Toward a Relational-Developmental Model of Character Development

Commentary on Lerner and Schmid Callina

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In their provocative, integrative and timely paper, Lerner and Schmid Callina [this issue] have called for a new generation of character research, one that reflects an understanding of character as viewed from a relational-developmental perspective. The relational-developmental approach, elaborated by Lerner and his colleagues over many years, is one of several types of developmental systems frameworks that have emerged in developmental science in recent decades [Overton, in press]. It reflects a very real shift away from viewing psychological processes as more or less decontextualized and static entities and toward understanding them as dynamically produced by coactions among complexly nested biological, psychological and sociocultural processes. Character consists of an integrated, yet dynamic, system of thinking, feeling and acting, organized with reference to social and moral values. It assumes different forms in different people and develops through divergent pathways as a result of the ways in which biology, individual action, and social context influence each other.

Several features of their approach stand out as noteworthy. The first consists of the relational-developmental framework itself with its stipulation that character, like all forms of psychological activity, emerges over time as a dynamic, multidimensional, and coactive process. Second, in rejecting traditional models that define character as a kind of fixed or trait-like property of individuals, Lerner and Schmid Callina define character dynamically in terms of systems of *individual-context relations*. Character operates as an integrative system of “cognitive, affective, and behavioral attributes of the person” that function with reference to “institutions of civil society and democracy.” In so doing, character exhibits both order and variability. Order emerges as individuals organize their actions in terms cross-situational attempts to “do the

right thing.” Variability arises because what constitutes “the right thing” necessarily differs from context to context. As such, a person of character must be adept at sizing up the moral demands of a given situation and positioning her *self* in relation to them.

Lerner and Schmid Callina offer their framework as a starting point for a “theory-predicated research conversation” addressing the nature of character, its development, and its cultivation by socialization agents. Their rich metatheoretical framework invites dialogue on a series of foundational issues. In what follows, I address issues related to (a) the concept and definition of character, (b) the ways in which the study of character challenges core assumptions about the role of objectivity in empirical inquiry, (c) how models of character continue to be haunted by the specter of trait theory, and (d) the need for process models of character development.

Defining Character

From a relational-developmental approach, Lerner and Schmid Callina define character as:

a specific set of mutually beneficial relations, that vary across ontogenetic time and contextual location (place), between person and context and (as we shall elaborate later), in particular, between the individual and other individuals that comprise his/her context.

The holistic, contextualized and relational aspects of this definition flow smoothly from Lerner and Schmid Callina’s relational framework. The idea that character should be defined in terms of relations that are mutually beneficial for both self and other is a novel contribution of the relational approach. The concept of character, however, is typically defined with reference to moral content [Nucci, 2001]. The closest that Lerner and Schmid Callina come to incorporating a moral dimension in their definition involves the idea of “mutually beneficial relations.” However, the term “beneficial” implies little moral content. There are many types of relations that might qualify as mutually beneficial when viewed from the standpoint of the individuals involved that might be difficult to classify under an even broad definition of moral. A pair of students who agree to help each other cheat in their courses may arguably lead to a benefit for each partner. Without a broader framework that can help specify the moral content of “beneficial,” the concept of character ceases to be a moral concept. Such a view runs the risk of reducing the moral to mere preference or reciprocal gain.

This issue is recapitulated later in the paper, where Lerner and Schmid Callina invoke the concept of *adaptation* as a criterion for understanding the functions of character (emphasis added):

We believe that mutually beneficial individual $\leftrightarrow$ individual regulations may constitute specific instances of adaptive developmental regulations that reflect character structure and content ... Conceptually, developmental regulations are adaptive when, and only when, they are beneficial to the maintenance of positive, healthy functioning of the components of a bidirectional relation (e.g., both individual and context).

Here, Lerner and Schmid Callina come close to equating character – “mutually beneficial regulations” – with adaptation. For Lerner and Schmid Callina, adaptation is defined in terms of relations that are “beneficial to the maintenance of pos-

itive, healthy functioning.” However, the terms *beneficial*, *positive*, and *healthy* are not empirical concepts. Instead, they are evaluative judgments that occur against the backdrop of inescapably moral frameworks [Taylor, 1989]. Lerner and Schmid Callina are certainly correct in saying that “in humans, individual $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ individual adaptive developmental regulations embedded within culture have a privileged position among the possible set of adaptive developmental regulations.” This is because culture helps constitute what can be taken to be positive, healthy, beneficial and adaptive. As a sociocultural product, character is primarily a moral, and not merely an adaptive, process. Although the merits of moral judgment depend on the facts on the ground (if, in fact, there is no God, then a divinely-constituted morality is false), moral judgments necessarily go beyond the information given [Danto, 1987].

Engaging the Moral: The Fact/Value Distinction in Developmental Science

Both positivist and postpositivist approaches to science embrace the principle of objectivity when making scientific observations. The quest for objectivity requires that we bracket our presuppositions and considerations of value. This stipulation immediately leads to the *fact-value* distinction: science can reveal what *is* (facts) but cannot tell us what *ought to be* (values). If we, as developmental scientists, accept the fact-value dichotomy, we place ourselves in a difficult position, especially when it comes to the study of moral development. On the one hand, we are expected to describe the world “as it is.” On the other, that which we seek to study is shaped and viewed through the medium of human values.

The evaluative aspects of human activity are not things that can be identified objectively. We cannot identify what is good, healthy or beneficial simply by looking. Such categories are inherently evaluative ones that require the invocation of values that extend beyond the information given in any “objective” observation. It follows that moral character is not something that can be studied independently of some conception of what constitutes the good. This is a deep problem, one that is not always acknowledged by psychological scientists. One way that psychological scientists deal with the problems associated with the fact-value distinction is to blur the lines that separate so-called fact from value. For example, it is very tempting to believe that processes named by terms such as *prosocial behavior*, *social competence*, or *moral character* are behaviors in the world that can be observed more or less directly. However, the fact that we may agree that helping a person in need falls under the category “prosocial” does not render that category any less evaluative. To treat that which we call “prosocial” as an empirical observation blurs the line between so-called fact and value.

Another way to resolve the fact-value dilemma is to try to infer what *ought to be* from an analysis of *what is*. The invocation of the adaptation as a kind of social value is a case in point [Borges, 2002]. Evolutionary psychologists sometimes suggest that some pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting serves adaptive functions for an individual or society. Because such functions are adaptive, they are therefore good. But *adaptive* and *good* are not synonyms. One might argue that the training of Spartan youths in warfare served adaptive functions for the Spartan state; this does not necessarily make such practices morally good.

If we assume the fact-value distinction, we cannot move from an “is” to an “ought.” However, another way to resolve the fact-value distinction in psychological science is to abandon it [Davydova & Sharrock, 2003]. For many, however, such a remedy would threaten the credibility of psychological science. But this is not necessarily the case. It would only acknowledge that the processes by which we come to know persons are quite different from the processes by which we know objects and things. We do not gain knowledge of self and others by observing overt behavior; we gain psychological knowledge because we are capable of engaging in intersubjective relations with others. Acknowledging this situation would not weaken the scientific status of psychology. It would require, however, that we practice reflexivity as a way of acknowledging and understanding how our preunderstandings – including our moral ones – structure our inquiries into the social world [Sullivan, 2002].

The Trouble with Traits

We often invoke the concept of character to indicate something about the type of person someone is. From this view, character can be understood as a set of moral attributes of an individual person. Character has long been linked to theories of virtue and virtue ethics. From the standpoint of virtue ethics, a person’s moral behavior is a reflection of the type of person she is. However, such conceptions depict character in terms of a set of personal traits – more or less fixed and stable structures of moral thinking, feeling, and acting that arise from processes that operate within individuals. Drawing on their relational-developmental model, Lerner and Schmid Callina critique the concept of trait: “character is not a trait-like phenomenon; character is not fixed (e.g., by purported genetic endowment) across time and place.” In fact, they state:

there is abundant evidence that purported traits are in fact not “trait-like” at all. That is, these attributes reflect relations between individuals and contexts as they occur at particular times and places ... Indeed, methodological work framed by RDS concepts ... indicates that the purported life-span stability of traits, as well as the purported immunity to contextual influences, are empirically counterfactual.

Later in their paper, as the authors begin to sketch out a relational-developmental research agenda, they appear to incorporate trait-like concepts into their formulation. For example, they suggest that at any given point in development, “one might posit that character at a given age level is structured as a global construct as a sort of characterological ‘g’ factor [Spearman, 1904] and, if so, one would then also need to decide what manifest variables were indicators of the construct.” In seeking to illuminate “the structure and content of character,” the authors suggest: “character can be conceptualized as a latent variable marked by observable (manifest) variables. Character could also be considered as a higher-order latent variable. That is, there may be more than one latent construct associated with character ...”.

To support these trait-like speculations, Lerner and Schmid Callina draw on factor analytic studies assessing the “content and structure of character attributes.” They draw on Peterson and Seligman’s [2004] factor analysis of questionnaire data that produced “six latent virtue constructs: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.” Lerner and Schmid Callina suggest that a developmental analysis of character could show how the structure and content of character

undergo differentiation and integration over time. While such an analysis could show developmental variation in the structure of character, it is difficult to reconcile this trait-like conceptualization with the idea that character consists of emergent systems of individual-context relations. What do such factor analytic analyses show? Do they reflect the structure of character? Or do they represent the structure of the *conceptual systems* that we use to classify moral virtue? Where, from a relational-developmental point of view, does the structure of character as produced by such studies exist?

Lerner and Schmid Callina justify their invocation of such trait-like conceptualizations by locating them as but one moment in a three-moment analysis of progress in relational-developmental research. In the first moment – *identity of opposites* – researchers identify individual and context as opposites that mutually constitute each other. In the second moment, *opposites of identity* are examined. In this moment, the features that constitute the parts of the whole – individual and context – are analyzed as conceptually distinct processes: “This moment allows one, in effect, to hold the other parts of the integrated system in abeyance and focus on one part of the system.” The third moment of analysis – *synthesis of wholes* – restores the parts into their original mutual relation in the context of a fully coactive relational-developmental research agenda. The analysis of trait-like models of character at the level of the individual is meant to operate as but one analytic moment in a hierarchically emergent research strategy.

The movement of research from the analysis of wholes to parts and back to wholes again provides an alternative to reductionist research that often treats individual categories of psychological processes (e.g., cognition, affect, action) as if they functioned in isolation. In contrast, Lerner and Schmid Callina’s approach privileges neither the whole nor the parts but instead the parts operating in relation to the process that is the whole. Thus, to make their tripartite research sequence work, the act of analyzing an individual system component by bracketing the remainder of the system requires sensitivity to how the component functions as part of the whole. The idea that character is a dynamic, emergent, and relational process is at odds with the idea that character exhibits a trait-like structure and content. To avoid the trappings of trait thinking, the relational-developmental approach can be enhanced through the elaboration of *process models* of character as it emerges and functions within and across social contexts.

Toward a Relational Process Model of Moral Character in Action

Building on Lerner and Schmid Callina’s metatheory, figure 1 provides but one example of what a relational process model of character and moral action might look like. The model identifies three component systems in the production of moral action and character: (a) personal *identification* with sociocultural systems of moral value, (b) the functioning of core motives within the *emotion process*, and (c) one’s *agentive relation to social contexts*. We begin with the idea that the term *moral character* does not refer to a particular type of person, but instead to psychological activity that functions with reference to a certain type of *moral identity*. A person of moral character is one for whom moral virtues and values function as a core aspect of personal identity [Frimer & Walker, 2009]. Such an individual (a) identifies himself with a sociocultural system of moral values that have their origins outside of the self, which are there-

Fig. 1. A relational process model of character and moral action.

upon internally appropriated, transformed, and made one's own. The process of identifying with a system of social values comes to transform one's core goals and motives. When this occurs, moral action becomes increasingly organized by (b) emotional processes as they operate within (c) particular social contexts. Drawing on contemporary emotion theory, emotions arise nonconsciously with notable shifts in the relations between events and one's core (in this case, moral) motives (event "appraisals"). Outside of consciousness, emotions motivate action tendencies related to one's operative motives while simultaneously selecting, amplifying, and organizing appraised events in consciousness for further deliberation and action [Mascolo & Fischer, in press].

Moral action thus arises as a coactive product of processes that operate both within and between individuals. Although moral character is the result of identifying with moral values, when such values function as core motives, character becomes a deeply emotional process. It cannot be reduced to rational calculation, social experience, or situational effects. As a relational process, it is composed of the integration of cognitive, affective, and motivational processes that operate as individual-context relations. Consistent with Lerner and Schmid Callina's metatheory, moral character thus reflects the operation of a dynamic individual-context system and cannot and should not be understood as a fixed, trait-like structure. Rather than speaking of traits, it is more helpful to think of the individual's contribution to character as set of *dynamic cognitive-affective-motivational dispositions* that orient action within particular social contexts.

The Promise of Relational-Developmental Approaches to Character Development

The relational approach is a welcome corrective to traditional models that seek to account for moral development in terms of the separate and independent contributions of biology and environment. It provides a framework for resolving many of

the thorny questions that have occupied the attention of developmental scientists since the inception of the field. The relational-developmental approach is a genuinely integrative one; it allows us to move beyond traditional dichotomies (e.g., nature-nurture, trait-context, character-behavior, inner-outer, cognition-emotion) by synthesizing their half-truths into larger wholes that resolve their apparent contradictions. The translation of relational-developmental metatheory into specific models and theories of character will advance our understanding if we take seriously the research questions that Lerner and Schmid Callina have identified: What sorts of individual-context relations emerge in the development of character and moral action? What are the coactive processes by which they undergo developmental change? What forms do they take at different points of development and within different contexts and in relation to different social groups? The relational-developmental approach is not a unitary one; there are doubtless many ways to apply the relational-developmental approach to the tasks of understanding and promoting character development. The approach has the advantage of being both expansive and integrative; its holism offers the promise of understanding how we, as contextualized moral agents, transcend the systems that make us up.

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