

# Moral functioning as mediated action

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In this paper, I argue that it is quite useful, both theoretically and empirically, to adopt a socio-cultural approach to the study of moral development. This entails viewing 'moral functioning' as a form of mediated action, and moral development as the process by which persons gradually appropriate a variety of 'moral mediational means'. Mediated action entails two central elements: an 'agent', the person who is doing the acting, on the one hand, and 'cultural tools' or 'mediational means', the tools, means, or 'instruments', appropriated from the culture, and used by the agent to accomplish a given action, on the other. I make this argument drawing on recent work in socio-cultural psychology, specifically the work of James Wertsch (1998). I also consider the work of both Carol Gilligan (1982) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984) as illustrative examples, to show how their respective insights about moral functioning and the process of moral development can be interpreted from, and enriched by, a mediated action/socio-cultural perspective.

Karen, a White college student (aged 18) attending a private university in New England, when asked to describe a real-life moral conflict or dilemma she has recently faced, talks about an approaching situation in which she and two of her room mates will have to decide whether or not to tell their fourth room mate, with whom no one gets along, that they do not want to share a room with her next year:

Karen: It's not for a while yet, but I don't know how it's going to be resolved, because on the one hand, we really should say, 'yes, you can be roommates with us, and that is fine', but on the other hand, we don't get along, we argue and we fight...it's not a good situation. It would be much better for everyone, much happier, if she could find another place to live, but I don't know how you could say that. I haven't looked at this from my Kantian point of view, and I should probably consider it [smiles], but ...

Interviewer: What are the conflicts in this for you?

Karen: The conflict is that I don't want to hurt her, *we* don't want to hurt her, but it will probably be me because I am kind of caught between the two. The others really don't want her and they don't care whether or not she is hurt or not. But I am afraid if we said 'we don't really want you to room with us' she is going to

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be hurt, or we will violate her humanity ... that we are not respecting her by saying that or something.

Interviewer: Can you say more about that?

Karen: Well, in a way we are rejecting her and not being fair to her because she deserves to be a part, you know. On the other hand, since we don't get along, it's not hurting her, we are almost respecting her more ... I don't know. Do you see what I mean? We are saying that we don't get along and let's respect each other's happiness and contentment of mind and not try to force this, but on the other hand, I think that most people, if they had three room mates and the three room mates said, 'we don't want you', that is not going to be seen as a sign of respect, it will be seen as a sign of 'we don't like you, we don't think you are good enough', and rejecting her. In that sense, it is not really fair of us to do. On the other hand, it is not fair to anyone to make her stay with us. Also ... if we deprive her of rooming with us, she may have to room with complete strangers next year. That is not really fair to her.

Interviewer: Could you say more about the fairness involved?

Karen: She would probably get into a room that would have ... she would be an outsider again, while she is now one of us ...

Interviewer: So how would you put your 'Kantian point of view to work on this?

Karen: I would probably try to think that if I were in her position, what I think I would do ... And in that sense I would be saying that if I were in her position, and I were rooming with three people with whom I did not get along, and they were kind of talking about next year, I would try looking for new friends, or start trying to make myself more compatible. And at the same time, we are in a way respecting her human dignity by saying that, you know, if we continue living together for the next four years, we will really not be respecting each other at all by the time those four years are over, you know. And so, we should come to a different situation out of this effect. I guess that's what I would say. But something just doesn't seem right in saying to another person, 'no, you can't room with us next year'.

Interviewer: Why doesn't that seem right?

Karen: I don't *know*, I just feel really bad about it. I'm not sure why.

Like many in the field of moral development, I have spent a significant amount of time and energy trying to interpret and understand what people, like Karen, say in interviews like this. Such interviews are captivating and absorbing because they provide a glimpse of the moral life, of lived moral experience, that is, and should be, the primary focus for those interested in moral psychology and moral development (Tappan, 1990). But such interviews obviously do not speak for themselves, and thus some theoretical frame must be brought to bear, some stance taken, some decisions made, in order to make sense of any given interview text.

Although I was trained as a cognitive-developmental psychologist to focus on the structures and stages of justice reasoning evident in such interviews (see Kohlberg, 1981, 1984), for a number of years now I have been exploring approaches to the study of moral development that extend, enrich and sometimes even challenge this perspective (see Tappan, 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2005a, 2005b; Day & Tappan, 1996). I have been particularly interested in the so-called *socio-cultural* approach, because although it has not been widely employed in the field of moral development to date (see, however, Crawford, 2001), I believe that this approach has much to offer those interested in studying the dynamics and vicissitudes of moral development across the lifespan.

A socio-cultural perspective, inspired by the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and his colleagues and contemporaries writing in Russia in the early decades of the Soviet era (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981), seeks to explore the *relationship* between the individual and the social, cultural, historical and institutional contexts in which the individual lives (see Wertsch, 1991; Cole, 1996). Specifically, it seeks to understand the way in which social/cultural/historical/institutional ‘artifacts’, ‘tools’, or ‘symbols’ *mediate* individual moral functioning.

Central to the version of this perspective that I want to explore in this paper is the notion that human *action*, rather than ‘cognition’, ‘emotion’, or even ‘mental functioning’, should be the primary unit of analysis, ‘the fundamental object to be described and interpreted’ (Wertsch, 1995, p. 61) in any developmental inquiry. More specifically, this perspective focuses attention on ‘mediated action’ (Wertsch, 1998). Mediated action entails two central elements: an ‘agent’ – the person who is doing the acting – and specific ‘cultural tools’ or ‘mediational means’ – the tools, means, or instruments, appropriated from the culture, and then used by the agent to accomplish the action in question.

This focus, on agents acting with the use of cultural resources and tools, which serve as the mediators of action, ultimately shifts our understanding of the goals of developmental inquiry:

One consequence of taking this perspective is that the very notion of agent comes to be redefined. Instead of assuming that individuals, acting alone, are the agents of actions, the appropriate designation of agent is ‘individual-acting-with-mediational-means’. It is only by using this designation that we can hope to provide an adequate response to the underlying question, Who is it who carried out the action ...? (Wertsch., 1995, p. 64)

Working with, and elaborating, these and related ideas, my aim in this paper is to argue that it is quite useful, both theoretically and empirically, to view ‘moral functioning’ as a form of mediated action, and moral development as the process by which persons gradually acquire and use a variety of ‘moral mediational means’. In so doing, I hope to take another step toward a more comprehensive and fully elaborated socio-cultural approach to the study of moral development.

In constructing such an argument, I will first sketch a general description of the concept of mediated action, as well as a preliminary conception of moral functioning as mediated action. I will then turn to the work of both Carol Gilligan (1982, 1983)

and Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984), as illustrative examples, to show their respective insights about moral functioning and the process of moral development can be interpreted from, and enriched by, a mediated action perspective. Finally, I will conclude with some brief reflections on questions left unanswered, and speculations about future directions for both theory and practice based on an understanding of moral functioning as mediated action.

### **What is mediated action?**

The concept of mediated action has been explored and articulated most fully by James Wertsch (1991, 1995, 1998). Wertsch (1998) argues that the goal of *socio-cultural* inquiry, in contrast to strictly psychological inquiry, is to understand the relationship between the individual and the social, cultural, historical and institutional contexts in which the individual lives. To accomplish this goal, he suggests, we must be careful not to limit our focus to individual mental functioning, on the one hand, or to the social/cultural/historical setting, on the other. Rather, we must find a way to ‘live in the middle’, to focus on both the personal and the systemic, and thus to avoid the tension between the individual and society, and the perils of both individualistic and social reductionism, that have plagued us for generations (p. 17).

Wertsch (1998) proposes that the notion of mediated action provides the most useful way to ‘live in the middle’. Mediated action, as I have indicated above, entails two central elements: an ‘agent’ and specific ‘cultural tools’ or ‘mediational means’. Understanding that virtually all human action is mediated action therefore involves focusing on both agent *and* agency, on both ‘what person or kind of person performed the act’ in question, *and* ‘what means or instruments she used’ (p. 24).

Wertsch (1998) provides a number of examples to illustrate mediated action and its properties. One is the track and field event of pole vaulting. The modern event of pole vaulting involves a vaulter running down a 125-foot runway with a fibre glass pole in his/her hands, planting the pole in a vaulting box at the end of the runway, and using the pole and his/her momentum to carry him/herself off the ground and over a bar that can be as much as 20 feet above the ground (Wertsch, 1995, 1998). Even though vaulting over a bar 20 feet in the air may appear, at first glance, to be an individual achievement, when it is considered as a form of mediated action it illustrates the impossibility of separating the individual agent (the vaulter) and her cultural tool (the pole):

On the one hand, the pole by itself does not magically propel vaulters over a cross bar; it must be skillfully used by the vaulter. On the other hand, a vaulter without a pole or with an inappropriate pole is incapable of participating in the event, or at best can participate at less than an optimal level of performance. (Wertsch, 1995, p. 66)

But there is more to this example, as there is to all forms of mediated action. That is, the mediational means employed by a pole vaulter when s/he successfully vaults over a bar 20 feet in the air are not limited to the physical tool of the pole. Rather, there are a host of other cultural tools – primarily linguistic or semiotic tools – that a

vaulter employs. These include information from books and videos about how to pole vault, guidance and direction from coaches about style and technique, etc. This guidance and direction, moreover, may even be experienced as a specific voice or voices that the vaulter ‘hears’ in his/her mind, perhaps without even being fully conscious of it, while s/he is vaulting (‘Hold your hands this way, take this many steps, don’t look at the bar, etc.’). In any case, the point here is that a vaulter employs a variety of mediational means, both physical and linguistic, when engaged in his/her sport. Thus one should not assume that any given form of mediated action employs only one kind of cultural tool; in fact, mediated action typically entails multiple mediational means of various kinds (Wertsch, 1998).

So, how are cultural tools/mediational means acquired? They are *appropriated*. The notion of ‘appropriation’ is employed here, rather than the more commonly used term, ‘internalization’ (see Vygotsky, 1978), to ensure that the process by which individuals acquire cultural tools is *not* viewed as one in which something static is taken across a boundary from the external world to the internal psyche, but rather to highlight a process by which persons actively participate in the ongoing process of gaining proficiency and expertise in using specific mediational means, whether they are physical tools or linguistic tools (see Rogoff, 1995).

There are two primary dimensions of the process of appropriation. The first is *mastery*. This entails developing the skill or know how to use a particular cultural tool with a relatively high degree of facility. The second is *ownership*. This entails taking a given mediational means, something, quite commonly, ‘that belongs to others [at least initially] and making it one’s own’ (Wertsch, 1998, p. 53).

A third characteristic of the process of appropriation, in particular, and mediated action, in general, is that mediational means and mediated action are always associated with power, privilege and authority (Wertsch, 1998). An analysis of power, privilege and authority, and how they are implicated in any specific case of mediated action, must focus on both the agent and the cultural tools s/he employs in the case at hand. Such an analysis, says Wertsch, highlights ‘the ways in which the emergence of new cultural tools transforms power and authority’ (p. 65), and the degree to which ‘mediational means are differentially imbued with power and authority’ (p. 66).

So, a pole vaulter, as s/he learns how to pole vault, gradually appropriates the mediational means associated with his/her sport. S/he masters the use of the relevant physical tools (e.g., the pole, the track, the equipment s/he uses and wears), and linguistic tools (e.g., the guidance about form, style, and technique s/he receives from his/her coach). S/he also comes to ‘own’ those tools, to make them his/her own, to use them in his/her own way, to make them part of hm/herself in a fundamental sense – all of which are hallmarks of expertise in her sport.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, taking mediated action as the unit of analysis in a socio-cultural inquiry entails assuming that *any* human action – at least any action that entails what Vygotsky (1978) called ‘higher psychological functioning’ (action that is not biologically or instinctually motivated) –always involves an irreducible and dynamic

relationship between an agent and his or her cultural tools. Humans, in essence, are ‘tool using animals’ and the concept of mediated action extends this insight from the physical realm, where technical tools like knives, shovels, machinery and computers are used, to the psychological, semiotic and symbolic realm, where the tools employed are most typically words, language and forms of discourse. As such, as I have indicated above, in response to the question ‘who is carrying out the action?’, we must always answer something like the ‘individual [agent]-acting-with-mediational-means’ (Wertsch, 1998, p. 26).

### **Moral functioning as mediated action**

My aim in this section is to begin to construct a perspective on moral functioning as mediated action. Moral functioning is the higher psychological process (in Vygotsky’s terms) that a person invokes in order to respond to and resolve a specific problem, conflict or dilemma that requires a moral decision and a moral action – that is, when a person, like Karen, is faced with the question ‘What is the “right” or “moral” thing to do in this situation?’ Moral functioning considered as a form of mediated action entails focusing on *both* the agent – the *moral agent* – and the cultural tools/mediational means – what might be called her *moral mediational means* – that s/he employs in responding to the moral problem, conflict or dilemma at hand. And the mediational means/cultural tools most often employed in mediating moral functioning are words, language and forms of discourse, which profoundly shape moral thinking, feeling and acting (Tappan, 1990, 1991b, 1992, 1997). When Karen, therefore, is faced with the moral conflict about how to talk to her room mate who is going to be left out in the cold next year, she responds to and resolves it with the help of a specific set of (discursive) moral mediational means, just as she responds to and resolves any other problem she encounters in her life.

#### *Gilligan: moral voices as mediational means*

Although they certainly did not intend to, I would argue that Carol Gilligan and her colleagues have presented very compelling evidence regarding the ways in which moral languages and forms of moral discourse mediate and shape persons’ responses to moral problems, conflicts and dilemmas in their lives. They have distinguished two different moral ‘voices’ – ‘justice’ and ‘care’ – and they have documented the existence of these voices in persons’ narratives of real-life moral conflict and choice (see Gilligan, 1982, 1983; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). These two voices represent different ways of speaking about the world of human relationships – different ways of describing moral problems that arise from such relationships, different ways of understanding such problems, and different strategies for resolving them.

More specifically, these two voices are tied to different visions of *ideal* human relationship: the *justice* voice reflecting an ideal of equality, reciprocity, and fairness between persons; the *care* voice reflecting an ideal of attachment, loving and being loved, listening and being listened to, and responding and being responded to

(Gilligan, 1982, 1983). These ideal visions, furthermore, are experienced as being undercut, in the case of justice, by oppression, domination, inequality and/or unfairness of treatment; in the case of care, by detachment, abandonment, inattentiveness and/or lack of responsiveness.

Gilligan and her colleagues' research on moral voice has documented the existence of these two voices in individuals' narratives of moral conflict and choice, and explored their relationship to gender. Specifically, in a review of studies that included both male and female adolescents and adults, Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) report that when asked to describe a moral problem or conflict they had recently faced, more than two-thirds of educationally advantaged American adolescents and adults in the studies they reviewed represented considerations of *both* justice and care in their interview narratives. Despite this plurality of voices exhibited by individual subjects, however, Gilligan and Attanucci also note that almost two-thirds of these subjects manifested a clear *dominance* of one voice over the other. The males and females involved in these studies (high school students, college students, medical students and adult professionals) were equally likely to demonstrate this *dominant focus* phenomenon. This finding suggests that individuals tend to 'prefer' one or the other voice, even though they are capable of using both. Finally, Gilligan and Attanucci observe striking differences between males and females in their dominant focus. Although not all women with a dominant focus showed a preference for the care voice, where the care voice was dominant, it was manifested almost exclusively by women. Thus, more than half of the women who showed a dominant focus preferred the *care* voice; in contrast, of the 31 men who manifested a dominant focus, 30 showed a preference for the *justice* voice.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, the work of Gilligan and her colleagues suggests that justice and care represent two fundamentally different moral languages or forms of moral discourse, that persons can speak in the language of *both* justice and care, and that persons therefore can and do use both voices, as mediational means/cultural tools, to respond to moral problems and conflicts in their lives. Moreover, it is clear that moral functioning mediated by justice and care involves an irreducible tension between the agent and mediational means (Wertsch, 1998). Neither justice nor care are always completely sufficient for responding to and resolving a given problem, and thus persons often try both, switch back and forth, or speak in ways that seem to combine justice and care in particular ways (see Lyons, 1983; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Johnston, 1988). These two claims, that the moral voices of justice and care are mediational means/cultural tools used by agents to resolve moral problems, conflicts and dilemmas in their lives, and that there is always an irreducible tension between the agent and mediational means, are both illustrated in Karen's interview text.

I would argue that Karen clearly expresses and represents the moral voices/moral languages of both care and justice in her narrative of lived moral experience – providing evidence, in the process, of the ways in which these voices mediate her moral functioning. One voice, the voice that says 'I don't want to hurt her', 'the others really don't want her and they don't care whether she is hurt or not', 'we are

rejecting her’, and ‘she would be an outsider again, while now she is one of us’, sounds very much like a care voice. It is a voice that focuses on the relationship that Karen has with her room mate, and the importance of taking care of her, in some sense. The other voice speaks of ‘fairness’, ‘respecting her human dignity’, ‘violating her humanity’, and says ‘she deserves to be a part’. This sounds like a justice voice, focusing on perspective-taking and universalizable human rights like dignity and respect. It is interesting to note, furthermore, that while it is the justice voice that seems to predominate Karen’s discussion of this dilemma (e.g., her focus on her ‘Kantian point of view’), it is the care voice that gives rise to her bad feelings (her ‘guilt’, as she says later in the interview). This clearly suggests that there is ongoing tension, conflict and dialogue between these moral voices – a dialogue that also mediates, and thus influences, what Karen thinks, feels and does in this situation (see Day & Tappan, 1996).

There are three additional points worth noting here. First, the moral voices of justice and care clearly illustrate Wertsch’s (1998) claim that mediational means are always ‘material’.<sup>3</sup> These voices/languages exist in the world. They are represented in the media, in books, on TV, in the movies. They cannot be touched, but they can be, and certainly are, manipulated, used, ‘bought’, ‘sold’, ‘commodified’ in a variety of ways.

Second, in tandem with the first point, the moral voices of justice and care clearly illustrate Wertsch’s claim that mediational means and mediated action are always associated with power and authority. Justice, traditionally, has been a more powerful, more public moral language in the contemporary US culture (what Bellah *et al.* (1985) call our ‘first’ moral language), while care has been less powerful, less public (our ‘second’ moral language). Thus moral functioning mediated by justice has been more seen as more legitimate than moral functioning mediated by care – and this legitimacy has been linked to gender-related asymmetries in power, privilege and authority (e.g., Karen’s invocation of Kant when she uses the justice voice). Gilligan and others, as noted above, have challenged the traditional masculine/justice hegemony, but it has not been easy, and the struggle continues.

Third, mediational means and mediated action are necessarily situated in a particular socio-cultural context that has a particular history (Wertsch, 1998). As such, the moral voices of justice and care are socio-culturally situated – that they are moral languages/forms of moral discourse that have emerged out of the US culture of the last 30 years (the culture in which both Gilligan and her colleagues *and* the children, adolescents and adults whom they have interviewed have lived). Such a socio-cultural contextualization of these two voices, however, is not meant as a criticism of Gilligan’s approach, or her findings. Rather, it is simply to acknowledge that because these moral languages are socio-culturally situated, a similar effort in another social, cultural and historical context would have identified very different moral mediational means/cultural tools/types of moral discourse (e.g., moral discourse that focuses on *filial piety* in traditional Chinese cultures (see Dien, 1982), or moral discourse that focuses on the teachings of the *Koran* in orthodox Islamic cultures).



In sum, then, I would argue that bringing a mediated action approach to understanding moral functioning into dialogue with the work of Gilligan and her colleagues illuminates a number of interesting and important issues. Specifically, even though they may not have been intended in this way, the moral voices of justice and care provide concrete evidence of how the process of moral functioning is mediated by moral mediational means/cultural tools, in the form of moral languages/forms of moral discourse, that originate in the modern USA socio-cultural context. In addition, a mediated action approach helps to explain how and why the differences that Gilligan and her colleagues have identified between males' and females' experience and understanding of relationships may emerge, given gender-related (and hence, power-related) differences in the use of language and forms of discourse, understood as mediational means/cultural tools.

*Kohlberg: moral stages as mediational means*

While the work of Gilligan and her colleagues clearly illustrates the conception of moral functioning as mediated action for which I am arguing, I want to turn at this point to consider the cognitive-developmental approach of Lawrence Kohlberg (1976, 1981, 1984). While, on the surface, there may appear to be little in common between the cognitive-developmental and socio-cultural perspectives, I want to suggest that Kohlberg's work can also be interpreted, at least in part, in socio-cultural terms.

Kohlberg's approach to the study of moral development is well known. Following the groundbreaking efforts of Piaget (1932/1965), Kohlberg argued that moral development – defined, specifically, as thinking and reasoning about justice and fairness – proceeds through six stages that mark distinct changes in the underlying structure of moral thought. Moral development, in other words, moves from 'heteronomous morality' (Stage 1), to 'individualistic, instrumental morality' (Stage 2), to 'interpersonally normative morality' (Stage 3), to 'social system morality' (Stage 4), to 'human rights and social welfare morality' (Stage 5), to a 'morality of universalizable, reversible, and prescriptive general ethical principles' (Stage 6) (Kohlberg, 1984).

Kohlberg described this sequence of qualitative reorganizations as a developmental progression from pre-conventional (Stage 1 and 2), to conventional (Stage 3 and 4), to post-conventional (Stage 5 and 6) moral judgement. Moreover, Kohlberg claimed that this *sequence* of six structurally defined stages of reasoning about justice and fairness is cross-culturally universal (rather than culturally specific). As Kohlberg (1976, p. 51) says, 'major aspects of moral development are culturally universal, because all cultures have common sources of social interaction, role-taking, and social conflict which require moral integration'.

Kohlberg and his colleagues have amassed ample empirical evidence to support these theoretical claims. Colby and Kohlberg (1987) presented evidence from a 20-year longitudinal sample of men that suggest that, for each subject, reasoning about

justice and fairness progresses in a way that can be captured by Kohlberg's stage descriptions. Similarly, in two cross-cultural longitudinal studies, one conducted in Turkey and the other in Israel, Kohlberg (1984) reports that where movements in justice reasoning occur, they do so in an invariant sequence, and their distributions are roughly equal across places and cultures in which subjects have been interviewed (see also Snarey, 1985).

I will take up the question of cultural differences in moral judgement below. For now, however, let me suggest the following: What if Kohlberg's six stages of judgement and reasoning about justice and fairness are not simply descriptions of cognitive structures and justice operations that are invoked when persons respond, particularly, to hypothetical moral dilemmas, and which develop as cognitive capabilities mature? Rather, what if they are also, at least in part, increasingly sophisticated forms of moral language and moral discourse (*moral mediational means/cultural tools* from a specific social-cultural-historical context) that a person uses to solve moral problems and dilemmas, just as a pole vaulter uses his/her pole to solve the problem of how to jump over a bar 20 feet above the ground, or a fifth-grader uses the conventions of long-division to solve a homework problem?

This mediated action interpretation of Kohlberg's six stages of justice judgement can best be illustrated by taking concrete examples of stage-specific responses. Consider, therefore, the following excerpts from one of Kohlberg's longitudinal subjects, 'Joe', responding to the well-known 'Heinz Dilemma'. These excerpts are used by Kohlberg (1976, pp. 33–38) to illustrate the social perspective of the three levels of moral judgement:

Joe, aged 10: the pre-conventional level (Stages 1 and 2)

Q. Why shouldn't you steal from a store.

A. It's not good to steal from the store it's against the law. Someone could see you and call the police.

Stage 1 (Heteronomous Morality) and Stage 2 (Individualism, Instrumental Purpose and Exchange) are characterized by a social perspective in which 'rules and social expectations are something external to the self' (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987, p. 16). Reasons for not stealing, in particular, and obeying the law, in general, primarily entail avoiding punishment and making sure one's own interests are being served. In the above excerpt, Kohlberg would characterize Joe's reasoning as primarily Stage 2 (see Colby & Kohlberg, 1987).

But what Kohlberg calls Stage 2, here, are specific words, language and forms of moral discourse: 'It's not good to steal.' 'It's against the law.' 'Someone could ... call the police.' These are phrases that a ten-year-old would have heard again and again, in a variety of contexts, for many years. They are cultural tools that Joe has appropriated and now uses to make sense of and understand a particular social situation, and thus to construct a response to the question, 'Why shouldn't you steal from a store?' As such, Joe's moral functioning here is mediated and shaped by these particular forms of moral discourse.

Joe, aged 17: the conventional level (Stages 3 and 4)

Q. Why shouldn't you steal from a store?

A. It's a matter of law. It's one of our rules that we are trying to help protect property, not just protect a store. It's something that's needed in our society. If we didn't have these laws, people would steal, they wouldn't have to work for a living and our whole society would get out of kilter.

Stage 3 (Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships and Interpersonal Conformity) and Stage 4 (Social System and Conscience) are characterized by '(1) concern about social approval; (2) concern about loyalty to persons, groups, and authority; and (3) concern about the welfare of others and society' (Kohlberg, 1976, pp. 33–36). Reasons for doing right (in this case, not stealing), focus on being seen as a good person in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others, and keeping the social system going as a whole, to avoid a breakdown or collapse of the system that is society. In the above excerpt, Kohlberg would characterize Joe's reasoning as a mix of Stage 3 and Stage 4 (see Colby & Kohlberg, 1987).

But, once again, what is most apparent in Joe's answer are specific words, language and forms of moral discourse that he has appropriated from the particular social-cultural-historical context in which he lives. 'Rules', 'laws', concern about helping 'protect property', worrying that 'society would get out of kilter' – these are the mediational means that Joe uses here to answer the question at hand. Moreover, they are the kinds of moral discourse to which a 17-year-old is more likely than a 10-year-old to have been exposed.

Joe, aged 24: the post-conventional level (Stages 5 and 6)

Q. Why shouldn't someone steal from a store?

A. It's violating another person's rights, in this case, to property.

Q. Does the law enter in?

A. Well, the law in most cases is based on what's morally right, so it's not a separate subject, it's a consideration.

Q. What does 'morality' or 'morally right' mean to you?

A. Recognizing the rights of other individuals, first to live then to do as he pleases as long as it does not interfere with somebody else's rights.

Stage 5 (Social Contract or Utility and Individual Rights) and Stage 6 (Universal Ethical Principles) are characterized by a 'prior to society' perspective: 'it is the perspective of an individual who had made the moral commitments or holds the standards on which a good or just society must be based' (Kohlberg, 1976, p. 34). Reasons for not stealing, in this case, focus on 'a sense of obligation to law because of one's social contract to make and abide by laws for the welfare of all and for the protection of all people's rights' (p. 35). In the above excerpt, Kohlberg would characterize Joe's reasoning as primarily Stage 5 (see Colby & Kohlberg, 1987).

It is with respect to the post-conventional level that the utility of seeing Kohlberg's stages as charting a sequence of progressively more elaborate and sophisticated moral mediational means is most clear. What must be present in any interview, including the above excerpt, in order to achieve a Stage 5 (or Stage 6) score are

specific moral terms and particular forms of moral discourse. ‘Rights’, a concern about ‘violating another person’s rights’, and the construction of the logical hierarchy of the ‘right to life’ prior to other rights – these are the cultural tools that Joe uses to respond to the interviewer’s questions in this excerpt. Moreover, they are relatively rare because they are forms of moral discourse that are not typically encountered, let alone ‘mastered’ and/or ‘owned’ (markers of appropriation), in day-to-day social life, in the USA or elsewhere. Rather, they are most likely to be encountered in institutions of higher education, at either the undergraduate or graduate level, in courses in philosophy, political science and the law – where, not surprisingly, most of the subjects who use these forms of moral discourse have been found over the years (see Kohlberg, 1984).

With these ideas in mind, let me suggest that a mediated action approach to moral functioning using Kohlberg’s stages as descriptions of a set of moral mediational means – specifically, a set of forms of moral discourse about justice and fairness – also has something to say about Karen’s interview excerpt. From this perspective what is most interesting is Karen’s discussion of what she calls her ‘Kantian point of view’. Here, again, is her description of that point of view:

Interviewer: So how would you put your ‘Kantian point of view’ to work on this?

Karen: I would probably try to think that if I were in her position, what I think I would do ... And in that sense I would be saying that if I were in her position, and I were rooming with three people with whom I did not get along, and they were kind of talking about next year, I would try looking for new friends, or start trying to make myself more compatible. And at the same time, we are in a way respecting her human dignity by saying that, you know, if we continue living together for the next four years, we will really not be respecting each other at all by the time those four years are over, you know. And so, we should come to a different situation out of this effect. I guess that’s what I would say. But something just doesn’t seem right in saying to another person, ‘no, you can’t room with us next year’.

From a Kohlbergian point of view this sounds like it could be Stage-5 reasoning, focusing on resolving the conflict between claims inherent in this situation with reference to the concepts of universality, mutual respect and respect for human dignity that are hallmarks of the post-conventional level (see Kohlberg, 1981, 1984).

As it turns out, Karen knows that I (as the interviewer) know she had been taking a moral philosophy course, where she had been reading Immanuel Kant’s (1785) *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* as well as John Rawls’ (1971) *A theory of justice*. Thus her reference to her ‘Kantian point of view’ is, in fact, a reference not only to Kant’s ideas about the Categorical Imperative, but also to Rawls’ ideas about what he calls the ‘original position’ – ideas, of course, that are both central to Kohlberg’s (1981, 1984) conception of the post-conventional level of justice reasoning, including the final stage in his developmental sequence, Stage 6. This is precisely what makes this excerpt sound, as it should, like post-conventional moral reasoning – because Karen uses, in a preliminary way (she could have done better had I pushed her on it), the proper words, language and forms of discourse.

From a mediated action perspective, therefore, what Karen is exhibiting here is the initial results of the process of appropriation. She has received these words, language and forms of discourse from her reading and from her philosophy class, she recognizes when they are suitable tools to use in resolving a particular moral dilemma, and she puts them to work. She has neither fully owned nor mastered them, but she is well on her way, I would argue. Has she reached the post-conventional level of moral reasoning? While that would be the Kohlbergian question to ask in this case, I am not sure it is as interesting or useful as are questions about the process of appropriation and the nature of the moral mediational means Karen chooses to employ in this situation, or insights about the characteristics of mediated action that arise from this example.

One of these characteristics is that 'new mediational means transform mediated action' (Wertsch, 1998, p. 42). The introduction of new mediational means can, and often does, cause mediated action in any given domain to undergo a radical transformation, so much so that, in certain cases, entirely new forms of mediated action appear. This, I would argue, is precisely what Karen's interview illustrates. As she has begun to appropriate these new Kantian and Rawlsian ideas from her moral philosophy class, her moral functioning-as-mediated-action has changed, her response to moral dilemmas (like the one she reports) has become more complex and sophisticated. She has, in a word, *developed* (see Tappan, 1989).

Here, then, is a second characteristic of mediated action: 'Mediated action is situated on one or more developmental paths' (Wertsch, 1998, p. 34). Mediated action, argues Wertsch, is always historically situated, both in terms of the agent's own developmental history, and in terms of the history of the social, cultural, and institutional context in which it occurs. This developmental characteristic of moral functioning as mediated action (at least at the individual level) is one that Kohlberg and his colleague have documented to a much greater degree than have Gilligan and her colleagues. I would argue, however, that there is much more work to do if we are to fully understand the developmental histories of the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which moral functioning as mediated action occurs.

Karen's interview also illustrates a third characteristic of mediated action: 'Mediational means constrain as well as enable action' (Wertsch, 1998, p. 33). While most discussions of mediated action focus on how mediational means/cultural tools empower, enable or afford a particular action, it is also important to acknowledge that mediational means/cultural tools constrain or limit the forms of action that persons can undertake. As such, argues Wertsch, 'even if a new cultural tool frees us from some earlier limitation of perspective, it [always] introduces new ones of its own' (p. 33). Thus, while Karen's new Kantian/Rawlsian point of view enables her to see the moral dilemma she describes in what is arguably a new and more complex and sophisticated way, it also serves to blind her, in a way, to the interpersonal, relational and emotional dimensions of her problem. In spite of its power and historical hegemony, there are, indeed, limitations to the justice perspective, as Gilligan (1982, 1983), Noddings (1984) and others have argued so convincingly.

Finally, let me also suggest that a mediated action approach to moral functioning using Kohlberg's stages as descriptions of a set of moral mediational means – specifically, a set of forms of moral discourse about justice and fairness – also has much to offer the ongoing debate about the degree to which the stage sequence is cross-culturally universal (rather than culturally specific) (see Dien, 1982; Snarey, 1985; Boyes & Walker, 1988; Huebner & Garrod, 1991; Garrod *et al.*, 2003).

Much of this debate centres around whether observed cultural differences in moral judgement represent differences in *content* (allowed by Kohlberg) or *structure* (assumed, by Kohlberg, to be universal) (see Blasi, 1987). Yet, from a socio-cultural perspective, the content of a particular utterance defines, precisely, both its socio-cultural and its developmental significance – as Vygotsky's (1934/1987) view of children's 'private speech' as a critical tool for thought, *versus* Piaget's (1923/1959) view of private speech as a structural, but useless, epiphenomenon of children's egocentric thinking, illustrates so well (see also Kohlberg *et al.*, 1968).

Thus I would argue that morality-as-justice is not a naturally occurring universal human concept, but is dependent on socio-culturally specific moral – just as is 'karma' (see Huebner & Garrod, 1991) or 'filial piety' (see Dien, 1982). Moral development, therefore, must not be understood simply as the result of a constructive process undertaken by a transcendental epistemic subject, but rather must be seen as the outcome of a complex developmental process that includes both maturational influences and the experience of social communication and social interaction between speaking persons, engaged in ongoing dialogue with others – dialogue that occurs in specific social, cultural and historical contexts (see Day & Tappan, 1996; Tappan, 1997). And persons, understood as '(moral) agents-acting-with-(moral) mediational means', are not limited to a particular set of tools that they must use when responding to moral problems, conflicts or dilemmas (as Kohlberg's assumption of stages as 'structured wholes' would suggest). Rather, a mediated action perspective adopts a much more functional/pragmatic view of how *different* moral mediational means are used by the same agent in response to *different* situations.

In sum, this view of Kohlberg's six stages as describing, at least in part, a sequence of increasingly sophisticated moral mediational means suggests that Kohlberg and his colleagues have, in fact, identified an important set of cultural tools that are used by persons engaged in moral functioning-as-mediated-action. As such, this socio-cultural interpretation of the cognitive-developmental enterprise points, I think, to some promising avenues for further inquiry. Briefly, these include understanding the phenomena of 'stage mixture', 'stage skipping' and even 'regression' (see Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969; Carpendale & Krebs, 1995), as predictable variations in the process of appropriation, not violations that threaten the fundamental theoretical assumptions of the paradigm; and understanding the difference between the 'heteronomous/A' and 'autonomous/B' moral types (see Tappan *et al.*, 1987) as reflecting qualitative distinctions in the process of appropriation between what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) calls 'authoritative' and 'internally persuasive' forms of

discourse (see Tappan, 1991a, 1999, 2000; also Day & Tappan, 1996), not markers of stage transition or consolidation, *per se*.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that it is quite useful, both theoretically and empirically, to view ‘moral functioning’ as a form of mediated action, and moral development as the process by which persons gradually appropriate a variety of ‘moral mediational means’. I have made this argument drawing on recent work in socio-cultural psychology, specifically the work of James Wertsch (1998), in order to illustrate how the concept of mediated action allows us to ‘live in the middle’, in Wertsch’s words, and thus to avoid both individualistic and social reductionism in the study of moral development. I have also returned to the work of both Carol Gilligan (1982) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984), to show how their respective insights about moral functioning and the process of moral development can be interpreted and understood from a mediated action/socio-cultural perspective.

There is obviously much more that can and should be said about how moral functioning-as-mediated-action develops (via appropriation, not internalization), its relationship to moral identity (see Tappan, 2000, 2005a) and the ways in which Gilligan’s and Kohlberg’s work, and the work of others in the field, can be further used to flesh out this perspective. There are also other characteristics of mediated action, particularly the insights to which it leads about the role that power, privilege and authority plays in all forms of human action, that also deserve exploration with respect to various aspects of moral psychology. And this perspective opens new links to critical sociological and anthropological studies of morality and moral development (see, for example, Cortese, 1990; Walker, 2000).

In the end, however, there are two aspects to this perspective on moral functioning as mediated action, and moral development as the appropriation of moral mediational means, that I believe are most powerful, and most revolutionary. The first is that a socio-cultural or mediated action perspective, like the one I have sketched in this paper, offers a distributed, collective, shared, fundamentally *dialogical* view of moral development that stands in contrast to the individualistic, atomistic, isolated, fundamentally *psychological* view that has dominated the field for the past century (see Day & Tappan, 1996; Tappan, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005b). This individualistic, psychological perspective has many limitations, not the least of which is the tendency, even in its most liberal forms, to view developmental ‘deficits’, ‘delays’ and ‘regression’ as problems on the personal level, not as problems on the social level – problems, in other words, that demand political (not simply ‘clinical’ or ‘educational’) solutions.

The second aspect follows directly from the first: when mediated action (‘agents-acting-with-mediational-means’), dialogue and the socio-cultural context (including dynamics of power, privilege and oppression (see Tappan, 2005a)) become the focus for the study of moral development, then moral education becomes less about ‘teaching’ the young right and wrong, and more about ensuring that the social world

provides just and compassionate moral mediational means for the young to appropriate – to master and to own. As such, as we move from a cognitive-developmental psychology to a socio-cultural psychology, we are closer, I would argue, to a critical psychology, and to a view of moral development and moral education as a form of *political* practice. And, in so doing, perhaps we can contribute, in our own way, toward the construction of the genuinely just and caring world that we desperately need in these troubled times.

## Notes

1. See Rogoff (1995) for a more detailed discussion of how cultural tools/mediational means are appropriated, via a three-level process that includes community, interpersonal and individual dimensions.
2. These findings clearly indicate that neither justice nor care is *gender-specific*. They do, however, suggest that the two voices are *gender-related*: males are oriented toward justice more frequently than females, while females are oriented toward care more frequently than males (see also Lyons, 1983).
3. Cultural tools, even language, have materiality; they exist as physical objects that can be touched and manipulated, and they continue to exist as physical objects even when they are not functioning as mediational means. Moreover, argues Wertsch:

The external, material properties of cultural tools have important implications for understanding how internal processes come into existence and operate. Such internal processes can be thought of as skills in using particular mediational means. The development of such skills requires acting with, and reacting to, the material properties of cultural tools. Without such materiality, there would be nothing to act with or react to, and the emergence of socio-culturally situated skills could not occur. (Wertsch, 1998, p. 31)

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