AUTOBIOGRAPHY, MEDIATED ACTION, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL IDENTITY

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This paper explores a sociocultural approach to the development of moral identity, by considering the recently published autobiography of Ingo Hasselbach. Hasselbach, the founder (in 1991) of the National Alternative neo-Nazi party in East Germany, writes about his childhood and youth, how and why he embraced the neo-Nazi perspective, and how and why he ultimately repudiated the movement that he had helped to create. The analysis of Hasselbach's story employs a "mediated action" approach to identity formation (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Wertsch, 1998). Such an approach entails taking human action as the starting point for the study of identity development, and understanding that mediated action, rather than an inner sense of identity, continuity, or sameness, provides the primary unit of analysis. In bringing a sociocultural perspective to bear on Hasselbach's autobiographical narrative, this paper thus highlights the connections that emerge in his autobiography between his changing/developing sense of moral identity and his moral actions and interactions in the world. In so doing, it explores and explicates the relationship between Hasselbach's moral identity and the sociocultural context in which it develops.

Moral identity is a key concept in contemporary theoretical and empirical work in moral psychology and moral development. Yet, in spite of its centrality, there remain a number of important questions regarding how moral identity develops (if, indeed, it does develop), and what is its relationship to other traits of character and/or personality, as well as to moral thinking.

Ingo Hasselbach’s (1996) recently published autobiography, *Führer-Ex*, provides a very interesting case to use in examining moral identity and its vicissitudes, and thus in addressing, perhaps, some of these lingering questions. Hasselbach, the founder (in 1991) of the National Alternative neo-Nazi party in East Germany, writes about his childhood and youth, how and why he embraced the neo-Nazi perspective, and how and why he ultimately repudiated the movement that he had helped to create. As such, Hasselbach tells the story of a series of striking transformations in his own moral identity—transformations that are mediated by specific social, cultural, and historical resources that he uses to shape and reshape both his ideological commitments and his own moral self-understanding.

Heretofore virtually all of the theoretical and empirical work on moral identity, at least within the field of moral development, has been conducted from an explicitly cognitive-developmental perspective (see Blasi, 1984; Damon, 1984; Damon & Hart, 1988), which grants “analytic primacy” (Wertsch, 1998) to individual mental functioning, and thus views identity simply as a characteristic of individuals, and identity development largely as a function of internal cognitive processes. Such a perspective has generated interesting and important insights about moral identity and its development [e.g., moral identity as a possible link between moral judgment and moral action (see Blasi, 1980, 1983, 1984)]. In the end, however, I will argue that such an approach is limited, because it fails to appreciate and acknowledge the relationship between the individual and the social, cultural, and historical context in which s/he lives, a relationship that is key to understanding the process of moral identity formation.

To address these concerns about the cognitive/individualistic approach to the study of moral identity development I consider an alternative perspective—a perspective that highlights the sociocultural embeddedness of moral identity and its development (see also Tappan, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1997). In so doing I extend the recent efforts of Penuel and Wertsch (1995), who have combined elements of the work of both Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1987) and Erik Erikson (1968) into a “mediated-action approach” to identity formation. Building on the claim that “resources” and “tools,” appropriated from the social world, shape and mediate human mental functioning (see Wertsch, 1991, 1998; also Wertsch, del Río, & Alvarez, 1995). Penuel and Wertsch (1995) argue that taking human action as the starting point for the study of identity development leads to several key insights—the most important of which are that “mediated action, rather than an inner sense of identity, provides a basic unit of analysis,” and that identity should be studied “in settings where forming identities are at stake in the course of the activity” (p. 90).

When such an approach—augmented by the insights of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) on the process of “ideological becoming”—is used to interpret and analyze Hasselbach’s life story—particularly his entry into, and his exit from, neo-Nazism—it illuminates the profound ways in which social, cultural, and historical processes influence his moral identity and sense of self-understanding. In bringing a sociocultural perspective to bear on Hasselbach’s autobiographical narrative, I thus highlight the connections that emerge in his autobiography between his changing/developing sense of moral identity and his moral actions and interactions in the world. In so doing, I seek to explore and explicate the relationship between Hasselbach’s moral identity (understood as “mediated action”) and the sociocultural context in which it develops.

HOW NAZIS ARE MADE: HASSELBACH’S STORY

Ingo Hasselbach was born in East Berlin in 1967. His father was a journalist who had been born and raised in West Germany, had joined the German Communist Party, been jailed for promoting “anti-constitutional” organization, and, in 1964, had “gone over the Wall in what you’d call the wrong direction—east” (p. 3) says Hasselbach (1996). His mother met his father at the East German Press Agency. They had a brief affair beginning in late 1965; they never married, but stayed in contact for 20 years because of their son. Hasselbach recalls knowing his father as “Uncle Hans”, who would visit from time to time and bring him presents. Otherwise, he says, “I never even noticed that I didn’t have a father” (p. 5).

Hasselbach spent most of his early childhood with his mothers’ parents, in their apartment in the Prenzlauer Berg district. He would listen to their stories of the war years, and he says that his “grandma was the only one who ever told me about the Nazi years, and I remember thinking only that these events had happened an eternity ago, in another world” (p. 7). He also says that his grandparents meant so much to him.
because at heart they were the least ideological people I knew. Just as they had never been Nazis in the Third Reich they were never Communists in the G.D.R. They were always just people. And in my life that has been a rare quality. (p. 7)

When Hasselbach was 4 his mother married her boss at the Press Agency. His stepfather, Edgar, had no personality, says Hasselbach. “He was very bland, almost easy to overlook, except that we was very authoritarian. After Edgar moved in, for the first time in my life, I was hit” (p. 7). Hasselbach, his mother, and his stepfather moved out of his grandparents’ apartment, into a newly built apartment building in the Lichtenberg district in the heart of Communist East Berlin.

Growing up in East Berlin, for Hasselbach, became an exercise in shifting affiliations and allegiances. He spent more and more time on his own, on the street, after his stepfather began beating him. He got to know a group of “hippies” who lived in his grandparents’ building. They took him to concerts on weekends, and to the Baltic coast in the summer:

They all looked after me, because I was the youngest. Sometimes they made sure that I didn’t drink too much; other times, that I had enough to drink. When I was eleven I lost my virginity to a twenty-six-year-old hippie woman who became my first girlfriend. Another hippie turned me on to Neil Young, whose music remained my favorite even after I became a punk and then a neo-Nazi. This guy also taught me a very important lesson: Do what you want. When you want something to eat, take it. When you want to leave, go. (pp. 14-15)

By the early 1980’s there was a substantial punk scene in East Berlin, and Hasselbach began to spend more and more time with the punks in Lichtenberg, and less and less with the hippies in Prenzlauer Berg. “All of the “opposition groups” were still on pretty good terms then” (p. 20), Hasselbach says.

But at the same time there was an undercurrent of violence that ... was the beginning of what would happen over the next ten years. Even when I was with the hippies, if an ordinary guy came along, a type wearing a nice shirt and tie, we’d throw him down in the dirt. And these were hippies, who were supposed to love peace and love. But everyone in the GDR was somehow hard. They were all prepared to oppose a society that pretended to be benevolent in order to hide the ruthless violence at its core. Every group wanted to fight with the cops, but nobody could so we fought with each other. (p. 20)

Hasselbach began to fight more and more—both in school and on the street. With the punks, he engaged in numerous gang fights, group fights, and rumbles, which often happened in discos. “It was ostensibly about someone’s girl or because someone had spilled his drink on someone, but then there’d be a rumble and you’d beat up everyone who was dressed differently from you” (p. 21). Hasselbach started, he says, “to really learn the fun of violence, especially crowd violence. There’s a unique thrill to being in the middle of a violent, dangerous crown and slamming, slamming, and kicking your way to victory” (p. 21).

The violence escalated, and a hierarchy established: the punks were harder than the hippies, and the skinheads were harder than the punks. But, says Hasselbach, “beneath all of the obvious differences in ideology and appearance, it was not about Right or Left. It was about the State”:

Each group had its own way of rebelling—the hippies had their life style; the punks stole like maniacs; and the skins used raw, sadistic violence—but the state that oppressed all of us was the same. It was literally an extension of the will of our parents, whose generation had strived to establish the first German “anti-Fascist” state. But in the state they created—the state I grew up in—there was nothing to strive for except conformity. And if you didn’t conform, this “anti-Fascist” state would come down on you with a brutal force reminiscent of the very Fascists they supposedly were protecting you against. (p. 21)

Gradually the punks split permanently from the hippies, and Hasselbach went with the punks, because “it wasn’t enough to protest just by waking up whenever I wanted or sleeping with whomever I wanted. I wanted to go outside and make a statement” (p. 22). He grew a mohawk and wore sayings on his jacket like “Destroy what you destroy” or “You’re free when no one is watching you.” He spent a lot of time stealing with another punk named Freddy Maisel, and they began spray painting capital letter “A”s with a circle around it (the symbol of anarchism) on the walls of houses in fancy neighborhoods. After a few weeks, they began to spray swastikas next to their “A”s: “We didn’t think much about what a swastika meant, but we knew it was the most forbidden of all symbols” (p. 24).

At sixteen Hasselbach took an apprenticeship with a bricklayer instead of staying in school. But he soon stopped going to work and simply stole as much as he could. He and the members of his “gang” were eventually caught by the police; Freddy was sent to youth prison camp for a year, but Hasselbach was given a choice. He could go to a work camp or he could live in the house of his father (“Uncle Hans”) for a year, who by then had become a popular radio commentator in East Berlin. Hasselbach chose
the latter, and "overnight," he says, "I moved from a circle of completely undisciplined, asocial hippies and punks into an orderly Socialist family" (p. 34). His father forbade him all contact with his mother, who, Hasselbach says, "had a helpless, passive attitude toward me and my troubles" (p. 37). Nevertheless, after about nine months he met her secretly one day. When his father found out he threw Hasselbach out of the house, and back on the streets.

During the nine months he had been away many of the East German punks had shaved their heads and become skinheads. Hasselbach shaved his head and went along. He also took to watching the "German Weekly Show"—a show from the Nazi era that was taped from West German television. "We didn't really know what we were doing," says Hasselbach, "it was simply another way to rebel!"

There were scenes from the war—the invasion of Poland, the bombing of Rotterdam, the Russian field campaign. It was cool to watch weapons being used and fascinating to see a time when German men had been on the move. It was the opposite of the stagnant national pool in which we'd grown up.

The music was stirring, often Wagner, gigantic—as vast and ethereal as the concepts the newscasts reinforced: camaraderie, patriotism, dreams of conquest. There were also some Nazi political speeches in the weekly shows. Some scenes of Hitler, but those weren't so important. It was more about the soldiers and the reports from the front. Our crowd wasn't yet really interested in the Nazis; that only started later. Sometimes someone would raise his arm high in a Hitler salute, but it was basically a joke.

In early 1987, at the age of 19, Hasselbach and Freddy Meisel decided to attend a government-sponsored festival in Lichtenberg Park—a "Friendship Festival to Honor the Soviet Troops." After drinking a lot, Hasselbach walked into the middle of a group of Soviet soldiers and yelled "The Wall must fall" again and again. Arrested by the Stasi, tried and convicted for rowdyism (disturbing the peace) and for making "an attack on the anti-Fascist Protective Wall," Hasselbach was given a one-year prison sentence. He ended up in Rudersdorf prison—"the ideal environment for acquiring the rudiments of Nazism" (p. 60). Here Hasselbach he met several old Nazi war criminals who introduced him to the ideology that was to become the center of his life for the next six years. "I was looking for a new oppositional ideology," Hasselbach says, "and I was eager to listen to them" (p. 60).

The two old Nazi prisoners whom Hasselbach got closest to were Heinz Barth, known as "the butcher of Oradour," because he had led the SS extermination of the town of that name in France, and the former Gestapo chief of Dresden, Henri Schmidt. While Barth had subsequently become an avowed Stalinist, Schmidt was still as much of a Nazi as he had been in 1945:

He told me why he considered the Nazi years to have been a great time for Germany: the economy had improved, and Germany had been freed from the criminal Versailles Treaty through which they Jews had brought the nation to ruin. The Jews of Dresden had been deported under Schmidt's orders, and he was still proud of this work and found it justified. He explained in mostly in terms of economics: first, the Jews had squeezed the German people, so that they had lost the First World War; then they had caused the economy to crash in the nineteen-twenties; and, finally, they had wanted to destroy the economy after the Nazis came to power. I liked to listen to Schmidt, and it didn't occur to me that perhaps somebody who had been a chief of the Gestapo in the Third Reich was similar to a chief of the Stasi in the GDR. (pp. 61-62).

April 20th, Adolph Hitler's birthday, was always a special day in Rudersdorf. The old Nazi prisoners painted swastikas on pieces of toilet paper that they made into armbands. "It may sound pathetic," says Hasselbach, "but it was an incredible provocation":

Here were the oldest political prisoners in the GDR—some imprisoned since the war—who still hadn't given up their resistance to the anti-Fascist state. Many of them didn't know anymore how long they'd been in. They wore their toilet-paper armbands proudly and proclaimed their continuing faith in national socialism. They hadn't changed their beliefs at all. We younger political prisoners didn't know much about their ideology, but we admired their resistance and saw it as a parallel to our own efforts as punks and skins. They had held firm, never allowing themselves to be influenced in another direction. (p. 63)

Hasselbach was released from prison in October, 1987. By that point the protest culture had split more sharply between the left-wing punks and the right-wing skins. Although Hasselbach and many of his friends had been punks not long before, he came to see punks as "leftist pawns of the State... part of the leftist hegemony that needed to be slammed, kicked, scared, and brutalized to make room for us to breathe" (p. 65). For Hasselbach, therefore, protest became more and more closely associated not only with the right-wing skinhead movement, but also the forbidden Nazi past:

By the fall of 1987, I'd begun spraying swastikas instead of anarchist "A's. I'd reached a point where I thought, I've always rejected communism and the idea of the GDR as an anti-Fascist State, therefore I can no longer make any protest from the Left. The only alternative was to orient myself completely to the Right. Now I would fight the anti-Fascists by being a Fascist. (p. 66)
In January 1988 Hasselbach and six friends founded a *Kameradschaft*—the old Nazi term for “brotherhood.” This was effectively the first official neo-Nazi party in East Germany. It was named the “Movement of the 30th of January,” for the date the Nazis first seized power in 1933. Everyone in the group had either, like Hasselbach, met old Nazis in prison, been told about Nazism by a grandparent or relative, or stumbled onto some reading material. The group held training sessions in National Socialist thought, read forbidden Nazi books, watched illegally obtained videos of old Nazi propaganda films, and made plans for the future:

In the Movement we’d read whatever accounts we could get of the Nazi era—which were very few—and critique them and read between the lines . . . . It was really a kind of reading circle at first—to bring us all to the same level of understanding about Nazism and how it was the solution to our problems of taking on socialism now. (p. 75)

During the next several years Hasselbach became ever more involved and committed to the neo-Nazi ideology. He crossed into West Germany after the Wall came down in November 1989, and spent several months in a refugee camp for East Germans in Hamburg. In the camp he was recruited by West-German neo-Nazis to become the “Fuhrer of the East”—the leader of the East-German neo-Nazi group. He was ideal for this role, Hasselbach says, “because I was tall and blond . . . exactly the “biological type” of the perfect German leader” (p. 82). He met and became close friends with Michael Kuhnen, the leader of the West German neo-Nazis and one of the most notorious right-wing leaders in Europe. With Kuhnen’s help and support, Hasselbach founded the first legal neo-Nazi party in East Germany—the National Alternative Berlin. By late 1990 it had about 800 registered members.

Hasselbach and the members of his party spent a significant amount of time on “race education”—for themselves and for others. This included learning how to recognize the “typical features” of a Jew and other foreigners, by paying attention to the size of people’s heads, the shades of color in their eyes, the shape of their hands. The movement was also grounded not only in classic Nazi ideology, contained in *Mein Kampf* and other publications of the Nazi era, but also in modern neo-Nazi and anti-Holocaust writings, including *The Auschwitz Lie* by Thies Christopherson and *The hoax of the twentieth century* by Arthur Butz. Hasselbach describes his first encounter with the idea that people were not in fact gassed with Zykon B at Auschwitz, and that the Holocaust was all a lie:

This was a revelation beyond words. No gas chambers! NO mass murder of the Jews! It had all been Communist lies, like so much else . . . . In this moment of relief and joy we passed from being simply rebels against the GDR to being true neo-Nazis. Even as citizens of the GDR we’d grown up with German guilt. We’d been told that millions of innocent people had been gassed by our grandparents, and even though we were always told that our Germany had not been to blame—that it had itself been a victim, like the Jews—we still felt guilty. This was not the legacy that belonged to a heroic Volk. (p. 88)

Hasselbach and a number of other neo-Nazis lived in a large apartment building in East Berlin. From this base of operations they would periodically organize attacks on various left-wing “Anti-fascist” groups in East Berlin. The street war the developed between these groups escalated, as did violent attacks on Gypsies and foreign refugees. Hasselbach describes his thoughts and feelings after one of these attacks, during which Molotov cocktails were thrown in a boarding house for foreign workers, mostly Vietnamese and African, in East Berlin:

During the whole action, I never thought about the safety or well-being of the people in the house. They didn’t exist for me. Only my friends and I existed. And the Cause, the Party. The foreigners were far away from me somehow, even though I was acting as though they were so much in my way and paining things on the walls of their house. For me, it was a purely political action, and its consequences for our standing in the polls worried me . . . a few days later [however] the city administration emptied all the workers out of the house. The action had been a success. (p. 175)

In September 1991 Hasselbach met Winfried Bonengel, an independent filmmaker living in Paris who wanted to make a film about neo-Nazis. After his initial suspicions about Bonengel’s intentions were assuaged, Hasselbach invited him to film a short interview:

He was different from other journalists, who only wanted to get their story and then disappeared. Bonengel seemed interested in me as a person. He listened carefully to the answers I gave to his questions and then asked even more probing questions. He was able to go quite deep, yet I could tell he had little background on Nazis or neo-Nazis. To him we were simply a bizarre phenomenon—a cult, like people who thought they’d been picked up by UFO’s—and he wanted to explore our motives and beliefs on film. (p. 290)

Bonengel told Hasselbach that he did not fit his cliched image of a young Nazi, and that is why he was interested in making a film about him. “At the time,” Hasselbach says, “I figured he thought I didn’t look like the cliche—
didn’t have a shaved head or a brown shirt with an armband—but later he said he’d meant I seemed to sensitive and intelligent to be a neo-Nazi” (p. 290). During the next several months, as Hasselbach traveled around Germany with Bonengel’s film crew, their conversations continued:

Bonengel had a brash sense of humor, and didn’t restrain himself from making light of my Kamerads. And he was constantly making fun of our rituals and ideology. I now saw that this was part of a strategy to make us seem less intimidating to him, but at the time I thought he was really crazy. Sometimes [thought] he even succeeded in making me smile at the grim, overbearing poses of my Kamerads as they spoke about their hatreds, plots, and plans. (p. 291)

Bonengel’s viewpoint, Hasselbach says, “gradually began to get under my skin” (p. 290).

On one occasion, Hasselbach recalls, Bonengel was interviewing a neo-Nazi who described how he could personally erect concentration camps for “Jews, fags, political enemies, and the Jew-influenced politicians in Bonn.” “Then he sang a little anti-Semitic song,” Hasselbach says, “jumping up and down with glee in his seat, his huge potbelly and walrus mustache juggling as he sang and took sips of beer” (pp. 291–292). Something about this scene clicked for Hasselbach:

This was the first time that I’d ever listened to people talk like this with someone else in the room—someone I respected who was entirely outside the Movement. All my friends for as long as I could remember had been in the Movement in one way or another. Now, to hear a Kamerad talking the presence of my new friend—as I now thought of him—I actually began to feel ashamed. I was ashamed to be associated with these hate-filled drunken pigs. As I listened to them go on and on, I began to identify more and more with Bonengel and his team than with my Kamerads. It was a terrifying moment, for I suddenly felt cut loose and adrift. My home was in the Movement. Outside was nothing. Yet now the Movement seemed to be closing to me, the doors closing at the end of a tunnel, and it was much too far to run fast enough to slip out in time. Winfried—I’d taken to calling him by his first name—had arrived a stranger, but now he had made my Kamerads seem stranger than he. (p. 292)

Hasselbach’s disaffection with the Movement gradually increased over the next year. In November 1992 a neo-Nazi arson attack in the northern German town of Molin a middle-class Turkish woman, her grandmother, and her young niece were burned alive. The neo-Nazis who had attacked the home had deliberately thrown their Molotov cocktails so they would set the house on fire and block the exits. Hasselbach says that he was “sickened” by this act of violence. At the next Kameradschaft meeting Hasselbach told his friends that “killing innocent women and children was reprehensible, that it was the worst possible publicity for the Movement” (p. 323).

Bonengel’s film, We’re back, played two weeks later in prime time. Hasselbach’s doubts about the Movement increased further as a result, both because of his mother’s negative reaction from the film (“What have I raised for a son,” she asked him tearfully after the film had aired), and because of his own reaction to seeing himself on film:

I’d talked on camera about how I was prepared to engage in terrorism. I’d allowed Winfried to film leading war-games training. But the part I found almost physically painful was seeing myself with a somewhat drunken grin on my face (whether from liquor or simply from the power of playing the Fuhrer it was hard to tell anymore) rattling on about the Jews: “The Jews I’ve met were slimy, not really honest.” Such lies. I had never met a Jew. I had literally created things, and people, places to fit in with my world view. (p. 324)

Hasselbach thought more and more about quitting. The winter of 1992–1993 saw increasing public outcry against neo-Nazi violence—“these were the first mass protests against the weekly firebombings that had been happening for over a year” (p. 331). Hasselbach realized that he had some more soul searching to do: “I needed to explore some hard questions . . . not about the firebombing of foreigners but about far more fundamental aspects of my ideology—questions that began and ended with the Holocaust” (p. 331).

Hasselbach turned to his younger step-brother, Jens, who had also been involved in the Movement, but who, it turned out, was also having his doubts:

As a neo-Nazi, I needed to talk over the Holocaust with someone who was more “open-minded”—someone who was reading to consider doubts and thus deal with them. Of course, most new-Nazis would voice no real doubts: they accepted the dogma that the Holocaust had never happened, and all discussion could only lead to proving that point. (p. 332)

Hasselbach and Jens read and talked about the central texts of the neo-Nazi belief (disbelief?) system—Christopherson’s The Auschwitz lie and, most importantly, the Leuchter report, which claimed to refute the gassings at Auschwitz scientifically. They came to see that Leuchter’s account was “absurd,” that it was written in “a ridiculous style” and that the evidence, in fact, “seemed only superficially scientific” (p. 333):

Jens and I were shocked at how shoddily this cornerstone text of the Movement actually was. The secret was that nobody ever looked at it in detail. It was simply
a prop, useful for dazzling a young person eager to hear that Germans were not, in fact, guilty of the worst crime in history. A neo-Nazi could thump his hand on the report and say, “Look, here an American engineer, a disinterested expert, has determined that the so-called gassings were a lie…”

Afterward I often asked myself why I had not sat down sooner and read this thing thoroughly. The answer was that I had not wanted to. I had seen in national socialism something both humanitarian and heroic. In order to maintain this view, I’d had to look the other way from the truth. (pp. 333–334)

Hasselbach says that these conversations and readings with Jens were the first concrete steps he took to free himself from the ideology around which he had structured his life for the past four years. By the end of January 1993 he was convinced, and he contacted Bonengel and told him he wanted to quit the Movement:

I had decided the only way to do it would be to quit publicly—and in such a way that I wouldn’t have the choice. Winfried arranged to get my announcement filmed for television, and it aired on March 15, 1993. At the end of it, I burned a picture of Hitler and some other propaganda material for the camera. To outsiders, this might seem a little silly. But I knew that within the Movement it would be an utter provocation. (p. 336)

Hasselbach’s announcement had a profound effect on the Movement. The day after his announcement was broadcast, his Kameradeschaft dissolved. Hasselbach reports that he later heard reports that some of his Kamerads had been so shocked that they had cried as they watched his announcement. “I didn’t realize until I quit,” says Hasselbach, “how seriously they all took the idea that I was their Fuhrer” (p. 339).

As a quitter, Hasselbach became a target for both his former Kamerads and his former enemies, the left-wing groups. In November, 1993, a package bomb was delivered to his mother that, had it exploded, would have blown four stories off her apartment building. He also survived an attack by a gang of anarchists on the streets of East Berlin, finding, in the process, that he could no longer easily muster the urge to defend himself:

Physical violence was so associated in my mind with being inside the Movement that even hitting someone on self-defense seemed to play my new sense of myself. I waited until it seemed I was going to be beaten to a pulp before I finally hit back. When I escaped, I was trembling. It was strange: I’d never shaken after a fight before. I was a different person. (p. 349)

Hasselbach began a two-year stint of living underground. He surfaced to make public appearances with Jewish leaders, to speak to schools groups, and to dialogue with others about race relations—“generally,” he says, “to work against all that I’d formerly propagated.” He also provided German authorities with new information about right-wing terrorist operations. This information led, in part, to the arrest of Gary Rex Lauck in Denmark in April 1995. Lauck was a supplier of neo-Nazi propaganda for all of Europe, and the leader of a worldwide terrorist network (p. 382). Hasselbach also testified against many of his former Berlin Kamerades, whose trials began in September, 1995: At the end of the first trial one of the defendants stood up in front of the courtroom and yelled “Hasselbach, I’m going to kill you, you Jewish pig!” “Having this anti-Semitic death threat shouted at me by a boy whom I’d once indoctrinated into the Movement,” Hasselbach says, “seemed to perfect ironic comment on my life” (p. 384).

MORAL IDENTITY: A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

Attempting to account for the relationship between moral knowledge/judgment and moral action, Augusto Blasi (1980, 1983, 1984) has sketched the outlines of what he calls a “self-model” of moral functioning. In so doing, Blasi makes the following four claims about the self:

(1) that the outcome of moral judgments becomes, at least in some case, the content of judgments of responsibility; in other words, that the agent, having decided the morally good action, also determines whether that action is strictly obligatory for him or her; (2) that they criteria for responsibility (in the sense of strict obligation) are related to the structure of one’s self, or the essential definition of oneself; (3) that they motivational basis for moral action lies in the internal demand for psychological self-consistency; and (4) that moral action will be more likely to follow moral judgment if the individual has the ability to stop defensive strategies from interfering with the subjective discomfort of self-inconsistency. (Blasi, 1984, p. 129)

In order to clarify more fully the role that the self plays in motivating moral action, Blasi (1984) proposes the concept of moral identity. He accepts Erik Erikson’s (1964, 1968) characterization of identity as emerging for the first time in middle-adolescence, and as (1) experienced as rooted in the core of one’s being; (2) being true to oneself in action; and (3) respecting one’s own conception of truth and understanding of reality (Blasi, 1984, p. 130). As such, Blasi claims that “identity” is equivalent to the “essential” or “core” self:
Each individual, beginning relatively early in development, has an image, a perception, a scheme, or a theory of himself or herself ... being at the same time a principle of cognitive organization and the source of a special class of motives, the self motives. (pp. 130–131)

Moral identity, therefore, is equivalent to the essential moral self—one's view of oneself as a moral person, including the tendency to define oneself in moral terms, and the degree to which a perspective on morality (being a good person, being just and/or caring in relation to others) plays a significant role in one's life, shaping one's outlook, one's worldview, and one's understanding of both self and other. As such, Blasi suggests that moral identity should properly be seen as a dimension along with individuals will differ; moreover, he argues, some of these differences and variations are quite likely developmental in nature:

It should not be surprising if moral identity cannot be found before a certain age (adolescence?), even when moral reasoning and cognitive moral criteria are already present. Similarly, it is not improbable that one's moral identity undergoes changes, for instance, from focusing on obedience as a central virtue to emphasizing loyalty and, finally, moral autonomy. (p. 132)

So how, then, does moral identity mediate the relationship between moral judgment and moral action? On Blasi's view, moral identity provides the (moral) motivation for moral action:

The connection between moral identity and action is expressed through the concept of responsibility (in the sense of strict obligation to act according to one's judgment) and integrity. These two concepts are closely related and derive their meaning from a view of moral action as an extension of the essential self into the domain of the possible, of what is not but needs to be, if the agent has to remain true to himself or herself. Responsibility, in this sense, stresses the self as the source of "moral compulsion." Integrity, instead, emphasizes the idea of moral self-consistency, of intactness and wholeness—all essential connotations of the self as a psychological organization... [M]oral cognition and moral action are not the same; their relation is not a matter of fact but is a matter of obligation and depends on the unity of the self. (pp. 132–133)

In sum, then, Blasi's conception of moral identity assumes that morality/moral understanding and identity/self-understanding are initially separate psychological processes (see also Damon, 1984). As development proceeds, however, a greater and greater degree of integration between these domains occurs, such that, at the highest levels, one's moral understanding becomes a part of one's self-understanding. When this occurs, Blasi (1995) argues, morality has become a core dimension of one's identity, and one's "moral identity" is firmly established as a conscious, central, immutable, and unchanging aspect of one's personality.

Let me briefly turn to a consideration of Hasselbach's story from the standpoint of Blasi's cognitive approach to the study of moral identity. First of all, it is important to note that Hasselbach's story is indeed one that revolves around a series of profound transformations in his sense of identity or self-understanding—the two most important of which occur, arguably, when he becomes a neo-Nazi upon his release from prison in 1989, and when he leaves the Movement in 1993. These two different identities, moreover, clearly bear a relationship to the actions and interactions in which Hasselbach engaged—his neo-Nazi identity led him to engage, personally, in physical violence directed against foreigners, and to promote the racist neo-Nazi philosophy in a variety of ways, while his anti-Nazi identity led him to speak out against racism and intolerance, and to testify against his former Kamerads. In these and other ways, therefore, Hasselbach's story confirms several of Blasi's key insights.

In at least three other ways, however, Hasselbach's story challenges Blasi's perspective. First, while Blasi assumes that moral identity will always be focused on a sense of self-understanding that revolves around positive moral characteristics (e.g., acting with justice or compassion), Hasselbach's identity as a neo-Nazi was clearly focused on what most would agree were very immoral characteristics and attitudes. Hasselbach leaves little doubt that his adoption of a neo-Nazi identity was morally and politically motivated—he saw it as a way to oppose the corruption of the "anti-Fascist" GDR. Yet it was a morality very different than that typically considered, not only by Blasi, but by researchers studying moral development in general. At the very least, therefore, Hasselbach's story points to the importance of broadening our understanding of morality, so as to appreciate the degree to which moral understanding is shaped by culture and context, and to understand that what we assume to be a widely accepted understanding of what constitutes "positive" morality is, in itself, a social construction.

Second, while Blasi acknowledges that developmental transformations in moral identity can and do occur, he clearly assumes that these transformations will be gradual and progressive, charting a relatively smooth movement toward a integrated sense of self-understanding as a moral person, characterized by integrity and authenticity (see also Blasi, 1993). Hasselbach, however,
describes a series of radical transformations in his own moral identity—transformations that entail, first, a wholehearted acceptance of neo-Nazism, and, then, a wholesale rejection of it. These, in short, are not the kind of developmental changes in moral identity that Blasi’s approach assumes; yet they must be explained if we are to come to a full and complete understanding of Hasselbach’s moral experience and moral development.¹

Finally, in a related vein, Blasi assumes, following Erikson, that identity, including moral identity, is directly linked to the essential or core self, which is relatively stable, unchanging, and internally consistent over time. Such a core or essential self, however, does not clearly appear in Hasselbach’s life-story. Rather, Hasselbach adopts a series of different, and sometimes competing, identities, running the gamut from hippie, to punk, to skinhead, to neo-Nazi, to anti-Nazi—in each case one could perhaps argue that there is a link to an inner, core, essential self which remains stable and unchanging, but that, I think, would be a difficult argument to make. Instead, Hasselbach seems to have adopted a wide range of identities and roles, depending, largely, on the social context in which he found himself, and on the social relations in which we was engaged. Hasselbach’s story, in other words, is marked much more by multiplicity, variety, and “unfinalizability” (see Bakhtin, 1984) in his

¹Moreover, from a cognitive-developmental perspective (see Kohlberg, 1981, 1984) the kind of change of mind that Hasselbach describes in conjunction with his decision to leave the Movement and work in opposition should be the result of an upward developmental shift from conventional stages of moral judgment—Stage 3 (Interpersonally normative morality) and Stage 4 (social system morality)—to post-conventional stages of moral judgment—Stage 5 (Human rights and social welfare morality) and Stage 6 (Morality of universal ethical principles).

However, on my reading, Hasselbach describes much more of a shift from a focus on his role and obligations as the leader of the Movement, and his commitment to ensuring the smooth functioning and continuing existence of the Movement, understood as a social system (Stage 4) to a focus on interpersonal issues associated with his relationship with Winfried Bonengel, and his concern that his new friend perceive him as a good person (Stage 3). This kind of shift from Stage 4 to Stage 3 is not a developmental shift from the cognitive-developmental perspective, and it would not normally be associated with the kind of moral action in which Hasselbach ultimately engages (testifying against his former comrades). He also does not provide any evidence that he has moved to a new understanding of the relationship between human rights and social welfare that would characterize Stage 5.

In addition, the cognitive-developmental interpretation assumes that developmental change is a result of internal cognitive reconstruction, as the individual assimilates, accommodates, and attempts to find a new equilibrium between his stage of reasoning and the problems he faces in the world (see Kohlberg, 1984). While some of this does seem to occur in Hasselbach’s story, it takes place in an explicitly relational/dialogical context.

moral identities than by a move toward a single, integrated, self-consistent identity.

Given the serious nature of these challenges that Hasselbach’s story poses to the kind of cognitive approach to moral identity proposed by Blasi and others, I would argue that we must seek an alternative approach to the study of moral identity and its development—an approach that can shed some light on the ways in which Hasselbach’s moral identity is not only more “polyphonic” than it is internally consistent, but is also profoundly shaped by the social, cultural, historical, and institutional context in which he lives. Let me turn, therefore, to a consideration of just such an approach.

MORAL IDENTITY AS MEDIATED ACTION: A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

A sociocultural perspective on moral identity development begins with three basic themes that form the core of Lev Vygotsky’s (1978, 1987) approach to the study of human mental functioning: 1) “the use of genetic or developmental analysis to study individual functioning”; 2) “the claim that individual mental functioning has sociocultural origins”; and 3) “the claim that human action is mediated by tools and signs” (Penell & Wertsch, 1995, p. 85; see also Wertsch, 1985). These three themes, taken together, highlight the primary emphasis Vygotsky places on the role that social, cultural, and historical forces play in shaping and influencing the process of human development.

In extending these general Vygotskian themes to the domain of identity development, William Penell and James Wertsch (1995) have sought common ground between the work of Vygotsky and Erik Erikson. While Erikson (1968), who defined identity as “a subjective sense of invigorating sameness and continuity” (p. 19), tended to emphasize individual functioning in his analysis of identity formation, and Vygotsky tended to emphasize sociocultural processes in his analysis of developmental phenomena, it is possible, Penell and Wertsch argue, to “integrate individual functioning and sociocultural processes into a kind of mediated-action approach to identity formation” (p. 88). That is, by seeking to maintain the dynamic tension that necessarily exists, as both Vygotsky and Erikson recognized, between the individual, on the one hand, and society, on the other, an understanding of the role that
social, cultural, and historical processes play in the formation and transformation of individual identities is not only possible, but quite desirable.

Penel and Wertsch’s “mediated-action approach” to identity formation, which takes human action as its starting point, and is grounded in Vygotsky’s insights about developmental analysis, sociocultural processes, and mediation, gives rise to four central claims:

1. “Mediated action,” rather than an inner sense of identity, provides a basic unit of analysis;
2. Cultural and historical resources for identity formation are integral as empowering and constraining tools for identity formation;
3. The use of a genetic method calls attention to the importance of studying identity in settings where forming identities are at stake in the course of the activity;
4. Variation in the use of cultural resources for identity formation must be viewed in terms of commitments in Erikson’s domains of identity—fidelity, ideology, and work. (pp. 89–90)

Let me briefly explore each of these claims in turn.

With respect to the appropriate unit of analysis to be used in a sociocultural approach to identity formation (claim #1), Penel and Wertsch argue that we must move beyond Erikson’s notion of an “inner sense” of coherence and stability as characteristic of identity, towards a focus on the forms of “mediated action” in which an individual is typically engaged. 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” used by the agent to accomplish a given action, on the other. Following Kenneth Burke (1969), understanding and analyzing any action as mediated action therefore involves focusing on both agent and agency, on both “what person or kind of person performed the act” (“who did it”), and “what means or instruments [s/he] used” (“how [s/he] did it”) (Wertsch, 1998, p. xv).

Such a focus on agents and the cultural tools that mediate their action (and interaction),\(^2\) moreover, entails acknowledging the fundamental and irreducible tension that necessarily exists between these two elements (Wertsch, 1998). That is, in examining the dialectic between agents and cultural tools at work in any given (inter)action, it is always tempting to reduce the action in question to a function of one or the other element. Such a temptation must be resisted, however, or we run the risk of destroying the phenomenon under observation.

Methodologically, adopting a mediated action approach to identity formation means focusing less on what persons say about their own sense of self-understanding, and more on what they do in specific situations and circumstances:

Taking mediated action as the unit of analysis … allows us to ask a different set of questions about the way individuals use cultural tools to form an identity, without having to sacrifice Erikson’s concern for coherence. In this approach, what we are attempting to interpret, explain, or analyze is meaningful human action, rather than either inner states of individuals or sociocultural processes, considered in isolation … [The sociocultural framework asks us to focus on specific questions about the mediational means or cultural tools that people employ to construct their identities in the course of different activities and how they are put to use in particular actions. When identity is seen in this framework as shaped by mediational means or cultural tools, questions arise as to the nature of cultural tools and why one, as opposed to another, is employed in carrying out a particular form of action. (Penel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 91)

Turning next to the fundamental role that cultural and historical resources, tools, or mediational means play in individual functioning (claim #2), Penel and Wertsch focus on the ideologies that are available in a particular sociocultural-historical context—ideologies that shape and mediate identity in critical ways (e.g., the ideology of “autonomy” and “freedom” that provide such powerful resources for identity formation in a contemporary American context). Such ideologies, however, can have both empowering and constraining effects on the development of identity (see also Wertsch, 1998):

On the one hand, cultural tools in the form of ideologies provide individuals with a coherent world view, something that, in [Erikson’s] view, youth desperately need to fashion an identity. In that way, these ideologies are empowering, providing youth with a compass in a contradictory and complex world. At the same time, these resources are, according to Erikson, constraining, in that individuals are limited

\(^2\) I include the term “interaction” here and below, in my discussion of identity-as-mediated-action, to acknowledge that moral identity is shaped as much by social and relational processes that occur between persons as it is by cultural, historical, political, and institutional processes that occur on a somewhat larger scale.
in who they can become by the array of choices of ideology, career, and self-expression. (p. 90)

Penuel and Wertsch also argue that the meaning of ideologies-as-cultural tools is not fixed and immutable, but is rather quite fluid and flexible, determined, in large measure, by how such resources and tools are used in a particular situation:

The cultural and historical resources for identity formation do not constitute a single, undifferentiated whole, but represent a diversity of mediational means. In that way, identity may be conceived as formed when individuals choose on particular occasions to use one or more resources from a cultural “tool kit” to accomplish some action (see Bruner, 1990; Wertsch, 1991). Ideologies are embedded in a multitude of tools and signs; in this respect, identity researchers must be open to the variety of settings and signs in which an individual’s identity is being constructed or expressed. (p. 90)

Penuel and Wertsch, in claim #3, argue that “identity research must examine contexts in which identity is contested or under[going] transforming shifts” (p. 90). As such, they highlight not only the role that social processes play in the formation and transformation of identity, but also the degree to which identity is always as much a distributed or collective phenomenon as it is an individual phenomenon. They suggest studying identity in social-movement organization meetings, community support groups, and psychotherapy sessions, for example, in “provide insight into the way that individuals and groups can struggle against dominant discourses of their identity to co-construct a different way of speaking about themselves and develop new forms of action” (p. 90). It is important to undertake such studies in such settings, moreover, because “they are concerned . . . with the multitude of ways in which women and men struggle to come to terms with their membership in societies and with their own sense of who they are in the midst of a vast but structured field of signs, symbols, and voices from the culture(s) in which they live” (p. 90).

Finally, Penuel and Wertsch argue that to understand this variation in the both the context and content of identity development, we must return to Erikson’s insight that the formation of identity entails developing commitments in the areas of fidelity, ideology, and work (claim #4):

When speaking of identity in particular, we are concerned with how individuals select, choose, and commit to different people and idea systems in the course of their activities. This selecting and choosing process is of utmost concern to the problem of identity, even as it is shaped by sociocultural processes. (p. 91)

To clarify further the role that that forming commitments to ideologies-as-cultural tools plays in the process of identity formation, let me turn briefly to the work of Vygotsky’s contemporary Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). On Bakhtin’s view, to understand the formation of a self (and hence the development of identity), we must consider the process by which one appropriates and uses others’ words, language, and forms of discourse—how one makes the words and language of others “one’s own.”3 This process occurs, argues Bakhtin, as one selectively “appropriates” and “assimilates” the words of others—allowing and enabling, that is, the voices of others to enter into an ongoing inner dialogue with one’s own voice. This is what Bakhtin calls, interestingly enough, the process of “ideological becoming,” and it is key to understanding identity development as it occurs in the “dialogical self” (see also Day & Tappan, 1996):

The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of an individual’s coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse. This problem is made more complex by the fact that a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual’s consciousness (just as they struggle with one another in surrounding social reality). (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 348)

It is important to note that, from Bakhtin’s perspective, the goal of development is not simply a matter of speaking in one’s own “true” or “authentic” voice.” It is, instead, a matter of engaging in ongoing dialogue with the words of others, and thereby coming to a somewhat more “internally persuasive,” and somewhat less “externally authoritative,” sense of self-understanding (Bakhtin, 1981; see also Tappan, 1991a).

Bakhtin thus offers an explicitly dialogical account of the development of identity. He does so by acknowledging that the words, language, and forms of discourse (i.e., the ideologies-as-cultural tools which are, themselves, forms

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3 Bakhtin’s discussion of the process of appropriation directly informs Wertsch’s (1998) claim that, from a mediated action perspective, “the relationship of agents toward mediational means can be characterized in terms of appropriation” (p. 25), whereby the process of appropriation is understood to entail “taking something [a given cultural resource or tool] that belongs to others and making it one’s own” (p. 53).
of symbolic action) that mediate and shape the self are always shared, communal, distributed, and thus are never the "property" of individual persons. While one’s own voice, one’s own sense of self, does gradually emerge from the multitude of voices that one encounters in the social world, for Bakhtin’s one’s identity is never simply defined in terms of one’s individual characteristics, qualities, or properties. Rather, from the start, it is always a function of conversation and dialogue.

Thus, joining Bakhtin’s insights to those of Penuel and Wertsch (1995), I would argue that moral identity must be seen not as an understanding of oneself as a moral person that comes from access to or reflection on one’s "true" or "essential" self, but rather as a form of "mediated [moral] action" in the world—action (and interaction) that is shaped by specific cultural tools and resources. Chief among these tools and resources are moral orientations or ideologies that are carried and transmitted via words, language, and forms of discourse. One finds one’s moral identity, therefore, in the ideologically-mediated moral action in which one engages, not in the process of reflection on one’s inner moral self. And the development of moral identity, on this view, entails a process of "ideological becoming" whereby one selectively assimilates the words, language, and forms of discourse of others with whom one is in dialogue, and in-doing struggles to strike a healthy balance between "authoritative" and "internally persuasive" forms of discourse.

These ideas are clearly reflected, I would argue, in Ingo Hasselbach’s life story. He does not tell the story of the gradual development of his own inner sense of himself as a moral person. Rather, he tells the story of his adoption of a series of ideologically-mediated identities—identities, that is, shaped by specific cultural tools and resources (i.e., the ideologies of the hippies, the punks, the skin-heads, and the neo-Nazis), and embedded in a particular historical time and place (East Germany before and after 1989). Moreover, these various "moral" identities were not generated by self-reflection, or by the construction of an inner sense of self-coherence. Rather, they were generated by action (and interaction)—often aggressive, violent, and hate-filled—in the world.

The clearest example of these processes, of course, occurs in Hasselbach’s account of how he became a neo-Nazi. In his account we can find clear evidence of the four claims that Penuel and Wertsch (1995) make about studying identity from a sociocultural perspective. First, as I have suggested above, Hasselbach’s neo-Nazi identity was manifest primarily in action and interaction—mediated and shaped by his neo-Nazi ideology—not in self-reflection. Interestingly enough, his mediated (inter)actions ultimately led to self-reflection, as he began to question his neo-Nazi identity, and ultimately quit the movement. But even then, his new identity as an anti-Nazi was primarily an identity-in-action, as he spoke out against racism and testified against his former Kamerads.

Second, Hasselbach’s neo-Nazi identity-in-action was dependent upon cultural and historical tools and resources—both those that came from the original Nazi era in Germany, and more contemporary tools and resources that offered revisionist accounts of the Holocaust. Hasselbach found these ideological tools and resources extremely empowering as he became a neo-Nazi; needless to say, he also found them quite constraining as he began to question his involvement in the Movement, and that constraint was ultimately a primary reason for his decision to quit the Movement.

Third, Hasselbach came to his neo-Nazi identity in a social and cultural setting—East Berlin in the late 1980’s—in which identity was at stake, as many groups were expressing political opposition to the government of the GDR. As Hasselbach says, neo-Nazism appealed to him largely because he “was looking for a new oppositional ideology.”

Finally, Hasselbach’s neo-Nazi identity clearly reflected commitments he made in the domains of identity—fidelity, ideology, and work. Once again, however, these commitments and loyalties were ideologically mediated. When he began to question the neo-Nazi ideology, his loyalty to the Movement, and his involvement in its work, began to change.

The sociocultural approach to moral identity is also quite helpful in interpreting what is arguably the most complex and complicated aspect of Hasselbach’s autobiography—his decision to repudiate the neo-Nazi movement. Here, I would argue, Hasselbach’s story exemplifies the relationship between externally authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse that lies at the heart of Bakhtin’s conception of the process of ideological becoming. In brief, I would argue that, as Hasselbach encountered the neo-Nazi ideology, first in prison, in dialogue with Barth and Schmidt, and then afterwards, as he became more and more involved in the Movement, it functioned clearly as authoritative discourse in his life. Hasselbach appropriated the words, language, and forms of discourse of the Movement as the “Truth”—the neo-Nazi ideology demanded his “unconditional allegiance,” and Hasselbach and others in the Movement could not conceive of challenging its authority, or doubt-
ing its version of reality (e.g., the neo-Nazi version of the Holocaust). As Hasselbach (1996) says, “most neo-Nazis would voice no real doubts: they accepted the dogma that the Holocaust never happened, and all discussion could only lead to proving that point” (p. 332).

After several years, however, as he assumed a more and more central leadership role in the Movement, it seems clear that the neo-Nazi ideology began to function, for Hasselbach, more like what Bakhtin calls internally persuasive discourse. As such, on the one hand Hasselbach himself began to experience the neo-Nazi discourse as more his own—he had fully assimilated it, and could re-tell it, as it were, in his own words, rather than simply reciting the dogma by heart. On the other hand, however, I would argue that it is precisely this move from authoritative to internally persuasive discourse that opened the door to Hasselbach’s ultimate repudiation of the Movement, and his corresponding rejection of his ideologically-mediated identity as a neo-Nazi. As Bakhtin suggests, when others’ words become internally persuasive they not only enter into “interanimating relationships with new contexts,” but also enter into “an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses.” In short, they are open to change.

This is precisely what happened in Hasselbach’s narrative. I would argue, first in his relationship with Winfried Bonengel, and then in his discussions with Jens about the neo-Nazi ideology. Both those experiences of dialogue could only change Hasselbach’s neo-Nazi ideology once it had become internally persuasive. Had it remained authoritative, Hasselbach could not have experienced the kind of “intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values” that is key, from a dialogical perspective, to genuine and authentic identity development.

In sum, then, the developmental image that Bakhtin’s perspective on identity-as-mediated-action suggests, and Hasselbach’s story illustrates, is not that of a ladder or set of stairs, wherein each developmental shift entails a step upwards in a hierarchical progression, but rather that of a spiral or helix, wherein shifts or transformations from authoritative to internally persuasive forms of discourse recur again and again, and the outcome of the dialogical encounters that ultimately give rise to developmental changes is never quite certain. On Hasselbach’s account he began to question his commitment to neo-Nazism as a result, at least initially, of his conversations with Winfried Bonengel. These ongoing dialogues, we can imagine, led Hasselbach to begin to appropriate some of Winfried’s words, language, and forms of discourse—words that were critical—in a humorous way—of the Movement. As Hasselbach, in Bakhtin’s terms, gradually sought to make Winfried’s words “his own,” his views began to change. The formation of his new moral identity—as an anti-Nazi—was further supported by a re-reading of the anti-Holocaust propaganda that had initially provided some of the most important cultural tools and ideological resources for his neo-Nazi identity. In the end, therefore, his dialogical encounter with his brother Jens, in conjunction with his ongoing relationship with Winfried, provided Hasselbach with the motivation he needed to act—to announce his renunciation of neo-Nazism and to become, as he says, “a different person.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would argue that a sociocultural perspective on moral identity development provides a more useful interpretation of Hasselbach’s autobiographical narrative than does a strictly cognitive interpretation. In particular, the sociocultural perspective deals easier with the three challenges to the cognitive perspective posed by Hasselbach’s story. First, the sociocultural perspective, which focuses on the role that cultural tools and ideological resources play in the formation of moral identity, has less trouble accepting a variety of conceptions of “morality”—including very “negative” conceptions—than does the cognitive perspective, which continues to be wedded largely to a deontological conception of morality (see, for example, Kohlberg, 1981, 1984).

4 It is important to note, here, that while, for the purposes of this analysis, I am taking Hasselbach’s account of his moral transformation from neo-Nazi to anti-Nazi at face value, I am fully aware that there may have been other, “non-moral,” motivating factors at work here that Hasselbach does not acknowledge. For example, it is possible that his renunciation of the Movement was motivated, at least in part, by the economic advantages that he foresaw as resulting from the writing and publication of a very compelling autobiography. Alternatively, perhaps his strong need to belong to and be accepted by a group was no longer being satisfied by the Movement, and he saw, in the anti-Nazi coalition, a more inviting audience. Much more could and perhaps should be said about these interpretations and the issues to which they give rise. My point here, though, is simply to acknowledge these alternative views, while at the same time holding firm to my interpretation that Hasselbach does undergo a striking transformation in his moral identity—a transformation that is both dialogically shaped and discursively mediated.
Second, the sociocultural approach to moral identity as mediated action does not assume that development necessarily entails a gradual and progressive process. Rather, because the forms of mediated action in which one engages are often quite variable, depending on the context in which those actions occur, one's identity, too, is often quite variable, depending on the context in which one finds oneself.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the sociocultural perspective accepts the multiplicity, variability, and unfinalizability of one's moral identity as being a fundamental characteristic of being human (see Sidorkin, 1996). It does not, therefore, seek a single, integrated, consistent identity that marks the "essential" or "core" self. Instead, it recognizes and celebrates the "polyphonic" nature of the dialogic moral self (see Day & Tappan, 1996), and sees in Ingo Hasselbach's autobiography not a special or a unique case but a prototypical one—a story that illustrates the kind of striking transformations in moral identity to which we are all subject, as we negotiate the dynamics and vicissitudes of the social, cultural, political, historical, and institutional settings in which we live and grow.

Let me say a word or two about the value of using autobiographical narratives, like Hasselbach's, to study moral identity and its development from a sociocultural perspective. First, because writing an autobiography enables an author to write and rewrite his moral life and his moral self (see Freeman, 1993), autobiographies necessarily entail a process of self-interpretation that is a critical aspect of identity development. Most important, however, this is not an interpretive process that focuses simply on inner thoughts and feelings. Rather, it focuses on cultural tools and ideological resources—specifically, words, language, and forms of discourse—that comprise the texts that the author, himself, has fashioned vis-à-vis his life (see Shoter & Gergen, 1989). As Mark Freeman (1993) argues, "When I try to interpret my own memories, aren't I trying to come to terms with things that are already interpreted, already saturated in language, indeed in my language?" (p. 146).

Moreover, there is a clear connection between autobiography and ideology that points directly to the sociocultural focus on identity development as a process of "ideological becoming":

[The ideological impulse has so much in common with the autobiographical impulse. Both arise from a simultaneous groundedness and a need for acknowledging a meaningful orientation in a world; both are responses to the finitude and vulnera-

In other words, as Hasselbach's story exemplifies, the process of self-interpretation that is central to autobiography often finds, in ideology, a powerful tool for self-understanding and identity formation (and transformation). Finally, autobiographical narratives provide incontrovertible evidence, I believe, of the degree to which moral identity is, at its core, a form of mediated action "that is first and foremost rhetorical, concerned with persuading others (and oneself) about who one is and what one values" (Penel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 91). As such, from a sociocultural perspective, the process of rhetorical action and persuasion in which Hasselbach and other autobiographers engage may differ in degree, but certainly not in kind, from the process of identity formation and transformation we all experience, as we act and interact in the social, cultural, political, historical, and institutional worlds in which we live.

**AUTHOR NOTES**

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1997 Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. Thanks to Barbara Juen, Donato Tarulli, and one anonymous reviewer for very helpful comments and suggestions.

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