Character Development across Childhood and Adolescence and the Role of Parenting Practices

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Character Development

- There is renewed interest in the psychological study of character in positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), positive youth development (Lerner, 2004) and education (Heckman & Kautz, 2012).
- However, we lack understanding of what character is and how it develops (Berkowitz & Bier, 2014).

Development of Character Structure
- Dimensions that underlie character strengths have been proposed (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), yet factor analyses show divergent results across studies (McGrath, 2014).
- Character in childhood and early adolescence may have a global and undifferentiated structure. With age, character may become more complex and differentiated.

Development of Specific Strengths
- Some argue that certain lower-order strengths (e.g., kindness) begin developing early whereas higher-order strengths (e.g., purpose) develop later in life (Park & Peterson, 2006).
- Others argue that children of any age can display any given character strength depending on contextual supports (Bronk, 2011; Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2015).

Differentiation

- The orthogenetic principle emphasizes developmental processes as nonlinear, suggesting a dialectic process of differentiation and hierarchic integration (Werner, 1957).
- Based on this principle, character in childhood and early adolescence may exist in a global and undifferentiated structure; across adolescence, global structures of character may differentiate to become more complex and specific.
  - Character strengths may only be present in early age groups as a more general character factor but at later ages, strengths may emerge as distinct factors.

Parenting Practices and Character

- Examining the role of multiple parenting practices in relation to character development is important for investigating the role of socialization in character development theory.
- Recognizing the conceptual link between character and civic engagement, practices that emphasize civic socialization may cultivate character strengths.
- The current study explores three parenting practices: Parental civic modeling; Civic communication, and Psychological needs support.
  - **Civic discussions**
    - Provide opportunities for youth to gain insights about how to work in collaboration with others, have a voice in decisions or issues, and envision change and future possibilities thus cultivating strengths such as teamwork, leadership, and future-orientation.
  - **Civic modeling**
    - May allow youth to see parents acting as leaders who work collectively to address community issues as well as commitments to making a difference in the world, reflecting strengths of responsibility and future-orientation.
  - **Psychological Needs support**
    - To the extent that character strengths are intrinsic, parenting practices that support basic psychological needs should promote character.

Method

Data for the study came from a larger study designed to examine the developmental roots of civic engagement.
- Children and adolescents completed questionnaires in school
- N = 2475 4th through 12th graders (M_{age}= 13.35, SD =2.66, 55.6% female)
- Recruited from rural West Virginia (33.2%), suburban southern California (42.1%), and urban Minnesota (24.7%).
- White (50.4%), Hispanic or Latino (30.2%), Black or African American (9.5%), Other Race/Ethnicity (13.1%), and Asian (6.7%)
Planned missing data design (see Table 1) was used to lessen burden on participants

Table 1. Three Form Planned Missing Design

Survey Form	Item Sets
1	X + A + B
2	X + C + A
3	X + B + C

Bifactor Models

- Bifactor models assumes that all character strengths share some common variance (captured by the general character factor) as well as unique covariance not explained by general character (captured by the specific factors).
- Exploratory bifactor models are uniquely suited to assessing potential differentiation by identifying strengths that load only on a general character factor as well as those that are differentiated into specific factors.
- To address whether character progresses from globality to specificity with age, we estimated separate exploratory bifactor analyses of character strengths among three age groups: elementary-, middle-, and high-school aged youth.
- After exploratory analyses, we examined the three parenting strategies as predictors of the final character bifactor model for each age group.

Character Items

Table 2. Character Items

Scale	Items
Future-Orientation	1. When I make a decision, I consider the impact it will have on my future.
	2. I am hopeful about my future.
	3. I think about who I will be when I'm older.
Optimism	1. I usually see the positive side of things.
	2. I know how to find something good in every situation.
	3. I believe things will turn out well
Perseverance	1. When I get stuck on something I'm working on, I keep trying until I figure it out.
	2. I almost always finish things that I start.
	3. I am a hard worker
Responsibility	1. If I do something wrong, I take responsibility for my actions.
	2. When I say I'm going to do something, I do it.
	3. I am responsible.
Thrift	1. I am careful about how I spend my money.
	2. There are things I don't buy today so I can save my money for the future.
	3. Reusing an item you already have is better than buying something new.
Leadership	1. I am usually the one who suggests activities to my friends.
	2. My peers consider me to be a leader.
	3. I am good at leading others to reach a goal.
Respect	1. I treat others with respect.
	2. I mostly use good manners.
	3. I treat others the way I want to be treated.
Teamwork	1. I am good at working together with other group members.
	2. When working on a team, I do my part to help my team meet its goals.
	3. When I work with others, I think about what is best for my team.
Gratitude	1. I feel thankful for everyday things.
	2. When good things happen to me, I think about the people who helped me.
	3. I find it easy to thank people.

Parenting Practices and Bifactor Models

Table 3. Models linking parenting practices to character bifactors

Predictors	G-Factor	S-Factor 1	S-Factor 2	S-Factor 3	S-Factor 4	S-Factor 5	S-Factor 6	S-Factor 7
Elementary School	General	Future-Orient.	Civic	Thrift				
Civic Modeling	0.09	-0.41		0.02				
Psych. Needs Support	0.49***	0.00	-0.05	0.05				
Civic Communication	0.34***	0.39	-0.03	-0.10				
Middle School	General	Perseverance	Leadership	Respect	Teamwork	Optimism		
Civic Modeling	0.11	-0.10	0.39***	0.10	0.15	-0.07		
Psych. Needs Support	0.44***	0.14	-0.21*	-0.06	-0.07	-0.03		
Civic Communication	0.24***	-0.04	-0.22	-0.08	-0.10	0.17		
High School	General	Future-Orient.	Leadership	Respect	Teamwork	Integrity	Thrift	
Civic Modeling	0.16*	-0.18	0.09	-0.13	0.06	-0.18***	-0.06	0.21
Psych. Needs Support	0.38***	-0.23	-0.32***	-0.02	-0.07	-0.08	-0.08*	
Civic Communication	0.37***	0.32**	0.37***	0.03	0.11*	0.16***	0.19*	-0.12

Exploratory Bifactor Analysis

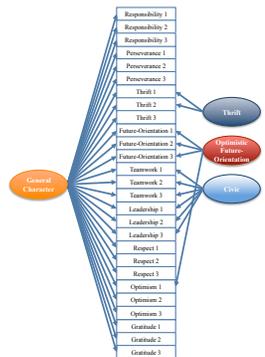Figure 1. Bifactor Models for Elementary School

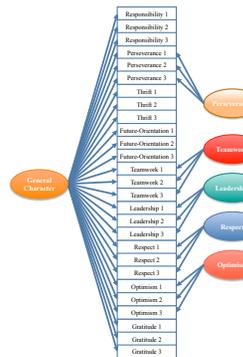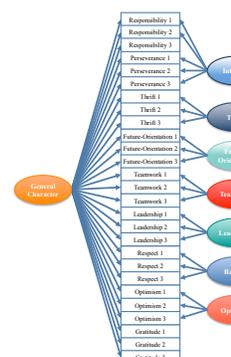Figure 2. Bifactor Models for Middle School

Figure 3. Bifactor Models for High School

Discussion

Character Development
- Results shed light on developmental differences in character across childhood and adolescence.
- Consistent with Werner's orthogenetic principle, character is more global and diffuse at elementary school ages and becomes more differentiated across ages.

Bifactor Models
- Exploratory bifactor analyses are especially well suited to character research, as they are able to simultaneously capture general and specific aspects of character structure.
- Results from the bifactor model suggest that the general factor captures a tendency towards positive responding whereas the specific factors are capturing unique character strengths not explained by general character.
- Compared to alternative measurement models, bifactor models may provide increased precision in measuring character and its related outcomes.

Parenting Practices
- Psychological needs support from parents is positively related to character development across ages.
- Civic modeling has differential effects on character development for older and younger adolescents.
  - For younger youth, parents' civic modeling was strongly related to leadership.
  - The association between modeling and the general, but not specific factors, in older age groups suggests that the influence of parental civic modeling becomes more generalized with age.
- The positive association between civic communication and general character suggests discussing politics and problems facing the community are promotive of broad aspects of character across ages.

Implications

- There has been a dearth of theoretical work on addressing age differences in character strengths (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006).
- The current study advances developmental theory by elucidating structural changes in character and provides a richer understanding of the conceptual link between character and civic development across late childhood and adolescence.
- Our results offer strategies that parents, educators, and youth development professionals can implement to foster youth character development.

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