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The Expanding Universe of Character Education: One Man's Journey

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Abstract

From the perspective of an autobiographical 40 year professional journey through various guises of understanding and promoting the positive, pro-social, and ethical development of children and adolescents, this paper explores the ideally interdisciplinary nature of an effective approach. Starting as a social science (specifically developmental psychology) basic researcher, the author slowly encountered challenges to that limited perspective. Epiphanies about and justifications for integrating a developmental psychological approach with ethical philosophy, sociology, and educational science are presented. If one wants to understand the ethical nature of such a person, then ethical philosophy is needed. If one wants to understand how a person becomes an ethical agent, then developmental psychology is required. However, sociology is needed to fully understand the social contextual forces undergirding such development, especially school and classroom culture. And ultimately, if one wants to nurture such development, educational science (pedagogy) is also necessary. For a truly comprehensive and effective approach, an interdisciplinary approach, including at least these four disciplines, is necessary.

The Expanding Universe of Character Education: One Man's Journey

I have now spent 40 years working in the field variously labeled as moral development, moral education, character education, positive youth development, values education, moralogy, pro-social education, peace education, applied positive psychology, social-emotional learning, virtues education, etc. There are two broad questions that arise as I look back at the trajectory of this professional journey. First, why? What drew and continues to draw me to this specific path of professional effort? Second, what has been the trajectory of, and the lessons learned from, this now rather protracted and circuitous journey?

The first question's answer has become clearer to me over time. At first, it was simply a fascination with understanding how people think coupled with an idealistic interest in matters of right and wrong. Hence, it was the pairing of these in the cognitive developmental work of Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1948) and Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1984) that seemed like my best bet for an intellectual home. Over time I began to realize, particularly as I slowly succumbed to the siren's call of applied science, that it was also a deeper calling to what in Hebrew is known as Tikkun Olum, or healing the world. By this time, I was already working as a developmental psychologist studying moral reasoning development, and hence my best leverage point to contribute to the healing of the world was through my focal expertise. This led me to moral and character education, both in families and schools. The bottom line is that the best way to make a more moral world, that is to heal it ethically, would be through moral people. My contribution would best come through applying what I knew about moral psychology to actual influences on child and adolescent development; i.e., families and schools. Moral character education is

therefore applied social science, taking the scientific knowledge to improve conditions for fostering the moral development of youth as a way to contribute to building a more moral world.

As an aside, I have also come to realize that I am a moral optimist. But I am a macro-optimist. I believe that we are making constant moral progress, but that the upward trajectory can only be seen if one pulls back the lens and takes a macro- or long-term perspective, at the minimum over half centuries (Pinker, 2011). There is no better time in history to live than now, in that macro sense of "now." This is most poignantly true if one is a member of any disempowered group: women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, those with non-traditional gender identities or sexual preferences, etc. (e.g., deMause, 1974). When were health care, longevity, education, or access to food and water more widespread? When was the concept of human rights more widely understood and more broadly applied? Ask yourself, in which other century would you rather have lived? So I believe in moral evolution, not merely as a possibility, but as a dialectical inevitability. And I believe that we can contribute to the nature and pace of such evolution; that we can indeed contribute to tikkun olum, to healing the world. Of course this underscores an important point. Just because I believe this is the best time morally for humankind, it does not mean it is a good time or at least a "good enough" time. Complacency after all is the enemy of progress. That is the call to action.

As I look back at the trajectory of my professional history and struggle to see some pattern in the chaos of this journey, I could choose from quite a diverse and seemingly incompatible set of models of development as metaphors to make sense of the changes that have transpired in my career and how I approach the central issue of how to make

good people. Borrowing a metaphor from the physical sciences, perhaps the journey was from order to chaos, following some version of entropy theory. Or turning to the biological sciences, perhaps a more apt metaphor is that I began with the most significant and central issues and then began expanding outward to less and less central and more and more peripheral issues, as is the general nature of prenatal biological development. Or I could invoke the converse biological model, where growth starts at the outer reaches and moves inward to center, as tends to be the case in much of the adolescent pubertal development growth spurt. Or perhaps my career was more evolutionary and the best work kept trumping the less worthwhile work.

Most likely they all are perspectives that reflect some bit of insight about my own professional journey. But the developmental metaphor I want to explore is more cosmological; namely, the ever expanding universe. So let's start at the Big Bang.

The Big Bang: Where It All Began

For me, the Big Bang, or creating something seemingly out of nothing, started when I entered Bill Overton's undergraduate class on developmental psychology at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1970. He was a constructivist psychologist through and through and was in the midst of writing a piece with a behaviorist (Hayne Reese) on what they termed "models of man" (Reese & Overton, 1970). So I was introduced to grand theories of human nature and development and particularly Piaget. I simply loved the idea of detailing ways people think and how those meaning making structures evolve ontologically to more and more adequate ways of thinking about the universe and everything in it. I decided to become a developmental psychologist and study Piagetian constructivism. So, with a freshly minted B.A. degree in psychology from the State

University of New York at Buffalo, I headed off to earn a Ph.D. in life-span developmental psychology in 1972.

Serendipity struck and pulled me further outward from my narrow focus in the developmental psychology of Piagetian structures of logical thinking, when, in the Wayne State Ph.D. program, I signed up for a class in adolescent development. Unfortunately the psychology department was between adolescent specialists at that particular point in time. So Lillian Troll, a gerontologist, gamely stepped in and taught the seminar. For some reason that I do not recall, she had requested and had just received the latest draft of Lawrence Kohlberg's moral reasoning stage scoring manual. It was hundreds of photocopied pages that arrived in a box, and they were both out of order and devoid of instructions on how to make sense of and use them. For those reasons, the content of the seminar transformed from a general focus on adolescent development into a collaborative endeavor to help Professor Troll make sense of this document and what it represented. For me, however, it was much more than a detour in a course on adolescent development. Rather, it was the next expansion of my universe.

I suddenly discovered that I could apply constructivist developmental theory to the content domain of morality. I realized that I could study how people develop the capacity to think effectively about moral issues. Instead of continuing to focus on how children understand images and gestures and other physical phenomena, studying how they understood right and wrong became my raison d'être. Of course, I still did not know that I would need more than a psychological lens to see this clearly. So I turned my academic agenda for both my masters and doctoral studies to the exploration of the development of moral reasoning. I became a reasonably successful psychological researcher, and spent

nearly twenty years in the psychology department at Marquette University studying and teaching from this frame; all while remaining a fairly orthodox "Kohlbergian."

One anecdote from a bit later on exemplifies my Kohlbergian orthodoxy (and others will be described below, as such a devotion does not end easily, nor should it). I received a phone call in 1992 from Michael Josephson, whom I did not know. He had started the Josephson Institute of Ethics to promote professional ethics after having found a passion for that in teaching legal ethics as a law professor. He had subsequently become concerned about the earlier development of values in youth and decided to begin a project on that subject. Jim Rest, a colleague of mine, was an advisor and apparently had recommended that I be one of about 30 diverse experts in what was then being called "youth values" and who should be part of a cloistered think tank meeting. I agreed to fly to Aspen Colorado for this meeting in April of 1992. It was a great and enriching discussion, ably facilitated by Josephson. One of his agenda items for this think tank was to consensually identify a small set of "universal" values as the hub for the proposed work on youth values. Being an orthodox Kohlbergian dedicating my career to the study and fostering of forms of moral reasoning, I echoed Kohlberg's argument that values are relative and any set of values or virtues is an arbitrary selection from what he often called "a bag of virtues." I was the lone and somewhat strident dissenting voice.

I lost the debate. The group settled on six core values (respect, responsibility, caring, fairness, trustworthiness, civic virtue). These soon morphed into their better known form as "The Six Pillars of Character," and became the heartbeat of Character Counts, the most widely disseminated and known character education framework in the US (and beyond). Furthermore, I saw the wisdom in, at least for recognition, communication, and identity

purposes, to having such a list. More importantly, as I watched schools, school districts, and communities grapple frequently with generating a communal list of such values or virtues of their own, the clear common denominator concepts were respect, responsibility, caring, fairness and trustworthiness. When the Institute for Global Ethics did an international survey, they found essentially the same set. My orthodoxy and narrow professional lens both led me to off-handedly discount the value and possibility of identifying at least a consensual if not universal set of concepts to frame the enterprise of defining human goodness, beyond merely forms of moral reasoning.

My colleague BR Rhodes, a former highly successful educator and school leader, has noted that children do not “grow in straight lines.” In a similar way, personal universes also tend to expand and evolve in often surprising and certainly indirect ways. Nor are all causal effects and changes immediate; rather there are latent or “time released” impacts in our lives. So this temporal narrative needs to back up a bit. Between graduate study at Wayne State and the ensuing professorship at Marquette University were two deeply transformational and formative years as a post-doctoral research associate at Kohlberg’s Center for Moral Education (CME) in the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. I was part of a marvelous team applying Kohlberg’s theories in radically democratic and experimental high schools; i.e., Just Community Schools (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). The CME in those years was a magical place with projects on applied interventions in schools (such as the one I was working on), applied interventions in prisons and workplaces (Hickey & Scharf, 1980), basic research on the psychometrics of measuring moral reasoning development (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987), gender differences in moral development (Gilligan, 1982), cross-cultural comparisons (Snarey, 1985), etc.

It was in the CME, largely because of Kohlberg and how he thought, that seeds were planted or hints dropped that my universe was too small; that it needed to expand, and expand in very specific directions. There were two main directions of such expansion: (1) to apply theory and basic research to real life practice, whether in parenting, schools, prisons, workplaces, friendships, etc. (in essence to venture out of the purity of the ivory tower and into the space of the great unwashed); (2) psychology alone would not suffice; other disciplines were needed. In retrospect, I wish I had taken these hints to heart immediately, but I was young, brash, obstinate, and decidedly focused. Gladly, nonetheless, the epiphanies came eventually, but I will discuss that a bit later. First, I want to explicate the nature of the hints.

Planting Seeds

It was hard to miss the press to have an applied focus. After all, I was employed as part of a research team studying Kohlberg's Just Community Schools model in local high schools (Power et al., 1989). I was in schools and observing and interviewing frequently. However, I was vastly more interested in the theoretical and empirical sides of this project than in its application in schools. In fact, at the same time that I was working on Kohlberg's Just Community Schools project, I was also working on an offshoot of my dissertation on moral dilemma discussion; namely transactive moral discourse (Berkowitz, Althof, Turner, & Bloch, 2008; Berkowitz & Gibbs, 1983). This was highly relevant to school interventions, but to me it was a purely scientific study of developmental processes. Nonetheless, I was clearly marinating in the wonderful world of applied science and particularly schools, and although this perspective did not sprout at that time, the seeds had been planted. I was simply unaware of it.

The second hint or seed was about a need to expand my scholarly disciplinary horizons. This one was immediately obvious. Kohlberg himself had an academic position both in the Graduate School of Education and in the Department of Psychology. But most saliently for me was the sudden immersion in an interdisciplinary academic center. When I arrived, Kohlberg had just recommended all at his Center read William Frankena's *Ethics* (1963). I remember being daunted and concerned over the fact that I was being asked to learn philosophy, something about which I had almost no background. I worried that I had to now master yet another academic discipline, having just taken about 7 years to do likewise with developmental psychology. Kohlberg was also invoking sociology (Durkheim), theology (his work on Stage 7; Jim Fowler's work on faith), and educational theory (Dewey). At the same time, Carol Gilligan was relying heavily on her background in literary studies. My head was swimming and I was feeling overwhelmed. So I stuck to my psychological focus, my professional orthodoxy.

Early Signs of Expansion: Ethical Philosophy

But one question remained salient, frequently came to the fore, and to this day has not been adequately faced. How could I work so hard to study and eventually apply a particular model of moral being without being able to philosophically justify it? How could I answer the not infrequent questions of (1) what do I mean by moral and (2) why even be moral? While I was not completely close-minded about this (as will become evident below), I was nonetheless hesitant to become a two-headed scholar, but there was nonetheless an allure to expand my universe into the realm of ethical philosophy.

My Kohlbergian and more broadly psychological orthodoxy is best exemplified by two anecdotes. The first was the tale of my obstinacy at the Aspen Summit on Youth Values

already described above. The second is more relevant to this siren's call of ethical philosophy as a necessary part of my professional mission. When I arrived at Marquette as a new junior level psychology professor, I had not missed Kohlberg's push for me to study philosophy. So I reached out to the Marquette University Department of Philosophy, even dreaming for a while of the possibility of earning a second doctorate. (When I realized how full my hands were just in being a professor and working toward tenure, I slowly had to admit to myself that such a goal was going to remain a dream.) I discovered their faculty reading group and joined it. I labored through Anscombe's *Intentions,* Gadamer's book on hermeneutics, Mandelbaum on phenomenology, etc. Then they asked me to offer a colloquium presentation on Kohlberg's theory to the philosophy faculty. In the question and answer period that followed the presentation, one of the philosophy faculty asked, "Who does Kohlberg think he is, proposing that justice is the single best defining element of morality?" The implication was that it was absurd that a non-philosopher should just select one philosophical criterion and afford it such exalted status. My reply characterized how much I had bought into the orthodoxy of Kohlbergian moral psychology, "well if you philosophers have tried and failed for 2000 years, why not let someone else take a shot?" Really.

The seeds were planted for me to break my orthodoxy of basic developmental psychology, but I largely ignored those hints and worked at basic research, although skirting around the fringes of ethical philosophy. One more way, however, that I replied to the siren's call of philosophy was to write two grant proposals to the National Endowment for the Humanities. I realized that the philosophy reading group, while very enriching, was too eclectic for my specific needs to learn ethical philosophy. It was also too advanced, as it assumed an extensive background in philosophy, which I did not have. The first grant

proposal was for a two week summer institute for Marquette faculty to learn classical ethical theory. We were awarded the grant and two MU philosophers (Bob Ashmore and Bill Starr) led a very diverse group of faculty (pychology, literature, engineering, sociology, etc.) in studying Aristotle, Kant, Mill, etc. It was a powerful and formative experience (Ashmore & Starr, 1991). That second grant was for a similar two week institute in applied ethics (Ashmore & Starr, 1994). To this day, these two summers were my greatest exposure to ethical philosophy. If a little knowledge is dangerous, then one should approach me with great caution and trepidation.

I continuously work with and learn from philosophers in this field. At the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue, virtue ethics is the dominant approach to ethical philosophy. With Kohlberg, at his Center, it was deontology that carried the day. I have come to conclude that it is not my role to adjudicate between seemingly competing ethical theories. In fact, as an outsider and pragmatist, I am satisfied if psychologists and/or educators pay any attention to the justification of their work with ethical theory. If they rely on virtue ethics, on deontology, on utilitarianism, on natural law, I am satisfied. And if we teach students all, one or a few of these theories, and help them apply them to making ethical choices, I am satisfied. Helping students develop a reasonable and justifiable moral compass is a great goal for character education. I will leave it to the philosophers to fight it out (or as I noted above, continue for a third millennium to fight it out) as to which moral theories should take precedence.

Further Expansion: Educational Science

Armed with a doctorate in developmental psychology and a dangerously minimal exposure to ethical philosophy, I was still too limited, although far from aware of it. The other parallel foray that I needed to do was into the field of educational science. As I already noted, my post-doctoral work with Kohlberg was in applications to education. But there is a subtle antipathy between faculties of psychology and faculties of education, at least in most American universities. Psychologists view educators as non-scholars and educators perceive psychologists as firmly ensconced in the ivory tower with little or no understanding of the real world. So there is a disincentive to cross disciplinary borders. I dabbled in education and had a secret life when I went to conferences such as the Association for Moral Education where I could run workshops on how to lead moral dilemma discussions in classrooms, but I did not talk about that at home.

In fact, Kohlberg had himself offered a great hint in what he termed the "Psychologists' Fallacy" (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Upon completing a large funded multi-location study of the impact of moral dilemma discussions within high school social studies curricula (Colby, Kohlberg, Fenton, Speicher-Dubin, & Lieberman, 1977), he discovered that teachers who had successfully implemented this project abandoned the method immediately upon the end of the funded study. The operation was a success, but the patient died. Kohlberg realized that just because a construct had great import for psychologists (namely, stages of moral reasoning development) did not necessarily mean it mattered to educators. He vowed from then on to work collaboratively with the practitioners (educators) to ensure that whatever he did in schools had meaning in both worlds; that is, the worlds of academic psychology and of schools.

The seed had been planted and I could not resist the allure to study and impact schooling as one of the best pathways to impact the moral formation of youth and in so doing contribute to healing the world. (It is worth noting that I also worked on models of parenting for moral development as the other main leverage point to impact children's moral formation; Berkowitz & Grych, 1998). So over the two decades I spent in the psychology department at Marquette University, I increasingly dabbled and then immersed in applied educational work and eased my way out of the closet of being a psychologist with a secret heart for educational work. I wrote more and more about and for education, attended more education conferences, etc. Then in 1992, not only did I attend the Josephson Summit on Youth Values in Aspen, but I connected with the group that was at the same time launching the Character Education Partnership (now renamed character.org). I was becoming more and more frustrated with the Association for Moral Education, the de facto Kohlberg society and my scholarly "home", for its failure to seriously do anything substantial to transform education. The CEP clearly was going to be decidedly more applied in focus and therefore had a much greater chance to impact educational practice. In fact, I tried to be a bridge builder. I even orchestrated a plenary session at an AME conference in New York City in 1995 between AME and CEP officers to try to find common ground. It was an abysmal failure, and they both continued on their merry and separate ways. I remained active in both nonetheless, serving on the Boards of both, etc.

Then, in 1998, I was offered two positions and asked to apply for yet another. The latter was to be the director of research for a think tank, and I was not willing to relinquish tenure to do so. So I quickly dismissed that one. The other two, however, were both endowed professorships in education. One was a one-year position at the US Air Force Academy's Center for Character Development and the other was my current position as the

McDonnell Professor of Character Education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Being a greedy fellow, I endeavored to take both. I spent 1999 at USAFA and subsequently moved to UMSL permanently. I only accepted the latter reluctantly, however, as I was concerned deeply with what Jürgen Habermas (1975) called the legitimation crisis. I was concerned that I would not be perceived as legitimate by educators as I had never worked as an educator (other than in higher education). I was particularly concerned about the reaction of school leaders, as I was contractually obligated to run a Leadership Academy in Character Education (LACE) for school leaders. It was clearly a real risk. I might land in the world of pedagogy only to be a pariah, or at least marginalized as an irrelevant outsider; a pretender. Fortunately, my fears were not realized and I was accepted as relevant and knowledgeable. In fact LACE is the single most impactful contribution I make to character education.

LACE is a year-long professional development experience for school leaders. A cohort of approximately 30 participants meets approximately once per month for full day professional development experiences. Over half of these are workshops led by top experts in character education. The other half are site visits, conference attendance, orientation, and graduation. In addition, there is a monthly cycle of assigned curriculum (school-team collaboratively generated reflections) coupled with expert mentoring through written feedback on the submitted work. The participants also receive a starter library on character education (Berkowitz, 2011). Over a period of 17 years, over 600 school leaders have experienced LACE and the impact on many of their schools has been deep and broad, through comprehensive theory- and research-driven professional development about school transformation designed to nurture both academic achievement and character development of students.

Furthermore, we have replicated LACE in part or fully in three US cities. We have also recently completed a video-based blended learning version of LACE for replication in Taiwan (thanks to the HTC Foundation). And we are currently seeking funding for further expansion in the US and abroad. Over the past 7 years, nearly 1 in 4 schools recognized across the US by the Character Education Partnership for excellence are in the St. Louis region and led by a graduate of LACE. A five year project in the inner city school district in St. Louis showed markedly better gains in academic scores in schools led by LACE graduates. I no longer doubt my legitimacy in education, nor am I blind to the importance of such applied work. If the expansion into ethical philosophy has been very limited, at least the expansion into the world of education has been rather complete and successful.

The Final Frontier

There was still a disciplinary piece missing from my professional tool kit. The final discipline that was most hidden to me was sociology. I had almost no background in sociology. Kohlberg (1971) was discussing Durkheim (1961) heavily and Piaget's (1948) seminal work in moral development was in many ways written as a rejoinder to Durkheim, but I had not read Durkheim. And in fact the only study I have ever done in sociology was a bizarre undergraduate course which was a self-study course. This format may no longer seem so odd, but in 1971 it was largely unheard of. So being a lazy undergraduate I did nothing for the course all semester and then frantically wrote the final paper for the course from minimal knowledge. I learned little and remember nothing of what little I did learn about sociology.

Now, as with the other disciplines, the seeds were there from very early on. There was the constructivist love/hate affair with Durkheim. But much more centrally, the Just

Community School project, on which I worked from 1977-1979 at Kohlberg's Center, was about what Kohlberg called "moral atmosphere." Currently the terms more typically used for this are school climate or school culture, but whatever you call it, it is a deeply sociological concept. I worked closely with the Kohlberg team that was conceptualizing and assessing moral atmosphere, most notably Clark Power, Ann Higgins, and Joe Reimer. Clark in particular was doing his brilliant dissertation on how to measure moral atmosphere and did what to me is still the single best analysis of this challenge (Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1989). How can one measure the development of a collective belief in right and wrong? Long discussions about the nature of collective, institutional variables and how they develop were eye-opening for one who had focused only on changes within individuals. It is somewhat telling that, at the same time, John Gibbs and I were working on understanding the impact of peer discussions on individual moral development (Berkowitz & Gibbs, 1983). We spent years analyzing peer dialogues looking for the developmental features that impacted moral reasoning. But we never looked for shared meaning; only how interactions impacted changes within the person. Our lenses were clearly and purely psychological.

Now the more I work in schools, the more I realize that a sociological lens is needed. It is indeed the overall climate and culture of educational organizations, whether at the micro level of the classroom or the macro level of the school or school system, that provides the context for student learning and development. If one does not understand this, and/or is ill-equipped to intervene and study at that sociological level, then one is severely limited in potential impact (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). This is why I have recently begun to attempt to turn educators' attention to considering, assessing, and intervening with school culture in general, but most centrally the adult culture of the school: To identify and work with adult cliques, particularly counter-productive ones; To assess

how the faculty think of and interact with school leadership; To what the shared and unspoken norms are in the school; etc.

This is also why I encourage LACE participants to simultaneously learn and create a leadership team for character education, and then to turn to assessing and improving the adult culture in the school, before ever implementing character education for students. I like to use the metaphor of the petri dish for this view of schools. Nothing grows without the corresponding nutrients. The culture of the school is the context, the petri dish, in which those nutrients are or are not present, and hence the context for whether students thrive or not. As Paul Houston, the former executive director of the American Association of School Administrators has said, “your schools are perfectly designed for the results you are getting. If you want different results, you need to redesign your schools.” It is precisely in this redesign process that a sociological lens is so important. Organizational theory needs sociology. School reform is organizational reform. And character education needs to be based on comprehensive school reform to be optimally impactful.

So at this point in my journey, I have moved from being a monomaniacal basic developmental psychologist to a purpose-driven applied scholar with an interdisciplinary respect for the integration of at least psychology, ethical philosophy, educational science and pedagogy, and sociology. To heal the world we need them all…and more. We need ethical philosophy to help us clarify and justify our ends and concepts. What indeed is goodness? Why is it worthy of our efforts? We need developmental psychology to help us understand the nature and life course of moral growth in people. What does it mean to be a moral person? How does one become a moral agent? We need educational science if we want to leverage the profound influence of schools on student development. How do

schools most effectively influence moral development? What are our greatest leverage points? What works? And lastly, we need sociology to understand the nature of schools as organizations that are the medium in which students learn and develop. How does school (and classroom) climate impact individual development? What are the processes and stages organizations go through in becoming an optimal petri dish for the nutrition of character development? How can we best leverage that to optimally promote character development? What is the optimal role of leadership in shepherding culture change?

What does the future hold (and, yes, one as old as I am still may have a future)? I certainly don't know. This talk was about the surprise turns in my journey. I expect to keep being surprised. And to keep learning and adapting to the epiphanies that life throws in my path. For that is the best way to contribute to the healing of the world.

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