

CHARACTER

A Multifaceted Developmental System

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Character is a developmental system embedded within the self-system. This Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) view is in juxtaposition with virtue theory and accounts of character in terms of moral identity. The character system includes 4 components 3 of which: basic moral cognition (as described within domain theory); other regarding; and self-regarding social emotional capacity, comprise “moral wellness.” The fourth component “moral critical social engagement” defines mature moral character. The fourth component rests on the willingness of individuals to employ their moral reasoning to question the conventions of society and their personal moral positions. It also entails responsive engagement in moral discourse with others of diverging social positions and moral perspectives to arrive at shared morally defensible positions. This RDS perspective views character and the context as mutually constitutive and continuously interacting. Character is captured through its coherence within and across contexts rather than consistency of actions or moral choices.

Most people, including skeptics of the character construct, have a sense of what Martin Luther King (King, Carson, & Carson, 2007) meant when he uttered the famous lines in his “I have a dream” speech looking forward to the day when his children would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” It is also worth noting that King would prioritize character as the aspect of persons most central to their evaluation. Nonetheless, social scientists and educators are hard pressed to offer a common definition of character, and an important core of researchers in moral education beginning with

Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972) have challenged the scientific validity and educational utility of the character construct. In the face of these challenges, this paper will offer a coherent view of character that will bring together the disparate strands of current work in the areas of moral development and moral education, social and emotional learning, and character formation. This argument will draw from the work of several people (e.g., Berkowitz 2012; Berkowitz & Bier, 2014; Lerner & Callina, 2014; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2015) to make the case that the study of character and its assessment must

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employ a multimethod approach that views character as a multifaceted dynamic developmental system rather than a search for traits or entities within the person.

LIMITATIONS IN CURRENT DEFINITIONS OF CHARACTER

Character as Virtues

Traditionally, character has been defined in terms of a set of traits or virtues (e.g., Carr, 2008) that emerge from socialization practices that foster habit formation and internalization of culturally valued qualities that guide behaviors (Sokol, Hammond, & Berkowitz, 2010). There are several fundamental problems with this traditional approach to character. The first is the lack of agreement across cultures and historical periods as to which qualities count as virtues (Sokol et al., 2010). A humorous example of the variability in the identification of virtues was provided by Daniel Lapsley (1996). Lapsley compared the virtues listed in his own elementary school report card against the list of core values for character education established in 1988 by the American Association for Curriculum Development (ASCD). He found that the only value that overlapped on the two lists was courtesy. Moreover, he reported that the list offered by the American Association for Curriculum Development in 1988 left out 9 of the 11 core values compiled by the same organization in 1929. A more systematic recent historical analysis by Robert McGrath (2016) found that of the five primary virtues identified by Plato only one (courage) made it into the list of 16 primary virtues identified by Aristotle, and only one of the virtues maintained by Aristotle (justice) made it onto the list of seven core virtues identified by Catholicism.

In addition to the variability in the identification of virtue, attempts to define character in terms of virtues run contrary to evidence demonstrating that people are by and large inconsistent in their application of virtues. The well-known studies by Hartshorne and May in the 1920s for example, found that people were

honest in some contexts and dishonest in others. Character as a set of virtues was nonexistent, according to Hartshorne and May (1928) as people appear to behave differently as a function of context. Contemporary virtue philosophers have attempted to address these shortcomings by appealing to the application of judgments in context through “practical expertise” (Annas, 2011) that selects which element of virtue to apply, or through a modification in the definition of virtue that allows for partial realization of an ideal within varying contexts. These “teeny bits of virtue” (Curzer, 2016, 2018) function by capturing the larger trajectory of the virtues that comprise an individual’s character. Such adjustments in virtue theory, however, are acknowledgments that the core of moral action lies in the judgments made within context rather than static abstract qualities thought to define the person. In concert with this view, developmental psychologists (Lerner & Callina, 2014) have argued that defining virtues as traits engages in a “split metaphor” in which qualities of the person are treated as discrete and apart from the context.

Moral Identity

Researchers in the field of moral education who have moved away from reference to virtue have instead focused upon what they refer to as the “moral self” or “moral identity” (Blasi, 2005; Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Krettenauer & Hertz, 2015; Lapsley & Stey, 2014). A common strategy adopted within this area of inquiry has been to study the life histories and shared features of moral exemplars. The notion here is that some people hold morality closer to the core of their identity than do others. Critics of this assumption (e.g., Nucci, 2004; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2015) have noted that moral exemplars turn out to be not so different from the rest of us in terms of their concerns for morality, once you examine the totality of their lives. That is to say that with the exception of the small percentage of people who are psychopaths, current evidence suggests that all

people care about morality. Moreover, people care about how they view themselves as moral people. In a recent comprehensive review of the research on moral identity, Lapsley (2016) reports that moral categories are more readily accessible than competence traits and dominate our impression formation. As suggested in M.L. King's quote, it is moral character that is most distinctive about identity and what we care most about in others.

Variations in the centrality of moral identity, however, have less impact. The outcomes of 3 decades of studies exploring self-report measures of the centrality individuals place on possessing and enacting moral values has uncovered individual differences in the expected direction (enactment of prosocial actions abstaining from antisocial behavior) (Lapsley, 2016). However, the differences are relatively small and not uniquely associated with moral identity as the explanatory variable (Krettenauer & Hertz, 2015).

The focus upon identity has stemmed from the mistaken notion that moral motivation comes from the desire to act in accordance with one's view of oneself as a moral being. This viewpoint runs the risk of reducing morality to self-interest, and undermines the motivational force that is inherent in knowing what is the "right" thing to do (Nucci, 2004). Where people appear to differ is in their reading of social contexts, their degree of social and emotional regulation, and other factors that impact their actions within particular contexts. The concern for moral identity as Wainryb (2011) has elegantly shown emerges most powerfully as people confront the consequences of their own wrong-doing rather than as a motive for action. Paradoxically, an overconcern for morality has its own downside in the form of moral zealotry. The philosopher Susan Wolf (2001) has written critically of "moral saints" lacking in balance and incomplete as persons.

Toward a Definition of Character

The emphasis on identity is grounded in the reasonable insight that concerns about moral-

ity are connected to one's sense of self (Blasi, 2005). As will be outlined below, current evidence is consistent with a definition of character as a partial system operating within the self as a whole. The self-system includes our overall sense of agency (Proulx & Chandler 2009, Deci & Ryan, 2014) and unique personal identity (Nucci, 2014). The overall self-system also includes such things as our gender or ethnic identity, and sense of ourselves as productive members of the family or society. What we mean as character borrowing directly from Marvin Berkowitz (2012, p. 248) is "the composite of those characteristics of the individual that directly motivate and enable him or her to act as a moral agent." Moral agency as defined by Wainryb (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010) refers to people's understandings and experience of themselves as agents—people whose morally relevant actions are grounded in their own mental states, goals, beliefs and emotions. Moral agency, as will be discussed below, is a critical component of what is referred to here to as basic moral wellness. Moral agency emerges throughout childhood both through reflections on positive actions, but also very powerfully as children account for their own harmful actions and the harmful actions of others (Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne, & Pasupathi, 2015). Experiences of trauma, and the engagement in acts of violence impact and disrupt the formation and status of moral agency (Wainryb, 2011).

As discussed here, however, character is not simply a collection of components contributing to moral agency as Berkowitz' (2012) definition leaves open as a possibility. What is being proposed instead is a system of interrelating partial structures that inform and impact one another within contexts. These component systems are themselves operating within a reciprocal dynamic relationship with the context. This definition of character conforms to the Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) metatheory offered by Lerner (Lerner, 2006; Lerner & Callina, 2014) and Overton (2015). This article is not the context in which to fully review this metatheory. A key aspect of the

dynamic developmental systems metatheory for our understanding of character is that it views the relationship between the individual and the context as in continuous mutually constitutive relationship rather than a notion of the interaction between the individual and context as accounting for a proportion of the variance. This is depicted within Figure 1. Thus notions of character as virtues that exist independent of their enactment within a context are meaningless. This holds equally true for presumed structures of moral cognition. A dynamic developmental systems view of character is also much more in keeping with the latter of work of Piaget (1985) in which he focused upon processes of equilibration than in his earlier work when he was preoccupied with an account of structures and stages. Accordingly, the present discussion of how to view morality in context will emphasize the activity of coordinations of competing elements within contexts (Nucci, Turiel, & Roded, 2017; Turiel, 2002), rather than a focus upon static definitions of stages or levels of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984).

A second aspect of this metatheory is that we can take snapshot views of the person or context within a given moment or period of ontogenesis that will help to track or measure moral development and character as long as we understand these to be moments in the

course of microgenetic and ontogenetic development, rather than reified and frozen entities (virtues, traits) or structures. Thus, what we should be looking for in terms of character is not consistency across contexts, but coherence (Lerner & Callina, 2014). It is not a matter of acting in the same (consistent) way (e.g., “honest”) irrespective of the situation, but in a manner that is morally sensible (coherent) across situations. In addition, what is meant by character is never a finished product, but is continuously evolving. Finally, the notion of a dynamic relationship between the person and the context means that as we look over time what we will see is evidence not just of the impact of the context on the person, but the impact of the person on the context. This is not generally the object of research on character per se. However, it is argued here that a comprehensive understanding of character entails the systematic analysis of the role of people in transforming society. Taken seriously, this has implications for the goals of character education in terms of moral citizenship.

Finally, what this means in terms of methods is that we will need to understand the difference between snapshot views of the person in one moment in time in which we ignore context, but simply try to measure, assess or describe, the structure of the person’s character at that moment, and the more comprehensive

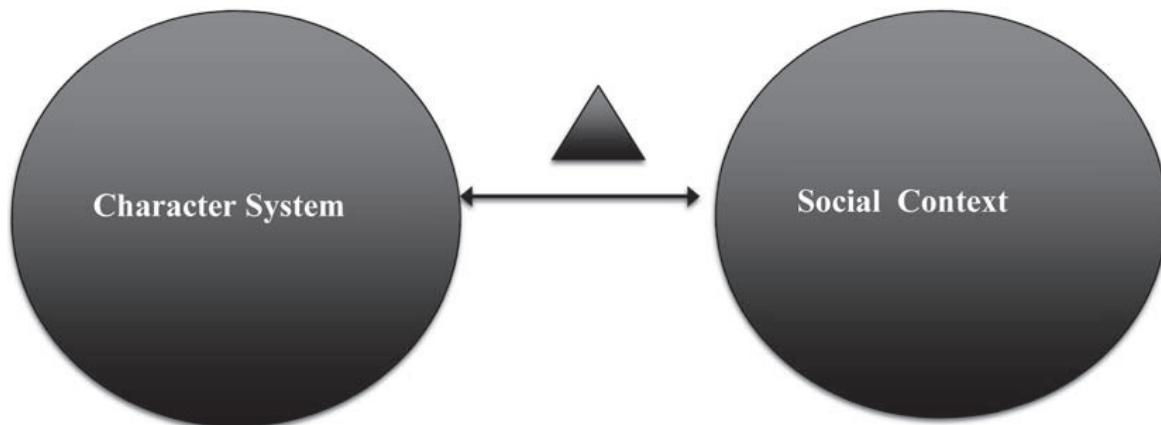


FIGURE 1
Character and Context as Interpenetrating and in Dynamic Relationship

look at the person in relationship to the context and over extended periods of time.

THE COMPONENTS OF CHARACTER AND CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Let us turn then to an analysis of the basic components of what collectively contribute to and comprise “character.” There are four basic components. These are presented in Table 1. The first three components collectively comprise what is referred to here as basic moral wellness. Wellness connotes normative moral functioning, but also includes the assumption that establishing moral well-being is an ongoing process that requires active attention and nurturing. The three components of moral wellness are: (1) basic moral cognition, (2) other regarding social emotional capacities and skills such as empathy, and perspective-taking, and (3) self-regarding capacities for executive control and self-regulation of emotions and desires. This third component is employed both in the enactment of moral actions, and in the completion of nonmoral tasks that require steadfast commitment and engagement. In other places this steadfast commitment to the completion of nonmoral tasks has been referred to as “performance character” (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2008). These three components of basic moral wellness map onto the aspects of character identified by Sokol, Hammond, and Berkowitz (2010). The present model includes a fourth component, which is the discourse and communication skills and orientation for principled

moral change at the social level. This fourth component is not generally included within discussions of moral character. However, the case being made here is that the standard view of character does not account for the interpenetration of the person with the context. An RDS view of character would account for how persons as moral actors may impact the social context. Inclusion of this aspect of character is also consistent with comprehensive views of development that attend to the sociogenetic component along with micro and onto-genetic aspects of development (Saxe & Esmonde, 2012). It also allows for coherent inclusion of the work being done on moral purpose as an aspect of character formation and expression (Damon, 2009). Figure 2 represents the relationship between this character system and the self-system as a whole. It illustrates how character is connected with moral identity and agency as aspects of one’s total sense of self, as well as how the self-regarding (performance) component of character can link up with other aspects of identity such as academics or sports performance.

In this analysis, “social and emotional learning” (SEL) is viewed as a contributor to character rather than viewing character as a direct outcome of SEL. Social and emotional learning refers to the emergence of basic emotional competencies, and skills such as emotion recognition and emotion regulation that are essential to basic moral mental health and moral functioning. This is consistent with the role of SEL in relationship to morality and character as discussed by Maurice Elias and his colleagues in their chapter in the *Handbook*

TABLE 1
Components of the Character System

Basic Moral Wellness
Reasoning: Moral, conventional, personal domains
Other regarding SEL capacities: empathy, emotion recognition, emotion regulation, perspective-taking (theory of mind)
Self-regarding SEL capacities: Self-regulation, emotion regulation, executive control
Moral Critical Social Engagement (Discourse/communication skills for responsive engagement and moral evaluation of self and society; “moral purpose”)

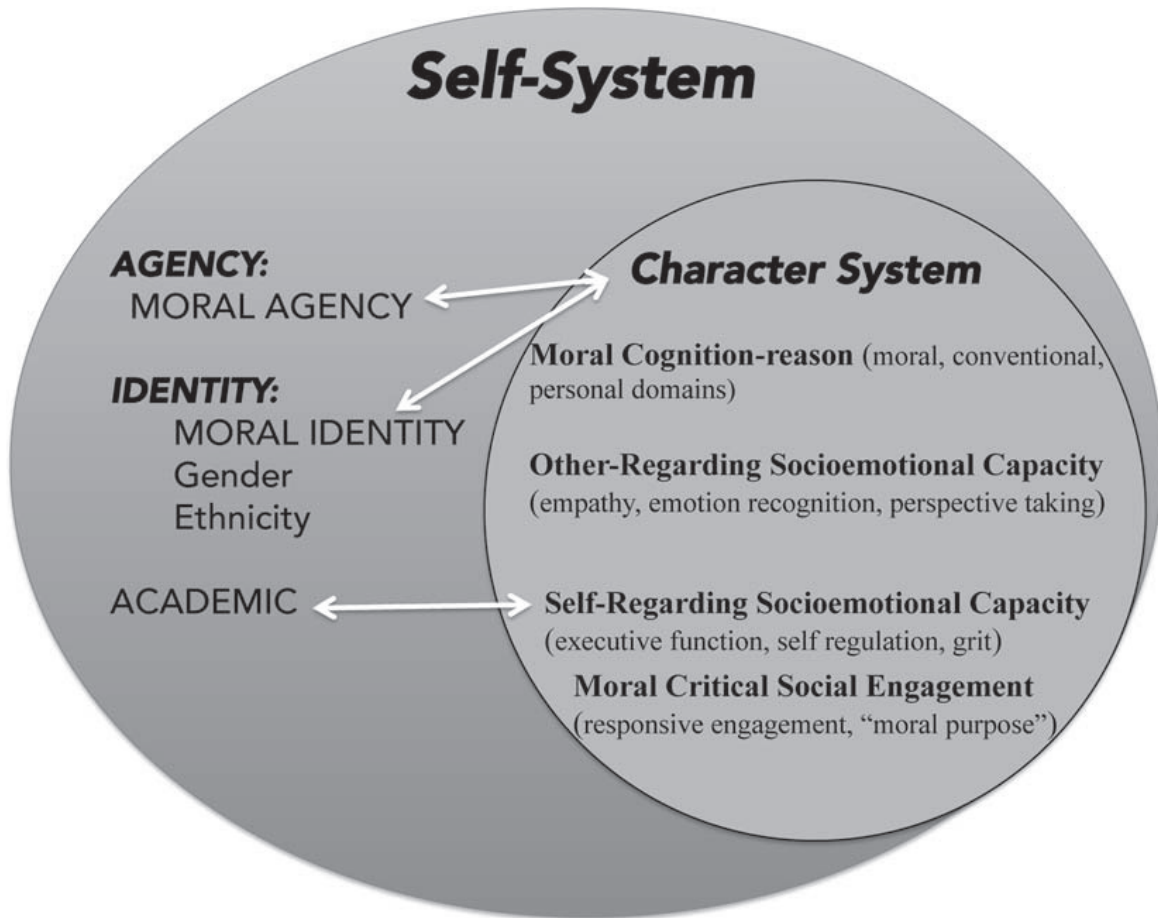


FIGURE 2
The Character System Within the Self-System

of *Moral and Character Education* (Elias, Parker, Kash, Weissberg, & O'Brien, 2008).

MORALITY AND MORAL COGNITION

Character is at its core about the engagement in moral choices. The notion of character is not simply that people prefer the moral option, or are emotionally drawn to the moral option, but that the person willfully elects to act in the moral direction. We do not attribute character, for example, to bees that instinctively sacrifice their lives for the hive, or to someone who accidentally disrupts a crime. This is not to suggest that a person of character would have

to ponder whether or not it is right to engage in unprovoked harm, or deliberate extensively over whether or not to help a person in need. Moral decisions, especially those made in highly familiar contexts may require little active deliberation (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005; Turiel, 2010). However, moral judgments often entail weighing what is morally right against other personal considerations, or social expectations.

Understanding the development of the capacity to generate moral decisions within context has been the focus of research in what is referred to as social cognitive domain theory (Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014). Domain theory draws a distinction between the development of judgments about morality (issues of

fairness, welfare, and rights) and concepts of societal convention (consensually determined norms of a given social system), and matters that fall within the personal domain of privacy and personal choice (Smetana et al., 2014). Concepts within each domain follow independent courses of development, accounting for qualitatively differing aspects of social experience (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983). Contextualized social contexts may be multifaceted, including elements from morality and considerations of social convention and/or personal needs and preferences. Decision-making in such multifaceted contexts may draw on concepts from more than one domain requiring cross-domain coordination (Smetana et al., 2014).

Character formation is thus impacted by development within domains as well as the capacity to coordinate competing considerations across domains. From this standpoint, Kohlberg's (1984) stage theory may be best thought of as a description of age-typical cross-domain coordination applied to the scenarios employed within his assessments. The inconsistencies reported in the Kohlbergian research program reflect individual differences in development within domains, and individual variations in the prioritization of moral and nonmoral considerations in varying contexts (Nucci, 2001). These nonmoral considerations include the assumptions people make about the facts or information relevant to a decision. For example, people who assume that a fertilized human egg is a human life that is to be accorded personhood will view abortion as the immoral act of murder. These assumptions are informed by science, but also by religious belief or cultural tradition.

The domain theoretical framework does not define moral development in terms of stages, and does not dismiss the impact of context simply as content for moral decision-making. Moral judgments are inexorably bound up in context. This makes the assessment of moral growth and the identification of character more challenging. As children get older their moral judgments become

more comprehensive. However, there is no end point in which adults apply moral principles across all contexts independent of competing nonmoral considerations. (For a recent comprehensive discussion of these issues see Turiel & Nucci, 2018) The contextual multi-domain nature of the application of morality to lived situations is why any definition of character must be framed in terms of coherence in moral judgments rather than context independent consistency. As stated above coherence refers to the rational connection among contextualized moral judgments and actions as seen from the vantage point of the actor rather than the similarity in actions within a given type of situation as seen from the point of view of an observer.

The definition of morality as centered around issues of justice and human welfare is consistent with the cognitive developmental tradition of Piaget and Kohlberg. It is also consistent with the sociocognitive framework for understanding character proposed by Lapsley (2016). However, it has come under criticism in recent years by proponents of intuitionist moral psychology (Haidt, 2001, 2012). Within this view, there are several moralities that emerge from evolutionary selection and socialization: care/harm, fairness, liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority, sanctity. Moral decision-making according to Haidt (2001) is the outcome of emotionally driven intuitions, and that reasoning serves as after the fact rationalization rather than a source of moral decisions. Responses to Haidt's (2012) intuitionist psychology have come from several sources. First, are cognitive psychologists who argue that Haidt has misrepresented the relationship between rapid processing of deeply understood or well-rehearsed concepts or decisions, such as judgments about unprovoked harm that are constructed through interactions in early childhood, with innate emotionally driven reactions (Narveaz & Lapsley, 2005; Turiel, 2010). Second, he has underplayed and misrepresented the rational expressions of potential harm that people offer in some of the contexts such as brother-sister

incest that he describes as cases of moral dumfounding (Jacobson, 2012). Perhaps more importantly, his mentor, Richard Shweder, has criticized Haidt's position as misunderstanding the rational requirements of any moral code. Morality, according to Shweder, is not simply a taste or preference, but needs to appeal to reason for its authority (Nucci, 2015). This final point is consistent with other critics who have noted that Haidt's identification of multiple presumably equivalent moralities leads to relativism in which there is no basis for deciding what is right beyond consensus, authority or preference (Blum, 2013).

OTHER REGARDING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL CAPACITY

The second component of character is comprised of the social emotional capacities for engaging the motives and needs of others. This includes the capacity for empathy (Eisenberg et al., 2002; Saarni, 1997), the ability to accurately read the emotions of others (Saarni, 1997, 2007), and perspective-taking (Martin, Sokol, & Elfers, 2008). These components provide the inputs for the universal capacity of human beings to generate moral judgments about harm and human welfare (Sokol et al., 2010). Disruptions in normative development negatively impact the development of empathy and related emotional competencies. As Wainryb's (2011) work has shown, for example, the capacity for moral agency, which is the ownership of one's moral actions and capacity to positively benefit from self-review of one's own actions causing harm to others, is seriously damaged by direct exposure to violence. Research on school based SEL programs emerged initially from efforts directed largely at ameliorating or overcoming the deficiencies in children's home lives and communities that undermine these basics for moral and social functioning. More recently, however, SEL has been viewed as a means of optimizing these emotional competencies (Elias et al., 2014) and is offered to all students. This approach is

concordant with the notion of moral wellness being offered here in which normative moral functioning and character development need to be nurtured rather than viewed as an inevitable outcome of development.

SELF-REGARDING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL CAPACITIES

Character is more than the capacity for judgment of the right thing to do, it is the propensity to act on that judgment. This has often been mischaracterized as a problem of moral motivation (Nucci, 2004). The authors of research and theory on moral identity, for example, offered the desire to maintain coherence between one's actions and one's moral identity as the motive force behind moral behavior (Lapsely, 2016). Morality, however, is intrinsically motivating (Nucci, 2004). Once a decision is reached regarding what is the right course of action, that decision is its own motivation. Engaging in moral action, however, requires supporting personal strengths and socioemotional skills. This collection of capacities is core component of moral agency.

Moral agency is also sustained by the normative development within a personal domain of privacy and prerogative (Nucci, 2014). Personal issues are such things as one's choice of friends, the content of one's diary or correspondence, and aspects of personal appearance such as clothing choices. The exact content of what gets defined as personal will be impacted by culture. However, claims to a personal area of privacy and choice is grounded in the human need for the construction of selfhood and individuality (Nucci, 2014). Cultural psychologists who initially questioned the universality of a personal domain now agree that it is a component of persons in all cultures (Miller & Bland, 2014). There is also now extensive evidence that the pattern of emergence of the personal in normative development is seen across cultures as adolescents differentiate themselves and parents relinquish control over decisions in the personal area to their adoles-

cent children (Smetana, 2010). The development of the personal is intrinsic to the construction of personal autonomy, self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2014) and the capacity to extend compassion and moral empathy (Nucci, 2004).

Often doing the right thing comes at a cost. In some cases those costs, such as losing one's job or health, may be sufficiently high as to lead to a rational choice to prioritize self-interest over the morally right thing to do. Wainryb's (2011) interviews with child soldiers in Colombia uncovered several instances in which young teenagers were ordered by superiors to kill an unarmed opponent. In those cases the failure to act in the "moral" direction, may be understood as emerging from the coordination of moral and nonmoral factors such that morality is evaluated as secondary. This is also the case in situations where the perceived benefits or needs met by the nonmoral choice outweigh morality, such as in extramarital relationships involving love between one member of a marriage and another person outside of the marriage. Here again, the coordination of moral and nonmoral factors may be such that morality is secondary to the personal. (The salience of morality in this example, may also be minimized if the affair is secret, and the spouse presumably unharmed.) In both cases, it is not simply a case of will power or external motivators, it is simply that morality is not always primary. This is the reason that any account of character has to look at coherence and not consistency.

What is meant by character, however, is acting in the moral direction precisely when doing so competes with other goals, or comes at some cost. It means for example, not shoplifting when the opportunity presents itself, or helping someone in need even if it is inconvenient to do so. The third component of character is the capacity for self-regulation and follow-through. This is the subject of research on emotion regulation (Thompson, 2014) and executive function (Zelazo, Mueller, Douglas, & Marcovitch, 2003). Emotion regulation allows for the person to act on the basis of

rational choice, rather than the heat of the moment. Executive function serves to enable the coordination of cross-domain considerations (Richardson et al., 2012), and enhance impulse control (Kerr & Zelazo, 2004). Current research on mindfulness indicates that it contributes toward the development of capacities for executive function in children and adolescents.

More recently, work on "grit" suggests an avenue for exploring personal willingness and propensity for moral follow through. As defined by Duckworth (2016) grit is the combined capacity for passion and perseverance of long-term goals. Grit is normally associated with academic or personal achievement in areas such as the arts, athletics or business that require sustained effort in the face of obstacles or challenges. Grit would most readily be viewed as a component of performance character. It is not clear whether one can apply grit as a construct to morality. The construct of grit may help us to understand the commitment made to addressing injustices that we see in moral exemplars such as M. L. King, but also in the many youth who remain moral in the context of strong countervailing environmental challenges of poverty and systemic violence. It is possible that research on purpose may be linked to the notion of grit among individuals who elect to engage in community building or social justice work at some personal cost (Damon & Colby, 2015). However, we need to also be careful about conflating character with supererogation.

***NICE IS NOT ENOUGH:
DISCOURSE SKILLS FOR
RESPONSIVE ENGAGEMENT,
PURPOSE AND AN ORIENTATION
FOR PRINCIPLED MORAL CHANGE***

The components I have listed thus far account for the conventional notions of character as well as what Kohlberg (1984) referred to as conventional morality. They describe the development of the person who will operate

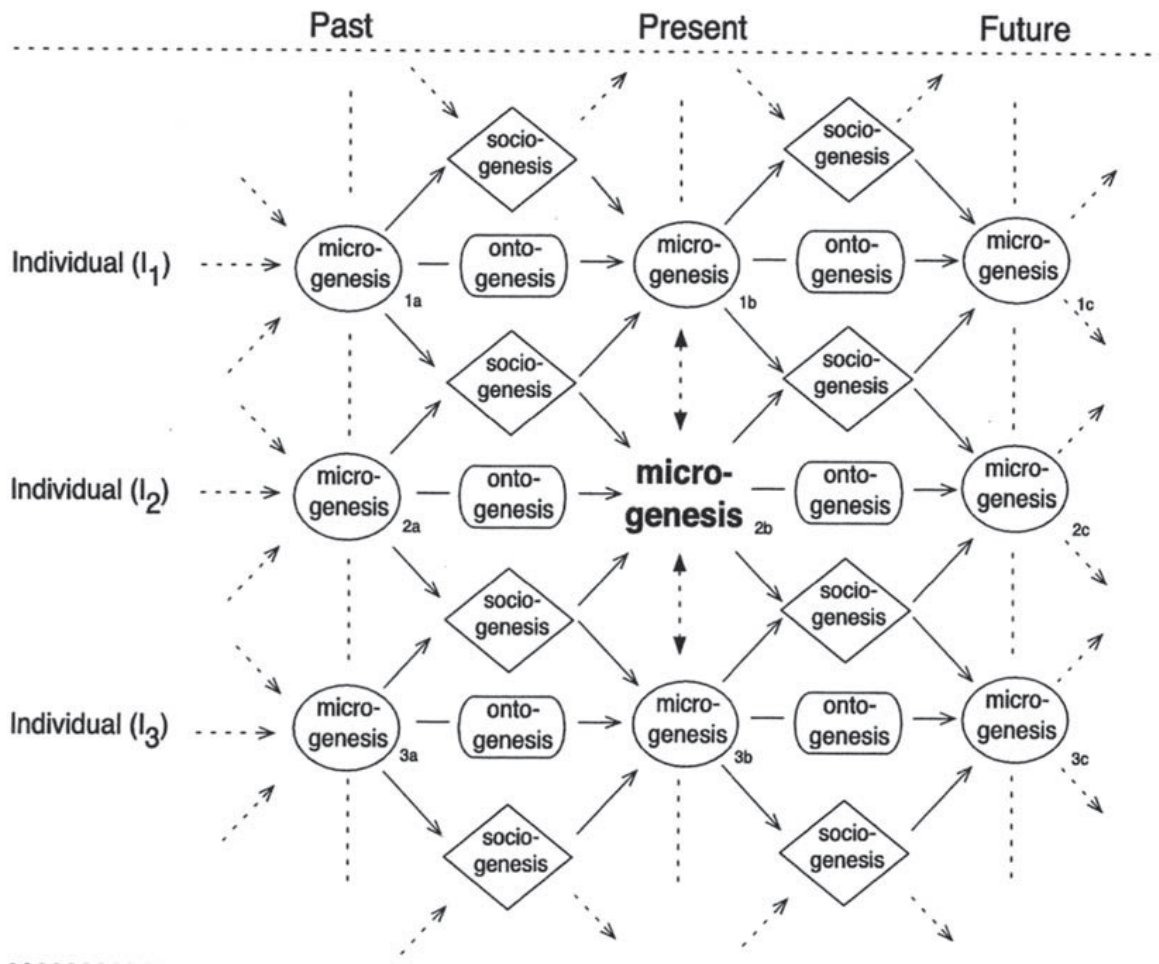
morally in everyday life. The problem with this account is that it allows for the person of character who will live quite happily within a culture or society with structural inequalities or structural practices, such as slavery, that are themselves immoral. This is no idle concern as our own cultural history makes evident. Using the normal language of character we would be hard pressed to argue that the people living during those times were any less moral than we are in a period overtly struggling with issues of racial equality. Kohlberg (1984) attempted to account for the emergence of people whose morality transcended the norms of their cultural period as having reached a stage of development he referred to as postconventional principled moral reasoning. Unfortunately, the evidence for such an orientation as a structural developmental stage of moral development is weak (Gibbs, 2013). However, there is ample evidence from history as well as from contemporary cross-cultural research that resistance to unfair practices is common and especially prevalent among individuals in positions of lesser power or privilege (Turiel, 2002). Often their resistance is unrecognized because it occurs surreptitiously or remains as a viewpoint rather than expressed as overt action.

Translating personal moral opposition into a principled moral perspective, however, is something that may not be possible at an individual level. This is the argument made by philosophers such as Habermas (Habermas, Lenhardt, & Nicholsen, 1991) and in the later works of John Rawls (2001) that abstract moral principles cannot be translated into genuine moral positions in the absence of dialogue with those for whom those principles are meant to apply. To put this in more ordinary terms, men can only imagine if you will, the most fair way to construe the social world for women; in the absence of open dialogue with women they can never expect to actually get it right. Aside from the easy to imagine obstacles that men would face in trying to generate the fairest and most ethical ways to construct a world for women, any group of people in a position of relative power will fail to see at

least some of the injustices of those who are not in positions of power (Turiel, 2002). Understanding the perspectives of those in subordinate positions, however, is also only part of the process in attempting to correct immoral practices at general societal level.

For the most part, our theoretical views of moral and character development operate at the level of the isolated individual, and do not include the role of the individual as a component within a larger social network. This is an error that functions in two directions. On the one hand, the focus upon ontogenesis leaves out the impact of sociohistorical components in individual development. One of my female graduate students asks how it is possible that boys who construct basic conceptions of morality in terms of fairness and human welfare in early childhood, and who grow up loving their mothers who gave them life and sustenance, can grow up to be misogynist adults? On the other hand, our focus on the individual leaves out the role that persons have in changing societal and cultural practices. Responding to these issues requires us to enlarge our view of development, and to incorporate the contributions of researchers who examine the sociogenetic line of development. The RDS metatheoretical perspective that I am suggesting that we take toward character requires that we fully integrate sociogenetic and ontogenetic lines of development in our theoretical accounts. This is exactly what Geoffrey Saxe (Saxe & Esmonde, 2012) has done in the area of math cognition, and what I propose that we incorporate into our comprehensive view of character.

Figure 3 is taken from Geoffrey Saxe's (Saxe & Esmonde, 2012) award winning book on the development of mathematics among generations of people within a small community in Papua New Guinea. What it represents are the coactions of ontogenetic and sociogenetic contributions to the microgenetic changes within an individual participating within a community of practice. What you will see in this deceptively simple representation is that the individual is not merely



Source: Saxe and Esmonde (2012).

Figure 3
The Interplay Among Developmental Processes Over Time

being shaped by external inputs as in the standard view of socialization, nor is the individual merely reconstructing at an individual level what has been produced at the social level as would be the case in a Vygotskian scheme, nor is the individual engaged in a sui generis construction of reality. Instead all elements of this dynamic system (Witherington, 2011) are interpenetrating and coacting on one another. The ontogenetic line—what we might call the individual’s cognitive structure—emerges within, and operates upon the social milieu of the surrounding community of practice.

Our current notions of character do not include attention to the features of persons as they interact within the discourse world of the community. There is, however, an emerging group of researchers working in collaboration with philosophers to begin to sketch out what the political philosopher Anthony Laden (2012) refers to as “responsive engagement.” Responsive engagement is a form of discourse that has as its goal the location of common ground. That common ground may in fact end up being quite close to the position taken by one of the partners in a discourse, or in a third position not anticipated in by either member in

advance of the discourse. What is essential for this type of discourse to count as “engaged reasoning” is that each speaker work toward finding a conceptual space that all can share, and accept as their own. “Engaged reasoning is thus reasoning together in the most robust sense of the term” (Laden, 2012, p. 171). Laden differentiates engaged reasoning from debates or efforts directed solely at persuasive argumentation. This is in the tradition of what Habermas et al. (1991) referred to as communicative discourse.

Laden’s (2012) viewpoint is viewed as naïve by Jon Haidt (2012) who claims that it is basically a waste of time to try and get members of a discourse to be open-minded and truth seeking, because individuals work to maintain their own positions. Discourse serves as a context in which to engage in persuasion and conversion of others by appeals to their emotions and interests. For Laden and like-minded political philosophers, this is both a misreading of the ways in which productive political discourse proceeds and is corrosive of genuine democratic society. Laden’s (2012) educational goal is to foster both the skills and supporting dispositions to generate what he refers to as a “civic virtue” of responsiveness. There is now evidence that educational programs that foster responsive transactive discourse can impact moral development and student attitudes (Nucci, Creane, & Powers (2015). What I am proposing is a process for developing a discourse orientation and skill set that would increase the likelihood of principled moral change in the social system. This is neither a conservative or liberal political agenda, because it does not presuppose the outcomes of a genuinely responsive and transactive social dialogue. What I am suggesting as an important component of character is the skill set for contributing to the sociogenetic component of the character system.

Finally, we may link this final set of skills to what William Damon and Anne Colby (Damon, 2009) have referred to as “purpose.” Purpose as described by these researchers is the establishment of a set of personal goals that

provide meaning and direction to a person’s life. Purpose within the context of character links these personal goals to the contribution to social justice and the welfare of others. Purpose conjoined with the skills for responsive engagement would address the long sought for postconventional component of moral development and character education.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

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 does not exist as an entity because it functions coactively within the social context. As an autopoietic system character 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 (Turiel, 2015). Thus, attempts to impose an impossible level of consistency through theoretical constructs such as “will” or moral identity mistakenly 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 (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971) are valid only when directed at definitions of character as a set of traits, or features of personality that operate independent of the context.

In the present analysis there are four components of the character system. Three of these components comprise character as it usually thought of, and what has been referred to here as basic moral wellness. These are: (1) moral reasoning and associated domains (morality, convention, personal); (2) other regarding social emotional capacities (empathy, and emotional skills such as emotion recognition, theory of mind); (3) self regarding social emotional capacities (agency, autonomy, executive

function, self-regulation). The fourth component is offered to account for a view of mature moral character that is more than compliance with the existing socially defined moral code. This would be “postconventional” character (responsive engagement and discourse skills, purpose).

As researchers we may study, measure or investigate the components of character as independent objects of study. However, the core of character is morality defined in terms of fairness and human welfare. Thus, it is an error to elevate research on any particular expression of morality, such as gratitude or compassionate love, as having particular relevance in the absence of its role or position within the character system. Because psychology is a science with competing and diverging paradigms, the study of moral reasoning and character should be broadly enough defined as to include researchers who operate within a range of research traditions.

Character is not reducible to emotional development or the development of skills associated with emotion recognition or emotion regulation. Thus the research on SEL and related educational programs is a component of character and character education, but does not encompass or include character within its definition. Research on character has largely been the search for an account of individual differences. Thus there has been an effort to try and measure character as a matter of degree—most recently the grit scale (Duckworth, 2016) has been misapplied in this way. It is unclear what benefit would come from efforts to generate these kinds of assessments. Moreover, defining character as a matter of degree misunderstands the developmental dimension of social and emotional growth and moral reasoning. Appropriate assessments would examine the forms of moral reasoning, for example, and not simply whether the person was strong in character or weak.

A more meaningful and educationally appropriate approach would be to examine all components within the character system the way that one would conduct a comprehensive

physical exam, or the ways in which a pediatrician might exam a child’s physical development. This would entail separate assessments for SEL competencies, moral reasoning, and moral mental health. However, even these assessments would be snapshots of disconnected components, rather than a contextualized picture.

One promising avenue would be to combine questionnaire, interview, and observational methods with the use of narrative and narrative analysis (McLean & Syed, 2015; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Narrative analysis is particularly appealing as moral choices are impacted by the entire prior history of that person acting as a moral agent. Each moral choice both reflects and alters that history and that aspect of “self.” What may appear from the outside as inconsistency in moral judgment and action (and a lack of character) may be sensible from the vantage point of the actor. Coherence rather than consistency may be found within a person’s moral choices and actions by understanding the particular life-world and contextualized moral judgments as narrated by the actor (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Sarbin, 1986). One might envision a future version of a narrative assessment that could be written or oral depending upon the age and educational level of the respondent that could generate a series of scores for SEL competencies, moral reasoning (including cross-domain coordination) and purpose that might afford some access to the respondent’s character system. Whether large-scale analysis of such scores would allow for the generation of a common underlying factor for character as recently proposed by Lerner and Calina (2014) is unclear. At present narrative analysis is time-consuming and expensive. However, advances in automated coding of text and voice material is making cost-effective analysis a probability. Similar forms of automated coding could be applied to assess individual’s capacities for responsive engagement in sociomoral discourse. This is an avenue of research being proposed by researchers working with Anthony Laden (Levine, Shaffer, &

Nucci). All of this presupposes knowledge of moral development and contextualized moral functioning that is far from being a settled matter (Killen & Smetana, 2014).

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