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“Can’t Put my Finger on It”: A Research Report on the Non-Existence and Meaninglessness of Sin

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Abstract

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Keywords

Research Report, Religion, Sin, Deviance, Meaning-Making

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“Can’t Put my Finger on It”: A Research Report on the Non-Existence and Meaninglessness of Sin

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This paper presents findings from an exploratory study of sin. Based on nine in-depth interviews with self-identified religious people, we demonstrate that respondents define sin as (1) nonconformity, (2) relative to other social realities, and (3) taught by moral authorities. In so doing, respondents’ definitions reveal that sin, despite its use to justify all types of social policies, is a social construction that has no established concrete meaning in daily life. In conclusion, we argue that social scientists would benefit greatly from systematic analyses of the meaning (lessness) and significance of sin in people’s lives as well as within existing social scientific literature, and propose avenues for research concerning this term. Keywords: Research Report, Religion, Sin, Deviance, Meaning-Making

In the process of working on another research project (e.g., Cragun, Sumerau, & Williams, 2015; Sumerau & Cragun, 2014; Sumerau, Cragun, & Mathers, 2015), the first and third authors observed that religious leaders often spoke about “sin,” “sinful behavior,” and the dangers of “sinning” on a regular basis without ever defining these terms. Intrigued by this observation, the first and third authors sought to ascertain what this term meant in both the Protestant religious tradition at the heart of the aforementioned study and existing social scientific literature. Unexpectedly, the first and third authors quickly learned that neither the religious tradition nor the social science literature provided an answer. Rather, in both cases the word drifted around without a definition as if people somehow naturally knew what it meant. Since people act towards things based on the meanings those things have for them (Blumer, 1969), the first and third author began to wonder what sin actually meant to religious people.

To this end, the first author began surveying research for any mention of the word sin, and analyzing such studies for meanings. In so doing, ze¹ came across studies in the 1970’s where researchers had proposed the need for understanding the meaning of sin (see, for example, Lyman, 1978; McConahay & Hough, 1973), but no follow up to these studies. Further, ze located research articles wherein scholars discussed the impact of sin upon individuals, social policies, minority rights, and other social arenas without ever actually defining what sin was for the organizations that and individuals who utilized this term (e.g.,

¹ Ze is a gender neutral pronoun (the possessive is Zir) that compliments gendered pronouns (i.e., he, she, her, his). The same way a cisgender man or woman may run, a transgender or non-binary person may run, and as a result one might say that he, she, or ze might run to include all possible subjects. For more information on trans-inclusive scholarship and writing, see Nowakowski, Sumerau, and Mathers, 2016; Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers, 2015.

Barton, 2012; Heath, 2012; Robinson and Spivey, 2007; Rose, 2005). Finally, the first author noted that discussion and analyses of the term was rare in social scientific and empirically-based journals, and again found that when used the term did not generally include a definition.

Surprised by these observations, the first author then decided to seek guidance from other researchers. To this end, ze began asking everyone ze encountered at conferences, workshops, and on academic message boards where to find a good definition of sin. Unfortunately, the results of these efforts mirrored the literature search wherein no one was able to offer a shared definition or a citation for such a definition that came from empirical study. Although some scholars vaguely suggested theology (i.e., an area of study where meanings of sin are regularly debated outside the context of people's lived experiences of religion, see Moon, 2004) and others pointed to "deviance" in general, no one offered a concrete definition of the term itself that people actually might use in concrete settings (for a similar critique of the studies in the 1970's, see Palencia-Roth, 1979). After all these efforts, the first author continued to ask the same question – how could a term that shows up in almost every political and policy debate exist almost completely unexplored in the social sciences? How could we not know what actual religious people think the term means?

Considering that the term "sin" is utilized in a wide variety of public policy debates to advance or forestall the advancement of many religious and non-religious people alike, it is safe to say this term carries some kind of meaning in both secular and religious ideological frameworks. While there is considerable disagreement about the origin of the term, many believe it to be a term initially created by religious traditions to serve religious ends (Lyman, 1978). Given this possibility, one would assume it would be impossible for non-religious people to sin or for public policies that effect religious and non-religious people to be justified through the use of a term that only has meaning within the context of religion. Even so, a casual glance at our world reveals that this term is often utilized well beyond the symbolic boundaries of any given religious tradition, which suggests that at some point the term became a "generic" (Schwable et al., 2000), "commonplace" (Goffman, 1963) or "unquestioned" (Kleinman, 2007) element of society.

Building on these insights, this manuscript begins the process of uncovering the meaning of sin among contemporary Americans. Specifically, we explore the ways religious people define sin in order to demonstrate the usefulness of developing a social scientific study of religious terminology as well as a social scientific understanding of sin. To this end, we elaborate the ways people breathe life into societal use of the term sin by granting it meaning in their own lives. Importantly, it is not our intent to suggest a universal meaning of sin, but rather to demonstrate some ways religious people define sin in contemporary America, which could be examined within and across other social settings, contexts, and populations (e.g., Becker, 1998; Prus, 1996; Schwalbe et al., 2000). In fact, our report repeats the call issued in the 1970's to take sin seriously as a social scientific concept in hopes that our discipline may be more ready and capable to build such a field at present.

Methods

In the absence of recent scholarship to draw upon, we adopted a "grounded theory" (Charmaz, 2006) approach to studying sin. Following Charmaz (2006), grounded theory relies upon researchers' establishing broad questions to capture "what is going on" in a certain situation or context, and then allowing the data to guide theoretical development in an organic manner. When starting with relatively few findings, for example, researchers may use semi-structured interviews in order to let respondents educate scholars on taken-for-granted ideas, practices, beliefs, and/or meanings. In so doing, researchers may develop definitions and

theories from the meaning making of ordinary people to bypass existing assumptions, prejudices, and biases within academic circles (Kleinman, 2007).

The findings in this research report derive from 9 semi-structured interviews conducted with people who identified as religious. The interviews were conducted by students participating in a qualitative methods course built around empirical study of religion. While students were granted the opportunity to add questions to the interview through dialogue and discussion, each interview began with the question, "What is sin?" Students began with this question, and then probed respondents for details and examples of what they defined as sin, sinful, or sin-related. The final sample was mostly white (7 of 9), mostly female (6 of 9), and mostly from economically privileged backgrounds (8 of 9), but most came from different Christian traditions (2 of 9 identified with Catholicism and 1 of the 9 identified as Hindu) and all but one identified as heterosexual. Interviews were conducted at a location chosen by respondents, and typically lasted between one and two hours. All interviews were tape recorded, and transcribed in full by the students, but the first author checked each recording and transcript to be certain of accuracy.

Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in an inductive manner. The second author coded all interviews in full searching for patterns and themes that emerged in the interviews. Specifically, the second author read through each line of interview transcript sorting out statements respondents made concerning the nature, definition, and existence of sin in the world. In so doing, she categorized these statements based on their shared or divergent themes. When a respondent noted that "sin is something that depends on your personal beliefs," for example, the second author sorted this as "sin is relative." Similarly, when a respondent noted that "sin comes from the lessons we get as children," the second author sorted this statement into a category labeled "sin is learned." This process continued throughout the data set, and resulted in a collection of categories.

Following Charmaz (2006), all three authors took the collection of categories and studied these statements. In so doing, we compared and contrasted different definitions and explanations offered by the respondents to create thematic categories evident throughout the data set. Further, we compared and contrasted categories from the initial round of coding in a second round of more focused coding in order to ascertain labels that most accurately captured the definitions in the data. While people offered different interpretations for the meaning of sin, for example, their interpretations (i.e., "it depends on the issue," "anything that's not socially acceptable," "not being a good person") could all be grouped together in a shared category (i.e., the three above all suggest the meaning of sin is relative or contextual).

During this process, we noted that people rarely offered explicit definitions of sin. Rather, they generally sought to define sin by explaining things they considered sinful. In so doing, they suggested that certain actions or behaviors were sinful because these were actions or behaviors they had learned to interpret as negative in relation to other social authorities, groups, or experiences. Building on this insight, the first author outlined a definition of what ultimately constituted sin from the initial codes and shared thematic categories created by the second author, which all three authors revised in a back and forth process in order to arrive at the ways people defined sin as (1) nonconformity, (2) relative, and (3) learned.

Results

Sin Is Nonconformity

Since interviewers (formally and in the field) simply asked respondents, “What is sin?” respondents were granted substantial leeway in defining the term without any prompt or direction. Despite giving respondents ample latitude in this process, all of their definitions of sin revolved around a single theme – nonconformity. Specifically, respondents defined sin as any activity that violated existing social, religious, or interpersonal norms. Importantly, respondents all began their definitions with vague statements, such as “its bad stuff” or “not being a good person,” and only offered more concrete examples and definitions after they were asked to clarify more specifically what they meant by these statements.

The first and most common form of nonconformity cited revolved around the violation of existing social norms. In some cases, as the following illustration reveals, respondents specifically defined sin as the violation of secular laws and rules: “I guess it’s doing something that’s unacceptable in humanity. I guess, like, if you’re going to rob a bank, kill someone, anything that could get you in trouble with the law I guess is sin. Just what’s not socially acceptable.” Echoing this notion of sin as the violation of secular rules, another respondent said:

Anything that’s not socially acceptable in the world, like we’ve been taught that if you murder somebody you’re going to go to jail, you take something that is not your property, you’re going to get in trouble for it. Everything you have, you did the work for it, you did the hard work to earn it.

While stealing and murder are also cited in religious sources as unwelcome behavior, it is telling both that respondents cited secular laws more often than religious ones, and that other behaviors not explicitly noted in religious sources, like the following statement shows, often arose as well:

Like, if someone did something wrong yes they would get stared at for doing it, but if no one was around to see it, they would still feel resentment. That feeling of resentment is a response to sinning. Anything that expresses deviant behavior, if you think about doing something and whether or not it is right or wrong it’s probably not the right decision. Offending someone, it’s almost like your conscious is a monitor for our morality.

As these illustrations reveal, sin was simply a code word for violating secular conventions. On a deeper level, however, these illustrations also reveal the power the term has whether or not it contains a concrete meaning. The feelings of “resentment” or the expectation of “morality” noted at times in our respondents’ statements suggest, regardless of meaning, belief in the existence of sin or actions deemed sinful can have important repercussions for people (see Barton 2012 for an in-depth analysis of this point in relation to sexual actions deemed sinful).

Alongside the violation of secular norms, respondents also defined sin as a form of excess. Considering the emphasis upon restraint and politeness in contemporary American society (Warner, 1999), these definitions framed sin as a violation of interpersonal social norms. In fact, as the following statement reveals, the unwillingness to “control” or “restrain” one’s behavior lies at the heart of sin:

Taking one more sip of coffee, if coffee is a sin; drink this much, take that last sip, it sends you over the edge. No! And I think the sin is if you're doing something harmful to yourself or to somebody else, and you don't rectify it, that is a sin.

Another respondent noted: "Maybe being deceitful or trying to have your way." Worded differently, another respondent suggested something very similar: "I am really not sure, but um, I guess that other people would view it as being arrogant and not caring about others." Another respondent explicitly tied sin to politeness: "anything offensive that does not abide by a culture's rules." The idea of caring was echoed in this comment by another respondent: "the meaning of sin for me is like not being a good person, like one of the biggest things that was emphasized was always to be a good neighbor." In all such cases, people defined sin as simply failing to conform to existing interpersonal assumptions of acceptable and "decent" self-presentation (see also Goffman, 1959, 1963). Stated another way, "sin" was a code word for any behavior labeled as "deviant" (Becker, 1963) within society.

Although interpersonal and social norms were the primary focus, some respondents did echo common assumptions that sin was a violation of religious rules. In so doing, respondents demonstrated a secular expansion in the meaning of sin by only sometimes tying it to religious edicts or codes. Both Catholic respondents, for example, initially defined sin as simply the violation of the Ten Commandments. Similarly, a Protestant respondent noted: "The meaning of sin is the disobedience of God's word. If you think about it there's only one law." Another one noted: "When you're talking about sin it's different from the actual law that people have in society because sin actually comes from the Bible and sin is not abiding by God's rules." As another respondent put it: "I believe the meaning of sin is breaking one of God's commandments and going against him – I try very hard not to take the Lord's name in vain. I never put any other God before me; he's my God and that's it." While these respondents defined sin in relation to their religion explicitly, it is noteworthy that even their definitions suggested that sinning basically meant failing to conform to or obey existing rules.

Rather than offering universal or concrete definitions of the term, our respondents defined sin as nonconformity. Whether one violated secular norms, interpersonal patterns of interaction, or religious commandments, the ultimate ingredient that made an act sinful was the inability or unwillingness to obey existing notions of appropriate behavior. As a result, it appears that sin, like so many other systems of meaning and interpretation (see Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959), has become a catchall term for people to explain activities one disagrees with or finds uncomfortable for one reason or another whether or not one ties this term to religious beliefs, practices, or traditions explicitly (see also Lyman, 1978).

In fact, the secondary nature of religion in our respondents' statements opens an interesting set of questions for social science. Researchers interested in historical meaning making, for example, might ask: if the soul is the prison of the body (Foucault, 1977), do beliefs about sin represent the bars on the cage? In fact, the feelings expressed in relation to this term suggest that even if people define sin as nonconformity, the reach of this definition – and the term itself more broadly – suggest there may be many complexities and nuances to be revealed via the development of systematic studies of sin. One might ask, for example, at what point does nonconformity become sin and in what ways do non-conformist actions deemed sinful differ from those not given this label. While we are unable to tease out such nuances in this exploratory study, these questions suggest the development of a social scientific study of sin could be incredibly useful for understanding the complexities of contemporary religious experience. In a similar fashion, researchers seeking to understand the historical subordination of any minority group in terms of morals and values might learn a great deal from the beliefs about sin in a specific historic or situational context and the ways these beliefs relate to minority

(or other non-conformist) experiences. Finally, researchers seeking to expose the ways meanings shape inequalities might find sin – and other religious terms – to be a fruitful foundation on which to build examinations of the ways meanings are used to distinguish the moral character of some at the expense of others (see also Goffman, 1963).

Sin Is Relative

Since sin has no concrete or universal meaning that our respondents could locate or explain in everyday terms, it's likely that the meaning of sin will vary across time and space. Like other conceptualizations of conformity and norm violation, the meaning of sin relies upon ongoing processes of interaction and interpretation wherein people define some things positively and other things negatively (Goffman, 1963). While sin may well vary in relation to infinite social conditions, time periods, situations, settings, and systems of meaning, our respondents offered a starting place for exploring such variation by noting sin's relativity to religions, families, individuals, the magnitude of the norm violation, and the level of one's faith. In this section, we outline these variations to provide a starting point for examinations of the ways sin may vary within and between societal contexts, time periods, and structures.

Respondents regularly noted that the meaning of sin varied by religious tradition. As one respondent noted when explaining Catholic versions of sin in relation to other religions:

Sin is everything that goes against your religion, every negative connotation that goes against a religion. 'Cause like how I think of sin you go to confessional the first thing they say is forgive me father for I have sinned, but I never completely understood what is defined as sin because everything could be considered a sin.

Another noted: "It's kind of hard to answer because if you look at someone else's religion or an arranged marriage, that's just how cultures are run differently. We have the freedom to choose who we're going to marry and stuff like that. So I guess that's sin, it can really change." In such statements, respondents noted that different versions of sin existed in different religions and contexts, and thus suggested the meaning of sin was relative to a specific tradition or culture.

Our respondents also suggested that sin varied in relation to families and individuals. In terms of families, as the following illustration suggests, different members could adopt different meanings for the term: "Like between me and my brother, he talks to my mother sometimes disrespectfully and I know he has stole stuff, you know those are sins and we were raised by the same person and he just feels they are not." Similarly, respondents, like the next illustration reveals, noted that individuals in any context could disagree on the meaning of sin: "I feel like everyone has their own personal definition of sin." Another respondent added: "Maybe some people see that lying is sin, but it can be like a white lie is not that bad of a thing or something like that." These comments indicate that respondents did not share a universal meaning of sin and that people create their own definitions of this term.

Another variation noted by our respondents involved the magnitude of the sin and the level of faith of the person sinning. In terms of magnitude, for example, respondents, like the following illustration, generally believed some sins were worse than others but offered no rationale behind this distinction: "Murder's the biggest sin, but being unfaithful in a relationship is definitely one, you know, there's always two sides and everything." Another respondent noted: "Like my sins weren't bad, my sins were, like, I said a curse word. It was a different kind of sin because I was a kid." Respondents also suggested that a person's level of faith helped determine what constituted sin: "If you're a firm believer, then it's going to be a sin you're feeling. Like I'm not a firm believer, so I'd have to say no." Another respondent

echoed this idea after defining dating outside their religion as a sin: “So, yeah, I guess it depends on how strict on religion you are.” Whereas all our respondents believed there were sins, they suggested that sins carried different levels of immorality, and that what constituted a sin would depend upon just how religious someone was in the first place.

Our respondents thus defined sin as a relative term that could shift and change depending on the situation and/or person examined. As a result, social scientific understandings of sin may require exploring the myriad ways people make sense of sin in varied situational, social, and historical contexts while comparing these strategies of meaning making to that of other people in different social locations. In fact, this finding suggests that, in much the same way social researchers have noted in relation to minority terminologies (Collins, 2005), people listening to the invocation of sin by politicians, religious leaders, and others may only be hearing what their definition of the term is, and may therefore have no clue what the speaker is intending to say.

Sin Is Learned

If sin has no universal meaning and is relative to many social variables, then one would expect that sin is a socially constructed artifact of human interaction and interpretation (see, e.g., Goffman, 1959). As a result, people must be learning specific definitions of this term from somewhere, and in so doing, establishing their own baseline understanding of the concept. Our respondents suggested this is exactly what is happening. Specifically, our respondents noted that sin was learned from churches, families, and experiences. In this section we outline the education efforts of “teachers of sin.”

The most common place where respondents learned about sin was in the churches of their youth. Although none of them recalled their churches actually defining the term explicitly, each one believed, as the following respondent notes, they “must have” heard about it there: “I don’t remember too much of my childhood but I would imagine I heard about it in Sunday school.” Another respondent noted: “Like I would misbehave in church, and I learned what sin is sitting in church.” Within the context of the church, some respondents, like in the following instance, recalled lessons on sin: “Because if I follow any other religion that would be considered adultery and that is actually a sin.” Others recalled the meaning of sin arising from rituals in church: “Like after Ash Wednesday, not eating meat. That’s supposed to be a sin in my religion.” Another respondent noted: “I guess the Catholic stuff, like you break one of the commandments, you have the potential to go to hell. Then once you go to confession and confess to the priest, and he says prayer. You know, like you say a couple prayers, supposedly he does a little magic trick and says oh hey it’s over.” According to our respondents, church was the location where they were first introduced to sin.

Whereas our respondents suggested churches taught them about sin, a review of their definitions suggests there may be more to this story. Since they generally understood sin as any form of deviance, it is likely that they actually first learned about deviance within their homes and from their families (Cahill, 1987). However, what churches taught them involved learning to see “deviance” as “sin,” and thus equating non-conformity with damnation, judgment and punishment instead of simply variation or potential ridicule (Goffman, 1963). Respondents likely learned not to deviate growing up in their homes, learned deviation is sinful and has disastrous eternal and social consequences from their churches, and then began to generalize deviance (and in some cases, maybe all deviance) as evidence of sin. Respondents’ other memories about teachers of sin support this suggestion by emphasizing the role of families and ongoing experience with non-conformity.

Specifically, respondents often cited the family as another common educational resource for learning about sin. In so doing, they generally recalled, like the next example, that

parents had been their source of information on sin: “I would say from what I’ve been taught growing up. You know all the different things you’ve been told by your parents.” Another added: “My parents tell me not to sin, whether it’s a religious view of sin or not a religious view, and that I know right from wrong. You know, like I know what’s not socially acceptable and how I can get into trouble.” Respondents mentioned parents, siblings, and grandparents as rather common sources for learning what was and was not sinful in their early lives.

Importantly, our respondents noted that experience generally continued their education on sin throughout their lives. They noted that once they were exposed to ideas of sin, they, as evidenced in the next few examples, saw sin everywhere: “I feel like sin impacts me almost every day. I always try and avoid doing wrong things. Not because of my fear that God will judge me, but because of my fear I will judge myself.” Another respondent added: “I feel like we’re all sinners. We’re born sinners, but we try to clean ourselves in a way through baptism and stuff like that, but like we have a sinful nature.” It is noteworthy that this example both demonstrates developing or learning about sin over time, and a potential expression of what sin could mean to a given individual (i.e., sin as an attribute embedded in humans from birth). As is common with other patterns of interpretation and action (Goffman, 1959), people may express various understandings of sin at the same time in their statements. In so doing, they may also note where and how sin appears in such processes. As another noted: “I see sin almost every day in my mind. It may not be through actions but I can almost tell people are constantly judging just by the expressions on their face.” Echoing studies of religious socialization processes (Thumma, 1991) and other forms of deviance (Becker, 1963), our respondents first learned about sin from churches and parents (i.e., trusted authorities, see Cahill, 1987), but then later developed a degree of expertise in classifying actions, behaviors, and thoughts as sin and, as a result, observed sin in contexts other than religion and the home. Further, they learned to disengage notions of sin from the very religious sources where they first understood the term, which allowed them to view all interactions through the lens of religious teaching about non-conformity and the dangers of difference.

Like all other humanly created concepts (Schwalbe et al., 2000), the meaning of sin held by our respondents emerged from the lessons they received from trusted authorities. Sin was part of the lesson plans whereby churches and presumably religious parents socialized their children, and thus became frameworks whereby our respondents made sense of the world around them. As a result, social scientific understandings of sin – and by extension religious experience writ large – may require analyzing the lessons children receive from parents, churches, and other sources about conformity, obedience, and moral behavior (Cahill, 1987) as well as how that is socially constructed into the concept of sin. Such analyses might equally reveal insights into both the religious development of children, and religious adults’ responses to social issues.

The recognition that sin is a taught or learned behavior, however, also has wider implications. Raised in conservative religious traditions, for example, the first and third authors, like many other religious people, learned that no one – except maybe Jesus or Mother Mary in some traditions – was free of sin. While this line of thought might be defensible if (a) there was some universal notion of sin or (b) sin was not a taught or learned behavior, our respondents suggest that anyone who has yet to be taught about sin would live a sinless life and be free from sin. The second author, for example, had no clue what sin meant or why it was important in politics because his parents had never taught him to see the world through the use of this term. Similarly, the third author is currently co-parenting a child in a non-religious fashion wherein the child has no concept of sin and, since his parents do not believe in sin, has no chance of committing any sins (e.g., experiencing non-conformity as explained via the use of the word sin). It would thus appear there may be a multitude of sinless beings scattered throughout the world due to the simple fact that not everyone is taught this term.

While it may seem simple to note that one who does not have exposure to the idea of “sin” would be unable to speak or act in relation to such a term themselves, this reality is intriguing considering that many people (like some of our respondents above) are taught that all people are sinners, that all people may sin, or that any action deemed untoward may be regarded as sin. While it is beyond the scope of our exploratory study, this situation raises interesting questions yet to be discussed in social scientific literature. For example, what happens when someone who believes in sin (however defined) interacts with someone who does not? What cognitive and interactional processes might the believer and the nonbeliever engage in to make sense of this distinction in the midst of their interactions with others? How might meeting someone unfamiliar with sin influence the definition and interpretation of someone who deeply believes in the concept and how might this influence work in the other direction? Additionally, once people realize that sin is socially constructed, can this lead to the realization that they, too, are sinless, since they may no longer endow the word “sin” with any meaning? These questions are especially relevant in societies where nonreligious populations are growing and becoming more visible (Hammer et al., 2012). These may be important questions for social scientists to begin grappling with in the coming years.

Limitations

Although our analysis above represents the first attempt at establishing empirical definitions of the term sin, our results should be approached as possibilities for further study rather than viewed as comprehensive or exhaustive. As an exploratory study investigating the ways people organically define sin in their own terms and with their own life experiences, we are able to draw out patterns that may be common in future studies of varied populations (see Schwalbe et al., 2000), but we are unable to generalize these findings to any specific given population. In fact, the primary finding from our analysis is that sin is likely much more complicated, nuanced, and in need of systematic study than its relative absence in existing literature would suggest.

It is with these thoughts in mind that we must note both the rigor our study offers by staying as close as possible to the illustrations and interpretations of everyday people in natural settings (Charmaz, 2006), and the limited transferability of our findings as a result. On the one hand, our findings (sin as nonconformity, relative, and learned) may be explored in the cases of other people in various settings and situations, and thus provide a foundational set of hypotheses for analyses. On the other hand, only systematic study of varied populations utilizing and interpreting the term sin will allow us to develop overarching theoretical understandings of the operation, nuance, and / or diversity of such definitions in relation to the categories we found in this case. We provide here a baseline observation of how some people define sin in contemporary American society, but caution readers against extrapolating these findings broadly at present. Rather, we encourage readers to build upon this work by elaborating other potential themes in the definition of sin, testing and comparing variation in such definitions and definitional efforts, and ascertaining the origins and transformations of such definitions within and between populations over time. Simply put, we offer a first case in this potential area of study, but it remains one case and primarily directs our attention to the usefulness of developing a systematic social scientific study of sin.

Conclusions

In this exploratory report, we set out to begin the process of elaborating the social construction and meaning of sin in contemporary society. Rather than offering concrete or universal definitions of the term, however, our respondents revealed sin could in fact mean

anything, and as a result, it ultimately means nothing when removed from concrete activities. In other words, our respondents defined sin as a description of social nonconformity, explained that what counted as sin varies greatly in relation to many different aspects of social life, and demonstrated that the meaning of sin is something one must be taught by trusted others. Our findings suggest that much political decision-making, social policy, and religious experience is ultimately the product of ongoing demands for social conformity via the marginalization of anything perceived to be different from religious social norms. In simple terms, sin may be deeply meaningful or completely meaningless depending on the background, interpretation, setting, and context of the person or group that encounters the term. This realization suggests it may be very important to develop systematic studies of what sin means in a wide variety of contexts and to a wide variety of populations.

To this end, we may do well to look to past scholarship wherein people built fields of understanding concerning terms and ideas regularly circulating in given social worlds. Building on the traditions of other scholars who revealed the taken-for-granted use of socially constructed terms (see Goffman, 1963), for example, an important line of inquiry could thus be developed by explicating the widespread use of sin to marginalize “difference” in contemporary American society (see also Barton, 2012). On the one hand, researchers could explore the ways “sin” becomes entangled with interlocking systems of oppression, such as race, class, gender, cisnormativity, sexuality, age, nationality, and ability. Such research might importantly demonstrate the role of religion in maintaining or challenging widespread social inequalities. On the other hand, researchers could explore the ways “sin” is used to marginalize departures from “respectable” or “appropriate” styles of interaction (Goffman, 1959), such as notions of professionalism, politeness, and responsibility. Such research could illuminate the ways “taken-for-granted” religious terms (like sin) influence a wide variety of behaviors, beliefs, and interpretations of the social world in positive or negative ways.

As such, one could easily argue that the relative nature of sin in contemporary society might be very good for some and deeply harmful for others. For those in power seeking to maintain privilege, for example, a concept that can ultimately mean anything and encourage obedience offers an incredibly powerful tool of social control and norm maintenance since authorities can adjust the definition any time a new threat to the status quo emerges. Further, by creating a definition of sin that requires “treatment,” religions can both poison their followers (e.g., teach them they are in need of salvation because they are unclean or damaged) *and* provide the antidote (e.g., maintain religion in the world by “treating” the afflictions they initially gave to their followers), which may create a cycle wherein people believe they need religion precisely because religious people taught them they needed religion in the first place (see also Cragun, Sumerau, & Williams, 2015).

For the famous masses Marx spoke of, on the other hand, the flexible nature of sin means that any and all attempts at social change, nonconformity, or difference may well expect immediate moral outrage, backlash, and scorn. This realization may hold tremendous insights into both the continuous transformations within and between religious systems of meaning over time, and the historical patterns whereby every minority population – at one time or another – has garnered the condemnation of mainstream authorities. As our respondents demonstrate, the meaning of sin is contextual, and thus the context of broader social debates and conflicts may find voice within shifting or static meanings of sin. This observation suggests that social scientists may learn about important nuances (both positive and negative) in relation to social movements for and against change by exploring the ways everyday people are taught to make sense of sin in a wide variety of ways.

For example, we may note the absence of active religious concern about homosexuality prior to the 1940’s, the shift to explicit condemnation of homosexuality throughout the following six decades, and the current softening of language about homosexuality while

maintaining opposition to this “lifestyle,” which mirrors the emergence of active non-heterosexual social movements in the 1920’s, the increased public presence and protests of these groups throughout the next six decades, and the lessening opposition to these groups at present (e.g., Sumerau & Cragun, 2016; Sumerau & Cragun, 2014; Wilcox, 2001). When homosexuality was hidden from sight, religions did not mention it much less take the time to define it as sinful, but when it emerged in the mainstream, religions defined it as a sin and only softened their attacks as homosexuality came to be seen as less and less deviant. By examining people’s definitions of sin, researchers could watch as similar debates begin within and between social groups concerning bisexuality and transgender experience (see Sumerau et al., 2015). In so doing, researchers might be able to map the notions of sin – like those shared by our respondents – do or do not change in relation to these wider cultural debates. While history is littered with such examples of religious reactions to shifting notions of deviance within and between societies, all such cases rely upon what religions define as sinful and how these definitions shift over time in relation to dominant social norms. As a result, unraveling and critiquing the meanings and uses of religious terms like sin may represent a powerful opportunity to better understand the mechanisms whereby religion operates and contributes to social organization across time and space.

To unleash this power, however, will require developing social scientific approaches to taken-for-granted religious terms. Since such terms are, as our respondents note in relation to sin, ultimately taught to people by trusted authorities, researchers could lead this charge by unpacking the meanings of such terms in the lives of everyday people, exploring the use of such terms by trusted authorities, and explicating the messages received by the public when such terms are used. Further, researchers could examine the ways that existing social systems shape the meanings of sin and other religious terms in varied situations and social contexts (cf. Josephson, 2012). Finally, researchers should observe situations wherein religious terms like sin are more or less relevant as well as the ways people respond to assertions that their behavior is or is not sinful, moral, or otherwise religiously relevant.

Whereas only systematic research can tell us what sin actually means throughout our social landscape, we suggest that sin and other religious terms could represent “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer, 1969) that compel people to act and interpret social objects in specific ways. Further, a social scientific study of sin could render such meaning systems visible, and in so doing, researchers could reveal taken-for-granted systems of meaning by proposing alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and being for all religious and nonreligious people. While our exploratory story offers an opening to this type of analysis, the development of a social scientific understanding of sin will ultimately require exploring variations, nuances, and complexities surrounding the term sin in a wide variety of contexts, populations, and settings. As our respondents’ definitions suggest, there may be much to learn about the meaning of sin in the lives of everyday people and the ways such people interact with the broader social world.

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