

UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER

IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

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For over a decade now, traditionalists, such as Bennett, 1993; Kilpatrick, 1992; Ryan, 1996; and Wynne, 1989 have proposed character education as a remedy to moral decay among American youth. The traditionalists have explicitly opposed approaches based on moral developmental research for failing to emphasize the role of habit, modeling, direct instruction, and authority in the formation of character. Portraying the developmentalists as narrowly focussed on moral reasoning and decision-making, the traditionalists invoke Aristotle in support of an alternative approach designed to build character.

Unfortunately, the traditionalists never define what they mean by character. Character comes from the Greek meaning a distinctive mark or stamp (Moody-Adams, 1990). As used to translate *thos* in Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, character has a specifically ethical connotation. In terms of contemporary psychology, character may best be understood as the specifically moral dimension of the personality or self. Developmentalists, such as Arnold (1993); Blasi (1993); and Higgins, 1995 have recently become interested in exploring character in this sense as they have struggled to bridge the gap between moral judgment and moral action. Developmental moral educators, particularly those involved with the just community approach (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989), have, more over, come to recognize the importance promoting responsibility and not simply reasoning. Traditionalists and developmentalists may thus find common ground as they turn their attention away from polemics to the description of character development as the aim of character education.

Cognitive Developmental Psychology and the Study of the Self

Part of the difficulty in studying moral behavior from a cognitive developmental perspective is that moral stages are formal structures of thought that have only a probabilistic relationship to moral content. As The Standard Issue Scoring Manual (Colby, Kohlberg, Hewer, Candee, Gibbs, Speicher, and Power, 1987) shows, opposed resolutions of moral dilemmas can be justified at any stage. Moreover, appeals to specific virtues and values (e.g., trust; love; honesty; respect for life, law, authority, and property) can be made at almost any stage.

Although moral stages are too abstract to yield straightforward predictions to moral action, they do provide a context of meaning lacking in accounts focusing on the mere content of values and virtues. Cognitive developmental researchers are now beginning to examine the development of virtues within a cognitive developmental framework. This marks a dramatic shift from Hartshorne and May's (1928-1930) studies of character. Hartshorne and May started with the common sense assumption that being virtuous presupposed possessing certain attitudes and information or knowledge. Yet their tests of attitudes and knowledge did not consistently predict to behavior. In fact, their most significant finding was that children could not be divided as virtuous or unvirtuous, but that moral behavior appeared to be situation specific. Although reanalyses of the Hartshorne and May data indicate that virtuous behavior maybe somewhat more consistent than Hartshorne and May originally found (Burton, 1963), the correlations remain weak. A more fruitful approach to the study of virtue and character may be one that examines virtue from a cognitive developmental perspective.

The Just Community Approach as Character Education

A cognitive developmental approach to virtue and character may seem strange to those familiar with Kohlberg's (1970) critique of character education as the "the bag of virtues" approach. Yet Kohlberg based that critique on the understanding of character and virtue found in the Hartshorne and May Studies. Kohlberg later entertained a far more sympathetic view of the Aristotlean approach to the teaching of virtue as a result of his just community experiments (see Kohlberg, 1981, p. 2-3).. The just community approach to moral education involves establishing a democratic community of students and teachers. The key institution this approach is the community meeting where the members make and enforce the rules and policies that express the shared aspirations of the group. In practice, rules and policies were established and redefined in response to particular disciplinary problems. For example, rules about attendance and respecting property were made in response to incidents of skipping class and stealing (Power et al., 1989).

The purpose of the rule making exercise is to engage students in a moral discussion of why a community needed to have particular rules and give students responsibility for upholding the rules. Community meetings succeeded to the extent that the students agreed to hold each other accountable for maintaining certain standards understood to express the values of community. Thus, for example, the meetings that established a rule about stealing had as their goal the establishment of a commitment to the value of trust. From the standpoint of the group, the just community has as its aim the development of collective norms and values. From the perspective of the individual, however, the just community approach has as its aim the development of specific virtues. In this sense, virtues are patterns or habits of action accompanied by requisite reasons and feelings. For example, the establishment of a collective norm of trust, entailed fostering a personal commitment to act regularly in a trustworthy manner out of an understanding and valuing of trusting relationships. Students thus learned the virtue of trust not through an academic lesson but by experiencing need for and the fruit of trust in a small school.

The just community research indicated that the specific norms and virtues of community developed discretely, that is the development of a norm of trust with reference to property did not entail the corresponding development of a norm of participation in the classroom (Power et al., 1989). The norms were, nevertheless, related to each other, such that the development of each norm made it easier for the next one to develop. All of the different norms, after all, express in different ways a common conception of community. Although the just community approach arguably fostered virtue and character, the research on the approach focussed on assessing the moral atmosphere of the school and not the development of individual virtue and character (Power et al, 1989).

The Development of Responsibility

The just community research did, however, find that members of the just community schools were more likely than their peers in the comparison high schools to develop a sense of responsibility for upholding the norms and rules of their school (Power et al., 1989). This sense of responsibility was defined as a particular kind of moral orientation and judgment, much along the lines suggested by Gilligan (1982). The communal emphasis of the just community schools called students' attention to value of helping others for the sake of group solidarity and the democratic institutions encouraged personal accountability for their behavior. The strong influence of the environment on the students in the just community programs, raised questions, however, about the lasting effects of the intervention. Would the students still feel responsible to act in prosocial ways without the support of their community? Had the just community approach influenced the students' character?

Responsibility Judgments

Kohlberg introduced a conception of responsibility in his later reflections on the judgment action question (Kohlberg, 1984) and on the significance of the just community approach (Power et al., 1989). Following Blasi (1983), he hypothesized that the deliberative process leading to moral action involves two kinds of judgments: a deontic judgment about the rightness or wrongness of a particular course of action and a responsibility or an aretaic judgment about whether one should follow through. The responsibility judgment entails a response to the question How important or necessary is it for me to do what I believe to be right (or to refrain from what I believe to be wrong) in this particular situation? Individuals may recognize that particular action is the right thing to do without feeling a strong personal obligation to act. Real life decision-making is complicated by the fact that competing values are at stake. To do what is morally right may mean sacrificing a career opportunity or hurting a friend. Therefore, individuals may not be consistent in acting upon what they know to be right. Analyzing McNamee's (1978) experimental study of helping in a situation of drug abuser, Kohlberg (1984) noted that consistency between a decision that one should help and actual help offered increased in a monotonically from 25% to 88% from stage 2 to stage 5. Kohlberg attempted to explain this increasing consistency as due to a corresponding "decrease in ... excuses or 'quasi-obligations' at each higher stage" (p. 522). For example, in the McNamee (1978) study, stage 4 participants typically excused their inaction by referring to the fact that the drug abuser had been denied help from a psychologist, who was the authority in this situation.

Although he claims that responsibility judgments are related to individuals' self-definition, Kohlberg's (1984) explanation of the judgment-action relationship simply extends his cognitive stage model a step further by showing how the stages prior to stage 5 can generate excuses for doing what one thinks to be right. Yet this explanation fails to explain why many individuals at the lower stages act consistently. As Blasi (1983) argues, the impetus to act one way or another depends to some degree on the kind of person one thinks one is and wishes to become. Individuals are more likely to feel responsible to act morally if moral concerns are crucial for their self-definition.

Self-Consistency and Moral Justification

In our current research (Power & Khmelkov, in press), we are examining the extent to which judgments of self-worth depend on moral criteria. In attempting to build a bridge to moral judgment research, we ask a number of questions probing why an individual should keep a promise or generally act in a moral way if no one were likely know how he or she acted. These questions are designed to elicit some reference to

the self as moral. Consider for example Jennifer's response to the question **WHY SHOULD A PROMISE BE KEPT TO SOMEONE WHOM YOU DON'T KNOW OR WON'T SEE AGAIN?** "If you are an honest person, you keep your word; and it would be good for you to do and it would help your image." Jennifer thinks that keeping a promise follows from being an honest person. Keeping a promise is not only a consequence of being virtuous, it also contributes to becoming that kind of person, as Jay puts it, "it [keeping the promise] would be good for you and it would help your image."

Self-Esteem and Character

Jennifer tells us that by acting morally in one develops a positive sense of self, which in turn increases the likelihood that one will act morally in the future. Her sense of the role of self-esteem in the moral life deepens the common view that simply building self-esteem fosters good character (e.g., Mecca, Smelser, and Vasconcellos, 1989). This common view presupposes that a high sense of self-esteem can inoculate children and adolescents from having to find alternative, anti-social means of gaining approbation. Children appear to resort to anti-social behavior if they fail to meet conventional norms of success or if they are denied approval from parents, teachers, coaches, and popular peers. Delinquency research, however, fails to support the common view (Scheff, Ratzinger, & Ryan, 1989; Oyerserman and Markus, 1990).

Although most theorists assume that self-esteem has a moral basis, the empirical data indicate that there is no necessary relationship between the two. Moral behavior is but one of several components of self-esteem and apparently not an essential one. As Harter (1988) has shown, self-esteem is based on such non-moral sources as success in school and sports, popularity, and physical appearance. Furthermore, individuals vary in the importance that they attribute to sources of self-esteem. Some children value athletic achievements, others good grades. There is no reason that individuals will derive a sense of self-esteem from acting morally unless becoming a moral person is an important feature of their self-definition.

Character Development and Self-Esteem

Character, as previously noted, refers to the moral dimension of one's self-understanding or self-definition. People of good character place moral concerns at the center of their identity. Although they derive self-esteem from many sources, their self-esteem is deeply influenced by their moral behavior. Character is thus that dimension of the self that leads to responsible action. This notion of character is consistent with Aristotle's depiction of character in a general sense as the kind of person one is and in a more specific sense as the kind of person possessing the virtues

(Irwin, 1985). Aristotle's depiction of character and virtue has a key cognitive component insofar as it includes *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as well as a behavioral component, habit, a term that often leads to confusion. Habits seem to imply automatic behaviors that are learned through simple repetition. Yet Aristotle speaks of habits as regular patterns of behavior that are done for the right reason, on the proper occasion, experiencing the appropriate pleasures. The character educators' emphasis on habit as distinct from reason does not do justice to Aristotle's complex view. On the other hand, the moral educator's almost exclusive emphasis on reasoning about the morality of actions appears shortsighted as I have noted in discussing the moral judgment/moral action relationship.

If moral educators wish to have an impact on moral responsibility, as well they should, then must begin to explore how character is formed. Here we can learn from children and adolescents, who, like Jennifer in the example above, tell us that character involves building a positive self-image or positive self-esteem through moral deeds. Yet there is a circularity about all of this that Aristotle saw very clearly. If moral deeds presuppose moral character, how can moral character be formed through moral deeds? Aristotle believed that virtue could be taught in some ways like a craft through an apprenticeship of guided practice. Aristotle recognized, however, that virtue differed from craft because virtuous action presupposed a capacity for decision-making based on right reason and a stable disposition. Aristotle's view of character education thus includes within an apprenticeship model a concern for the development of moral judgment and moral responsibility. The character educator must not focus action alone (as the master of a craft does) but on the intentions and internal state of the apprentice.

The just community approach provides a concrete illustration of an apprenticeship model of character education. This approach has a strong behavioral component; all the students are expected to participate in the democratic process of decision-making and to abide by the norms of the community. The teachers in the just community schools are like the masters of a craft who model the kinds of actions that they expect the students to perform. With each new class of students, the teachers need to work particularly hard to demonstrate how to participate democratically and how to build community. The teachers generally face a two-fold challenge: **1)** students are generally unfamiliar with the institutions of direct participatory democracy and community and **2)** the impersonal bureaucratic organization of schools is hardly conducive to fostering democratic and communitarian values.

Character Education as Apprenticeship

The easiest way to illustrate how the just community approach functions as an apprenticeship is to analyze the often cited example of the way in which the first just community school, Cluster, dealt with the problem of cheating (Power et al., 1989). As in most urban public schools, incidents of cheating surfaced in the early days of Cluster. Typically teachers and students respond by not bringing valuables to school or by exercising greater caution (e.g., making sure that students lock their lockers with sturdy locks). In Cluster, the teachers made cheating an issue for community meeting discussion and deliberation. When they did so, the students expressed surprise that the teachers were making a "big deal" out of something that "goes on all the time." One student put it this way: "Just because a few things are stolen you don't have to cry about it." The teachers criticized the students' indifference and attempted provoke some expression of moral indignation: "Don't people think that it [stealing] is wrong? When the students tried to foreclose the discussion by moving that harsher punishments for stealing be instituted, the teachers asked the students to reflect on stealing as a matter of conscience rather than as an external nuisance: "Maybe someone can explain why stealing has been going on." Finally the teachers directed students' to think about stealing in relation to the ideal of community:

I think ripping off is not an individual business; it is a community business. It is not a discipline issue as much as some feeling by the community that people have to have some level of trust which is inconsistent with anybody ripping off from anybody in the community.

Although the students initially reject the ideal of community, the teachers act as if the school already was a community.

From a character education perspective, the teachers may be seen as habituating the students to participate in a democratic community and more specifically to stop stealing themselves and not to tolerate stealing by others. The teachers encourage the performance of certain behaviors, such as expressing their views, following a speaking order, analyzing the problem, and acting honestly. The habituation process includes a focus on students' reasoning, judgment, and emotions. The teachers engage the students in a moral discussion that will terminate in a vote. In the course of discussion, the teachers attend to the students' affectivity by evoking feelings of disappointment and indignation at the revelations of stealing and by fostering a desire for the security and freedom that comes with trusting relationships. Finally the teachers direct the students to look at stealing as an expression of an attitude toward others and the group as a whole.

As noted earlier, the research on the just community demonstrated that students' attitudes as well as behavior changed as a result of participating the in just

communities. For example, as students resolved the stealing problem, they began to exhibit the kinds of reactions that the teachers modeled in the initial meeting on stealing. After what would be the last occurrence of stealing in Cluster, a student leader admonished, "It's everyone's fault that she [the victim] don't have no money. It was stolen because people don't care about the community." The use of community as a motivation for moral responsibility thus contributes to the character development process. In the initial discussion of stealing, students did not take responsibility for the problem beyond establishing a strong deterrent. In the later meetings students began to say "**As members of this community, we should care about others in the community.**" This statement indicates a dramatic shift in both moral judgment and moral responsibility. Note, however, that few students also said, "As a moral person, I should care for others, whether or not I have a relationship with them." This generalized expression of moral responsibility is based on a higher moral stage and on a sense of personal moral identity. The just community approach contributes to such an expression of responsibility by habituating students in a fairly controlled situation with the hope that as students begin to act in certain ways and cultivate a "taste for the fruits" of their actions, they will generalize their behavior and define themselves as moral persons.

Moral Self-Evaluation

In what follows, I present an approach to character development that focuses on the development of the categories used in moral self-evaluation. I accept the belief, shared by many psychologists and teachers, that self-esteem plays a significant role in the moral life. I submit, however, that conventional measures of global self-esteem focus too narrowly on self-esteem as either high or low. Judgments of self-esteem vary radically, in our view, depending on their sources (moral and non-moral) and their developmental level. Building self-esteem is an important part of character development insofar as building self-esteem involves the construction of moral standards of self-evaluation.

Assessing the Moral Basis of Self-Esteem

Most self-esteem research focuses on self-esteem as the fruit of individuals' achievement. This is especially true with respect to James's (1989/ 1985) formula that self esteem equals successes over pretensions. It is true to a lesser extent with respect to Cooley's (1902) observation that self-esteem is influenced by the responses of significant others. Clearly the most reliable way of influencing others' judgments of the self is to act in ways that impress others.

An earned sense of self-esteem appears to depend upon living up to one's ideals, as Harter (1983), and Strauman & Higgins (1987) have shown, as well as avoiding the negative or feared possibilities for one's life (see Oyserman and Markus, 1990). These ideals may be thought of as congealing in an ideal self and these negative possibilities may be represented in a dreaded self. Moral self-esteem appears to depend upon judging one's actual self to be at least directed toward one's ideal self and away from one's dreaded self. In our research, we describe how these conceptions of the self develop and what extent individuals incorporate moral criteria into these definitions.

Our preliminary analysis indicates that ideal, dreaded, and real selves develop in a sequential pattern of cognitive levels with similarities to the moral judgment stages (Colby and Kohlberg, 1987), ego development stages (Loevinger, 1976), faith stages (Fowler, 1976), and self understanding levels (Damon & Hart, 1988). We use term levels rather than stages because without longitudinal data, we do not wish to make strong claims about invariant sequence or structured wholeness. The specifically moral characteristics of the first four levels are described below.

Level One. Individuals describe their ideal and real moral attributes with general labels, such as "nice." Often their descriptions of their ideal selves reflect either explicitly or implicitly parental expectations. Individuals descriptions of their ideal selves are consistent with their real selves. They rarely engage at this level or at the next in spontaneous self-criticism. When they do criticize themselves, they generally refer to specific acts of disobedience, but not to bad habits or negative traits. Conscience and guilt are expressed as anxiety caused by the anticipation of external punishment (imminent justice) for a moral transgression.

Level Two. Individuals describe their ideal and real selves in terms of dispositions for action. In describing moral attributes, they often mention helpfulness or kindness, understood as meeting the concrete needs or interests of others. Ideal are justified in term of their instrumental value, for example as leading to success. The dreaded self is of ten described as being unsuccessful or as a person with bad habits.

Level Three. Individuals describe their ideal selves in terms of traits and attitudes, which typically reflect a concern for being caring and unselfish. They also describe their dreaded selves with such traits, focusing especially on a fear of becoming self-centered. At this level, many individuals describe their dreaded self as a genuine threat if they are not vigilant. Spontaneous self-criticism is common in their descriptions of their actual selves as is self-acceptance in spite of their faults..

Level Four. Individuals describe their ideal selves as having an identity character. Some individuals express a desire to make a difference to their society or to the world.

Descriptions of the dreaded self focus on a failure to live up to one's ideals or role expectations often because of real world pressures. In describing their real selves, individuals sometimes distinguish their "true" inner self from an outer superficial self. This leads them to criticize hypocrisy. As they focus on their inner identity, individuals become conscious of the complexity of their motives and the possibility of self-deception.

These levels indicate that individuals do not develop an awareness of themselves as having a character in the sense of a unified self until high school at the earliest. The sequence of levels suggests, nevertheless, that the bedrock for character development is laid throughout the early levels. Moral actions play a significant role in children's depictions of themselves as good and nice at level one. At level two, they begin realize that good and bad habits are formed through their actions and they describe themselves as having dispositions to act in one way or another. This level is also one in which children begin to describe their ideal selves in terms of images of success. Some notions of success emphasize the acquisition of wealth and status; other notions emphasize acting in ways that reflect both personal achievement and a responsiveness to others' needs. This latter, active sense of self appears more conducive to later character development, but future longitudinal study will be necessary to explore this crucial question.

Intrinsic Self-Esteem

Although social psychologists focus on self-esteem principally as an achievement, self-esteem may also be thought of as intrinsic to the self. Theories of justice, emphasizing equality and respect for persons, abstract the fundamental value of personhood from both natural and achieved characteristics. Thus in his **Theory of Justice**, Rawls (1971) states that individuals have value apart from their age, gender, race, educational level, occupation, etc. This notion of personal worth leads to judgments that, for example, individuals have a right to life, even if they are strangers, have low status, or break the law. Related to this concern for the dignity of others based on their personhood is a concern for the dignity of the self. If individuals have worth simply because they are persons, then they have a basis for defending themselves against injury and insult, even when they may not earned respect through their actions.

A sense of intrinsic self-worth not only serves to protect the self, but also to empower and to challenge it. If one has a sense of inherent dignity, then one may be challenged act in ways that bring this dignity to realization. While an appreciation of one's intrinsic self-worth may thus be a source of comfort, it is also a goad to achievement.

We assess individuals' sense of intrinsic self-esteem by presenting them with stories in which individuals confront failure. We ask how these individuals should cope with failure and whether an individual has a duty to respect herself or himself. We find that individuals at the first two levels of development simply assert that no one should feel that they are worthless, but that it is only at the third level that individuals begin to justify an intrinsic sense of self-esteem as based on such notions as the value of all human life or the dignity of being a child of God.

Educational Implications

Our research suggests that character education must begin with an understanding of how character itself develops. Static views of character education that emphasize rewards and punishments, moral exemplars, and strong authority fail to take into account the extent to which children begin to construct for themselves ideals about their future and images of their negative possibilities. These ideals and images bear the influence of their culture, particularly as that culture is reflected in their school. Our children learn at an early age the importance given to outward success and the corresponding lack of recognition given to the practice of virtue. They find, for example, that teachers reward good grades, not honesty and that peers reward clique loyalty, not kindness to outcasts.

As can be learned from Aristotle's **Nicomachean Ethics** and the research on just community programs, the best approach to character education is one that provides a communal environment supportive of the virtues of trust, care, participation, and responsibility. I believe that it is also essential that students have opportunities to participate in decisions about the discipline of the classrooms and school, such participation affirms their sense of intrinsic self-worth while at the same time underscoring their responsibilities as members of an academic community. This democratic participation provides an apprenticeship in the virtues, encouraging students to form good habits and make sound decisions with the guidance of their teachers. I hope that our research on the development of self-esteem will help us to understand the character of character education so that we can undertake our educational interventions more effectively.

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