How the judgement action gap can be seen as a metaphor exposing the weaknesses of a non-integrated model of moral development.

A brief analysis of literature in the domain of moral psychology leads us to a plethora of terms related to its development; moral standards, moral reasoning, moral cognition, moral emotions, moral behaviour, moral judgement. At first glance, it seems apparent that the field of moral development is one that possesses many variables and it is not a huge jump to assume that ongoing development in associated literature will reveal ever more. This paper will present a view of moral functioning and development that rejects a traditional, linear movement as developed initially by [Kohlberg (1971](#_ENREF_5)). Rather, moral functioning and development will be viewed as integrative and inclusive of multiple factors, and as following a dynamic systems approach ([Kim & Sankey, 2009](#_ENREF_4)).

Volume 37, Number 3 of The Journal of Moral Education, published in 2008 as a Special Issue, proposed the notion of an ‘...integrated model of moral functioning.’ In its several papers, it surmised that a single comprehensive model of moral functioning was lacking from the field of moral development ([Reed & Stoermer, 2008](#_ENREF_10)). The collected papers addressed the field from ‘outlying’ perspectives such as personality, brain and central nervous system, culture, early experience and moral education and concluded that “...an integrated, multi-level model of moral functioning...” would be a timely theoretical development in the field ([Reed & Stoermer, 2008](#_ENREF_10)). Of these perspectives, the ‘judgement-action gap’ ([Frimer & Walker, 2008](#_ENREF_3); [Reed, 2008](#_ENREF_8)) is a criticism of the traditional approach that highlights one of the long-standing failings of moral development theory that has existed since Kohlberg’s time: The question of why is there a difference between what a person judges to be the right thing to do, and what that person actually does in real life situations ([Reed & Stoermer, 2008](#_ENREF_10)). The very nature of the existence of such a ‘gap’ in accepted theory demonstrates that there is a more robust approach required.

This current review will examine the nature of this ‘gap’ by investigating various factors raised in literature that may contribute to the bridging of one’s moral judgement to corresponding moral behaviour. The gap will then be held up as a beacon for the necessity of an integrated model. Finally, the implications of this integrated model on the notion of moral development will be discussed.

In exploring the notion of a judgement action gap, this paper will assume to define the terms that bookend the mentioned divide. On one side, Moral Judgement is representative of the internal processes that an individual goes through, whereas Moral Behaviour refers to the outward actions taken by the individual. It is proposed here that the correlation between these two is affected by many factors in different ways. It is not as simple as saying, for example, that anger changes judgement, so behaviour is changed also; rather, it will be argued that these two sides of the gap are not linked by a simple causal chain, but along with other factors, are parts of an integrated model of morality. The metaphor of the gap will be still used however, as it serves to illustrate that there is a ‘gap’ in the formal theory that exists in this domain.

[Frimer and Walker (2008](#_ENREF_3)) present the argument that moral cognition is an essential component of moral functioning and that the ‘gappiness’ of moral life as a “...conundrum for psychological theories of moral functioning.” Citing [Blasi (2004](#_ENREF_1)), they further contend that moral cognition forms part of the puzzle that makes up moral functioning. It is similarly argued that “...those with a well-developed moral personality are more likely to be motivated to carry out their moral judgements in the face of competing interests than are those bereft of such a moral personality.”([Frimer & Walker, 2008](#_ENREF_3)). It seems clear from these claims that those with a well developed sense of moral personhood are more likely to bridge the judgement action gap than those who have less fortified moral structures.

In bridging the judgement action gap between behaviour and judgement, it is necessary to understand these two terms in a little more depth. These will now be examined before we look at what can be done to connect them.

Moral behaviour relies on perspective and relativism. What is right for one may be wrong for another. To address this concern, the [Blasi (2005](#_ENREF_2))model relies on a ‘first person’ perspective. This notion ties in with the idea of developing morally according to one’s own self – moral personhood. [Blasi (2005](#_ENREF_2))(cited by [Frimer and Walker (2008](#_ENREF_3))) argues that personality provides the motivation for the carrying through of specific moral thought to the specified action. The benefit of this view is that all behaviour becomes morally relevant, as it is tied to the individual. [Frimer and Walker (2008](#_ENREF_3)) do not however discount the third person / universal categorisation of moral behaviour. Indeed, they spout its benefits, along with the shortfalls of both approaches, particularly in reference to empirical concerns. They conclude that both perspectives are valuable in the greater context of moral functioning.

Similarly, moral judgement can be split into two ‘competing’ positions of explicit and implicit cognition. The deliberative approach is one of responsible and considered moral thought and is categorised by [Frimer and Walker (2008](#_ENREF_3)) by the “...significant degree of effortful/active/ explicit cognitive processing involved.” Conversely, the intuitive approach takes the stance that moral judgement is quick and intuitive and is cognitively less explicit and deliberative. The individual who exhibits this type of judgement has a ‘rich moral path’ and possesses ‘highly elaborate and accessible moral schemas’ ([Frimer & Walker, 2008](#_ENREF_3)). Again, Frimer & Walker address empirical considerations of these stances, most notably from the intuitive side, where measurement of impulsive cognition is compared to Schrӧdinger’s Cat, due to the observational trouble involved. Both positions are valid however, and the authors take time to credit both.

What we see here is another dichotomy in even defining terms related to judgement and action in a moral sense. To think that these can be bridged by a single idea or theory contradicts the very nature of the subject. What this proves for us as we ponder the unification of these independently valid, but ultimately incompatible viewpoints, is that moral cognition does indeed require an integrated model that incorporates the collection of theory.

[Frimer and Walker (2008](#_ENREF_3)) do not set out to achieve such a unified theory. Their primary concern is the establishment of a view of moral personhood, which they sell as a factor in the bridging of the gap. Motivation is a primary factor in their highlighting of moral centrality and integrity of the self as key aspects of this idea. Moral centrality (consistently judging that one is responsible to do the right thing) and integrity of the self (maintaining a consistent sense of one’s responsibility) are the key facets of Frimer and Walker’s model and can be said to be sufficient for a psychological account that bridges the gap ([Reed & Stoermer, 2008](#_ENREF_10)). This is of course not sufficient for a unified model of morality.

In fact, in the same edition of The Journal of Moral Education as Frimer & Walker’s paper, [Reed (2008](#_ENREF_8)), purports that bridging the judgement action gap is a matter of continence ([Reed & Stoermer, 2008](#_ENREF_10)). This is certainly in line with deliberative judgement, and leads us to assume that there is much more than internal psychological factors at play.

Reed argues that the judgement action gap is not as Frimer and Walker suggest, but there is no connection between “...one’s perspective taking ability and one’s interaction tendancies.” (2008, p 371). It is also suggested that moral judgement is not a matter of doing what is right, but of knowing one is responsible to do the right thing, and that they expect themselves to do the right thing. While he does not in any substantive way elaborate on why people do not follow their judgments, Reed summarises by noting that there is an explanation for incontinence, but not for intemperance. What Reed’s contribution to the discussion entails is the suggestion that there are greater factors at play than simply knowing right from wrong and wanting to behave accordingly.

An aspect that is admittedly neglected by the above literature is the role of emotion. In the article, ‘Moral Emotions and Moral Behaviour’ published in the Annual Review of Psychology, [Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek (2007](#_ENREF_11)) present a review of moral emotions based on the premise that they “...moderate the link between moral standards and decisions, and ultimately moral behaviour.” ([Tangney et al., 2007](#_ENREF_11)). This underlying premise serves as a beacon to the current analysis of factors influencing the judgement action gap. While it is a comprehensive review, there is no definitive stance taken on the role of emotion in bridging the judgement action gap. They explicitly state that there is little research to support the link between standards and behaviour.

The motivating factors that are discussed in the functioning of moral emotions are concerned with society and one’s view of self: shame and guilt. This surely lets us deduce that if there is (and it is suggested here that there most probably is, subject to empirical work) a role that emotion plays in bridging the judgement action gap, then a connection can be made to the ‘third party’ sense of moral judgement that is presented by Frimer and Walker. If moral emotion is so strongly gauged by feelings of relativism and subjectivity to others, then this gives strength to the notion that a simple, linear model of morality cannot adequately account for individual differences, particularly with regard to perception and motivation.

It is contended here that there is indeed an emotional self that plays a part in the bigger picture, as suggested by [Kristjansson (2009](#_ENREF_6)). Two opposing options for bridging the judgements action gap are presented; the cognitive construction of moral self-hood, or the availability of moral emotions. The first option refers to the idea of moral personhood discussed above. [Kristjansson (2009](#_ENREF_6))emphasises the second, arguing that an emotion based paradigm is more realist. It is stated that a focus on the cognitive components of emotion can ‘ignore or underestimate the affective elements.’ However, it is carefully noted that there need not be a dichotomy between the moral self and moral emotions, and that moral judgement (which is defined by moral self/personhood) is “...the result of quick, affective and automatic (almost unconscious) intuitions, including emotions, followed by slow *ex-post facto* moral reasoning.” ([Kristjansson, 2009](#_ENREF_6)).

The position described here is indicative of this reviews proposal that multiple, interrelated elements constitute the wider field of morality. A person’s sense of self and integrity define their moral personhood, which is itself an element in their moral judgement. This moral judgement creates automatic responses, which manifest as moral behaviour, and are after the fact justified by the same moral judgement. The stronger and more developed that an individual’s moral self is, then the more likely they are to act / behave in correspondence to their self-held moral beliefs. All this is of course held in place by an assumption that emotion does not overwhelm ones moral judgement, leading to dis-corresponding behaviour. Simply said, there is no simple reason as to why the judgement action gap can at times be bridged, while at others times remain.

This is indeed an area that cannot be said to follow a prescribed linear model, but instead is dynamic and self emergent. The implication of this reality will now be discussed in light of an integrated model of moral functioning. Stated concisely: “...all human development, including moral development, is a natural process of emergent self-organisation, as children and adolescents interact with the multifaceted natural and social environments that they encounter and to which, as human organisms, they intrinsically belong.” ([Kim & Sankey, 2009](#_ENREF_4)). This review assumes this statement to be accurate, and that moral functioning is indeed affected by social constructs, and that to understand moral functioning, individuals need to be considered as part of a whole society, just as their moral judgement, behaviour, cognition etc is part of a greater system of moral functioning. Put another way, the Dynamic System approach allows the organisation of macro systems to emerge from the relationships between micro systems ([Kim & Sankey, 2009](#_ENREF_4); [Reed, 2009](#_ENREF_9)).

At this point we move to examine how, in fact, moral functioning can be presented as an integrated model in practical terms. The simple answer to this question is at this point, ‘we don’t know.’ All the papers that have been thus far examined concede that while integrating aspects of moral functioning is the way forward, it has not yet been presented in a meaningful way in literature.

Perhaps our best reference however, is the scaffolding set out by [McDaniel, Grice, and Eason (2010](#_ENREF_7)). Unlike the other papers discussed in this review, this dealt with an empirical process. While it does not produce a definitive model, it finds results that confirm its assumptions about the nature of the interrelatedness of factors concerning moral functioning: “...examine how various components of moral development interact.” ([McDaniel et al., 2010](#_ENREF_7)). Moral development was seen as consisting of three components; Developmental foundations, emotional variables and cognition. Already, the link between this model and a DS approach is apparent.

The developmental foundations consisted of societal, spiritual and familial ‘building blocks.’ The emotional variables consisted of empathy, guilt (relating to specific behaviours) and shame (connected to one’s self concept). Cognition refers to the moral judgements that we have examined previously. What makes the results of this study relevant to our discussion are the relationships between sub factors of the three components. The developmental foundation of spirituality, or relationship with a higher power, had a direct correlation to increased emotions of empathy and guilt. Dysfunctional familial relationships lead to increased instances of the shame emotion.

What we will take away from this study are two main points. Firstly, moral development can be seen as consisting of developmental, cognitive and emotional factors. Secondly, the subsystems within these factors interrelate in a meaningful way. This is sure evidence that and model of moral functioning that does not consider at least these approaches is doomed to be irrelevant and ultimately invalid.

It is conceded here that an integrated model of moral functioning does not yet exist. It has been illustrated however, that there is a need for one, a view which is backed by the publication of literature reviews supporting the notion.

[Frimer and Walker (2008](#_ENREF_3))discussed the dynamic nature of what is understood by both moral judgement and by moral behaviour. The dynamics of these issues not only suggest a natural dovetail with DS theory, but also that development can consist of more than just ‘improved judgement’. We are presented with the conundrum of whether moral judgement should be viewed from a first or third person perspective. This tells us that social factors at least play a part in defining one’s own moral stance. The variability that this notion is subject to proves that an individual cannot be simply compared to another individual in terms of their moral development, as the chance of altered social influence is a factor.

It is contended here that it is a factor strong enough, in line with DS theory, to alter the end product – that is, the moral judgement of an individual and thus, according to Frimer & Walker, moral behaviour. If morality is judged by behaviour, surely a subtle difference in societal, familial, spiritual, emotional factors can determine one person’s superior moral development as opposed to another.

[Reed (2008](#_ENREF_8)) proposes that development can be seen as exhibiting increasingly complex expectations of one’s self image. As deliberative reasoning approaches automation, it can also be argued that this is also an indicator of development. What is emphasised here is that the very nature of DS theory, as it applies to moral functioning, shows us that changes in micro levels will affect the macro levels. Thus, a child who is exposed to a fulfilling spiritual experience can be said to have developed in a moral sense. Likewise, a child who experiences a negative familial event will also develop morally, despite their sense of moral personhood ‘regressing’.

Further empirical study must be designed and applied to this field. A model of moral functioning and development is clearly required, yet has not been presented in a concise form. The analogy of the judgement action gap has been shown to represent the gap that is left in moral psychology by the absence of such a model. Opposing viewpoints are disconnected in a linear way, joined together by combinations of factors that work together to give context to the whole.

# References

Blasi, A. (2004). Moral functioning: moral understanding and personality. In D. K. L. D. Narvaez (Ed.), *Moral development, self and identity* (pp. 335-347). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Blasi, A. (2005). Moral character: a psychological approach. In D. K. L. F. C. Power (Ed.), *Character psychology and character education* (pp. 67-100). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame.

Frimer, J. A., & Walker, L. J. (2008). Towards a new paradigm of moral personhood. *JOURNAL OF MORAL EDUCATION, 37*(3), 333-356.

Kim, M., & Sankey, D. (2009). Towards a Dynamic Systems Approach to Moral Development and Moral Education: A Response to the "JME" Special Issue, September 2008. *Journal of Moral Education, 38*(3), 283-298.

Kohlberg, L. (1971). Stages of moral development as a basis for moral education. In B. S. C. E. V. S. C.M. Beck (Ed.), *Moral education: interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 23-92). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kristjansson, K. (2009). Putting Emotion into the Self: A Response to the 2008 "Journal of Moral Education" Special Issue on Moral Functioning. *Journal of Moral Education, 38*(3), 255-270.

McDaniel, B. L., Grice, J. W., & Eason, E. A. (2010). Seeking a multi-construct model of morality. *JOURNAL OF MORAL EDUCATION, 39*(1), 37-48.

Reed, D. C. (2008). A model of moral stages. *JOURNAL OF MORAL EDUCATION, 37*(3), 357-376.

Reed, D. C. (2009). A multi-level model of moral functioning revisited. *JOURNAL OF MORAL EDUCATION, 38*(3), 299-313.

Reed, D. C., & Stoermer, R. M. (2008). Towards an integrated model of moral functioning: an overview of the Special Issue. *JOURNAL OF MORAL EDUCATION, 37*(3), 417-428.

Tangney, J. P., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral emotions and moral behavior. *Annual review of psychology, 58*(1), 345-372.