

Character: A Multi-faceted Developmental System

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DRAFT

Most people, including skeptics of the character construct, have a sense of what Martin Luther King (1963/2007) 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, my goal is to try and offer a coherent way to think about character as a multifaceted construct 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. I will make the case that the study of character and its assessment must employ a multi-method approach that views character as a multi-faceted developmental system rather than a search for traits or entities within the person. In order to do so, I will be drawing from the work of several people including Marvin Berkowitz (2012; Berkowitz & Bier, 2014) and Richard Lerner (Lerner & Schmid Calina, 2014) who are part of this working group, who have offered recent efforts to define character and to lend coherence to inquiry in this area of psychology and education.

Kohlberg’s Critique and the Bag of Virtues

I think it is helpful to start from Kohlberg’s (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972) critique of character education in order to understand what a functional definition of character needs to entail. The traditional view that Kohlberg objected to was rooted in efforts to socialize

children into adopting social standards and habits of conduct defined by the culture and promoted by the school system. These traditional efforts were exemplified by writers such as Edward Wynne and Kevin Ryan (1993). Kohlberg referred to this as a “bag of virtues” approach. Despite being loosely tied to Aristotelian philosophy, the bag of virtues has little coherence, but reflects a set of presumed positive qualities valued by the proponents of a given collection of virtues. His mocking view of traditional character education as being based upon a “bag of virtues” was humorously updated by Daniel Lapsely (1996). Lapsely 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 ASCD in 1988 left out nine of the eleven core values compiled by the same organization in 1929.

It seems at times as if we are in a period offering another updated attempt to offer a bag of virtues. The current list of research foci includes gratitude (Emmons, 2009; Tudge, Frietas & O’Brien, 2015), hope (2002), grit (Duckworth, 2016), compassionate love (Fehr, Sprecher & Underwood, 2009), empathy (Gordon, 2005), mindfulness (Roeser, Vago, Pinela, Morris, Taylor, & Harrision, 2014), awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), purpose (Damon, 2009), and happiness (Seligman, 2004) not to mention the additional virtues included on the list compiled by Sir John Templeton (creativity, curiosity, diligence, entrepreneurialism, forgiveness, future-mindedness, generosity, honesty, humility, joy, love, purpose, reliability, thrift) that drives much of the funding for research in this field. [Perhaps one way to understand the seeming elasticity in what gets](#)

[included as a virtue is to recognize that virtue like the concepts of race and gender is a social construction.](#) One aim of this talk is to try and simplify this proliferation of disparate agendas into a common focus upon character.

Kohlberg also noted (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971) that attempts to define character in terms of virtues ran contrary to evidence demonstrating that people were 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 non-existent, according to Hartshorne and May (1928) as people appear to behave differently as a function of context.

Kohlberg's (1984) response to the bag of virtues was to offer a purportedly universal developmental sequence of stages of moral judgment that moved toward a universal moral ought based upon principled forms of justice as fairness. These structures of reasoning were the stable components of persons as they applied their judgments in context. People at each stage of development applied different priorities when evaluating actions within context. The goal according to Kohlberg was to move people toward principled stages of reasoning where decisions were based upon principles of justice as fairness. Kohlberg's stage theory has come under considerable criticism (Turiel, 2008). However, as I will outline below, his basic claim for a universal core of morality rooted in concerns for justice and human welfare has been sustained even by some of his harshest critics (Shweder, 2016).

I will argue in agreement with Kohlberg and others (e.g., Berkowitz, Lerner, Sokol) , that any meaningful notion of character has to place morality at the center. Other

features of character such as grit, or social and emotional intelligence that can support morality, can also be directed at negative goals. The Nazis and ISIS for example, have certainly displayed social and emotional intelligence, as well as grit in their efforts to dominate Western culture. Athletes, who may display grit on the playing field, appear to use lower levels of moral judgment, and evidence a greater willingness to engage in harm in the context of competition than they display in other contexts (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984). While qualities such as grit can support what some people refer to as performance character (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov 2008) and are associated with important personal and social goods, such as academic achievement and business success, performance qua performance is not a sufficient indicator of a person's character. I will come back to this later when discussing the supporting role of attributes such as executive function, self-regulation and grit associated with the enactment of moral character.

Moral Identity

Kohlberg's critique notwithstanding, he and his students acknowledged that moral education was not merely about the development of students' capacities for moral judgments (Blasi, 2005) but rested ultimately on impacting students as people. In accounting for the inconsistencies we witness between individual's stated moral positions and their actions, such as Thomas Jefferson's ownership of slaves, Kohlberg invoked the construct of ego strength suggesting that it was the social pressures of the times that overrode Jefferson's moral judgments. Presumably, had Jefferson displayed greater ego strength (grit) he would not have kept his slaves (Kohlberg, 1969) and would have acted quite differently toward his slave, Sally Hemmings, with whom he fathered several children.

The philosopher William Frankena (1963) recognized that the principles that guide moral reasoning carry with them corresponding dispositions to act on the basis of those judgments. Moreover, most people engage in backward reflection on whether their actions comport with their own judgments of what was the right thing to have done. As Michael Chandler has wryly commented, without such reflections of the relationships between one's decisions and actions, "judgment day would simply go out of business." (Chandler, Lalonde & Sokol, 2003, p. 13). Cecilia Wainryb and her students (Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne & Pasupathi, 2015) have demonstrated that reflections and concerns about one's own engagement in actions harming others emerge in early childhood and comprise an important part of the narratives children employ in constructing understandings of themselves as moral agents. This is to say that evaluations of one's moral misconduct is part of the construction of the self system.

Researchers in the field of moral education who have moved away from reference to the character construct 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). As I will outline 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. Elements of the character system, such as self-regulation or executive control, can also interact with and serve as components of other aspects of personal functioning such as academic performance.

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. I have written critically of this assumption (Nucci, 2004) as have others (Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2015). We 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 exam the totality of their lives. That is to say that with the exception of the small percentage of people who are psychopaths, 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, in press) 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 three 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 pro-social actions abstaining from antisocial behavior) (Lapsley, 2016, in press). 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. As I have written elsewhere this reduces 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 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 over-concern 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

What I want to suggest is that morality is an important part of the identity of most people. Our focus upon character is not to create individuals whose personal identity is preoccupied with morality. 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 I will discuss below, is a critical component of what I refer to as moral mental health. 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 et al., 2015). Experiences of trauma, and the engagement in acts of violence impact and disrupt the formation and status of moral agency (Wainryb, 2011).

My view of character, however, is not simply a collection of components as Berkowitz' (2012) definition leaves open as a possibility. My interpretation of what Berkowitz intended is a system of inter-relating partial structures that inform and impact one another within contexts. These component systems are themselves operating within a reciprocal dynamic relationship with the context. Thus, what I am proposing as a definition of character conforms to the Relational Dynamic Systems (RDS) meta-theory offered by Lerner (Lerner, 2006; Lerner & Schmid Calina, 2015) and Overton (in press). This keynote is not the context in which to fully review this meta-theory. The key aspects of this meta-theory for our understanding of character are 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. This means

Insert Figure 1

that 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. This 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 pre-occupied with an account of structures and stages. Thus, as I describe the ways in which we view morality in context, I will be emphasizing the activity of coordinations within contexts, rather than a focus upon static definitions of stages or levels of moral reasoning.

A second aspect of this meta-theory 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 micro-genetic and ontogenetic development, rather than reified and frozen entities (virtues, traits) or structures. What we should be looking for in terms of character is not consistency across contexts, but coherence (Lerner & Schmid Calina, 2015). 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 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. I want to argue, however, 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.

What this means in terms of methods is that we will need to understand the difference between snap-shot 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 look at the person in relationship to the context and over extended periods of time.

The Components of Character and Contemporary Research

I am going to lay out the basic components of what collectively contribute to and comprise "character" and connect them to the various research strands that currently

operate and compete for public attention and funding. I will refer to four basic components. These are presented in Table 1. The first is moral cognition. I will address

Insert Table 1

this component with reference to social cognitive domain theory. The second is what I will refer to today as basic moral mental health. This will include basic capacities for empathy, moral agency, and social emotional skills. In referring to this aspect of character, I will introduce the term “moral wellness” to convey the ongoing activity of updating and maintaining the character system rather than defining it as an achieved status or state. The third component is what we might refer to as enactment or performance. This includes self-regulation, executive function and grit. These three components map onto the aspects of character identified by Sokol, Hammond & Berkowitz, 2010). I add 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, I will make the case 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 socio-genetic component along with micro and onto-genetic aspects of development (Saxe & Ismonde, 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).

In this analysis, I differentiate between Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and moral development. I also place SEL 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 of Moral and Character Education (Elias, Parker, Kash, Weissberg, & O'Brien, 2008).

There has been a historical tendency for proponents of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) to subsume morality, and prudential life choices within their “brand.” For instance the Illinois State Standards for SEL include aspects of development within the moral, conventional and prudential areas. I authored those standards when at I was a member of the faculty at UIC, and working in collaboration with my friend and colleague, Roger Weissberg, who spearheaded the establishment of those standards as a part of Illinois Mental health legislation. More recently I joined many others at the urging of CASEL in signing onto “A Call to Action for Inspiring and Motivating Our Children and Teachers to Learn and Grow in Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Arenas” that was authored by Tim Shriver and David Osher to be presented to the US Department of Education. Thus, I see value in joining for pragmatic political reasons in common cause with colleagues who seek to better the lives of children and youth. However, we should not as, a research community, lose sight of the conceptual and empirical errors that would result from a conflation of development with learning, and the erasure of the actual supportive rather than encompassing role of SEL for moral development and

character formation. In this discussion I sub-divide the SEL contributions to character into components contributing to basic moral mental health and social skills, and a second set referring to the self-regulation and grit components of moral enactment.

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 don't 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 SCDT (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

& Turiel, 2009; 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 non-moral considerations in varying contexts (Nucci, 2001). These non-moral 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 non-moral considerations. I will come back to this point when I discuss the fourth component of character. 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.

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 social-cognitive framework for understanding character proposed by Lapsley (2016 in press). 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. These six moralities proposed by Haidt were expansions of a “big three” proposed by Richard Shweder (1990): autonomy, authority, sanctity/divinity. 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. Also in Shweder's view any rational moral code has to be grounded in a conception of justice (Nucci, 2016 in press). Indeed, what we most value as expressions of character are not unreflective responses, or automatic easily accessible moral chronics (Narvaez and Lapsley, 2005), but the reflectively deliberated moral choices made in the context of countervailing pressures and desires.

The incoherence of Haidt's (2012) framework becomes apparent when confronted with expressions of religious rulings that challenge any objective analysis of justice and human welfare such as the recent pronouncements by the leader of ISIS detailing the rules by which non-Muslim women may be taken sexually against their will (MEMRI, 2014). These rulings make direct reference to the Koran and thus overlap two of Haidt's six moralities: authority and sanctity. If each of these six is a morality in itself, then there is no basis upon which to judge these pronouncements by ISIS as morally wrong. The problem posed by the moral relativism inherent in this equation of religiously-based cultural norms with morality has not been lost on Richard Shweder. Shweder, who is not a relativist, has acknowledged that an unexamined presentation of such moral rules exposes cultural psychology to criticisms of being merely an "account of the despotism of tradition" (Shweder, 2011, p. 310). If on the other hand, one judges that these rules are wrong because of their inherent unfairness and harm imposed on women, then one has elevated the morality of fairness and harm as defined within developmental moral psychology as the core of morality and basis for moral judgments. This is in fact what

domain theory proposes, it is also what the cultural anthropologist, Shweder (2016), maintains as the center of any rational moral code. It is exactly the structure of arguments being made by members of the Islamic faith who are challenging these rulings by ISIS, and whose own reading of the “divine” precludes any dissociation of divinity from a morality rooted in concerns with fairness, human welfare and rights (Turiel, 2002; Wikan, 2002). For other philosophical and social science critiques of Haidt’s (2001, 2012) intuitionist psychology see Blum (2013), Jacobson (2012), Turiel (2015).

Emotional Development and Moral Mental Health

The second component of character is what we may refer to as moral mental health. This includes understanding the roughly one to three percent of the population who are psychopaths (Blair, Mitchell & Blair, 2005). Moral mental health refers to the capacity for empathy (Eisenberg, Guthrie & Chamberlain, 2002; Saarni, 1997), the ability to accurately read the emotions of others (Saarni, 1997, 2007), and the normative formation of moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2015). Each of these components of moral mental health 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.

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 adolescent children (Smetana in press). 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).

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. Optimizing emotional functioning is perhaps also the best way to frame current research on a series of "virtues" that are otherwise difficult to integrate into a coherent theoretical or research agenda. We might include here the research on "awe" (Keltner & Haidt, 2003),

Self-regulation and Grit

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 in press). 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. Any dieter, however, can attest that being motivated to do something is not the same thing as actually following through and doing it. Kohlberg (1969) recognized the need to account for moral follow-through and offered the construct of ego-strength borrowed from the work of the neo-Freudian, Jane Loevinger (2014).

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 non-moral factors such that morality is evaluated as secondary. This is also the case in situations where the perceived benefits or needs met by the non-moral 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 non-moral 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 unless it can be shown that grit comprises a more general aspect of individual personal style or personality. It may be

the case that people who are high on grit are also more likely to act in the moral direction when faced with competing contextual elements. The construct of grit may also 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). At the moment such research may be challenged by apparent problems with the available measures of grit in terms of the internal consistency of items (Worrell, 2016, under review). However, this would seem to be a technical rather than conceptual problem with the grit construct. 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 post-conventional 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, 2001). 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 et al., 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; 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 socio-historical 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 meta-theoretical 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 (2012) has done in the area of math cognition, and what I propose that we incorporate into our comprehensive view of character.

The following figure is taken from Geoffrey Saxe's (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 co-actions of ontogenetic

-- INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE --

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 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 co-acting 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, pg. 171). Laden differentiates engaged reasoning from debates or efforts directed solely at persuasive argumentation. This is in the tradition of what Habermas (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 post-conventional 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 co-actively 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 “grit” 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, 1969) 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. These are: (1) moral reasoning and associated domains (morality, convention, personal); (2) moral mental health (agency, autonomy, empathy, and emotional skills such as emotion recognition, theory of mind); (3) performance (executive function, self-regulation, “grit”). The fourth component is offered to account for a view of character that is more than compliance with the existing socially defined moral code. This would be “post-conventional” 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. For historical reasons associated with the contentious political meaning of character and morality within the United States political environment, SEL has become the brand that has been used to further a broader agenda. While one can applaud the success of this agenda, it is a conceptual error to subsume moral development and character formation as components of SEL.

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 (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Mclean and & Syed, 2015 in press). 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 Shmid Calina (2015) 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 socio-moral 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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Figure 1

Character and Context as Interpenetrating and in Dynamic Relationship

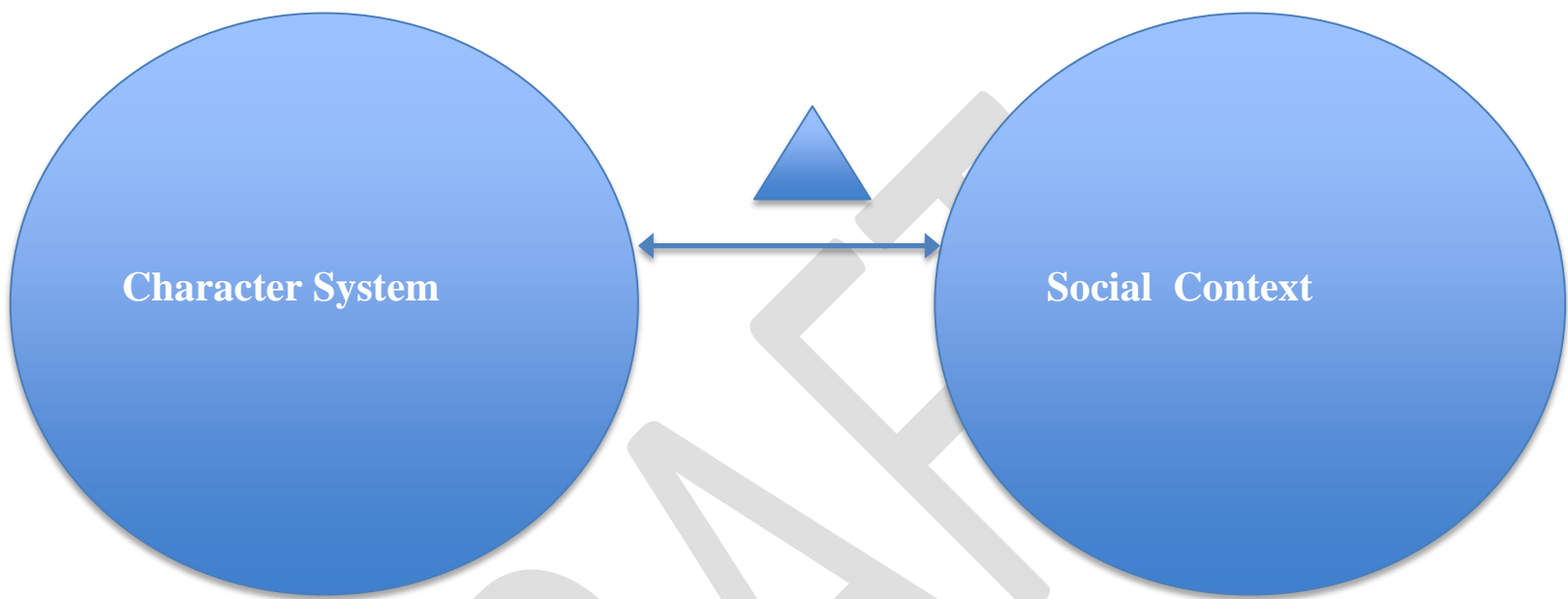


Table 1**Components of the Character System**

Reasoning: Moral, conventional, personal domains

Moral Mental Health: agency, empathy, emotion recognition, perspective taking (theory of mind)

Performance: Self- regulation, executive control

Moral Orientation and Discourse/Communication Skills for Civic Engagement
(responsive engagement, “moral purpose”, moral evaluation of society)