

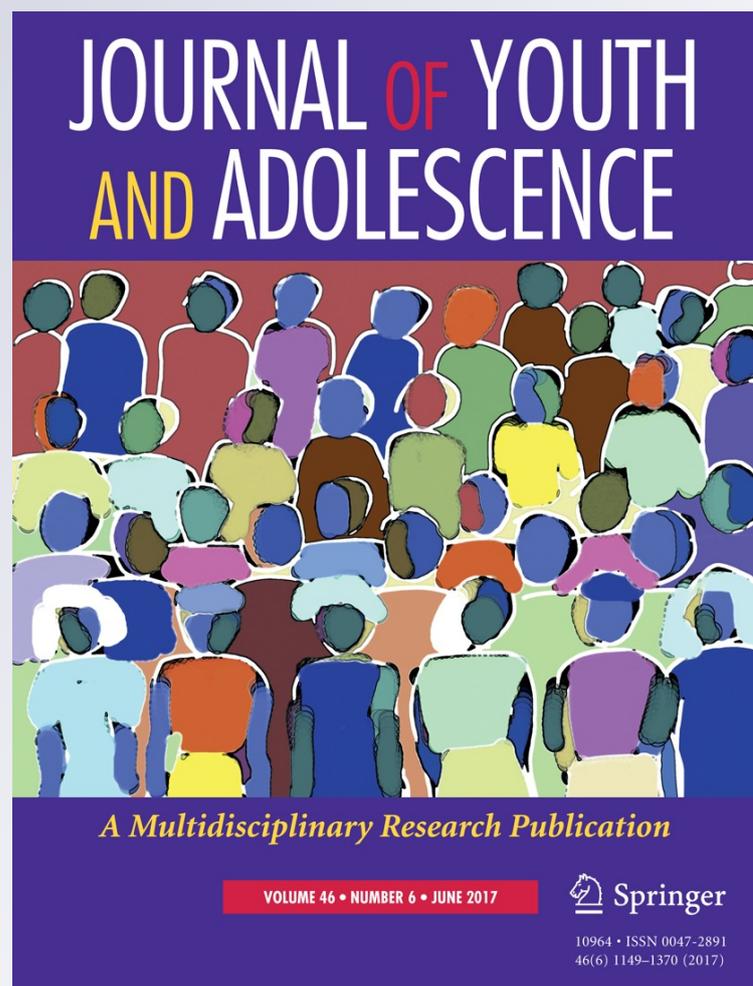
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Theoretical and Empirical Bases of Character Development in Adolescence: A View of the Issues

Scott Seider ¹ · Eranda Jayawickreme² · Richard M. Lerner³

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Abstract Traditional models of character development have conceptualized character as a set of psychological attributes that motivate or enable individuals to function as competent moral agents. In this special section, we present seven articles, including two commentaries, that seek to make innovative conceptual and methodological contributions to traditional understandings in the extant scholarship of character and character development in youth. In the introduction to this special section, we provide overviews of these contributions, and discuss the implications of these articles both to the current scholarship and to applications aimed at promoting character and positive youth development.

Keywords Character · Character development · Character education · Adolescence

Introduction

Parents and youth-development practitioners, working in schools or in out-of-school-time programs, are united in an

interest in identifying the contexts of youth that are associated with positive development. With increasing frequency, this interest is focused on a key indicator of such development: character. Embodied by the vision of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King (1963), that “my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character,” the growing interest in character development is predicated on the aspirations of parents and of youth-development practitioners that enhancing children’s character will benefit both individuals and civil society (Lerner, Vandell, & Tirrell, in preparation).

A desire to investigate the conditions and contexts that promote positive character development extends back to the very beginnings of philosophy and psychology. However, there are several challenges that have hampered contemporary research on character and character development. One such challenge lies in the broadness of the term “character.” Traditional models of character development have conceptualized character as a set of psychological characteristics that motivate or enable individuals to function as competent moral agents (Berkowitz 2012; Fleeson et al. 2014). Such a broad definition of character has meant that qualities reasonably included within this definition range from empathy to grit to a commitment to social justice. There is, of course, great variability in the developmental trajectories of these different “character strengths.” As a result, existing scholarship on character development has been hampered, in part, by different scholars using the term, character, to refer to very different sets of attributes. Accordingly, a key issue addressed in this special section is terminology, one that, as described in greater detail below, Baehr (in press, in this special section) takes on by offering a taxonomy in which different character attributes are parsed into moral, civic, performance and intellectual

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categories. Seider, Tamerat, Clark, and Souter (in press, in this special section) address the challenge of terminology as well, by considering civic, intellectual, and performance character attributes that may comprise the quality of youth critical consciousness, as it may be fostered by different pedagogical approaches.

A second challenge to empirical scholarship on character development has been the reliance on folk wisdom about the circumstances under which character develops. One example of such folk wisdom is that adversity builds character. Is such folk wisdom veridical with empirical relationships? Jayawickreme, Brocato, and Blackie (in press, in this special section) address this question by examining the relationship between college students' "Big 5" personality traits and their likelihood of experiencing stressful events in their lives as opportunities for wisdom and/or turning points in their life trajectories. Rejecting a view that adversity is always a basis for character development, the researchers demonstrate how particular individuals' personality traits impact their character development in the face of adverse life events. They also raise questions about whether late adolescence is an appropriate period for assessing beliefs about wisdom and redemption. Along similar lines, Malin, Liauw, and Damon (in press, in this special section) identify ways in which possession of a strong sense of purpose impacts the ways in which character strengths, such as compassion and gratitude, are expressed among youth in their early adolescence.

A third recent challenge facing researchers studying character development has been the absence of long-term, longitudinal data affording the depiction of trajectories of character attributes both across the adolescent periods and, as well, prior to and after it. How can character development across life be understood if studies focus on only small segments of the life span and are not integrated? In response to such a critique, Callina, Johnson, Tirrell, Batanova, Weiner, and Lerner (in press, in this special section) use an innovative methodology that allows for the pooling of multiple data-sets to fit one model to an aggregated data-set. Focusing on the attribute of hopeful future expectations, they demonstrate how trajectories spanning the first three decades of life may be derived from the methods associated with integrated data analysis procedures.

In sum, the research in this special section addresses key conceptual and empirical challenges pertinent to the understanding of character development across adolescence and, as well, in the developmental periods antecedent and after it. It is useful to describe in greater detail the contributions made by the conceptual and empirical contributions to this special section and, as well, the ways in which colleagues providing commentaries about this work frame it in regard to advancing the description, explanation, and

optimization of character development among diverse youth.

An Overview of the Special Section

At least since Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* all scholarship about character and character development has been embedded with philosophical issues about the meaning, content, and structure of character. Accordingly, we frame the research contributions in this special section with an opening discussion by philosopher Jason Baehr (in press, in this special section) about the moral and civic dimensions of personal character. Baehr explains that, at this writing, current work by philosophers, psychologists, and education theorists has drawn attention to two additional dimensions of character: intellectual character and "performance" character. Drawing on this work, Baehr presents a "four-dimensional" account of individual character and explores some of the character strengths or "virtues" constituting each dimension. In addition, Baehr links this analysis to character education, and indicates that "intellectual character education"—an intentional and systematic attempt to foster growth in intellectual virtues within the context of academic teaching and learning—is at once an underexplored and a uniquely promising enterprise.

The link between character development and character education is also a focus of the research presented by Seider et al. (in press, in this special section), who use character development to frame the study of adolescents' development of critical consciousness. Seider et al. use Paulo Freire's (1970) conception of critical consciousness, which is the ability to engage in reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. They point to a burgeoning research literature indicating that critical consciousness predicts several important academic and civic outcomes among marginalized adolescents. Using a mixed methods design, Seider, et al. studied critical consciousness development among adolescents attending schools offering different educational models. Using the lens of intellectual, performance, and civic character strengths, the researchers investigated if and how these models promoted the reflection and action requisite for critical consciousness. The results of longitudinal analyses indicated significant differences in the critical consciousness development of adolescents attending different schooling models.

With an interest in understanding the character virtue of wisdom, Jayawickreme et al. (in press, in special section) assessed the links among adversity, personality, and well-being among a late adolescence/college student sample in order to ascertain how individuals at these points in their development make sense of stressful life events. Participants reported the stressful events they had

experienced in their lifetime up until the survey, and indicated whether they considered each stressful event to be a turning point and/or an opportunity for wisdom. Students also completed measures of personality and well-being. To test the hypothesis that the personality characteristics of openness to experience, extraversion, and emotionality would have indirect effects on well-being, due to the mediating variables of the tendencies to interpret stressful events as turning points or leading to wisdom, the researchers tested partial and structural models according to extant guidelines associated with the evaluation of indirect effects models; they did not find evidence for the presence of indirect effects. However, Openness to experience was associated with the tendency to view stressful events as turning points, and Openness to experience and Extraversion were associated with the tendency to view stressful events as leading to wisdom, as well as with increased well-being. One interesting question raised by this study that merits future attention is the extent to which such redemptive interpretations end up being associated with prosocial and positive behaviors among late adolescents, as such a link has been posited to exist among mid-life individuals (McAdams 2013).

Malin, Liauw, and Damon (in press, in special section) examined the developmental relations between purpose and three other key character strengths that emerge during early adolescence: gratitude, compassion, and grit. Analyzing survey and interview data from a longitudinal study of character development among middle school students from the United States, their results indicated small but significant correlations between purpose and each of the other three character strengths. Interview data revealed patterns in ways that adolescents acted on their purposeful aspirations. In addition, interview analyses identified qualitative differences in expressions of gratitude and compassion between adolescents who were fully purposeful and those who were not.

Callina et al. (in press, in special section) used integrative data analysis techniques to model pathways of character development across the first three decades of life. This work was predicated on the fact that, whereas the burgeoning interest in character development has led to a proliferation of short-term, longitudinal studies on character, these data sets are limited in their ability to model character development trajectories due to low power and relatively brief time spans assessed. Accordingly, Callina, et al. note that integrative data analysis procedures allow researchers to pool raw data across studies in order to fit one model to an aggregated data set, and the purpose of their article was to demonstrate the promises and challenges of this new tool for modeling character development. Using data from four studies evaluating youth character strengths in different settings, the researchers fit latent growth curve models of

hopeful future expectations from participants aged 7 through 26 years. Callina et al. note implications for future research in regard to the advantages of integrative data analysis and discuss issues researchers should consider when applying these techniques.

The articles described in the preceding paragraphs are then discussed in commentaries by scholars who have been involved in applying evidence-based research about character development and, as well, in providing resources for both character development research and applications to in-school and out-of-school-time educational programs. In the first commentary, Andrew Sokatch (in press, in this special section), a Senior Program Officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the former Research Director of the Character Lab, discusses how the articles in this special section provide useful bases for new ideas and strategies that build character and enhance the abilities of practitioners working with youth to enact best practice. Sokatch highlights how the articles in this special section provoke important questions about what teachers and schools should do to build character in their students (as Seider et al. examined), what the appropriate set of character strengths to promote character might be (the focus of Baehr's article), and how youth and teachers might interact with, and be informed by, the school environments in which students find themselves (the focus of the studies by Malin et al.; Callina et al. and Jayawickreme et al.).

In the second commentary, Sarah Clement, the Director of the Character Virtue Development Department at the John Templeton Foundation, and Richard Bollinger, the Program Officer in this department provide a thoughtful and provocative commentary on the field of character education and new directions on character development (Clement & Bollinger, in press, in this special section). They note that, despite the research advances in the study of character since the 1980s, the practice of character education has not changed substantially in response to these advances, and that several assumptions about the effectiveness of character education programs in fact remain untested (or under-tested).

In regard to directions for future research, Clement and Bollinger (in press, in this special section) highlight the importance of assessing moral motivation (as highlighted by Baehr), examining programs that maximize character development for all students, as compared to focusing on average change (drawing on the Malin et al. findings), and understanding the developmental trajectories and specific contributions of character strengths through such approaches as integrative data analysis discussed in the Callina et al. article. Clement and Bollinger also stress the importance of understanding distinct personal profiles of character, as well as broad development patterns, as seen in the findings of Jayawickreme et al. Finally, Clement and

Bollinger note that the Seider et al. findings highlight the possibility that character education interventions may be more successful if they are better tailored to fit with students' preexisting concerns and values, such as fairness and justice.

Together, these commentaries offer thoughtful perspectives about the findings presented in this special section. The commentaries also offer vital guidance toward next steps on the path to better understanding the nature of character and successful character development. We believe the questions they pose hold exciting possibilities for the next generations of researchers interested in character development and character education.

Conclusions

The scholarship in this special section underscores the relational nature of character development. The work of philosophers and educators, on the one hand, and the research of developmental scientists, on the other, indicate that character development can be both a foundation for an individual's positive development and a key basis for enabling every young person to contribute positively to their own lives and to the betterment of their families, schools, and communities. In short, character development constitutes a pathway for a thriving young person and for a flourishing civil society.

In 2016, the National Academies of Science held its first-ever conference on the definition and measurement of character. As discussions at this meeting made clear (Lerner et al., in preparation), methodological challenges in the study of character development remain and, as well, there is a need to expand character development research to more diverse youth and settings, both within and across national boundaries, a fact many of these articles and commentaries acknowledge. Nevertheless, the contributions in this special section illustrate that cutting-edge theory-predicated and sound, mixed-method research is emblematic of the major contemporary approach to character development research. The articles in this special section are examples of the quality of contributions made by contemporary character development research. This work leads us to be optimistic that this area of developmental science can both advance understanding of how to enhance youth development and how, through promoting youth character virtues, positive contributions can be made to civil society.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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