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Moral Frictions: Ethics, Legitimacy and Creativity in Stem Cell Science

Organizations sometimes expand by encompassing goods traditionally deemed off-limits to instrumental action such as body-parts, children, cadavers or life. As a result, competing moral orders pervade markets and organizations. Studies of morals and markets show that organizational and occupational communities in contested areas defend one unique moral perspective in order to ensure public acceptance and organizational survival. However, this argument does not explain how competing moral orders might influence continuing action within these communities. Indeed as communities embed themselves within a strong moral perspective, they may be left with scant room for continuing creativity and change. For instance, organizational and occupational communities promoting a strong moral position may not create technologies at odds with the position they advocate. In this paper, I examine the U.S. Stem Cell community as a “trouble case” from this perspective: after advocating for the morality of using human embryos for research during many years, the community invented a technology which bypassed the use of human embryos. Drawing on data gathered through a 16-months ethnographic study of stem cell scientists, I find that while stem cell scientists presented a unified public front, they locally held diverse moral positions and embedded these views in the infrastructure of science by creating new technologies. In this case, local divergences over ethics shaped innovation and change. Moreover, the “dual ethics work” performed by scientists (public moral homogeneity alongside private heterogeneity) allowed them to maintain public legitimacy while exercising their capacity for innovation. This paper contributes to our understanding of the links between morals and organizations by showing that moral understandings are not just mobilized as post-hoc justifications of organizational products or practices but are integral to the constitution of these products and practices.