots challenges the idea of the white middle class as purely ‘outer-directed’ to use David Riesman’s (2020) phrase. Although the interviewees draw on the moral principles of their moral lifeworlds, these moral principles act as a moral gyroscope that the interviewees use to guide them through complex issues of liberty and obligation. Their inner moral gyroscope is not shaped by bureaucratization, career-making, or consumer capitalism, but is rooted in the moral culture of where they live and shaped by regional cultural history. The critics of an individualized and morally pacified modern middle class thus seems to have overestimated the strength of structural forces and underestimated the moral capacities of what Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, p. 37) has referred to as ‘ordinary people’.

## The Need for a Theoretical Conception of ‘Moral Lifeworlds’ in the Sociology of Situated Judgement

That the individual interviewees have relatively homogeneous and coherent moral lifeworlds challenges the situatedness of a sociology of situated judgement. Much of the empirical studies within the sociology of situated judgement focuses on how social actors use different moral ideals within separate spheres. Hochschild (1981) demonstrates that her interviewees tend to apply a principle of equality in the spheres, or domains, of social and political life, and a principle of differentiation in the sphere of economy. Lamont (1992) demonstrates, much like Hochschild, how her interviewees apply the morals of a Protestant work ethic to distinguish the morally pure from the morally corrupted in the sphere of work, career, and economy. Swidler (2003) demonstrates how her interviewees oppose their own pragmatic repertoires of love to a romantic repertoire in the sphere of love and relationships. Van Oorschot (2000, 2006) seeks to find the five criteria that citizens use to rank deservingness in the sphere of welfare support. Only Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) seek to de-contextualize their theory, but they still argue that the orders of worth are linked with moral worlds, which in turn order different spheres of an individual’s life. In sum, the sociology of situated judgement tends to emphasize that moral values are often inconsistent across spheres and that, although social actors subscribe to one moral principle in one sphere, they may contradict themselves by subscribing to a different principle in another sphere.

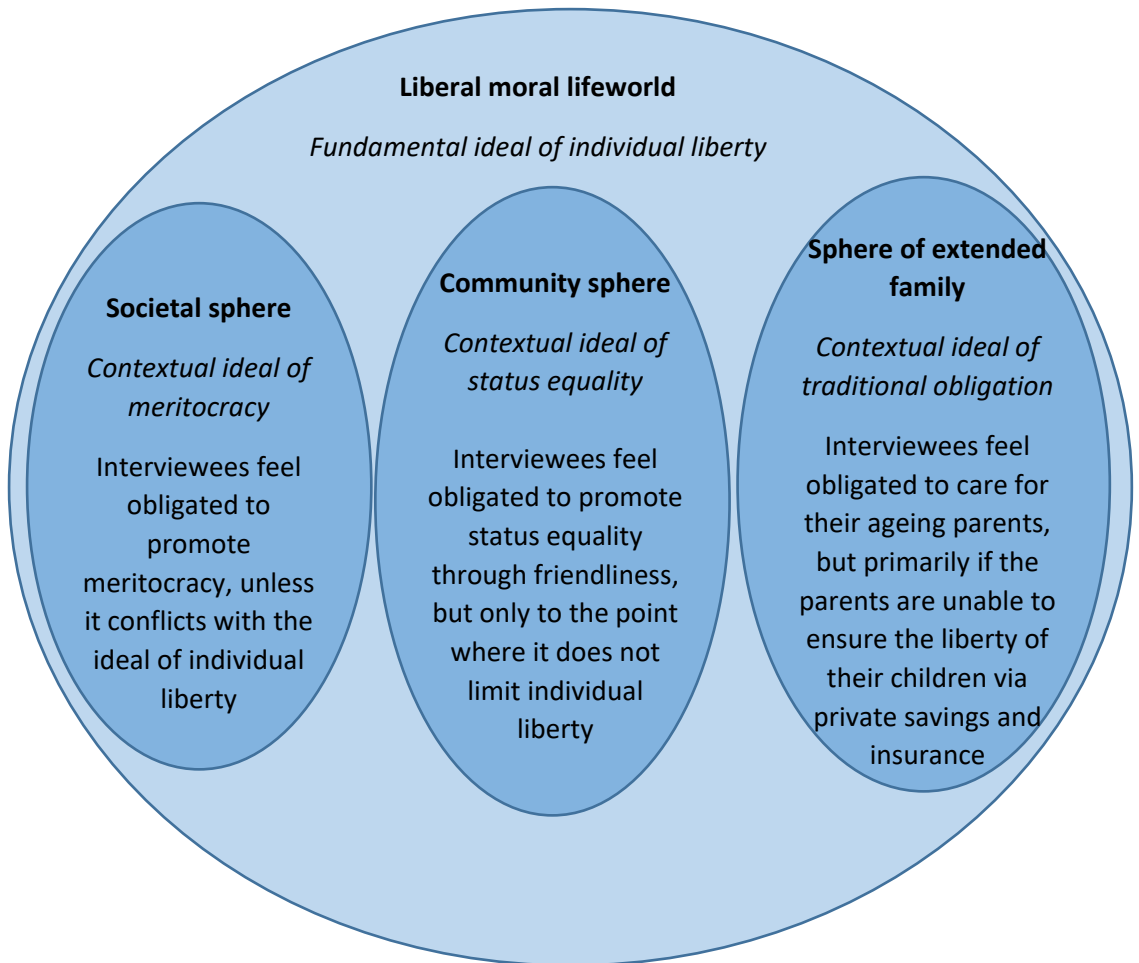
In this study, I have sought to explore how white middle-class Americans define their moral obligations towards their fellow citizens, their community, and their extended family, with an explicit comparative perspective. In contrast to the findings of the literature mentioned above which takes a structural perspective, I find that my interviewees have a fundamental moral principle spanning across the spheres as well as a contextual principle linked to each individual sphere. In this way, my findings resemble those of Bellah *et al.* (1985), except that only the definition of moral obligation found among the Boston interviewees are fundamentally shaped by an ideal of individual liberty from traditional moral obligations. The social relations of the Knoxville interviewees seem to be, on the other hand, fundamentally shaped by a conservative ideal of traditional moral obligation. Considering these findings, it seems, as mentioned above, necessary to re-introduce a conception of a coherent moral lifeworld, similar to the concepts of lifeworld or primary frame found in Berger and Luckmann and the insights in Erving Goffman into the sociology of situated judgement. Where the sociology of situated judgement has found that social actors draw on a plurality of moral ideals in different situations, and that they sometimes use these in an inconsistent and conflicting manner across spheres, the comparative aspect of this study indicates that the interviewees have fundamental moral principles across different spheres and that these fundamental principles are linked to the moral lifeworld of their regional moral culture. To capture this difference between fundamental principles that shape the moral lifeworld of the social actors and contextual moral ideals that the

interviewees apply in different spheres, I have found it convenient to introduce a theoretical distinction between fundamental moral ideals and contextual moral ideals.

Where the fundamental moral ideals form the backbone of an individual's moral lifeworld, the contextual moral ideals represent ideals that the individual would like to promote within the specific sphere, if it does not conflict with the fundamental moral ideals. The following figures illustrate how the different spheres and their contextual moral ideals are contained within a moral lifeworld constituted by a fundamental moral ideal. It is important to stress that these figures are ideal-typical illustrations of the liberal moral lifeworld found primarily among the Boston interviewees and of the conservative moral lifeworld found primarily among the Knoxville interviewees.

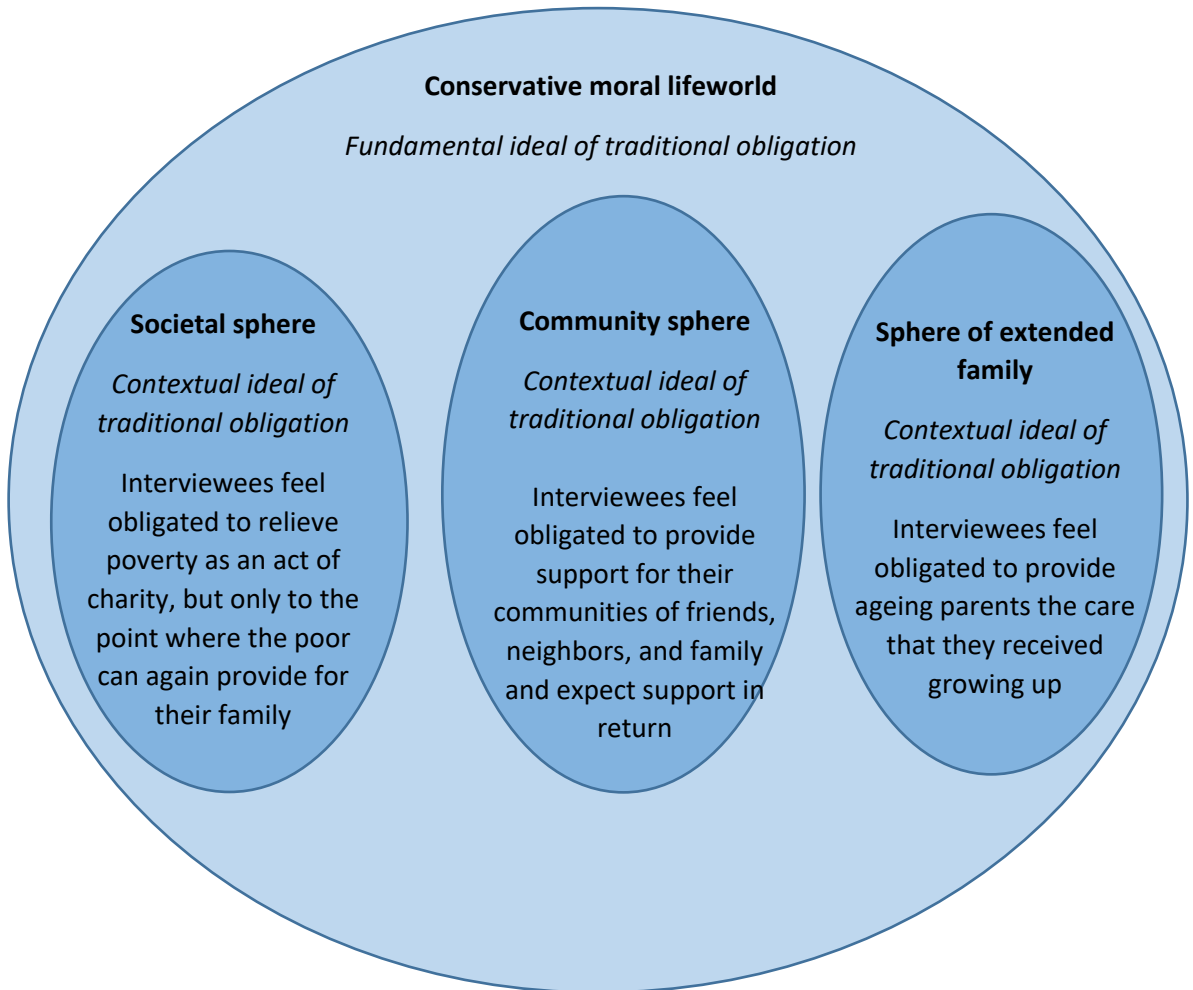
**Figure 1.**

*Model of the liberal moral lifeworld of the Boston interviewees*



**Figure 2.**

*Model of the conservative moral lifeworld of the Knoxville interviewees*





As the figures illustrate, the interviewees have fundamental ideals that define their moral lifeworld and contextual ideals tied to a context, or sphere. As it also becomes clear, the fundamental and contextual ideals are not necessarily in conflict. The fundamental ideal of traditional obligation, rooted in a pre-modern morality, rules sovereignly in the spheres of community and family among the Knoxville interviewees. Furthermore, the Knoxville interviewees seem to find it unproblematic to bound their ideal of charity by their fundamental ideal of family and community obligation in the societal sphere. When the individual family members have regained the fundamental ability to meet their obligations towards the family, the societal obligation of charity is redeemed, and responsibility is returned to the family. While the Knoxville interviewees rarely mention individual liberty, it often takes the place as the fundamental ideal in the symbolic lifeworld of the Boston interviewees. Consequently, the Boston interviewees seem to struggle more with balancing their fundamental and contextual ideals, since they must often bound contextual ideals of solidarity, meritocratic equality and traditional by their fundamental ideal of individual liberty. In other words, they often struggle to justify why societal meritocracy, status equality in local communities, and familial care should be subordinated by individual liberty. Meritocracy, status equality, and familial care are indeed important moral values to the Boston interviewees, but they must ultimately be subordinated to individual liberty, even if it is sometimes difficult for the Boston interviewees to make this subordination.

The fundamental principles of individual liberty and traditional obligation found in the two cases also illustrate that the moral lifeworlds of the two groups of interviewees have different structures. The Boston interviewees seem to operate with individual liberty as a fundamental moral ideal, which bounds the contextual ideals found in the three contextual spheres of society, community, and extended family. Consequently, they seem constantly aware of the structural challenges to individual liberty such as poverty and inequality in education, but only scarcely aware of obligations towards neighbors and ageing parents. In contrast, the moral lifeworld of the Knoxville interviewees seem rooted in a fundamental moral ideal of family and community obligation. Consequently, the Knoxville interviewees seem scarcely aware of structural phenomena such as inequality and poverty, but highly focused on their community and extended family. It seems that the abstract liberal ideal of individual liberty leads the focus of the Boston interviewees away from close relations and towards a structural perspective. In contrast, the ideal of family and community obligations of the Knoxville interviewees apparently means that they focus almost entirely on their close social relations at the expense of structural awareness. Not only do the moral lifeworlds of the two cases of interviewees rest on different fundamental ideals, but the fundamental ideals seemingly also define the structure and extent of their moral lifeworlds. It therefore seems imperative to introduce a concept of a coherent moral lifeworld defined by regional moral culture into the sociology of situated judgement.



## Chapter 6 – Conclusion and Prospects for Further Research

The US has been typified as a liberal welfare regime, emphasizing individual responsibility for ensuring oneself via savings and private insurance. Social benefits are reserved for a small residual portion of the population that is unable to survive without government help, and those who do receive support are often stigmatized as lazy and unwilling to live independent lives (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Jansson, 1993; Benson-Smith, 2005; Kohler-Hausmann, 2015). This liberal social policy and its emphasis on individual responsibility has meant that civil society and the family have been considered important sources of security in American culture (Eberly, 1998; Skocpol, 2000; McCarthy, 2003). However, since at least the 1950s, several American sociologists have lamented the decline, and even collapse, of American civil society. Often, they blame the individualized and status-oriented suburban middle class for lacking any sense of rootedness in a local community. Despite the praise that the new middle classes received from the political establishment for their redemption of the American dream, mid-century American sociologists such as Riesman (2020), Mills (2002), and Whyte (2002) criticized the new middle classes for abandoning their critical reasoning and community-awareness in favor of a vain status panic.

According to Lash, career-making middle-class parents' absence meant that families increasingly relied on external family "experts" to raise their children, which he argues led to increasingly narcissistic children,

regulated by the opinions of their peers rather than by their internal morals and obligations (Lash, 1977, 1991). The critique of middle-class culture continued throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In landmark publications such as Bellah *et al*'s (1985) *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* and Putnam's (2001) *Bowling Alone*, the critique of a suburbanized and individualized middle class with no rootedness in traditional values or local communities continued. The critique is echoed in culture and media studies. Prominent sociologists such as Richard Sennett (1999) and George Ritzer (2010) criticized both the flexible and career-oriented "new capitalism" and the individualized and post-modern consumer culture, which sprang out of the culture of the "new" middle class of the 1950s, for further corroding any sense of moral obligation towards others. With only little or no sense of obligation towards their fellow citizens or to their fellow community members, the middle class seems left only with obligations towards their family.

However, as middle-class households went from being dual-earner to two-career families in the struggle to maintain a middle-class lifestyle, many American middle-class parents had little time for their children (Hacker, 2012; Frank, 2013; Leicht and Fitzgerald, 2014). The career-oriented white middle class has never had strong cultural ideals of family obligations compared to American minority cultures, which often have more traditional family values. Therefore, the white middle class often try to spend their sparse time away from work with their spouses and children, while they feel little obligation towards their

extended family compared to minority Americans (Dilworth-Anderson, Goodwin and Williams, 2004; Dilworth-Anderson *et al.*, 2005; McCallum, Spencer and Goins, 2007; Bekhet, 2015; Epps, Rose and Lopez, 2019). In sum, this existing literature on the American middle class, and the white middle class in particular, portrays them as exceptionally *individualized*, when we define individualization in accordance with classical sociology as the liberation from obligations towards fellow citizens, family, and community.

The question of whether individualization, with its plethora of consumer choices and its endless possibilities for self-realization, is the fulfillment of the American Dream or a corrosion of social cohesion in American culture is a highly complex question that I have not sought to tackle in this thesis. What I have sought to do in this thesis has not been to decide whether individualization, defined as the absence of traditional moral obligations, is good or bad. Rather, I have sought to answer the following research question:

**How do white middle-class Americans define their moral obligations towards their fellow citizens, their community, and their extended family?**

In other words, I have sought to nuance the idea that the white middle class is, by definition, thoroughly individualized by exploring the moral ideals that influence their views of moral obligations in different spheres. Theoretically I have drawn on what I have termed the *Sociology of Situated Judgement* which claims that social actors do not

have a single moral ideal that they apply across spheres, but that they often use different moral ideals in different spheres, or contexts.

Findings demonstrate:

- 1) That the fundamental worldviews of the interviewees are relatively homogeneous within each case, but heterogeneous across the two cases:
  - a. The Boston interviewees are drawing primarily on a fundamental liberal ideal of individual liberty across the three spheres.
  - b. The Knoxville interviewees are primarily drawing on a fundamental conservative ideal of traditional obligation across the three spheres.
- 2) The contextual moral ideals that the interviewees draw upon in each sphere can both be in compliance with or in conflict with the fundamental worldview of the interviewees
  - a. The interviewees in Boston often struggle to compromise their fundamental ideal of individual liberty with the contextual ideals of meritocratic equality, of community engagement, and of family caregiving
  - b. The Knoxville interviewees often experience compliance between their fundamental ideal of traditional obligation and their contextual ideals of charity, community engagement, and family caregiving
- 3) The fundamental moral principle of the interviewees seems to define the structure of their moral lifeworld:

- a. The individualist ideals of the Boston interviewees seem to make them aware of structural obstacles to individual liberty, but scarcely aware of obligations towards concrete social relations with community and extended family.
- b. The traditional, or pre-modern, ideals of the Knoxville interviewees seem to make them obligated towards their communities and extended family, but less interested in societal issues such as inequality.

These findings challenge not only the image of an individualized white middle class culture in the singular shaped by structural forces such as bureaucratization and consumer capitalism, but also the contextual and situated focus of the sociology of situated judgement. The findings challenge the idea of a single mainstream white middle-class culture, since the moral principles that shape the social obligations of white middle-class Americans seem more closely linked to local moral culture than to class affiliation. Therefore, the white middle class appears more nuanced regarding the issue of individualization than suggested by previous literature on the middle class (Bellah *et al.*, 1985; Sennett, 1999; Putnam, 2001; Mills, 2002; Whyte, 2002; Ritzer, 2010; Riesman, 2020). Furthermore, the white middle class appear far more shaped by the moral lifeworld of where they live than by the individualized mainstream culture often associated with the white middle class. They are, in other words, much less outer-directed and much more inner-directed than suggested by the sociologists taking the structural point-



of view. As mentioned in the methods section, the purpose of the current study has not been to claim statistical generalizability. Rather, the purpose has been to challenge the image of an individualized white middle-class culture. That this image has indeed been challenged opens several new prospects for further research.

That there seems to be consistency in the fundamental moral ideals within the two cases but, at the same time, differences across the cases begs the question of just how important regional culture is compared to class and race affiliation. In this study, class affiliation mattered little compared to the moral culture of the geographical location. Although all interviewees belonged to the white middle class of America, they did not share the same moral culture. Recent qualitative studies of white Americans on the political right have demonstrated that social class has a diminishing influence on moral ideals compared to race (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012; Hochschild, 2018). The findings of this study contribute to this literature by demonstrating that class affiliation is far from the only factor that shapes the moral lifeworld of social actors, and that other factors might play a larger role than previously expected.

The most obvious way to further explore the importance of regional moral culture would be to repeat the study with other social classes, such as the working class or the upper-class. If the working class of Boston is as liberal as the middle class, and if the working class of Knoxville is as conservative as the idle class, it would further corroborate the relative importance of regional moral culture compared to class affiliation. Furthermore, the findings invite explorations of

whether local culture has primacy over race in matters of moral ideals. Existing literature suggests that minority cultures, and especially African Americans, have a stronger family culture than white Americans (Dilworth-Anderson, Goodwin and Williams, 2004; Dilworth-Anderson *et al.*, 2005; Bekhet, 2015; Epps, Rose and Lopez, 2019). However, the findings of this study suggest that even the family culture of the supposedly individualized white middle-class depends on regional moral culture. In sum, the findings of this study pave the way for a much more comprehensive qualitative and quantitative exploration of the importance of regional moral culture on feelings of moral obligations, compared to other factors such as race and class. Initiatives in this direction have already been taken within the sociology of situated judgement in an international perspective (see e.g. Lamont and Thévenot, 2000), but this study demonstrates the fruitfulness of comparative studies of regional moral cultures on the national level.

Furthermore, the findings that the moral lifeworlds of the white middle class seem defined by the local moral culture challenge the situationism of a sociology of situated judgement. Although the American and the European sociology of situated judgement have different aspirations when it comes to universality, they both focus narrowly on the uses of moral ideals within a specific sphere, context, or situation, either in general terms (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) or in specific spheres such as distributive policies (Hochschild, 1981; van Oorschot, 2000, 2006), work life (Lamont, 1992), or love life (Swidler, 2003). The findings of this comparative qualitative study suggest that the

interviewees draw on fundamental moral ideals tied up with the fundamental ideal of their moral lifeworlds. Furthermore, findings demonstrate that the contextual ideals found in the separate spheres of society, community, and extended family are subordinated the fundamental ideal of the moral lifeworld. Consequently, a sociology of situated judgement should be more open to studying whether the same moral ideals appear consistently across, or above, separate spheres of an individual's lifeworld, instead of focusing narrowly on the moral ideals that appear within specific situations, contexts, or spheres. There is a need for a continued focus on contexts and situations of evaluation and judgement, but not at the expense of the overall perspective provided by the idea of moral lifeworlds. As this study demonstrates, comparative studies within national cultures are suitable for this purpose.

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## Appendix 1 – Interview persons

IP-number*	Sex	Age group	Occupation	Number of children
<i>Boston, Massachusetts</i>				
501	Female	50+	Nurse anesthetist	1
502	Female	50+	Self-employed acupuncturist	0
503	Female	31-49	Primary school teacher at public school	2
504	Male	50+	Assistant principal at public school	2
506	Male	31-49	Associate professor at private university	2
507	Male	50+	School teacher at prison	3
508	Male	50+	Software-engineer	0
509	Female	50+	Self-employed real-estate agent	0
510	Female	50+	Middle manager in IT-company	1
511	Female	50+	Family nurse practitioner	0
512	Male	18-30	Middle-manager at hotel	0
514	Male	31-49	Self-employed IT consultant	1
515	Female	31-49	Wildlife conservation director	0
516	Female	50+	Architect	0
517	Female	18-30	Case manager at public homeless shelter	0
519	Female	50+	Middle-manager at public hospital	3
520	Female	31-49	Manager at public library	0
521	Female	18-30	Manager at fitness center	0

522	Male	50+	Freelance film/advertisement producer	3
<i>Knoxville Tennessee</i>				
701	Female	31-49	Management consultant	1
702	Female	18-30	Interior designer	0
703	Male	31-49	IT-engineer	0
704	Female	18-30	Construction site manager	0
705	Male	50+	Army engineer	3
706	Female	50+	Shop owner	2
707	Female	50+	Mental coach	2
708	Female	50+	Head nurse	3
709	Female	50+	University teacher	0
710	Female	31-49	Program coordinator at college	2
711	Female	31-49	Pharmacist	1
712	Male	50+	Middle school teacher	3
713	Male	50+	Middle school teacher	2
714	Female	31-49	NGO worker	4
715	Female	31-49	Business Development Coordinator	2
716	Male	31-49	Middle school teacher	2
717	Male	50+	Middle school principal	2
718	Female	31-49	Middle school teacher	3
719	Female	50+	University teacher	0
720	Male	31-49	NGO worker	0
721	Female	50+	Museum clerk	0
722	Female	31-49	Freelance artist	3
724	Female	31-49	NGO worker	4
725	Male	50+	Copywriter in advertisement business	2
726	Female	50+	Owner of gardening company	2

## Interview guide – Just Worlds, US

### **Introduction (before turning on recorder)**

- We will be talking about your values about how people treat one another and your opinions on social policies for e.g. healthcare and unemployment
- There are no right or wrong answers. All your thoughts are of interest
- We will guarantee you full confidentiality. Your name will not appear anywhere in the published articles and recordings will be stored on a secure university hard drive
- We will start the interview as a normal conversation which will take around 45 minutes and end with some survey-questions in the last 15 minutes
- Feel free to break off the interview at any time or ask any questions you may have
- It is important to us that you understand that we collect this interview with your full and informed consent and that you may at any time break off the interview and you may stop participating in the study at any point during or after the interview, in which case we will completely delete any information and data provided by you. (Sign consent form)

## **Family and care**

- Many people consider family to be an important part of their life – what does family mean to you?
- Do you believe that a parent has certain responsibilities towards his/her partner and children?
  - o What values would you like to pass on to your children?
- Do you believe that a person has certain responsibilities towards his/her parents and siblings?
- Who in general has the responsibility to take care of people when they get old?
- Who should be responsible for children when the family can't take care of them?
  - o If the child's health is starting to deteriorate?
  - o If the child is unable to read or write?

## **Community**

- Are you part of a community?
  - o If no: Can you think of a time when you felt part of a community?
- Was it easy to become part of the community?
  - o What makes for a good community member?

- Do you know of people who have been excluded from your community?
  - What was it about that person?
  - Why was that not acceptable?
  - If no: What would make you want to exclude someone?
- Can you think of instances where you have helped each other in the community?
- Can you help each other with all kinds of things in your community?
- Are there limits to what help you can provide for each other?
  - What about if someone loses his/her job?
  - What about if someone gets seriously ill?
- Do people ask for help or is it just offered?

### **Equality and tax**

- Do you think most people get their fair share of wealth, education, influence – in the US right now?
  - Do you think that there are groups in the US who pay too much tax? Too little?
- Do you think that there is too much or too little equality between people in the US?
  - Is economic equality a good thing? To what extent?



- Do you think society should focus more on supporting people with the most potential or helping those least able to take care of themselves?
- Do you think that people who move to the US from other countries should have the same rights to social benefits as everyone else?

## **Unemployment**

- Do you think that it is important that public support is provided for people when they are unemployed?
  - Unemployment benefit is funded through pay-roll tax - do you think that people should buy their own insurance instead?
  - On the other hand, should anyone not have the right to unemployment benefits?
- Unemployed people without income can receive Food Stamps (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families if they qualify. What do you think of these benefits?
  - What do you think it is like to raise a family on TANF and SNAP?
- For how long should the government keep providing for people who are unable to provide for themselves?

- What about drug addicts? Criminals?
- What kinds of reasons do you know for people ending up without a job?

## **Education**

- Everyone can receive free or low cost public education in the US – what do you think about that?
- Many schools are run by local government, some by non-profit organizations and others are run for profit. Who do you think should run the schools and why?
  - How does it make you feel that some can afford to pay for private education while others cannot?
  - Who do you think go to private schools
  - Who do you think go to public schools
  - Are public schools important?
- Do you think the educational system is a fair system?
  - Do you think some people get inadequate education due to the system?

## **Health insurance**

- Do you have healthcare? Where from?
- What do you think about healthcare being part of your employment?
  - Some people are individually insured via a private insurance – is that preferable?
- Finally, some people who are unable to cover their own health expenses are covered by *medicare* and *medicaid* with government funding – are these good systems?
  - Is it important that there are systems to cover expenses for those who cannot afford healthcare?
  - Do you think the healthcare system is a fair system?
  - Do you think some people do not get any healthcare due to the system?

### **Overall redistribution**

- When people are in need – poor or sick – who do you think are responsible for taking care of them? Is it their own problem or should family, community, philanthropy or government be responsible?

## SUMMARY

The focus on individual responsibility in American social policy has meant that communities and extended family have historically been important sources of security in American society. However, since at least the 1950s, critics have considered the white American middle class as a proponent of an individualized mainstream culture that undermines the moral force of communities and extended families. The white American middle class thus appears exceptionally individualized with no sense of obligation towards fellow citizens, communities, or extended family.

Jacob Didia-Hansen interviewed 45 white middle-class Americans from the city of Boston, MA, in the liberal northeast and the city of Knoxville, TN, in the conservative south. He seeks to find out if the white middle class is as individualized and outer-directed as they are often portrayed.

His findings suggests that his interviewees appear very little outer-directed and that they are able to mobilize moral arguments rooted in their regional moral culture when discussing complex topics such as welfare, public education, community commitment, and family obligations. These findings call for more studies in the influence of regional moral culture in the moral lifeworlds of ordinary social actors.