Two Views

Character: A Developmental System

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ABSTRACT—*In this article, I discuss character as a system that includes four components: moral cognition, other-related social–emotional capacities and skills, self-regarding capacities for executive control and self-regulation, and discourse skills for responsive engagement and an orientation for principled moral change. The character system is active, adjusting itself in response to social and emotional experiences and in an effort to keep the components of the system working harmoniously. It is dynamically related to the context, generating decisions and actions that are coherent within but not entirely consistent across contexts. Decisions and actions alter the self-system, thereby affecting subsequent decisions and actions. The character system is located within a larger self-system, and it interacts with that self-system in a relationship that is also self-maintaining. This two-way interaction alters both the character system and the self-system, leading to growth in character and related changes in personal identity and the sense of self. This system view contrasts with traditional definitions of character in terms of virtues.*

KEYWORDS—*character; moral development; self-system*

The opening scene of the movie *Miller's Crossing* (Cohen & Cohen, 1990) includes the following lines from a thug, Johnny Caspar, commenting on the actions of another gangster: "I'm talkin' about friendship. I'm talkin' about character. I'm talkin' about—hell. Leo, I ain't embarrassed to use the word—I'm talkin' about ethics." It seems that everyone, even gangsters, cares about morality and character. As if to prove that point, a recent special topic meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development focused on character development (Society for Research in Child Development, 2018). Despite this interest and concern, developmental psychologists and educators are hard pressed to offer a common definition of character, and moral development theorists beginning with Kohlberg (1984) have challenged the scientific validity of the character construct. As someone generally aligned with the critics (Nucci & Turiel, 2009), I will cautiously make the case for a vision of character as a multifaceted dynamic developmental system.

CHARACTER AS VIRTUES

Traditionally, character has been defined in terms of virtues that emerge from socialization practices fostering culturally valued qualities that guide behaviors. This approach to character has several fundamental problems. The first is the lack of agreement across cultures and historical periods as to which qualities count as virtues. For example, in a recent historical analysis, McGrath (2016) found that of the five primary virtues identified by Plato, only one (courage) made it onto 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, defining character in terms of virtues contradicts evidence beginning with Hartshorne and May (1928) that people apply virtues inconsistently, since they behave differently depending on the context (Turiel & Nucci, 2018). Contemporary philosophers of virtue and like-minded psychologists (Narvaez, 2008) 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 by modifying the definition of virtue to allow for partial realization of an ideal in varying contexts (Curzer, 2018). However, these adjustments in virtue theory acknowledge that the core of moral action lies in the judgments made within a context rather than an individual's static abstract qualities. In concert with this position, developmental psychologists (Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2014)

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have argued that when we define virtues as traits, we engage in what Overton (2018) calls a split metaphor—essentially treating an individual's qualities as functioning discretely from the context in which they operate when, in fact, they function together. (Ironically, Lerner and Schmid Callina cling to the notion of virtues even as they criticize the trait view.)

CHARACTER AND THE SELF-SYSTEM

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 and unique personal identity. What is meant here by character are those capacities and characteristics that motivate and enable the individual to act as a moral agent (Berkowitz, 2012). Moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010) refers to people's understandings and experience of themselves as generating morally relevant actions grounded in their own mental states, goals, beliefs, and emotions, and includes a capacity for self-correction or improvement in response to wrongdoing (Midgette, 2018). Moral agency is a critical component of what I refer 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).

Character is not simply a collection of components but a system of interrelating partial structures that inform and affect one another within contexts. These component systems operate within a reciprocal dynamic relationship with the context. This definition of character conforms to the relational developmental systems (RDS) meta-model offered by Overton (2018). For our understanding of character, a key aspect of RDS is that it views the individual and the context in a continuous, mutually constitutive relationship. Thus, notions of character as virtues that are independent of their enactment within a context are meaningless. This is also true for presumed structures of moral cognition. Accordingly, in my discussion of how to view morality in context, I will emphasize the activity of coordinations of competing elements (Nucci, Turiel, & Roded, 2017; Turiel & Nucci, 2018) rather than focusing on static definitions of stages of moral reasoning.

A second aspect of this meta-model is that snapshot views of the person or context in a given moment help track or measure moral development and character, as long as we understand that these are moments in the course of development, rather than reified and frozen entities (virtues, traits). Thus, what we should be looking for in terms of character is not consistency across contexts, but coherence (Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2014). Character is not a matter of acting in the same (consistent) way (e.g., honestly) irrespective of the situation, but of acting in a manner that is morally sensible (coherent) across situations. Differing with the perspective I offer, Lerner (Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2014) extends the notion of coherence beyond the subjective reading by the actor to include adaptive relations between the individual and the context. This move allows Lerner to focus on the relations across systems rather than placing character entirely within the person. Thus, in their recent work, Lerner and his colleagues (Schmid Callina et al., 2017) searched for particular latent traits, or virtues (e.g., honor and commitment), among cadets at the U.S. Military Academy that comprise character in that setting, but that might not constitute virtue in a different context.

However, defining what constitutes an adaptive relation in a moral sense goes beyond the ecological functionalism of an RDS meta-model. An individual operating as a coherent moral agent in an unjust social context might act in ways that are socially maladaptive and resistant (see Turiel, 2002). In his critique of Lerner's RDS account of character, Berkowitz (2014) suggests an inherent tension in viewing character in relations rather than within a person. As used here, the person-context relations are enacted by coordinating competing elements in arriving at a moral decision. For example, a child's decision about whether to participate in excluding an unpopular peer from a group activity would involve weighing the harm caused to the peer, the norms of the peer group, and the child's own self-interest and personal preferences (Killen, 2007). Over time, decisions generated by the character system alter the person and how he or she responds to similar moral situations, but do not determine future contextualized moral decisions. Finally, the notion of a dynamic relationship between the person and the context means that over time, we will see evidence not just of the impact of the context on the person, but of the impact of the person on the context. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of character entails the systematic analysis of the role of people in transforming society.

THE COMPONENTS OF CHARACTER

Now, we turn to an analysis of the components of what collectively contribute to and comprise character. The character system has four basic components. The first three relate to basic moral wellness (Nucci, 2017). Wellness connotes normative moral functioning, but also assumes that establishing moral well-being is an ongoing process requiring active attention and nurturing. The three components of moral wellness are: (a) basic moral cognition, (b) other-regarding social–emotional capacities and skills (e.g., empathy, perspective-taking), and (c) self-regarding capacities for executive control and self-regulation of emotions and desires. This third component is used both in enacting moral actions and completing nonmoral tasks that require steadfast commitment and engagement. Others have referred to steadfast commitment to completing nonmoral tasks as performance character (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2008).

We do not know whether self-regarding capacities such as industriousness, grit, or courage function in the same way in nonmoral contexts as in moral character. However, applying

the notion of character to particular skills or propensities in the absence of their connection to morality is problematic. For example, the Nazis were certainly industrious when it came to the enactment of their "final solution" toward the Jewish people. Similarly, it can be argued that individuals who carry out mass shootings have shown grit and perhaps even courage. But we would be hard pressed to argue that these displays of self-regarding capacities constitute character without evaluating their moral impact. Finally, individuals who show morally neutral capacities of industriousness in the classroom, or grit and courage on the playing field, would not be judged to have good character if they were abusive toward their romantic partner. This is because the evaluative meaning of character is tied inexorably into the expression of morality as an aspect of the self-system.

The aforementioned three components of basic moral wellness are present in all typically developing people (Berkowitz, 2012). The character system also includes a fourth component: the discourse and communication skills and orientation for principled moral change at the social level. This component is not typically included in discussions of moral character. However, the standard view of character does not account for the interpenetration of the person with the context. Including this aspect of character is consistent with comprehensive views of development that attend to the sociocultural along with individual aspects of development. It also allows us to include work on moral purpose as an aspect of character formation and expression (Damon, 2009). Figure 1 represents the relationship between this character system and the self-system as a whole.

Morality and Moral Cognition

At its core, character is about making moral choices. Moral judgments center on issues of fairness, welfare, and rights, and are distinct from judgments about consensually determined conventions, and matters of personal choice and privacy (Turiel & Nucci, 2018). Concepts of morality, convention, and the personal develop independently, accounting for qualitatively differing aspects of social experience. Developmental analyses have identified continuities in moral judgments within prototypical situations, such as unprovoked harm, as well as age-typical cross-domain coordinations (Nucci et al., 2017). These structural aspects of moral cognition contribute to observed consistencies in moral judgments and action. For example, individuals of all ages rarely endorse unprovoked harm. However, the trajectory of development in the moral and conventional domains is not linear, but follows curvilinear, oscillating patterns typical of dynamic systems in which rates of positive moral actions and adherence to convention are higher at younger and older ages than they are in early adolescence (Nucci et al., 2017; Turiel, 1983). Similar curvilinear developmental patterns have been reported for empathy and helping behavior (Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shepard, 2005). These developmental findings counter accounts of character formation in terms of habits or chronic, easily accessed cognitive schemes (Narvaez, 2008), because the latter would have to explain how and why moral virtue (expertise) disappears (and reappears) once it has been formed.

Moreover, social contexts may also be multifaceted and require coordinating concepts from more than one domain.
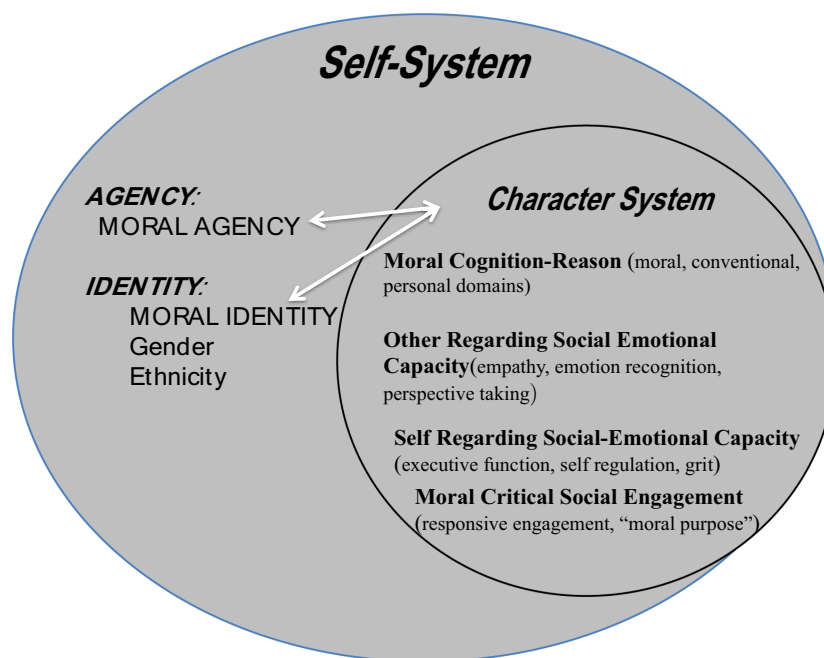

Figure 1. The character system within the self-system. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Older adolescents are more successful than younger adolescents at coordinating competing elements in ambiguous moral situations (Nucci et al., 2017). Thus, character formation is affected by development within domains as well as the capacity to coordinate competing considerations across domains. The contextual multidomain nature of the application of morality to actual situations is why any definition of character must be framed in terms of coherence in moral judgments rather than consistency that is independent of context. Observers can examine the coherent pattern of decisions and actions of an individual, identify patterns of decisions and actions, assign value, and call that virtue. But it is a mistake to go from those patterns to attributing their source to virtues or latent traits, as Lerner envisions (Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2014). Those moral decisions are the outcome of the character system engaging particular contexts.

Other-Regarding Social–Emotional Capacity

The second component of character includes the social–emotional capacities for engaging others' motives and needs. This includes the capacity for empathy (Eisenberg et al., 2005), the ability to accurately read the emotions of others (Saarni, 2007), and perspective-taking. These components provide the inputs for people's universal capacity to generate moral judgments about harm and human welfare. Disruptions in normative development harm the development of empathy and related emotional competencies. As Wainryb's (2011) work has shown, the capacity for moral agency is seriously damaged by direct exposure to violence.

Self-Regarding Social–Emotional Capacities

Character is more than the capacity for judging the right action; it is the propensity to act on that judgment. This has often been mischaracterized as a problem of moral motivation. However, morality is intrinsically motivating (Nucci, 2004). Nonetheless, engaging in moral action requires supporting personal strengths and socioemotional skills. 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 a person to act on rational choice rather than in the heat of the moment. Executive function enables the coordination of cross-domain considerations and enhances impulse control.

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

The components I have listed account for conventional notions of character and morality (Kohlberg, 1984). They describe the development of a person who operates morally. The problem with this account is that it allows for a person of character to live quite happily within a culture or society that features structural inequalities or structural practices that are immoral. Kohlberg (1984) attempted to account for the emergence of people whose morality transcended the norms of their cultural period by saying they had reached a postconventional, principled stage of moral reasoning, but evidence for a principled developmental stage of moral development is weak. However, history and contemporary research suggest that resisting unfair practices is common, especially among individuals in positions of lesser power or privilege (Turiel, 2002).

Yet translating personal moral opposition into a principled moral perspective may not be possible at an individual level. This is the argument made by philosophers (Habermas, Lenhardt, & Nicholsen, 1991; Rawls, 2001) who maintain that abstract moral principles cannot be translated into genuine moral positions without speaking to those to whom those principles are meant to apply. Our current notions of character do not include attention to the features of people as they interact with and talk to others. However, an emerging group of researchers is working with philosophers to sketch out what the political philosopher Anthony Laden (2012) refers to as responsive engagement: a form of conversation in the tradition of Habermas et al. (1991) that has as its goal finding a conceptual space that everyone can share and accept as their own. This contrasts with debates or other forms of discourse that either ignore others' positions or seek to defeat or convert competing viewpoints. Educational programs that foster responsive, transactive discourse may affect moral development and students' attitudes (Nucci, Creane, & Powers, 2015). They involve a process for developing a discourse orientation and skills to increase the likelihood of principled moral change in the social system. These skills may be linked to what Damon (2009) has referred to as purpose: establishing a set of personal goals that provide meaning and direction to a person's life. Purpose in the context of character links these personal goals to the contribution to social justice and the welfare of others.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS

Character is not a collection of virtues or personality traits, and it cannot be reduced to identity. Rather, it is a system that enables a person to engage with the social world as a moral agent. Character does not exist as an entity because it functions coactively within the social context. As a self-generating and self-sustaining 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. As researchers, we may 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, we should not elevate research on any particular expression of morality (e.g.,

gratitude, compassionate love) as relevant in the absence of its role or position in the character system.

We may research the general functioning of the character system using nomothetic methods of normal science. It would be interesting to begin examining how changes in one part of the system (e.g., self-regarding social–emotional learning capacities) interact with other components (e.g., moral reasoning to affect moral action). However, understanding the character of individuals requires idiographic methods. Particularly appealing is narrative analysis (McLean & Syed, 2015; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010) since moral choices are affected by the history of the person who is acting as a moral agent. Moreover, personal narratives incorporate the cultural metanarratives (McLean & Syed, 2015) that help frame the individual's reading of the social context. Coherence rather than consistency may be found in a person's moral choices and actions by understanding the particular life and contextualized moral judgments as narrated by the actor. By taking this system view, we can understand the irony of a gangster like Johnny Caspar talkin' about ethics.

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