Moral Psychology Fieldwork

Based on assignment from Haidt’s own course in moral psychology

Your assignment is to step out of your moral matrix and into another. Immerse yourself in a network of meanings and values that conflicts with your own. Seek out people who are expressing heartfelt moral convictions, ideally in a group, and pretend that you are an anthropologist trying to understand them accurately and fairly. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz said that the goal of fieldwork is not to become a native but to converse with the natives, and in the process, to "figure out what the devil they think they are up to."

You should start thinking right away about what moral world you’ll study. You should check your plan with me first. You should find a way to observe a group in action, ideally with you as a participant or close observer. For example, you might go to a church service of a denomination that you expect to dislike, or you might attend a meeting of a student group or local political organization whose agenda you oppose. Whatever you do, you should try to talk with people individually, ideally after the main meeting, to further your understanding. Be bold, take social risks, but be careful that you don’t hurt or offend the people you are trying to learn from.

You can either write this up or, better, share it with the class. If you do choose to write it up, here are instructions:

No need for an introduction. Just write and clearly label 2 sections:

1) Observations. The first section should be purely descriptive, no evaluation and only minimal interpretation (if necessary to present the observations). What did you see, read, or hear? If you attended an event, describe it as though you were an anthropologist. If you conducted a semi-structured interview with several people, include the questions you asked, along with the responses (perhaps in short summary form).

2) The Moral Matrix. The second section should attempt to extract or describe the underlying moral worldview or commitments of the people/group you studied. You should present them as sympathetically as possible, in a form that THEY might recognize as a fair statement of what they are up to, and of why they say and believe the things that they do. But then be sure to go deeper; try to figure out why or how they came to have the particular moral matrix they have, when others nearby have a different one.

There is no fixed length for your report.