

Trade practices key in deciding a trade's moral legitimacy

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Los Angeles, CA (JULY 28, 2011) How goods are traded, not just what is traded, is a principal consideration when deciding the legitimacy of a particular industry, according to a study recently published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, a SAGE journal.

This study examined commerce in human cadavers for [medical education](#) and research in the US to explore variations in [trade](#) legitimacy. The study's findings shed light on the micro-foundations of market legitimization and on the role of morals in sustaining professional jurisdictions.

Commerce in human cadavers was created by medical schools that trained future doctors in anatomy, requiring the dissection of a cadaver. Finding an adequate supply of cadavers for this purpose is an ongoing challenge, one which has been answered by both academically-housed programs and by independent, for- and non-profit ventures that are not affiliated with higher education or [research institutions](#).

To understand how the commerce in cadavers operates, and how markets are rendered [moral](#) or immoral, researchers visited and observed programs, interviewing almost fifty cadaver market participants. Then the data was analyzed in-depth.

The research found that cadaver marketing professionals rely on narrative distinctions to differentiate their own pursuit from alternative spheres of commerce. Additionally, as a way to build legitimacy into

their industry, they endorse proper practices, while discouraging what they consider inappropriate cadaver trading, including charging procurement fees in excess of actual costs and acquiring cadavers through families' consent instead of the actual donor's consent.

The study challenges the usual view on morals and markets by shifting the focus of moral assessment away from the good itself toward the practice of trade. This study showed that how trades are conducted can also render markets moral. Assuming that proper practices of trade can be enforced, the focus on categories of goods might give way to a more practice-based view of moral markets—one relying on practices of trade to guide moral action.

"Though commerce in cadavers is an extreme setting in which to study markets," concludes the article's author, Harvard University's Michel Anteby, "the relationship between practices of trade and morality is likely to apply to other markets as well. The category of traded goods is generally considered when assessing a market's moral legitimacy, but it only constitutes a starting point. A market's legitimacy is also defined by how trades are conducted."

More information: [doi: 10.2189/asqu.2010.55.4.606](https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2010.55.4.606)

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