Character Development across Childhood and Adolescence and the Role of Parenting Practices

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Method

Data for the study came from a larger study designed to examine the developmental roots of civic engagement.
- Children and adolescents completed questionnaires in school: N = 2,475 4th through 12th graders (M = 13.05, SD = 2.66, 55.6% female).
- Recruited from rural West Virginia (33.2%), suburban southern California (41.2%), and urban Minnesota (24.7%).
- White (30.6%), Hispanic or Latino (30.2%), Black or African American (9.3%), Other Race/Ethnicity (13.1%), and Asian (6.7%)

Character Items

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Bifactor Models

- Bifactor models assume that all character strengths have some common variance (captured by the general character factor) as well as unique variance not explained by general character (captured by the specific factors).
- Exploratory bifactor models are uniquely suited to assessing potential differentiation by identifying strengths that load only on a general character factor as well as those that are differentiated into specific factors.
- To address whether character progresses from globality to specificity with age, we estimated separate exploratory bifactor analyses of character strengths among three age groups: elementary, middle, and high school age youth.
- Exploratory analyses, we examined the three parenting strategies as predictors of the final character bifactor model for each age group.

Parenting Practices and Bifactor Models

- Exploratory bifactor analyses are especially well-suited to character research, as they are able to simultaneously capture general and specific aspects of character structure.
- Results from the bifactor model suggest that the general factor captures a tendency towards positive responding whereas the specific factors are capturing unique character strengths not explained by general character.
- Compared to alternative measurement models, bifactor models may provide increased precision in measuring character and its related outcomes.

Discussion

- Character Development
  - Results varied in developmental differences in character across childhood and adolescence.
  - Consistent with Werner's orthogenetic principle, character is more global and diffuse at elementary school ages and becomes more differentiated across ages.

Bifactor Models

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Parenting Practices

- Psychological needs support from parents is positively related to character development across ages.
- Civic modeling has differential effects on character development for older and younger adolescents.
  - For younger youth, parents' civic modeling was strongly related to leadership.
  - The association between modeling and the general, but not specific factors, in older age groups suggests that the influence of parental civic modeling becomes more generalized with age.
- The positive association between civic communication and general character suggests discussing politics and problems facing the community are promotive of broad aspects of character across ages.

Implications

- There has been a dearth of theoretical work on addressing age differences in character strengths (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2002).
- The current study advances developmental theory by elucidating structural changes in character and provides a richer understanding of the conceptual link between character and civic development across late childhood and adolescence.
- Our results offer strategies that parents, educators, and youth development professionals can implement to foster youth character development.

References


Download a copy of the poster on ResearchGate.net by searching Jennifer Shubert or email jennifer.shubert@rochester.edu.

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