Understanding television and morality –
Integrating media studies and media psychology

Tonny Krijnen

Television and its impact on the moral values have been a hot topic among academics the last few years. Most attention for the relation between morality and television comes from authors in the field of media studies using an active audience approach to explain how people might actually learn something from the stories television tells us. While George Gerbner (1999) was afraid these television stories would decrease specific cultural values by teaching people a rather limited set of values, contemporary research is much more positive. Media studies' approaches to popular culture have more often than not celebrated the active audiences and its uses of media as something good and revolutionary (cf., Hermes, 2005). The studies discussing television and its relation to the audiences' morality comply with this positive tone. Using a constructivist perspective, within this field the use of television stories for the construction of a moral comprehension is investigated. These studies are, as will be discussed in the next paragraph, convincing.

It is, however, important not to forget that there exists a much older tradition investigating the relations between television and morality. Employing Lawrence Kohlberg's elaborated work on morality, media psychologists have focused attention on children and adolescents and how they learn moral values from the television stories they are told (cf., Rosenkoeter, 2001). Contrary to the field of media studies, media psychologists have mostly argued that television has a negative impact on its audience. Within this field, effects of media on moral values and beliefs are investigated. These studies are also convincing, as will become apparent in the next paragraph.

The two academic fields described above usually circumvent communication and cooperation with each other. In this paper I will argue that their different belief systems are reconcilable. When it comes to studying the relation between television and morality, we do find similarities between the two traditions, besides distinctive differences. Furthermore, I will argue that integrating their particular perspectives and views enables us to understand how audiences use television stories to learn their moral values much better than the singular perspectives do. First I will shortly explain the key points of both lines of thought. Second, I will show the differences but more importantly also the similarities between the two traditions and what the first steps towards an integration of approaches could be.

1. Psychology and Morality

The field of media psychology is perhaps best known for its studies on media violence and its effects on children and adolescents. This is too narrow a view of a rich tradition in which morality has been a topic of concern for quite a while. When concerned with the effect of television on morality, almost without exception Lawrence Kohlberg's theory on the development of moral reasoning is adopted. Kohlberg, inspired by the ideas of psychologist Jean Piaget, formulated his first ideas on moral reasoning in his dissertation in 1958. These ideas later became known as the six stages of moral development.

Kohlberg argues that to understand moral stages, we need to locate them in a sequence of development of the personality (Kohlberg, 1984). To not confuse these latter stages with moral stages, I will use the term phase to refer to the stage in personality development, and the term stage to refer to six moral stages. This development of the individual is both in logical reasoning as in social perspective. So the individual moves through different logical and social phases when growing up.

First, let us look at the logical phases. Departing from Piaget's work, Kohlberg (1984) argues that an individual necessarily passes through different phases in life that are connected to the development of logical reasoning and intelligence. The three major logical phases can be identified as: the intuitive phase, the concrete operational phase and the formal operational phase. As a young child we find ourselves in the intuitive phase. The acts or behaviour shown should be considered as intuitive acts. After developing logical reasoning, a child reaches the concrete operational stage. This means that a child can make logical deductions about concrete things in life. Concepts such as ‚a fair share' and ‚playing by the rules' can be processed and used by the individual. During adolescence, individuals develop a capacity for abstract thinking and therefore they can move towards the formal operational phase. This is the phase in which abstract moral values become relevant to the individual and the relations between these values, relations between elements in a system, and different possibilities become clear. These concepts can then be used in moral reasoning.

Second, the social phases an individual moves through are of importance. Inspired by Robert Selman's work on role-taking, Kohlberg (1984) relates the five phases defined by Selman (egocentric, subjective, self-reflective, mutual perspective taking, and societal-symbolic) to the moral stages. When a human is born he or she is basically egocentric, the world revolves around him or her self. When growing up, we learn that other people are part of the environment and are important to us. The individual starts to reflect on the self in relation to other people or in relation to society. The importance of this development in social phases to moral reasoning is easily understood – morality, after all, always involves other people.

Important to note is that the development of the social phases is not necessarily related to the logical phases. This means that an advance social phase does not mean that the individual is also in an advanced logical phase and vice versa. Both logical as

social perspectives, however, are important to define the moral stages (cf. Krebs & Gillmore, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984).

The six moral stages can thus be defined on three levels:

Figure 1: Kohlberg's moral stages

Level:	Moral Stage:
I Pre-conventional Level	Heteronomous Morality
	Instrumental Morality
II Conventional Level	Interpersonal Expectations and Conformity
	Social System and Conscience
III Post-conventional Level	Social Contract or Individual Rights
	Universal Ethical Principles

During the first moral stage a child shows moral behaviour – doing the right thing – to avoid punishment. In the second stage, rules are followed simply because they are the rules. Most children under the age of nine are developed up till the second stage. Adolescents up till 20 years of age are found on the conventional level, and thus in moral stages three and four. In the third stage the individual does the right thing because he or she wants to be good in the eyes of others as well as in her or his own eyes. In the fourth stage the individual gets a sense of the greater good: the importance of keeping the system running. Moral choices are made because they contribute to the societal system as it is. After the age of 20, the post-conventional level can be reached. In the fifth moral stage a sense of the social contract becomes apparent to the individual. In the sixth stage a personal commitment to moral values is felt. Moral choices are then made because of a certain value that is more important than social rules and conventions. Once a certain moral stage is reached, an individual can never fall back in a previous one. Additionally, the last moral stage, Universal Ethical Principle, is only reached by some individuals. Most adults are therefore found in the fourth and fifth stage.

There are two perspectives that I would like to point out that are of importance to the use of Kohlberg's theory by media psychologists: the concept of age and the concepts of logical and social development. The concept of age is, on the one hand, apparent and, on the other hand, opaque in Kohlberg's theory. Kohlberg (1984) has set quite clear age limits to the several stages an individual moves through. These limits are based on the logical and social development of the individual and are society. The importance of this development on the logical and social development of the individual and therefore comprehensible. These limits however, also indicate that moral development is finished around the age of 25. There are a few exceptions to this development, such as criminal offenders. This implicitly means, and that is where the concept of age is much more opaque, that a human does not morally develop after a certain age. This point of view is at the very least debatable. There are many examples of people much

older who make life-changing decisions based on a change in their moral perceptions and moral reasoning capacities (cf., Krijnen, 2007). Nevertheless, the age limits do explain the enormous amount of attention on children and adolescents when studying the effects of television on morality.

The second perspective of importance is development of logical reasoning and social perspective. These are crucial to the moral stage an individual reaches. It is on these two concepts that media psychologist usually concentrate. Television stories can, for example, show the individual how others feel or which role they have in society – thus developing a social perspective. For example, Nancy Signorielli has studied intensively the content of television in terms such as gender roles, family roles, and values, including recognition and respect (Signorielli, 1982; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Signorielli & Morgan, 2001). Additionally, media psychologists also concentrate on lessons of how society works that are found in television – thus enhancing a grasp of elements of the system. Heintz-Knowles (2001), for example, shows how television stories represent the western society in which the private and public sphere conflict with one another. It is important to note that these studies often concentrate on the content of television. The underlying assumption in these kinds of studies is that people develop a social perspective along the lines of the concepts investigated. These studies seem to prove that television stories have an effect on moral reasoning, but it is still unclear how large the role of television actually is (cf., Rosenkoeter, 2001).

Though it is now clear why media psychologists concentrate on young children and how Kohlberg's theory can be connected to theories on the effect of television, it is not clear why media psychologists more often than not have a negative view of the effects of television on moral reasoning. As described before, we find almost no trace of this negative effect of television in the field of media studies.

2. Media Studies and Morality

In the field of media studies, the interest in the relationship between television and morality is quite recent. Building upon a tradition of viewing popular television as adding something positive to the everyday lives of audiences, scholars focus on what might be called the reflexive function of television (cf., Coolen, 1997). For the purposes of this paper it is important to explicate two concepts: the active audience and this reflexive function of television.

The active audience is maybe not so much a concept as a founding principle of media studies. Its early roots are found in theories on media use. In trying to understand why media effects are so much smaller than expected, scholars focused on the role of the audience, using these media. The early onset was what is now called the Uses & Gratifications approach (cf., Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). In the (overly) simplified version, this theory proposes an audience that has certain desires that are in need of gratification. Individuals are thought to select media content on the basis of their own desires. The impact of the media content is therefore dependent on

the needs that are gratified. The audience is considered very active (and powerful). Critiquing this conception of media use, Früh and Schönbach (1982) propose the 'dynamic-transactional-model' in which both media content and the individual, the recipient of this content, are important for the impact of media. The media use is thus not only defined by the needs or desires of the individual but also by media content. The audience therefore is less powerful, and also less active than in the traditional uses and gratifications approach.

The dynamic-transactional model has quite a few similarities with a model developed around the same time: the encoding/decoding model (cf., Hall, 1973). The emphasis of the latter is on understanding how audiences understand the content of media and not so much on identifying media impact. Adopting a social constructionist point of view, the encoding/decoding model also proposes an interaction' between content and recipient. The encoder constructs a message that is deconstructed by the decoder. Both are thus responsible for the meaning of the media message (and we might assume this is one way of looking at impact).

The second important concept that is in need of explanation is the idea of the reflexive function of television. This reflexive function of television is much more novel than the idea of the active audience and stems from philosophical work on narratives (cf. Bruner, 1987; Rorty, 1989; Bruner, 1991; Nussbaum, 2001). Narratives, or in our case television stories, enable the reader to reflect on questions revolving around (moral) issues, situations, people, and events encountered in everyday life. Television stories confront their audiences with different perspectives, opinions, characters, and character's motivations. This confrontation is assumed to engage the audiences into reflecting upon these perspectives, opinions, characters and their motivations. Connecting this narrative function to television stories has just been done recently (cf., Coolen, 1997, 2001; Hawkins, 2001; Slade, 2002; Hill, 2005; Krijnen, 2007).

As the reader might already have noticed, within media studies it is much harder to find the shared conception of morality. Some authors only refer to a Foucauldian idea of ethics. Hawkins (2001) and Hill (2005), for example, discuss how reality television might induce its audience to reflect on 'the good life' and Foucault's conception of governmentality. Other authors have a much wider conception of morality. For example, Slade (2002) shows how different television genres offer different ethical, or moral questions, to their viewers. Nevertheless, the perspectives on the relationship between morality and television have one thing in common: they seem to concentrate on other human beings and how the audience can be familiarized with other people, norms and values, and perspectives. Unfortunately, this commonality does not explain why the contribution of television stories to the morality of their audiences should be viewed as positive. On the contrary, with an average of several hours of television viewing per day, one might wonder why there are so many problems with different groups in society. Additionally, what is striking is that none of the authors discusses Kohlberg's elaborated theory on moral develop-

ment. This is conspicuous, because next to the differences the similarities between the two traditions seem so obvious.

3. On Differences

Now that the two traditions are outlined, rather crudely but suiting my goal, the similarities and differences between media psychologists and media studies authors in their approaches to the relationship between television and morality can be explained. The differences are explicated first, followed by the similarities.

The differences between approaches on morality and television between authors from the field of media psychology and the field of media studies can be illustrated by three points: conceptions of morality, conception of human beings, and conception of the development of morality.

First, the conception of morality encompasses a major difference between the two traditions. As mentioned earlier, while media psychologists adopt Kohlberg's theory on moral development within the field of media studies, a clear conception of morality is difficult to distinguish. Clarifying Kohlberg's implicit conception of morality is, however, helpful to elucidate the conception of morality in media studies.

A close-reading of Kohlberg's moral stages, as explained earlier in this text, makes apparent the Kantian conception of morality underlying Kohlberg's ideas. Following rules and having obligations towards other people and towards society are dominant in the third, fourth and fifth moral stage. Explaining the sixth moral stage, the stage in which the individual feels a personal attachment to universal principles, Kohlberg (1984) implicitly underscores the existence and validity of such moral principles. These principles are more commonly known as Immanuel Kant's (1796), categorical imperatives' and connect to a universal approach on morality (cf., Rachels, 2003). The conception of moral reasoning can thus be formulated in terms of independent, rational individuals who have the same rights and obligations towards one another. The solutions for moral issues are based on moral rules that are applied independently of the particular situation.

Within the field of media studies, this is not exactly what is understood as morality. A social-constructivist point of view prevents one from offering a-priori rules and principles as a starting point. Morality in media studies is always understood as a dynamic concept for which the meaning is subject to change and interpretation. This conception connects to a relativist approach to morality (cf., Rachels, 2003). Often the term 'ethics' is used to refer to reflecting upon what is good and what is bad, and 'morality' is used to refer to the behavior that is a result of this reflection (cf., Poole, 1991). Therefore, morality is not applicable to every other individual but rather is personal and subjective.

A second major difference is found in the conception of human beings. In the tradition of media psychology, a human is perceived as a rational, independent being. Conceiving of rules and obligations that apply to everyone and acting upon such rules

fails to acknowledge the significance of situational factors. In other words, it implies that humans are all born equal with the same opportunities. This is, of course, also a traditional conception of the individual within morality.

This conception of human beings is entirely the opposite of the conception found in media studies. Here the individual is perceived as uniquely situated within his or her personal history and social situation. This means that human beings are not all equal within society. Societal constructs hinder or facilitate everybody in their development in different ways. Moral rules and principles then, which are perceived as constraints already, do not apply to everyone. The idea of social-historical situatedness prevents one from arguing that everyone has the same obligations or should obey the same moral rules.

The development of moral reasoning is the third major difference found between the two traditions. The difference can be identified as either gradual or dynamic. The gradual development of morality is implied by Kohlberg's moral stages. The six stages are formulated each with distinct features. The more an individual advances through the several logical and social phases, the further he or she advances in moral stages. The stages furthermore have clear boundaries: reaching one stage means never going back to a previous one. This gradual development indicates growth (a positive sense of one's moral reasoning getting better) but also an end goal, using universal principles as one's guideline to morality.

The dynamic development of morality as found in the field of media studies has no stages with clear boundaries or distinct features. Moral development is defined as the result of ethical reflection. Moral growth is always possible and has no explicit end goal. I would like to argue that this indistinctiveness of the conception of morality in the field of media studies is exactly where a similarity with media psychology might be found.

4. On Similarities

The similarities between the media psychologists' and media studies' approaches to the relationship between television and morality are less obvious than are the differences. We can, however, distinguish two major similarities: the role of the social environment and the development of empathy.

The field of media studies is rather unambiguous with regard to the role of the social environment. It is here that the identity of the individual is seen as constructed by his or her personal and unique history and social background (cf., Hall, 1973). According to media studies scholars, it does matter, for example, in which place one is born and what kind of parents one has been blessed (or not blessed) with. Furthermore, social environment is also crucial to the construction of one's moral reasoning. It is the social environment that the individual is 'encultured' in (Fiske, 1987). The norms and values of the society one is born into are the norms and values one is taught. Of course, by reflecting upon those norms and values, an individual may

choose to disagree and change his or her opinion, but the starting point is always the social environment and what it brings to us.

Media psychologists do not explicitly state the importance of the social environment to the development of moral reasoning. They do, however, follow Kohlberg (1984) in his ideas of the necessity of social development for moral reasoning. The individual has to understand his or her place in relation to others and in the social system to be able to develop advanced moral reasoning. This social development is logically connected to the social environment. Children and adolescents need to learn what their position in society and in relation to others is. It is by experience that humans develop on a social level. We learn in the playgrounds of kindergarten that sharing a toy delivers more pleasure than fighting over the toy. Socialisation, pre-eminently a media psychology concept, might be implicit, but it is just as important in this tradition as it is in media studies. It is even very similar, since humans develop in society, in which place one is born and what kind of parents one has. Do the parents set a good example, and do they reward good behavior?

Connected to the role of the social environment is the development of a capacity for empathy. Media studies scholars focus most of their attention on how television stories teach their audiences how other people feel, think, motivate their decisions, and so forth. The reflection on the other is usually meant, as Nussbaum (1997) formulates this most eloquently, to develop the understanding that any human should be attributed emotions, feelings, and thoughts similar to one's own, but also that there are evident limits to each person's access to every other. This perspective has consequences for moral reasoning. When pondering a moral situation, we have to think about how the other people involved might feel, what their motivations are, and that these are similar to our own. Moral reasoning thus becomes involved with care and empathy for others.

The development of empathy is, in my opinion, just as important in the conception of moral reasoning of media psychologists. The conception of morality as based on objective rules and principles at first seems to have nothing to do with empathy. On closer consideration, however, we find a few strong indicators. The individual develops a sense of interdependency with other individuals. It is, next to socialization, also the knowledge of relationships with other people that is developed in the subsequent social phases (cf, Kohlberg, 1984). This knowledge is translated in the attempt to put oneself in someone else's position that is part of these social phases. The understanding of one's own position in relation to others is similar to developing a sense of empathy. It is attributing thoughts and feelings similar to one's own to other people while simultaneously understanding that other people might be different

5. Conclusion

Above I have (roughly) sketched two dominant approaches to the relationship between television and the development of morality in the field of communication science. Scholars from each tradition usually converse and discuss their ideas with colleagues and friends within their own tradition. While one tradition regards television habitually as something negative in society, the other celebrates the positive contributions of the medium. Though the differences seem large, the similarities are also quite easily found. I would like to argue that both traditions unnecessarily hold on to myths regarding the relation between television and society. As Schönbach (2000) argues, holding on to myths is tempting since they make it so much easier to explain the world. However, the relation between television and morality is complex and cannot be explained that easily. Neither tradition is right or wrong about the relationship between television and morality. I believe that an integration of approaches would be fruitful in the process of de-mystifying television's contribution to society's morality. There are a few steps that are necessary to take.

The first step in integrating both approaches would be to overcome the universal versus relativist perspective on morality. Taken to the extreme, both perspectives cause problems. A universal perspective formulates a-priori values applicable to each and every human being. This means that we have to decide on which values are the good ones. This is an impossible task, even when we look at everyday life issues such as lying. If we define lying as ultimately wrong, than we have to tell our friend who has a different taste in clothing that the shirt just bought looks awful. A relativist perspective is just as impossible to uphold. It means, for example, that it is very hard to judge any behavior as right or wrong.

Overcoming these contradictory views enables an integration of approaches. The media psychologists would open up towards the possibility of positive contributions of television to morality and the dynamic nature of the concept Television especially shows manifold perspectives and possibilities in any situation as well as the consequences of certain decisions. The difference between a white lie and a black one could become acceptable. Media studies scholars would grasp that, implicit in their own constructivism and celebration of popular television, there is a universal value they all pursue: the understanding of each other. Using a constructivist point of view, they emphasize over and over again the dynamic nature of morality. At the same time, the constructivist approaches on morality and television are quite clear on what is, at least morally, preferable: accepting each other in difference.

The second step that needs to be taken to integrate the approaches is to overcome the difference in the conceptualization of the individual. While media psychologists adopt an approach that formulates humans as all born equal, media studies scholars adopt an opposite perspective. Again, I believe the answer is found somewhere in the middle. Though we should all be born equal, we do not all have the same opportunities. This is valid in a global perspective: being born in Botswana means having different opportunities and possibilities than being born in the Nether-

lands. It is also a valid thought in a local perspective: being born in the Netherlands as a indigenous Dutch person or as a Moroccan-Dutch person un-fortunately does mean different opportunities and possibilities. On the other hand, this global and local perspective immediately points to the complexity of the social-historical situation. Sometimes it does mean similar opportunities and possibilities.

Understanding this complexity could help media studies scholars to transgress the emphasis on differences and uniqueness. Acknowledging similarity could lead to an understanding of what people have in common instead of explanations as to why they are different. In the meanwhile, media psychologists could learn to acknowledge that the social-historical situation does matter and that blindly following the rules maybe is rather naïve. A more pragmatic perspective on morality could be the result. It would be one in which the situation and motivations of people involved are weighed when a moral judgment is made.

These are just the first two steps that I believe are necessary to start to understand the relationship between television and morality in all its complexity. Many other steps might be necessary, but I believe that a good start is found in trying to be good philosophers': to live by what one preaches. For media studies scholars, this would mean understanding their own constructs and underlying bedrock-assumptions. For media psychologists, this would mean understanding one's own position in relation to others.

References:

Bruner, J. (1987). Life as narrative. *Social Research, 54*(1), 11-32.

Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry, 18*, 1-21.

Coolen, M. (1997). De reflexieve functie van soap. In G. A. M. Widdershoven & A. W. M. Mooij (Eds.), *Hermeneutiek & politiek* (pp. 123-139). Delft: Uitgeverij Eburon.

Coolen, M. (2001). De soap als relaas van het voortdurend verschuivend heden. In F. Van Peperstraten (Ed.), *Jaarboek voor esthetica* (pp. 110-125). Tilburg: Nederlandse Genootschap voor Esthetica.

Fiske, J. (1987). *Television culture.* London: Routledge.

Frith, W., & Schönbach, K. (1982). Der dynamisch-transaktionale Ansatz. *Publizistik, 27,* 74-88.

Gerbner, G. (1999). The stories we tell. *Peace Review, 11*(1), 9-15.

Hall, S. (1973). *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. Paper for the Council of Europe Colloquy on „Training in the Critical Reading of Televisual Language".* Leicester: Council & the Centre for Mass Communication on Research.

Hawkins, G. (2001). Ethics of television. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 4,* 412-426.

Heintz-Knowles, K. E. (2001). Balancing acts: Work-family issues on prime-time TV. In J. Bryant & J. A. Bryant (Eds.), *Television and the American family* (pp. 177-206). Mahwah, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hermes, J. (2005). *Re-reading popular culture.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Hill, A. (2005). *Reality TV. Audiences and popular factual television.* London: Routledge.

Kant, I. (1796). *The metaphysic of morals.* Edinburgh: Clark.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G. & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Uses of mass communications by the individual. In J. G. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds.), *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The Psychology of Moral Development. The Nature of Validity of Moral Stages.* San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers.

Krebs, D., & Gillmore, J. (1982). The relationship among the first stages of cognitive development, role-taking abilities, and moral development. *Child Development, 53,* 877-886.

Krijnen, T. (2007). *There is more(s) in television. Studying the relationship between television and moral imagination.* Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). The narrative imagination. In M. C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating humanity: a classical defence of reform in liberal education.* (pp. 85-112). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of thought. The intelligence of emotions.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Poole, R. (1991). *Morality and modernity.* London: Routledge.

Rachels, J. (2003). *The Elements of moral philosophy.* 4th edition. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill

Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, irony and solidarity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rosenkoeter, L. I. (2001). Television and morality. In D. G. Singer & J. L. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of children and the media* (pp. 463-474). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Schönbach, K. (2000). *Myths of media and audiences. Inaugural lecture.* Amsterdam, Vossiuspers AUP.

Signorielli, N. (1982). Marital status in television drama: a case of reduced options. *Journal of Broadcasting 26,* 585-598.

Signorielli, N., & Bacue, A. (1999). Recognition and respect a content analysis of prime-time television characters across three decades. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, 40,* 527-544.

Signorielli, N., & Morgan, M. (2001). Television and the family: the cultivation perspective. In J. Bryant & J. A. Bryant (Eds.), *Television and the American family* (pp. 333-351). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Slade, C. (2002). *The real thing. Doing philosophy with media.* New York, NY: Peter Lang.