Human Development

Letters to the Editor

Character Development: Are We Putting the Cart before the Horse?

Lerner and Schmid Callina [2014] have filled a theoretical lacuna in articulating a relational developmental systems (RDS)-based model of character. The tenets of RDS theory have the potential to chart a bold new course for character development research. Among the RDS tenets we most appreciate are its recognition that character is dynamically malleable as a result of individual ← → context relations and that young people are active agents in this process. Moreover, the RDS lens shifts the study of character development away from trait-based notions of character, which we agree is useful – even necessary – for fully embracing the study of character development in context. Thus, we applaud Lerner and Schmid Callina for grounding character in developmental theory and leading the field toward more advanced understanding of the processes integral to character development.

Despite the utility of RDS theory for articulating developmental processes of character, perhaps it is worth taking a step back and asking: Are we putting the cart before the horse? That is, what value is there in understanding the developmental processes that undergird character when we still have no consensus on what character really is? The definitional ambiguity surrounding character makes it especially difficult for developmental scientists to accept the construct as legitimate for study.

Of course, defining character is difficult terrain that scholars have struggled with for many years, and we also do not have clear answers to suggest. As a start, we agree with Berkowitz [2014] that character must be defined as situated within the individual and not as a relation. There is both value and utility in operationalizing character as a specific type of psychological construct. Some have labeled it a disposition toward action and others a set of skills [Lickona, 1999; Narvaez, 2006]. We believe that it could be useful to conceptualize character as a construct that integrates skills with dispositions toward action. In our own work, the contrast of character strengths with other developmental competencies such as empathy, perspective taking, and moral reasoning is proving useful for better understanding the theoretical (and empirical) margins of these concepts. Although

our research is very much a work in progress in this area, we contend that character has more heterogeneous, person-specific trajectories than other developmental competencies, with the latter demonstrating more consistent normative age-graded developmental trends across childhood and adolescence. It is also possible that certain developmental competencies are necessary but insufficient characteristics that underlie the expression of certain character strengths. Of course, these are open empirical questions. As more longitudinal developmental research on character is conducted, we will achieve greater understanding of what fits inside and outside of the domain of character.

Given the abstract nature of RDS theory, we contend there may also be value in employing a midlevel theory from which to study character, as such theories tend to lead to more concrete theory in which to ground research. As Mascolo [2014] and Berkowitz [2014] have already implied, identity development could be a useful lens through which to articulate a midlevel theory of character. Couching character within the identity literature recognizes that character strengths are inherently descriptions of the self that are central to who we are as a person and may become more or less central to one's identity over time [McAdams & McLean, 2013]. Lerner and Schmid Callina describe character as having some coherence and also considerable potential for malleability across time and contexts; these ideas about character align well with current conceptualizations of identity components as being continually updated and actively constructed by the individual [Blasi, 2004]. Considering character as an aspect of identity could also offer a tangible set of methods with which to consider character development. For example, growth in a character strength may be better illustrated by becoming more central to one's identity than by level changes over time.

Situating character within identity creates an opportunity to study the coherence of character. Lerner and Schmid Callina discussed coherence at an abstract level, but their description of coherence may be too broad for researchers to equate into testable hypotheses, to create appropriate measurement tools, or to formulate precise statistical tests. If, however, character is framed as a component of identity, coherence may be reflected and measured in more concrete ways, such as by assessing self-consistency [Cervone & Tripathi, 2009]. That is, character strengths that become a salient aspect of identity are likely to be exhibited across situations in order to maintain self-consistency. When thought of from this perspective, coherence could be operationalized as the consistent use of the same or functionally similar character strengths across similar contexts. The use of tools from the identity literature such as personal narrative methodology could shed light on the coherence of character over time and across contexts and processes by which individual ← → context relations prompt the integration of character strengths into identity.

Finally, Lerner and Schmid Callina's assumption of plasticity is undoubtedly a useful starting point for character development. However, although we agree with the idea that character is malleable, it is important to underscore the likelihood of relative plasticity. In other words, the extent to which character may change over time remains an unanswered empirical question. As this work moves forward, it would behoove researchers to be more careful in their consideration of the nature and time frame associated with changes in character as well as what methods and measures are ideal for assessing this change, a recommendation consistent with Lerner and Schmid Callina's call for change-sensitive measures. Moreover, we also think that researchers studying character should be prepared for empirical research to reveal illustrations of plasticity as well as the potential limits to plasticity. Identifying the limits and extent of plasticity may offer insights into the optimal timing for character interventions and education programs.

In summary, RDS provides insight into how to embark on the study of character development from a dynamic, developmental systems perspective. Yet without a clearer psychological definition, developmental scientists may not be able to fully apply the tenants of RDS in empirical research. The details of how to precisely define character and what sets it apart from related constructs will be the arduous and important work of the current generation of character development researchers and theorists. In lieu of a clearly delineated definition of character as a psychological construct, a useful next step for character development research may indeed be to put the proverbial cart before the horse by taking up some of the specific constructs generally agreed upon to be character and thoroughly studying them from an RDS theoretical perspective. As research begins delineating similarities and differences between character and other developmental processes, our hope is that a midlevel theory will emerge. There is no doubt Lerner and Schmid Callina's paper will serve as a useful guide in this important work.

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The Explanatory Significance of Organization and Process in the Study of Character Development

In their recent paper, Richard Lerner and Kristina Schmid Callina [2014] articulate a relational developmental systems model for the study of character development. They specifically focus on an understanding of character and its development from the bottom-up vantage point of dynamic process – that is, from the standpoint of "mutually influential individual ← → context relations" (p. 333) wherein character is defined in terms of the processes that comprise the person ← → context system as a dynamic whole, varying across time and context. However, Lerner and Schmid Callina also call attention throughout their paper to the legitimate vantage point of understanding character at the individual level of analysis, in terms of the organizational invariance of the person qua individual, irrespective of any particular context or adaptive encounter. Their active embrace of different explanatory vantage points relative to the study of character and its development laudably embodies the explanatory pluralism of the process-relational paradigm within which their relational developmental systems model operates [Lerner, Agans, De Souza, & Hershberg, 2014; Overton, 2014]. Unfortunately, the significance of this pluralistic approach to explanation does not fully translate to either of the commentaries that Michael Mascolo [2014] and Marvin Berkowitz [2014] provide.

Mascolo, for example, warns Lerner and Schmid Callina against the "trappings of trait thinking" and argues that "the idea that character is a dynamic, emergent, and relational process is at odds with the idea that character exhibits a trait-like structure and content" (p. 351), suggesting a fundamental incompatibility between viewing character as a process of individual-context relations and viewing character as a structural framing of the individual himself or herself, across time and context. Conversely, Berkowitz takes Lerner and Schmid Callina's model to task for its "overemphasis on process at the expense of the nature of the developing person" (p. 354), suggesting that character "resides in the person and not in the relations of which the person is part" (p. 355). Though both commentaries applaud Lerner and Schmid Callina for exploring the complex question of character development, neither Mascolo nor Berkowitz seems wholly satisfied with the juxtaposition of organizational/structural and dynamic process perspectives that Lerner and Schmid Callina advocate. I would suggest that Mascolo and Berkowitz's dissatisfaction does not stem from any shortcomings in Lerner and Schmid Callina's account but from an overly narrow view of what organizational/structural and dynamic process perspectives entail as fundamentally different yet fully complementary explanatory strategies toward any given phenomenon.

Viewing a person's character from the vantage point of organization and structure is a way of looking at the person in unified, invariant whole terms, as a system that, despite its perpetual

openness and incessant exchange of matter and energy with the contextual surround, maintains an organizational closure in the face of such continuous variability [Moreno & Umerez, 2000]. This organizational invariance of the person qua person, across time and context, serves as a level of explanation in its own right, irreducible to an articulation of the component processes that dynamically interrelate between person and context to both developmentally construct and actively maintain such organizational invariance. Crucially, however, the level of explanation provided by an articulation of someone's character in terms of its structure and organization is not an explanation of the temporal, antecedent-consequent variety that we routinely adopt in modern science. Unlike Berkowitz, I would argue that character is not something that sits inside the person as a property, part, or aspect of the person interacting with other parts of the person and context to account for the person's functioning. Rather, character is the person considered in her or his simultaneous totality, a context- and time-independent view of the person as a whole that serves as a critical explanatory backdrop or framework against which the temporally unfolding part-to-part relations of the person-in-context must be understood [Thompson, 2007]. Character, in other words, offers a structural level of explanation akin to Aristotle's formal cause. It meaningfully frames an understanding of an individual's specific activities in context in terms of the general organization that those activities evince, serving as a structural, topological context within which full understanding of the very processes that give rise to this organization must be embedded [Overton, 1991]. The structure of the person qua person, far from being reducible to a foundational level of process, comprises the very nature of process [Bickhard & Campbell, 2000]. Getting to the heart of developmental process, in other words, is not achieved by reducing all organization and pattern to relations and processes, as Mascolo seems to encourage, but by recognizing that organization frames an understanding of process as much as process frames an understanding of organization [Witherington, 2011; Witherington & Heying, in press].

Both Mascolo – in arguing against explanatory appeals to the structure of character – and Berkowitz – in arguing for character as a part of the person – seem to presuppose that defining character in terms of a person level of analysis means that character serves as a temporal antecedent, a motivating force relative to the activity of the person. But character as a structural explanation constitutes an explanation by means of abstraction without recourse to the flow of time: an abstraction from the specifics of real-time action in context that provides a critical context of meaning for understanding the temporal dynamics of process [Rychlak, 1988]. Structural explanation offers the explanation of a whole relative to the parts and processes that comprise the whole, which is of a fundamentally different nature than the explanation that parts and their relations provide relative to the whole (which is what the study of dynamic process is all about). Thus, treating the explanatory structure of character in functional, "push-from-behind" terms confuses structural explanation for what amounts to a structural reification, an ontological confusion

of wholes for parts [Witherington & Heying, in press]. Mascolo is certainly correct in warning against the structural reification that trait accounts of character routinely espouse. But an appeal to the structure of character needn't and shouldn't involve a reification of the structure; such a structural level of explanation instead offers a unique, organizational vantage point that complements rather than competes with or contradicts the dynamic process level of explanation. This is what the explanatory pluralism of the process-relational paradigm is all about and what Lerner and Schmid Callina call appropriate attention to in their consideration of different moments of analysis in a relational developmental systems approach to developmental science.

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