**Moral Self, Flourishing and Competence: Developmental Relational
Science and the Future of Childhood Studies**

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Abstract

Developmental science, and psychology as a whole, is compartmentalized
narrowly into specific research traditions. As a result it is difficult to pursue
the sort of integrative inquiry required by the complex realities of children
and of childhood. In this brief I press four related questions that suggest
possibilities for broader integrative and interdisciplinary research. The first
question concerns how to conceptualize the moral self and its development.
The second question takes up the problem of what it means to live well the
life that is good for one to live, or, alternatively, how to conceptualize
ethically rich notions such as virtue, thriving and flourishing in a way that is
psychologically realistic for "creatures like us." The third question concerns
the paradigmatic understanding of the child that is the subject of
interdisciplinary inquiry. The fourth question takes up the matter of
adolescent competence in light of recent research on adolescent decision-
making and psychosocial maturity.

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1. The Development of the Moral Self

The moral formation of children is one of the foundational goals of
socialization. The ambitions that most parents have for their children
naturally include the development of important moral dispositions. Most
parents want to raise children to become persons of a certain kind, persons
who possess traits that are desirable and praise-worthy, whose personalities
are imbued with a strong ethical compass. This goal is also shared by other
socialization agents and community institutions. It is a traditional goal of
formal education, for example, and the goal of many community
organizations that provide services to children and youth.

Yet developmental and other social sciences have not provided much help
with how to understand fundamental concepts such as the moral self,
identity and personality. For example, Kohlberg's stage theory of moral
development was largely silent on how the development of justice
reasoning implicates deeply rooted notions of selfhood and identity. There
were both paradigmatic and strategic reasons for this. The paradigmatic
reason can be traced to its source in Piaget's developmental theory. For
Piaget stages are best considered descriptive taxonomic categories that
classify formal "morphological" properties of children's thinking on an
epistemic level. They describe species of knowledge, forms of thought,
varieties and kinds of mental operations, and not different kinds of persons
(Chapman, 1988; Lapsley, 2006). Similarly, for Kohlberg, moral stages
classify variations of sociomoral structures, not individual differences
among persons. As a result Kohlberg and his colleagues could write that
moral "stages are not boxes for classifying and evaluating persons" (Colby,
Kohlberg, Gibbs & Lieberman, 1983, p.11) and cannot, therefore, be the
basis for aretaic judgments about the moral worthiness of persons. The
stage sequence cannot be used as a yardstick to grade one's moral
competence. It makes no evaluative claims about character, says nothing
about virtues, is silent about the moral features of personality and selfhood
(Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004).

Kohlberg also rejected the language of virtues and character for the strategic
reason that trait-talk gives aid and comfort to ethical relativism, an
epistemological position that he aimed to undermine with his moral stage

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theory (Lapsley, 1996). Besides, the casual appropriation of traits as the basis of moral character collided with growing doubts about their empirical warrant as well as the theoretical adequacy of the traditional claims made for them (Cervone & Shoda, 1999a, b; Mischel, 1990; Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

Hence it would appear that moral stage theory, and traditional approaches to moral character, are each inadequate for conceptualizing the moral dimensions of selfhood and identity, and for what it means to be a moral person.   This is a matter of some urgency if some formulation is to inform child-rearing and socialization strategies. The stakes are particularly high for character education. As Cunningham (2005, p. 197) noted "Unless psychology can provide a better model of human development which can fill in this gap in the philosophy of education, character will continue to receive sporadic and faddish treatment, and the public common school will continue to be undermined."

Fortunately a number of research programs have emerged recently to address the psychological bases of moral identity and personality (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005). Four such theories are summarized in Table 1. The first thing to notice is that each theory is broadly integrative in some fashion. Blasi's theory, for example, weds a commitment to cognitive developmental and Kantian views of self and morality with Harry Frankfurt's (1988) philosophy regarding second-order desires. Daniel Hart's model of moral identity blends traditional notions of identity (as including self-integration and temporal continuity) with ecological-contextualist considerations, and touches base as well with literatures on civic identity and youth engagement. Lapsley and Narvaez's perspective is strongly influenced by social-cognitive theories of personality coherence. Narvaez's "integrated ethical integration" blends Rest's (1983) four-component model of moral functioning with cognitive theories of expertise.

The second thing to notice is that each theory shares the same deficiency (although perhaps not equally). The focus of each theory is on the moral identity of youth and adults with virtually no specification of the prior developmental pathways that bring us to mature (or nearly mature) forms.

How the moral self is to be understood as a developmental achievement will be a pressing problem for childhood studies.

Traditional ways of doing moral development research pose two impediments to inquiry.   First, stage-and-sequence paradigms have long assumed that moral development was something that takes off in middle and late-childhood, and that toddlers and young children were egocentric, preconventional, premoral and otherwise incapable of moral sensibility. Second, there is a tendency to regard moral education as something that takes place in schools as a formal curriculum or intervention.

More recently there have been attempts to frame a "developmental relational science" that locates the early foundation of conscience and intuitive morality (and other dimensions of "sociopersonality" generally) in the quality of relationship experienced infancy and early childhood (Thompson, 2006, 1998).

 For example, there are clues to possible pathways to moral identity from research on the development of conscience in early childhood (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006). According to Kochanska and her colleagues (Kochanska, 2002; Kochanska et al., 2004), intuitive morality emerges in a two-step process that originates within the nexus of parent-child attachment. A secure, mutually responsive relationship characterized by shared, positive affect orients the child to be receptive to parental influence and to be eager to comply with parental suggestions, standards and demands. This encourages " committed compliance" (to use Kochanka's phrase) or "wholehearted" (using Harry Frankfurt's), self-regulated, and willing commitment to the norms, values and expectations of caregivers which, in turn, motivates moral internalization. The model moves, then, from security of attachment to committed compliance to moral internalization.

This model suggests that the source of wholehearted commitment to moral desires (characteristic of what Blasi requires of the "moral personality") lies in the mutual positive affective relationship with caregivers and the quality of the child's network of interpersonal relationships (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006). The source of self-control, integrity and moral desires ---the three

elements of Blasi's notion of moral personality---is deeply relational. There is a fundamental continuity between the dynamics of conscience development in the toddler years and emergent moral identity in later development. This model also underscores the importance of school bonding, caring school communities and attachment to teachers as a basis for prosocial and moral development (see Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006, for a review).

Of the four models of moral identity noted in Table 1 at least two seem positioned to capitalize on the insights of early sociopersonality development. For example, Hart and his colleagues have written on the importance of school attachment (Atkins, Hart & Donnelly, 2004) and family influence (Hart, Atkins & Ford, 1999) on moral identity, and the importance of caring relationships for motivating prosocial behavior (Hart & Fegley, 1995). Similarly, Lapsley and Narvaez (2004) suggest that the early formation of the moral personality is found in the shared discourse between child and caregiver that elaborates and gives meaning to event representations and emergent autobiographical memory in young children.

In my view researchers in childhood studies would find in this field a rich harvest of interdisciplinary questions that would engage the work of ethicists, developmental psychologists, educators and social policy analysts.

2. Flourishing and Human Development

Until recently it has been common to think of youth and their developmental needs in terms of risks, deficits, symptoms, vulnerabilities, and dysfunctions. Typically one charted "risk factors" of vulnerable youth and then designed interventions to redress them accordingly. Our understandable desire to fix the problems of children at-risk for developmental dysfunction left unaddressed the positive adaptational aspects of development. It became clear, for example, that "*problem-free is not fully prepared.*" Youth who are absent significant developmental symptoms or risks are not necessarily, by that score, fully prepared to take up the demands of mature functioning in adult roles. Moreover studies of vulnerable youth revealed several protective mechanisms that allowed some youth to overcome adversity (e.g., Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1991; Masten,

2001). Hence, in addition to risks-and-deficits researchers took up notions of competence, resilience and protection and its relation to *positive youth development* (e.g., Larson, 2000).

Positive youth development can be considered part of a larger "positive psychology" movement that aims to redress the historic emphasis in psychology on pathology and its diagnosis, treatment and prevention. Positive psychology "is the study of the conditions and processes that contributes to flourishing or the optimal functioning of people, groups and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104), or, more prosaically, on "the positive features that make life worth living" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). The range of topics that fall under this heading is large and expanding, but typically includes subjective well being and happiness, hope, optimism, creativity, wisdom, responsibility, perseverance, and spirituality, among others. Sometimes the personal qualities that promote these attributes are referred to as "character strengths" or "virtues" (Bacon, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which aligns positive psychology with the (Aristotelian) moral domain.

As with the case of moral identity the topics usually considered under the heading of positive psychology are treated only rarely from a developmental perspective, although, as noted earlier, perhaps the positive youth development is the developmental wing of positive psychology.

Lerner and his colleagues (Lerner, Dowling & Anderson, 2003) argued that positive youth development, particularly as understood against the backdrop of the developmental systems (contextualist) paradigm (see below), provides a conceptualization of *thriving* as the basis of personhood and civil society. In their view thriving is plasticity in human development; it is adaptive regulation of the person-context relationship; it is maintaining successful relationships over time and with one's community; it is the ability to make culturally valued contributions that result in moral identity, civic virtue, a sense of self-transcendence and spirituality. They write:

> "An integrated moral and civic identity and a
> commitment to society beyond the limits of one's

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own existence enable thriving youth to be agents both in their own healthy development and in the positive enhancement of other people and of society. Thriving youth become generative adults through progressive elaboration of behaviors that are valued in their specific culture and that reflect the universal structural value of contribution to civil society" (Lerner et al., 2003, p. 172).

Several questions are suggested by these considerations:

- **Does flourishing or thriving have a developmental basis?**
- **Can a notion of thriving or flourishing serve as an organizing heuristic for childhood studies?**
- **Must childhood studies cast its lot with positive youth development?**
- **The mantra of positive youth development is *"problem free is not fully prepared"*---but is fully prepared morally adept?**
- **Are notions like thriving and flourishing largely philosophical categories straining for psychological specification, and can the interdisciplinary focus of childhood studies help us sort it out?**
- **Thriving and flourishing give us a model of what it means to live well. But isn't this just half of the challenge? Isn't the problem not only to learn what it means to live well, but also to learn how to live well *the life that is good for one to live?* Can an interdisciplinary childhood studies help us here?**

3. Paradigmatic Childhood Studies

The history of developmental psychology is the history of struggle among competing meta-theoretical paradigms for conceptualizing the basic desiderata of the field of study. The way we think about development is usually part of a larger set of ideas we have about human nature and about the way the world works. We all tend to have at least a loose philosophy about these things. These larger ideas about human nature and of reality are sometimes called *paradigms* or *worldviews* and scientific theories of human development seem to align with them. The various paradigms each have unique sets of philosophical assumptions and favorite metaphors that

influence how we look at problems, how we conceptualize and understand human growth and functioning, and what it means to *develop*.

This brief has had occasion to mention two broad paradigmatic approaches: the developmental systems perspective, noted in Section 2; and "developmental relational science" as articulated by Ross Thompson (2006), noted in Section 1. To provide some context for my remarks on these paradigms I have constructed Table 2 which summarizes key claims of three other paradigms that have figured prominently in the history of developmental science.

The **developmental systems** (or developmental contextualism) perspective is the overarching conceptual framework that drives much of the study of human development today (Lerner, 2002, 1998). According to this view a person cannot be understood solely by reference to biology, environmental contingencies, or to psychological structures. Rather, development is an integrated matrix of variables from multiple levels of development, including inner-biological, outer-physical and inner-psychological. The individual is a *system*.

But to this must be added a broader set of contextual factors that includes family, peers, community, ethnicity and culture all of which are influenced by the historical forces that affect the generation in which we are raised. These multiple sources of influence are in dynamic reciprocal interaction. There is bi-directional influence between persons and contexts. The dispositions, interests and abilities of the developing child interact with the changing contexts of learning and socialization. Person variables and contextual variables dynamically interact in complex ways; both are mutually implicated in behavior. Indeed, an accurate account of development requires reference not only to person variables—genetic inheritance, biological dispositions or psychological structures---but also to the way these person variables interact with environmental and contextual variables, which themselves change over time. Development takes place, then, at the intersection of persons and contexts, or, alternatively, person-and-context is inextricably linked and cannot be separated.

The developmental systems perspective points to five critical assumptions:

1. Individuals differ in the pace of development.
2. Adolescents differ in the trajectory of development.
3. Individual differences are the norm.
4. There is constant change across the lifespan.
5. There is relative plasticity in development.

The claims for **developmental relational science** are not incompatible with developmental systems, although its claims are more circumscribed for the special case of how to account for sociopersonality development. Thompson (2006) makes three general claims:

1. Relationships are central

A developmental relational science focuses on the relational influences that contributes to basic competencies and that generate individual differences. It integrates perspectives offered by "attachment theory neo-Vygotskeyan thinking, sociolinguistic approaches to cognitive growth", among other perspectives (Thompson, 2006, p. 25)

2. Early sociopersonality development is best understood as the *appropriation of understanding from shared activity*" (*not* as socialization or constructivism).

As Thompson put it, ""Á model of *appropriated understanding from shared activity* offers more than traditional socialization or constructivist views the opportunity to integrate social and cognitive aspects of early sociopersonality development" (p. 25, my emphasis). The key point I want to make here is a paradigmatic one: that both nurture-socialization and organismic-constructivist fall short of the mark.

3. Thinking and understanding in early childhood is a conceptual foundation for what develops afterwards.

For Thompson relationships experienced in early childhood lay the foundations for the development of social cognition, moral judgment and self-understanding.

These considerations suggest the following questions:
- **What paradigmatic assumptions, if any, govern the field of childhood studies?**
- **Are paradigm assumptions necessary or optional?**
- **Or is childhood studies a "big tent" of plural, sometimes incompatible perspectives?**

4. Adolescent Competence: Invulnerability, Decision-Making and Social Policy

The cognitive competency of adolescents is a contested issue, and it is a question that has significant social policy implications. After all, many social and legal restrictions on teens are premised on the presumed fact of their immaturity and incompetence in decision-making. Yet a close look at (various) developmental literatures yields a harvest of complications. A cognitive developmental perspective would lead us to think that teenagers are in sight of the summit of rational deliberation, at least with respect to scientific and hypothetico-deductive reasoning (as in Piaget's stage of formal operations).

Yet if teenagers are good scientists they are poor statisticians. When asked to estimate the probability that dangerous outcomes are more likely for the self or for others---most teens nominate others as more prone to hazards than the self, a phenomena called "optimism bias" in some literatures.

But, as it turns out, adults are also prone to optimism bias, and there is generally no difference between adults and teens in this respect (at least for teens age 16 and older). This suggests that perhaps adolescents are not *uniquely* invulnerable, or else their invulnerability does not derive from their developmental status (Jacobs-Quadrel & Fischoff, 1993).

Some research finds that invulnerability is multidimensional, is not coterminous with "optimism bias", has both adaptive and maladaptive features, and may play a positive role in helping teens negotiate normative developmental challenges, such as separation-individuation (Lapsley, 2003). And whether invulnerability is evident or not may depend on a host

of methodological considerations (Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2001). And some researchers, perhaps despairing of decision-making research (Steinberg, 2003), insist that teens' judgment is compromised by "psychosocial immaturity" that renders them incapable (for example) of assisting in their own defense at legal proceedings (e.g., Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000). There is also emerging research that links adolescent risk-behavior to the neurological immaturity of the prefrontal cortex (Giedd, Blumenthal, Jeffries, Castellanos, Liu, Zijdenbos, Paus, Evans & Rapoport, 1999).

But several questions are suggested:

- **How are we to understand the basic rational capacities of adolescents?**
- **To what extent should the law and courts take notice of childhood studies into adolescent risk perception?**

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Table 1 — Four Theories of Moral Identity	
Source	**Précis**
Blasi (1995, 2005)	One has a moral identity to the extent that the self is organized around explicit moral commitments. One has a moral identity when moral notions are central, important and essential to one's self-understanding. A distinction is made between specific virtues that are circumscribed by specific contexts and general virtues that are enduring, stable and motivational. Three kinds of general virtues are described: will-as-self-control, moral desires, and integrity, each of which is required for moral character, but in different ways. Self-control allows one to persist, avoid distractions, set goals, delay gratification. Integrity connects our commitments to a sense of self and allied notions of responsibility and identity. But these have no moral significance unless one has moral desires and wills the moral good for oneself.
Daniel Hart (2005)	Moral identity includes self-awareness, a sense of self-integration and temporal continuity. It is a joint product of personal and contextual factors, and so is constrained by characteristics of family and neighborhood. There is some "moral luck" in the sort of identity-defining commitments that are available in some contexts. But there is also plasticity. Moral identity is open to revision, particularly when youth are given opportunities to undertake moral action, such as in service learning.
Lapsley & Narvaez (2004)	Moral personality can be understood in terms of the schemes that are chronically accessible for social information-processing. Chronically accessible categories provide a dispositional preference or readiness to discern the moral dimensions of experience. Moral chronicity is a dimension of individual differences.
Narvaez (2005, 2006) Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005)	Character is a set of component skills that can be developed to higher levels of expertise, or, alternatively, moral development is a form of developing expertise. Four component skills are emphasized: Sensitivity, Judgment, Focus, Action. Implementation of well-practiced ethical skills can approach automaticity.

Table 2 — Three Models of Development			
	Genetic-Maturational	**Mechanistic Environmentalism**	**Organismic**
What drives development?	nature	Nurture "socialization"	child's activity "constructivism"
Typical research?	genome, traits, biology	learning theories, behaviorism	stage theories
Model of the child?	child passive (biology active)	child passive (environment active)	child active (biology and environment passive)
Where are causal factors located?	inner-biological	outer-physical	inner-psychological