



Abstract Wertsch's 'mediated action' approach is complemented with a version of 'methodological individualism' (the preference/constraint approach) which allows researchers to avoid the exclusive separation of mind and culture and to concentrate on specific forms of their mutuality. This version of 'methodological individualism' focuses attention on an active mental agent who makes culture and mind meet in the context of social practice.

Key Words cultural psychology, methodological individualism, mind, mediated action, self

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The Confessions of a Methodological Individualist

In this brief and very schematic commentary I want to defend a particular version of 'methodological individualism', as a way of expressing my solidarity with Jim Wertsch's (1995) mission of turning the study of human mental functioning into a sociocultural and historical science. I think there is a version of 'methodological individualism' that ought to be an essential part of his inspiring intellectual agenda.

I also want to suggest that the idea of 'mediated action' (Wertsch's 'unique uses' and 'cultural tools'/'mediational means' approach) is basically a variation on the economist's idea that human action is the joint product of 'preferences' (ends, goals, values, tastes, desires, ideals) and 'constraints' (means, information, technology, resources, causal beliefs, abilities, dispositions), mediated by human agency (will) and by the logic of rational choice (which is the logic of means-ends or uses-and-tools thinking). In my view that connection between Wertsch's approach and preference/constraint (or means/ends) analysis is a point in favor of 'mediated action' as a unit of analysis for studying the sociocultural side of human mental functioning, but it is not a point against 'methodological individualism'. Indeed, I think 'methodological individualism' ought to be required of the 'mediated action' approach to sociocultural research, for the sake of its own success.

What is 'Methodological Individualism'?

In risking a defense of 'methodological individualism', I am aware, of

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course, that the phrase is often used as an epithet. My only consolation is this: since the doctrine of 'methodological individualism' actually comes in many versions, it is not always clear which version of the doctrine the epithet is meant to disparage. (The word 'positivism' also seems to function this way.)

The version of 'methodological individualism' I want to defend is not the version according to which the 'individual' of 'methodological individualism' refers to any unit of analysis that is relatively less divisible (or relatively more elementary) within the terms of some ontological scheme (e.g. an electron is an 'individual' vis-à-vis an atom, a morpheme is an 'individual' vis-à-vis a sentence, a person is an 'individual' vis-à-vis a group).

It is not the version according to which the 'method' of 'methodological individualism' turns every divisible (or higher order) unit into something unreal or epiphenomenal by redescribing it in more elementary (or lower order) terms (e.g. the 'self' becomes epiphenomenal relative to a description of human information processing in terms of neurons or neural nets).

Instead, the kind of 'methodological individualism' I suggest to complement Jim Wertsch's approach is the kind associated with the preference/constraint (or means/ends) approach to human action. According to that approach, the 'individuals' of 'methodological individualism' are things that have 'intentionality' and 'agency' and other defining marks of 'mental' functioning (belief, desire, will, a sense of self, and the ability to reason about means and ends), and the world was full of 'individuals' (things that have 'intentionality' and 'agency' and other 'mental' functions) long before the 'copyright age'. One major implication of preference/constraint (means/ends) 'methodological individualism' is this: human actions and social practices become intelligible (as human actions and social practices) only when we have been able to explain them by reference to the beliefs and desires (the mental functioning) of things that have 'intentionality' and 'agency' (i.e. 'individuals'). It is that version of 'methodological individualism' which a 'mediated action' approach to human behavior cannot do without and should not try to avoid.

Two Paradigms for Sociocultural Research: 'Person' and 'Situation' or 'Preference' and 'Constraint'?

One advantage of this type of agency-based 'methodological individualism' is that it frees us from another way of thinking about human behavior. Psychologists are all too familiar with the credo that behavior

is a function or joint product of two types of forces, labeled 'person' and 'situation'. There are many ways to think about the relationship between 'culture' and 'mind' or (what does *not* amount to the same thing) between 'social practices' and 'individual mental functioning'. Most of those ways are profoundly misleading but perhaps none is quite as misleading as attempts to assimilate those contrasts (culture/mind, social practice/individual mental functioning) either to each other or to the contrast between 'situation' and 'person'.

The main point of drawing a distinction between 'person' and 'situation' is to classify all potential causes of behavior into two exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories, although, as Maria Sullivan and I have suggested (1990), it is far from clear how those two categories are to be bounded. Supposed synonyms for the contrast between 'person' and 'situation' include 'inside' and 'outside' (inside or outside what? The skin? Consciousness? The mind?), 'subjective' and 'objective' (just try describing a social situation in a language completely devoid of a human subject!), and 'mental' and 'physical'. Obviously, those contrasts are not synonymous with each other.

The matter only becomes more mind-boggling when both 'mind' and the 'mental' are placed 'inside' (in the 'person' or 'in the head') and 'culture' and 'social practice' are placed 'outside' (in the 'situation' or the 'environment' or the 'setting'), thereby creating the false impression that mind/culture (or social practice/individual mental functioning) are mutually exclusive things. Nothing has done more damage to sociocultural research on mental functioning than the doctrine that all things (including 'mind', 'culture' and the 'mental') must be either inside (the 'person') or outside (in the 'situation'), but not both. And not neither either.

It seems to me that the preference/constraint, means/ends, 'mediated action' (uses/tools) approach to human action contrasts significantly with the psychologist's idea that human action is the joint product of 'person' and 'situation'. That is its advantage. Perhaps that is one reason the idea of 'mediated action' appeals to Jim Wertsch. That is one reason it appeals to me.

For one thing the preference/constraint (means/ends) approach has built into itself an *a priori* assumption that agency and intentionality (and rationality) are at the source of human 'action'. This contrasts with the person/situation approach where 'situational' forces must (by definition) be treated as outside the realm of human agency and intentionality (and where even some 'person' forces, namely personality dispositions, are treated that way as well). The person/situation paradigm is low on 'action emanating from agency' and high on 'behavior as forced'.

Second, the view that an action is the joint product of ends (preferences) and perceived available means (constraints), mediated by agency (will, rational choice) does not require an opposition between 'culture' and 'mind' or between 'social practice' and 'individual mental functioning'. When it comes to the preference/constraint approach to human action the 'individual' or 'person' exists on both sides of the equation, for example in his or her ideals, values and goals (preferences) and in his or her causal beliefs, information, skills, knowledge about technology, and resources (constraints) as well.

Finally, within the terms of the preference/constraint, means/ends or 'mediated action' approach certain crucial questions become easier to ask: How do social practices and individual agency serve each other and make each other up? Why do 'individuals' who are the bearers of a cultural tradition replicate their behaviors or care to 'pass on' their traditions to others? What goals do they accomplish by doing that? Why do they care so much about whether other members of their cultural tradition uphold their traditions the way they do? And how are self, tradition, morality and human agency interrelated anyway?

What About the 'Self' of Mediated Action?

That is not to say that the preference/constraint, means/ends, 'mediated action' framework, in and of itself, is going to get us very far in answering those questions. Jim Wertsch's (1995) essay raises crucial issues and introduces us to some key concepts, but the general framework is still skeletal and programmatic and needs to be supplemented, enriched and made concrete in several ways. One way I hope to be constructive in this commentary is by mentioning a few things that seem missing from the 'mediated action' approach.

For example, more needs to be said about the substance of human agency. What motivates 'mediated action'? What kind of 'self' is the imagined agent for this kind of approach? What are his or her parameters of self-definition? In some circles the 'rational choice' (preference/constraint, means/ends) approach has a bad reputation because it is associated with the idea of a 'thin self' motivated entirely by only three grubby kinds of ends or utilities: wealth, power and sensual pleasure. Yet that is a mistake. There is no necessary reason to associate preference/constraint or means/ends analysis with any particular substantive theory of human motivation. Indeed, I would hope that some of the exciting action in sociocultural studies of human mental functioning (I prefer to call this area of research 'cultural psychology'; see Shweder, 1991b, 1993; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993) will

be all about the idea of a 'thick self' motivated by a richer set of ends or utilities than wealth, power and pleasure (see D'Andrade & Strauss 1992; Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Any successful theory of 'mediated action' is going to need a theory of 'motivated action'. That means the 'mediated action' program is going to have to develop some kind of theory of self-identity maintenance (thick or thin or invisible) and some kind of theory of moral self-esteem (e.g. Menon & Shweder, 1994; Shweder, 1994a; Shweder & Haidt, 1993). There is already good reason to believe that the traditional practices of any group have meaning with respect to a limited set of 'thick' existential issues, and function as a means to realizing one or more moral ends (e.g. fairness, sympathy, duty, self-improvement, as described by Wilson, 1993; also see Schweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1994). Such moral ends are related to such self-defining existential issues as the problem of personal boundaries (what is me and what is not me?), the problem of gender identity (what is male and what is female?), the problem of co-substantiality (who is of my kind and who is not of my kind?), the problem of hierarchy (why do I share unequally in the burdens and benefits of life?), the problem of community (what is the proper relationship between what I want to do and what the community wants me to do?), and other issues as well. To what extent is a theory of 'mediated action' going to supply us with an account of mediation by the 'self'?

Mediated Action and Social 'Practice'

If there is going to be a real intellectual pay-off to the 'mediated action' program, more needs to be said about the substance of social 'practices' and about how to characterize and classify their psychologically relevant features. Since the word 'practice' is polysemous (and is sometimes used interchangeably with the word 'activity') it may be best for me to illustrate the point. Here is what I have in mind when I speak of social 'practices': burying the dead; lining up to buy tickets at the cinema; saying 'thank you' for gifts; eating together in the family; arranging a marriage; secluding women during menstruation; avoidance behavior between types of relatives (e.g. mother-in-law/son-in-law); taboos against eating certain foods (e.g. cows or pigs or dogs); parent-child co-sleeping arrangements; sleeping in a room of one's own. (On 'practices' and 'activities', see Goodnow, Miller, & Kessel, 1995).

And here are two examples of what I have in mind when I speak of characterizing the 'psychologically relevant features' of 'practices'. People who share a practice (e.g. separate sleeping spaces for parent

and child) often act as though they are parties to an agreement or contract to do so and take an intense interest in each other's moral rectitude (see Shweder, Jensen, & Goldstein, 1995). Transgressions of a practice, even those transgressions that do not directly harm other people, are sanctionable and enforceable by others. What does this interest in monitoring and punishing others tell us about mental organization, self organization, and the moral-emotional structure of human beings (see Fiske, 1992; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1994)?

Or to cite a second example, practices can be classified by the way they do or do not promote developmental competence in some domain of mental functioning (emotional functioning, moral functioning, interpersonal functioning, cognitive functioning). Janet Werker (1989) has generated a short list of hypothetical ways that 'experience' (read involvement in a 'practice') might affect the development of a skill or mental competence. She imagines five kinds of effects, which she labels 'maturation' (the practice made no difference; the competence would have developed without it), 'maintenance/loss' (the competence was pre-existing but would have been lost if it had not been activated by practice and kept on-line during some critical period in development), 'facilitation' (because of the practice full competence was attained more quickly than otherwise would have been the case), 'attunement' (because of the practice a higher level of competence was attained than otherwise would have been the case) and 'induction' (without the practice there would have been no competence at all in this area). The 'mediated action' approach will become rich when it goes beyond Vygotsky and general ideas about the 'zone of proximal development' and tells us more precisely how practice is linked to development.

The Subsumption of 'Culture' and 'Mental Functioning' by 'Mind'

Finally any successful 'mediated action' program is going to have to rethink some very thorny philosophical issues concerning the relationship of mind, culture and mental functioning. The issue is so thorny that different, hard-core, philosophically sophisticated investigators of 'cultural psychology' and 'sociocultural research' are likely to be using the terms 'mind', 'culture' and 'mental functioning' in very different ways and with somewhat different meanings in mind.

For example, I like to think of 'culture' as either (1) a morally enforceable conceptual scheme instantiated in practice (including linguistic practice) which is upheld by those who think they are parties to some implicit agreement to do so (a local moral community)

(Shweder, 1994b), or (2) all the local parochial knowledge (ideas about persons, society and nature) that serves as the intellectual bridge between substance and form (Shweder, 1994a). Although I cannot develop the point here I believe the two definitions are interrelated. I like to think of 'mental functioning' as a defining property of 'individuals' (of things that have intentionality, agency, rationality, that have a capacity to construct meanings and thereby add substance to form, that have the motivational and emotional inclination to instantiate and enforce a conceptual scheme in practice). And while I like to think of 'culture' and 'mental functioning' as supporting each other and making each other up, I think of them both as a subset of 'mind'. 'Mind' in my conception of things is broader than both 'culture' and 'mental functioning' and encompasses them both.

'Mind' is where 'psychic unity' is to be found, but it is a 'universalism without the uniformity'. In other words, what unifies human beings is the potential access they have to a heterogeneous collection (an 'original multiplicity'—Shweder, 1991a) of concepts and mental processes, only a subset of which are activated and kept 'on-line' in the experiences of any individual and/or the practices of any group (see Menon & Shweder, 1994). Whether 'mind' is 'inside' or 'outside' I do not know (it may be best to leave that old thorny metaphysical and theological question to the side), but the reality and latent availability of 'mind' becomes apparent whenever we manage to transcend our own cultural tradition and understand those whose culture and mental functioning are different from our own. (On this relationship of 'mind', 'culture' and 'mental functioning', see Shweder & Sullivan, 1993.)

So there, I have put some of my theoretical cards on the table. What Jim Wertsch thinks of all this I can only guess. Yet as we launch a new journal dedicated to cultural psychology those are the kinds of ideas and thoughts I hope we will share, critique and use as a basis for our interdisciplinary yet psychologically relevant sociocultural research. Jim Wertsch has gotten us off to a brilliant start. I only wish I could convince him that he ought to be a 'methodological individualist' too.

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Biography

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