

Character Development: Four Facets of Virtues

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ABSTRACT—*Character virtues are morally based actions that enable and individual and his or her social world to thrive across time and place. The morally valenced relation between individual and context involved in character virtue development may be studied productively by research and program evaluation focused on four facets of virtues: (a) Character virtue development involves mutually beneficial relations between the individual and the context (individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations); (b) Coherence, reflecting the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, enables understanding of the specific ways in which an individual may contribute positively to the context that, in turn, supports him or her; (c) Specific character virtues develop in specific places at specific times through specific individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations; and 4. Idiographic analysis is a useful first step in the study of character virtue development. Implications of these ideas for research and the evaluation of character education programs are discussed.*

KEYWORDS—*character virtues; relational developmental systems metatheory; idiographic specificity*

I have a dream that my four little children will 1 day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. (Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963)

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In the ecology of life, people discuss and evaluate other people in regard to many attributes, including those involving physical, behavioral, social, political, economic, cultural, and spiritual characteristics (Lerner, 2018a, 2018b). As exemplified by the epigram from Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, character is often included among these dimensions. All people can be discussed in regard to the character they possess, and character can be good or bad. However, and as again exemplified by the Dr. King epigram, parents and others involved in nurturing and mentoring young people hope that *attributes of positive character* (i.e., *character virtues*) mark the development of these youth.

In this article, I present a person-context relational conception of the development of character virtue that is derived from relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory (Overton, 2015). I discuss points of convergence between my conception and models of other RDS-oriented theorists concerned with character and moral development (e.g., Nucci, 2017; Turiel, 2015). I also address points of divergence, particularly regarding the research implications of my model.

A focus on character virtues is important because these attributes help individuals thrive throughout life. At the same time, character virtues help the social world thrive. The synergistic connection between individual and context that occurs through character virtues may create a social context (e.g., a nation or an international *zeitgeist*) marked by morality, support for the institutions of civil society, and social justice (e.g., Berkowitz, Bier, & McCauley, 2017). The absence of such a synergy may create a context of oppression, discrimination, injustice, and even fascism (Lerner, 1992, 2004, 2015).

Indeed, underscoring the links between character virtues and the genesis or maintenance of a democratic society marked by social justice, Nucci (2008) noted that a fundamental feature of the development of character virtues involves interpersonal relations marked by a concern for human welfare, justice, and rights. Similarly, Berkowitz (2012) explained that the development of character virtues involves "a public system of universal concerns about human welfare, justice, and rights that all rational people would want others to adhere to" (p. 249).

Similarly, Lerner and Callina (2014) defined character virtues as constituting attributes of an individual's relations with his or her social context that involve coherently "doing the right thing" (morally and behaviorally) to provide mutually positive benefits to both self and others (with "others" including individuals across time and place, e.g., across generations and national boundaries; Lerner, 2004).

Thus, given the morally valenced synergy between the individual and the context involved in the development of character virtues, the content of character referred to by Dr. King is not an enumeration of universally applicable actions others might evaluate regarding the absence or presence of items on a particular list—although many have tried to generate such a list of correct or fundamental items (e.g., McGrath, 2017). Items on such a list may be useful *or not*, depending on the time and place in which moral action is required. As Nucci explained:

Character is not a collection of virtues, personality traits, or reducible to identity, but a system that enables the person to engage the social world as a moral agent. Character ... functions coactively within the social context [and] ... provides coherence to moral action, but not complete consistency. The lack of consistency is not a sign of moral failing or weakness of character, but the normative and expected adjustments to the social context by a functioning moral agent ... Thus, attempts to impose an impossible level of consistency ... assume a decontextualized psychological system that has little to do with an actual human being. Similarly, theoretical critiques of character as a meaningful psychological construct because of the evidence of inconsistency ... are valid only when directed at definitions of character as a set of traits, or features of personality that operate independent of context. (Nucci, 2017, p. 12)

This statement embodies every concept needed to understand the development of character virtues. Indeed, Nucci's statement includes four key facets of the development of character virtues: Mutually beneficial individual-context relations, coherence, specificity, and idiographic development. Examining these facets has important implications for framing how research is designed, how character education programs are designed, and how policies are formulated to enhance both individual development and the institutions of civil society and social justice.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTER VIRTUES INVOLVES MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN AN INDIVIDUAL AND HIS OR HER CONTEXT

In agreement with other RDS-oriented theorists studying character virtues (e.g., Nucci, 2017), models of the development of character virtues emphasize mutually influential individual-context relations (represented as individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations) as the basic unit of analysis in the developmental process. RDS-based theories are also marked by the ideas of holism,

self-construction (autopoiesis) agency, and relative plasticity (Lerner, 2018a; Overton, 2015). According to Overton (2015), RDS-based theories eschew reductionist or split conceptions (e.g., ideas that separate biology and context in explaining development) in favor of ideas that emphasize integrating different levels of organization, ranging from biology and physiology to culture and history, to understand human development (Lerner, 2018b; Overton, 2015). Accordingly, the conceptual emphasis in RDS-based models is on mutually influential individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations.

Interest in these relations has a long history within the study of both phylogeny and ontogeny. From at least Darwin's (1859) *The Origin of Species*, scientists have understood that all life involves relations between an individual organism and its complex and changing ecology. Life is maintained when the organism gets from the context the resources needed for survival *and* when it does not deplete these resources, thus limiting its survival. Therefore, *an organism can optimize its chances for survival across time and place when it contributes to maintaining and perpetuating the context supporting its maintenance and perpetuation*. More than just mutually influential individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations are needed for organisms to survive across time and place; organisms also need mutually *beneficial* individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations across time and place (Brandtstädter, 1998). Thus, character virtues are instances of mutually beneficial individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations that involve a person acting morally to contribute to the social, cultural, and physical world that contributes to his or her life across time and place.

COHERENCE: THE ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPT OF PHRONESIS ENABLES UNDERSTANDING OF THE SPECIFIC WAYS AN INDIVIDUAL MAY CONTRIBUTE POSITIVELY TO THE CONTEXT SUPPORTING HIM OR HER

What should a person do at a specific time and place to engage in mutually beneficial individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations, or individual $\Leftrightarrow$ individual relations more specifically? Character virtues are numerous: for example, generosity, courage, humility, and love. Aristotle's (1985) concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, involves actions reflecting the *morally correct* virtue (i.e., the specific instance of actions necessary for mutual benefit at a specific time and place), in the correct amount (e.g., in regard to intensity or duration), at a specific time and in a specific place. Thus, the development of character virtue does not involve the same actions across time and place. Indeed, consistency in actions across time and place would be antithetical to the plasticity of functioning, that is, a defining feature of RDS-based theories (Lerner, 2018a). Therefore, coherence—the habit of doing the right thing at a specific place and a specific time—and not consistency is the hallmark of character virtues.

Nucci (2017) has a comparable view of the role of coherence in the development of character virtues. Developmental scientists can expand his view by emphasizing three points (cf. Callina & Lerner, 2017). First, coherence involves a system of morally valenced thoughts, feelings, and actions. To act coherently across time and place, an individual's repertoire must include different facets of moral functioning. Simply, a person must judge the right morally based action to take and he or she must then take it. Second, coherence is not a feature of the person; it is a feature of adaptive individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations enacted by a specific individual in a specific context (Bornstein, 2017). Coherence benefits both person and context. For example, as Adam Smith (1759/2002) explained, being generous to a person in need benefits both the person providing support and the recipient. Third, not all components of a person's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral repertoire involve character. As such, coherence of character virtue involves phronesis in another sense; it involves enacting character-related functioning only in appropriate, specific individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context situations (cf. Nucci, 2017; Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014). Being generous to a person in need may evoke actions based on character virtue, whereas solving a statistics problem or reading a journal article may not evoke such actions.

SPECIFIC CHARACTER VIRTUES DEVELOP IN SPECIFIC PLACES AT SPECIFIC TIMES THROUGH SPECIFIC INDIVIDUAL $\Leftrightarrow$ CONTEXT RELATIONS

Developmental science seeks to describe, explain, and optimize within-person (intraindividual) change and between-person (interindividual) differences in intraindividual change (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade, 1977; Lerner, 2018a). Therefore, and perhaps in contrast to empirical approaches in other models of character virtues or moral development, the focus of research on the development of character virtues (design, measurement, and analysis) and of evaluations of character education programs that seek to promote character virtues should be on the individual and his or her changing relations with contexts across time (Elder, Shanahan, & Jennings, 2015). Such an idiographic change-oriented, individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context-relation focus for research is formidable to enact because no two individuals—not even monozygotic twins—have the same set of time-ordered and place-specific individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations across their lives (Lerner, 2018a). Moreover, developmental epigenetics also enhances the idiographic pathways of each individual (Moore, 2015).

As such, general approaches to the development of character virtues—for example, using notions of average or prototypic concepts of the person (e.g., characteristic adaptations)—are not useful. No average character necessarily applies with veridicality to any specific person, and no average manifestations of character virtues are appropriate at all times and in all places (Rose, 2016). Accordingly, the *specificity principle* (Bornstein, 2017) is

a useful lens through which to conceptualize and study the development of character virtues. According to this principle, the development of character virtues involves mutually beneficial relations between the *specific* characteristics of a person and the *specific* characteristics of his or her context. To focus on the specificity of these mutually beneficial relations, researchers may address a complex, multipart set of questions. For instance:

1. What *specific* actions
2. Of what *specific* individuals
3. In what *specific* places (contexts)
4. In what *specific* communities, societies, cultures, and times in ontogeny and history
5. Will result in what *specific* features of character development, and
6. What *specific* individual contributions to self, family, community, and civil society?

Of course, these questions should be approached in a program of research. Whereas no single study could address all instances of specificity, several research programs on the development of character virtues demonstrate the empirical use of the specificity principle. For instance, research at the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development has studied the development of character virtues in the first three decades of life in groups from Cub Scouts to cadets at the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point (e.g., Lerner, 2018b). Across 2½ years and five waves of testing, character virtues such as helpfulness and kindness increased more in 6- to 12-year-old Cub Scouts than in non-Scout boys; however, whereas Scouts' scores for religious reverence were unchanged, the scores of non-Scout boys (all of whom attended religious schools) decreased for this character virtue (Wang, Ferris, Hershberg, & Lerner, 2015). In another study, of West Point cadets (Callina et al., 2018), researchers found a character structure involving four components that reflected character virtues salient to the USMA context: Attributes related to commitment, relationships, and honor covaried positively and were negatively related to attributes related to Machiavellianism.

IDIOPHIC ANALYSIS SHOULD BE THE FIRST STEP IN STUDYING THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTER VIRTUE

The specificity of the process of intraindividual change has led me to a research agenda that may vary from those of other theorists working within an RDS-based frame. To me, specificity means that typological approaches, whether involving purported universal personality traits (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1980; DeYoung, 2015) in general or character virtues in particular (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), may not pertain to a specific person's trajectory of intraindividual change (Callina & Lerner, 2017; Cervone, Shoda, & Downey, 2007; Mischel, 2007). Typologies involve analyses of how variables covary differently

across groups of people, and do not pertain to the changes in variables in a person across his or her life. Within-person change is the necessary focus of developmental analysis, and so research or evaluation focused on variables and not on individuals is *irrelevant* to the study of the development of character virtues.

Typologies and variable-centered analyses are derived from mechanist and reductionist approaches to human individuality. These ideas assume that the universe is uniform and permanent. In contrast, RDS-based approaches to human development regard the world as dynamic and variegated. Therefore, time and place are matters of substance, not error, and to understand human development, scholars must appreciate how variables associated with person, place, and time coalesce to shape the structure and function of behavior and its systematic and successive change.

To paraphrase Kluckhohn and Murray (1948), all people are like all other people, all people are like some other people, and each person is like no other person. Today, the science of human development recognizes idiographic, differential, and nomothetic laws of human behavior and development (e.g., Emmerich, 1968). Focusing on typologies, formed by assessing how variables covary across individuals (e.g., the Big Five, in either its original or its cybernetic resuscitation), or on imaginary average tendencies across individuals (e.g., characteristic adaptations; DeYoung, 2015), may, at best, fail to identify the attributes of human development that make each person like no other person and may, at worst, fail to apply specifically to the development of any individual. Why?

Molenaar and Nesselroade (2014, 2015) suggest that developmental processes have time-varying means, variances, or time-varying sequential dependencies. Therefore, the structure of interindividual variation at the population level is not equivalent to the structure of intraindividual variation at the level of the individual. As a consequence, to obtain valid information about the processes involved in the development of character virtues, developmental scientists should study intraindividual variation in single individuals. Molenaar and Nesselroade (2014, 2015) have also suggested the use of methods (e.g., the idiographic filter) that allow for an approach that may be summarized as analyze first (individual-level data) and then (if empirically justified) aggregate.

Furthermore, other developmental scientists are conducting such idiographic-based quantitative work (e.g., Ram & Grimm, 2015; Velicer, Babbitt, & Palumbo, 2014; von Eye, Bergman, & Hsieh, 2015). For instance, in a study (Brose, Schmiedek, Lövdén, Molenaar, & Lindenberger, 2010) of motivation and working memory in younger and older adults to assess equivalence of within-person and between-person structures linking motivational variables to working memory, within-person structures differed reliably across individuals. This finding supports the idea that the structure of interindividual variation at the group level is not the same as the structure of intraindividual

variation at the level of the individual (Molenaar & Nesselroade, 2014, 2015).

Of course, qualitative approaches to developing character virtues also exist, and involve ethnographic and narrative analyses (Damon & Colby, 2015), as well as artistic products (e.g., creating literature, film, and media tools) that may be used to depict idiographic pathways of such development. In a developmental science that relies increasingly on mixed methods (Tolan & Deutsch, 2015), such creative use of triangulated qualitative and quantitative procedures may be productive.

In summary, to study the development of character virtues, developmental scientists should focus first on the trajectory of individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations of a specific individual and then, if empirically appropriate, aggregate data to subgroups or to nomothetic case. Using this approach, developmental scientists may identify the coherence of individual pathways of developing character virtues across time and place, as well as any commonalities across specific individuals.

CONCLUSIONS

Both research about the process of developing character virtues and evaluations of programs for character development or character education should use the specificity principle and focus initially on the individual, on the idiographic, course of the development of character virtues. Beginning a study or program evaluation by focusing on variables or groups of people risks collecting data that are not applicable to any specific person, and that fail to illuminate the within-person changes that define the course of the development of character virtues for any person across ontogenetic time and place.

Focusing on the specific course of individual $\Leftrightarrow$ context relations that make up an individual's personalized trajectory in the development of character virtues may enable researchers and program evaluators to identify the *specific* attributes of *specific* people integrated with *specific* features of their contexts, and the ways these combine to promote individuals acting coherently to benefit themselves and their social worlds. Informed by such knowledge, practitioners and policymakers can create individualized ways to enhance the probability that individuals will thrive and, through the actions of these virtuous individuals, help create a world of enhanced democracy, liberty, equity, and social justice.

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