The social construction of character
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ABSTRACT

There has been increased interest in character strengths or virtues in recent years in social research and in various policy domains. However, while the notion of virtue has gained credibility in the fields of positive psychology and moral philosophy, it has yet to be satisfactorily considered from the perspective of social theory – in spite of the ongoing calls of researchers who have identified the need for further investigation into the role of culture and social context in the development of individuals' characters. In order to consider how good character and excellence in specific virtues are formed and sustained in social context, this article gives a theoretical account of character and virtue using well-known microsociological concepts. It is argued that whereas virtues are often understood as psychological 'traits' or 'dispositions', they are also socially practiced and represented. Analyses of their related social processes are therefore appropriate and empirically promising, particularly in institutional settings, and can complement other theoretical and methodological approaches.

Key words: virtue; positive psychology; social theory; character; trait; social construction; sociology

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been increasing interest among researchers, policy makers and practitioners in what could be dubbed the 'science of character' in the last two decades – how individuals may develop positive character strengths or virtues, such as honesty, compassion, self-control or courage, and what impact such attributes may have on a range of outcomes, including happiness, academic success, and human flourishing. Two main strands in this movement have been the rise in popularity of positive psychology (Seligman et al, 2009) and a renaissance of the Aristotelean notion of virtue (Kristjànsson, 2015). In spite of the current interest in character internationally, in fields as diverse as education, business, health and the military, there remains debate over the definition of key concepts, and scientific understanding is still extremely limited, particularly from a social, cultural, or intercultural perspective. Scholars have recently emphasised and stressed the limits of research in these respects. There is inadequate understanding of the role of social and economic context in psychological studies of virtue development (Clement & Bollinger, 2016). Methods of investigation and evaluation of character education interventions do not adequately account for cultural differences and values (Alexander, 2016; Camfield, 2016). Studies of virtue in institutional contexts have been unsatisfactory in demonstrating how quantitative measures of character strengths may accurately capture individuals' development in specific virtues across time and in relation to targeted interventions (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Given these identified weaknesses, it is timely to consider character and virtue in sociological perspective (Maccarini, 2016).

As psychologists and virtue ethicists prioritize the importance of character attributes to explain moral behavior or positive outcomes, critics, known as 'situationists', have stressed the importance of context in moral action and argue against the view that the

dispositions of individuals should be treated as the main determinants and explanatory factors of moral outcomes and behaviours (Harman, 1999; Doris, 2002; Appiah, 2008). The purpose of this article is to show how virtues are defensible as explanatory concepts, and moreover, to explain them by recourse to the social processes by which they may be practiced, understood, attributed, transmitted, developed and sustained. This builds upon a call in scientific literature to develop a robust and empirically-grounded theory of the complex multi-directional relationships between character attributes, context and behavior (Chen, 2013; Jost & Jost, 2009; Samuels & Casebeer, 2005). While other approaches are likely possible, one way to do this is to consider the synergies between social theory and classical virtue ethics on the one hand, and how sociological approaches may complement the psychological study of character as part of a constructive dialogue between disciplines, on the other (Denzin, 2010). Previously, sociological approaches have been largely overlooked, presumably because they are thought to be prone to relativism and/or situationism and therefore antithetical to the very notion of stable, objective traits and dispositions possessed by individuals as favoured by many psychologists and virtue ethicists alike (e.g. Bleidorn, 2015). While researchers have begun to suggest ecological models of character development (e.g. Lerner & Callina, 2014; Overton, 2015; Nucci, 2017), some further theoretical work is crucial to develop a general and coherent social approach to the study of virtues that pays due attention to the role of social context and the importance of its constituent mircosociological processes.

The argument made in this article draws from a wealth of sensitising concepts available in the social constructionist tradition, especially those found in the work of Rom Harré. While these microsociological theories – which develop from and rely upon the core thesis of the symbolic interactionists – have long been available, they have yet to be applied to questions of virtue or character development. The main contribution of this article, therefore, is to show how microsociology is highly relevant to this growing area of scientific

research. It does so in the following way. First, the popular misnomer that social construction necessarily comprises a radical anti-realism is challenged (Section 2). Second, the limitations of psychological approaches to character and virtue are evaluated in comparison to the insights possible with more contextualised social research (Section 3). These benefits are then grounded in a new sociological interpretation of Aristotle's foundational text on virtue ethics (Section 4). Following this, Sections 5 and 6 consider in more detail how microsociological concepts, in particular positioning and group theory, may make a powerful contribution to understanding character development and virtue acquisition.

2. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTER IN THE REALIST TRADITION

Social research and action progress on the bases of ontological and epistemological assumptions (Crotty, 2000). While ontological positions are often not made explicit in many empirical studies, or in everyday decision-making, they are ultimately of importance. Whether UK businesses are more honest than in another country makes all the difference to an investor, while to measure a given population's self-discipline also relies on a researcher's assumption that that there may be 'more' of that character strength among one group of people than there is among another. In these examples virtues are said to exist in some sense, to vary between people, to be possessed by individual humans or human collectives, and to be manifest in their actions. While many psychologists tend to bypass the metaphysical assumptions of their methods, and philosophers on the whole rely on an ontological account of virtues being dispositions or even the skills of persons, social theorists have long-entertained questions about the reality of comparable and related social entities such as roles, processes, norms, values and representations.

Social construction is one broad tradition of social theory that emphasises the production of reality, including the self, through social interaction. It became prominent with

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the publication of Berger and Luckman's seminal work (1967), but soon developed into a movement with divergent epistemological and ontological positions (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). On one anti-realist extreme, constructionists influenced by postmodern philosophy began to consider their own studies as constructed knowledge only partially contingent upon an objective reality (Gergen, 1999). This view has attracted considerable critique (e.g. Hacking, 1999), but can be separated from the more classical traditions of realist social theory that attempt to unpack how an objective social reality may relate to subjective experience and be created through individual agency,or as Archer explains it, how in different contexts 'pre-existing' social structures may impinge on the efforts of individuals to then 'elaborate' them (Archer, 2000). Hence social constructionism in the realist tradition can be seen as an alternative to positivism and anti-realism (Harré, 2002), as often invoked by qualitative researchers, such as the 'transcendental realism' influentially advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994).

The position presented here is not construction as an epistemological stance: that character is 'only a social construction, revealing of the observer's values but not of who or what is observed' (Peterson & Seligman, 2006, p. 10). Rather, what is presented is a general social theoretical approach to explore how objective social processes are associated with specific given attributes. In short, while virtues are dispositions of individuals, they are also socially practiced. This means that they are amenable to sociological explanation. Social constructionism – conceived as a repertoire of foundational microsociological phenomena that share the basic assumption that meanings and behaviours are co-constructed through observable and established processes of social interaction – gives a suitable umbrella under which this investigation can happen.

One of the goals of virtue ethicists and positive psychologists alike has been to understand how positive 'traits' may be instilled or 'internalised' in individuals, and how

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particular dispositions may contribute to happiness or flourishing. These assumptions, which date from Aristotle's notion of habituation, rely on theories of interaction that allow the transmission of ideal dispositions from exemplars to individuals (Bowditch, 2008; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2014). The processes of acquiring dispositions implicitly assumed in the scientific study of character can therefore be related to the perennial concern of social theorists to position themselves in regard to key dualisms which either prioritize the individual or the collective over the other in the production of behaviour and social reality (Layder, 2005). Finding our way through the binaries of micro/macro, agency/structure, and individual/society in regard to this, we may be inclined, on the face of it, to adopt an individualist view of virtue. A virtue is a trait attributable to a social actor on account of their effort, choice, habit, disposition or personality, and it therefore makes no sense to claim that virtues such as compassion or honesty exist in social structures and systems. In response to individualism, however, social theorists working in the social constructionist tradition, and its precursor, symbolic interactionism, give good reasons to reject individualist accounts because they do not suitably account for the dialogic relationship between the self and society (Mead, 1934). For example, emotions can be shown to be socially moulded according to cultural or linguistic conventions (Aranguren, 2017; Harré, 1986). According to a similar account of human behaviour, good character, though requiring individual agency and skill, and a prerequisite biological basis, is also a cooperative achievement ultimately requiring others' collaboration (Harré, 1993).

Although perhaps counter-intuitive to some, theorising virtues as social practices allows for a realist position that goes beyond situationism to explain how virtue acquisition (and loss) can take place (Dagmang, 2012). Rather than merely qualities of the individual, various character attriubutes are manifest in structured social practices and representations that exist before individuals adopt them, which are then sustained, adapted or rejected by

them. While not an in-depth sociological account, a compatible position has been suggested by the communitarian virtue ethicist Alsadair MacIntyre (1984) who argues that virtues are inextricably linked with social practices of a given community. A similar interpretation, given below, can also be made of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, the founding text of virtue ethics (Aristotle, 2009).

3. MICROSOCIOLOGY COMPLEMENTING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHARACTER

Given the traditional definition that virtues are the dispositions of individuals to act virtuously, it is perhaps not surprising that psychologists have largely operationalised them using the psychometric approach of personality theory. For psychologists virtues are positive and stable character traits which have cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects (Berkowitz, 2011; Niemiec, 2013). Divisions between different kinds of virtues are often made, particularly between so-called performative character strengths, such as resilience, grit, perseverance and self-control, and moral or social/civic virtues that are concerned with moral choices, such as honesty and compassion. This dichotomy expresses a differencein focus between positive psychologists interested in enabling cognitive processes which can explain different kinds of success, such as 'grit' (Duckworth et al., 2007), and character educators who are more concerned with the moral aspect of character development, such as how that grit may be directed towards right action (Lickona & Davidson, 2007).

While each approach has its merits and purposes, because of the nature of the discipline, psychological approaches to character in general are only secondarily concerned with the social contingencies of either kind of virtue. For example, it has been argued that moral expertise, conceived as a multi-faceted cognitive skill, is dependent on early life experience and other environmental factors, such as the availability of mentors (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2014). Similar assumptions about social context and behaviour are often implicit in

established measures of virtues. One of the most-used measures of character, the Values In Action Survey (VIA) measures respondents' self-reported engagements in certain social practices related to character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2006). The construction of the measure began with a historical consideration of universal human characteristics present in religious and philosophical traditions worldwide. Within the resultant nomenclature of six universal virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence, further strengths of character and situational themes related to each of them were determined according to 10 criteria − including the stipulation that any character strength should be manifest in rituals and institutions across cultures. A similar observation can be made of measures of performance virtues in regard to their relationship with individuals' agency and motivation. For example, the aforementioned measure of grit relies on the self-reports of respondents about their behaviour in relation to their goals and projects. While both these approaches access important aspects of character in these regards, they do so by decontextualizing and aggregating reported motivations and implicit references to the social environment of the participants in question.

Measures of virtues that rely on self-reports have been critiqued on account of their reliance on subjective judgement (Kristjánsson, 2013). However, the ontological assumptions and theory of mind invoked by these measures have not been brought into full consideration, nor has the theoretical approach of social construction been brought to bear on the pursuit of alternative research designs in the field. Given its psycho-social remit of focusing on the relationship between the individual and external social processes, it is not surprising that those working in the constructionist tradition called for a revision of traditional psychological methods more generally (e.g. Gergen, 1999; Kvale, 1992; Smith et al, 1995). This movement subsequently led to the establishment of a variety of alternative research paradigms, such as discourse analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, critical realism and discursive

psychology, which have since illuminated research topics and practices across the social sciences. In order to show how a constructionist approach may complement traditional psychological methods similarly in the science of character, it is worth considering the critiques of constructionists which invigorated the search for hybrid paradigms in other areas.

Rom Harré (1995) critiqued prevailing models of psychology on account that they posit the existence of unobservable mental processes. To Harré, this smacks of an implicit Cartesianism that in its contemporary form conceives the mind as a kind of stimulus-response computer within which certain mental substances react in predetermined ways (in the context of this article, these could be perseverance or integrity, for example). More appropriate, he argues is to study 'active people … using material and symbolic tools to accomplish all sorts of projects according to local standards of correctness' (p. 144). According to this alternative view, the problems inherent in using traditional psychological methods (like questionnaire based self-reports of virtues, for example) are fourfold: first, they do not account appropriatelyfor the specificity of individual agency and goals; secondly, they do not adequately account for, or profit from, a consideration of the social context behaviour takes place in; thirdly, they do not consider the discursive and symbolic processes by which people communicate, interpret or imbue meaning to their actions; and fourthly, in the place of 1-3, they posit dubious metaphysical mental entities, processual, cognitive or otherwise.

The contribution of Harré's observations to the study of character can be further understood by considering his critique of studies of moral reasoning (1983). The influential developmental paradigm of moral reasoning advanced by Laurence Kohlberg has left a substantial legacy in contemporary character research (Walker et al, 2017). However, according to Harré, this kind of approach misses important social determinants of moral behaviour by over-emphasising the role of moral cognitive skill at the expense of contextual understanding of expectations made of children, for example. This is not to say there is not

neurological change developmentally, but that moral knowledge is also manifest in social displays that are culturally determined. The dilemmas posed by Kohlberg (and subsequently others) therefore do not present problems of reasoning that can determine stages of cognitive capacity, but challenging hypothetical scenarios whereby divergent moral assumptions are juxtaposed and respondents forced to choose one over the other. In the case of neo-Kohlbergian measures, these involve presenting participants with identifiable role conflicts and asking them to take sides, for example between solidarity with one's classmates, or with the teacher (Thoma et al, 2013). Such a choice, then measured against an expert panel assesses the extent to which a participant positions themselves in one moral order or another. More important, Harré argues in response to Kolhberg's original theory, would be to understand how such moral orders function within specific groups. To assume virtue is a cognitive ability is to miss the point and make an ethnocentric claim based on the primacy of individualism to the North American mind.

Although Harré's position is a minority one, and his overall conjecture a closed debate for mainstream psychologists, it exposes important theoretical gaps in the psychological study of character that can be readily addressed using microsociological approaches. By prioritising the analysis of assumed cognitive processes of virtue, character strengths, rather than being explained in terms of social praxis and human agency, are considered to be the products of intermediary mental capacities. The resultant focus of establishing and measuring supposed cognitive aspects of virtue rather than making sense of the context in which virtues are enacted, causes problems for the study of character development in institutions in particular, including the evaluation of interventions intended to promote virtues. This is illustrated by the example of a case-study of character education programmes undertaken in three schools in Boston (Seider, 2012). In pre- and post-intervention tests of integrity and perseverance, students scored considerably lower on

average after a lengthy and multi-faceted character education programme intervention. This is because, Seider argues, students' scores were affected by a high level of optimism of their own abilities at the beginning of the school year only to become more realistic after demanding courses of character education. While this is an astute explanation, it is a supposition that accompanied the use of measures, not one that was derived from their use. It therefore illustrates the difficulties of assuming virtues are, or are analogous to, the cognitive abilities of individuals, whereas in actual fact it seems that varying scores are better explained in recourse to a collective intention engendered by the motivation of students to succeed at school – an inference based on the assumption of a highly structured institutional context, and the agency of individuals in response to it.

4. ARISTOTLE AS SOCIOLOGIST

Before considering the contribution of a social constructionist account of character in more detail, it is appropriate to consider how aspects of microsociological theory may be compatible with Aristotle's classic text on virtue ethics, The Nichomachean Ethics. As a foundational text of philosophy, it is to be expected that different interpretations have been made of Aristotle's thought (Lewis, 2012). However, it is of note here, that in his discussion of virtue (or excellence), Aristotle does not focus on what have since become to be considered important characteristics of morality in the Christian and post-Christian eras, such as concern for other persons or moral duty, but instead writes about what constitutes good conduct for men of wealth who have the means to pursue happiness (Brown, 2009). As MacIntyre (1984) notes, The Nichomachean Ethics can be read as a sociological treatise with more in common with the approach of Erving Goffman than with the concerns of modern moral philosophers. While a more thorough commentary to Aristotle could be written along these lines, in respect to the limited present discussion, rather than give a synopsis, I make

some observations of Aristotle's approach and its underlying assumptions which have deep resonances with social constructionism.

For Aristotle, virtues are performed. They are not mere capacities, but 'states of character' that 'arise out of like activities' (2009, p. 24). It is not by beauty or strength that athletes achieve award, Aristotle invites us to imagine, but through their action in competition. Moreover, while virtues should be best sought for their own sake, it is implicit in Aristotle's explanation that they are performed within, and sometimes to sustain, status hierarchies. Actions are the means by which praise and honour are bestowed for particular character states – and the means by which attributions of vulgarity and dishonour are avoided. Aristotelean social actors learn socially appropriate emotions because of their actions, which are also logically related to their personal objectives. The performance of virtue is an end in itself, but virtues also help performers achieve their goals. As Aristotle argues, a doctor does not deliberate about whether to heal a patient, but on the best way to do so. Performing virtues thus fulfils the expectations of social roles, such as for the rightfully proud man, who acting according to his merits (and status), walks slowly and speaks with a low voice, indicating his lack of perturbation at anything life throws at him. In these respects, Aristotle's view has synergies with contemporary notions of performativity and identity, that is, how actions bring about relatively (or apparently) stable phenomena, including the production of one's own self (Butler, 2010).

Given Aristotle's teleological approach, a given man's virtue will be those states of character that enable him to 'do his own work well' (p. 29). Agency is all important, as well as the unique circumstances of any action and their place in a narrative. Humans are not automata habituated into virtue through repetition of rigidly applicable rules of conduct. Virtue, calculated as the mean between two extremes of possible behaviour, is chosen through individuals' own deliberation, for its own ends and is appropriate and proportionate

to a given situation. Virtue is 'in our power' (p. 46) but cannot have any fixity; it must be judged on a case-by-case basis by a virtuous actor according to their practical wisdom (phronesis). For virtue to take place, therefore, Aristotle observes, it follows that a suitable social context must be available first. For someone to be just, they need the power to be so, and for someone to be courageous, they need the circumstances to show bravery.

It is important to note that Aristotle did not consider it possible to make a mathematical-like scienceof virtue. But he did believe it was possible to give a general account of virtue according to the reasoning of social actors' about their behaviour, and on the basis of how honour and dishonour are attributed in account of actions that produced virtue. Virtues are actions related to external systems of recognition, and the personal projects of social actors in relation to them: 'For each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant' (p. 45). Given these assumptions, Aristotle's inquiry considers the way people normally speak about character and virtues as a valid method by which to gain greater conceptual purchase as to what virtues are, and how they contribute to flourishing: '… we must consider happiness in the light not only of our conclusion and our premises, but also of what is commonly said about it; for with a true view all the data harmonize' (p. 13). Thus, Aristotle's approach is empirically-grounded in reasoning about people's general perceptions of virtue, and analyses of people's actions in context. In other words, it is an interpretative sociological account.

5. THE STRUCTURE OF VIRTUOUS SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONS

This section gives a preliminary account of how established elements of microsociological theory relate to the science of character. While much of the tentative account given here engages with Rom Harré's interpretation of concepts from classical symbolic interactionism, in particular Goffman (1956) and Mead (1934), the ideas of other scholars in this broad

tradition and its legacies would be in no doubt applicable for further refined theoretical advances and future empirical studies. Like the approach of Aristotle, sociological suppositions are empirically-grounded, drawing on theory and logical reasoning to direct observation and vice-versa. The examples given in this article arise from focused ethnographies of character education programmes in two secondary schools in Mexico made in early 2017. As a fledgling conceptual framework, each of the components sketched out merit further work, and are relevant to exploring virtues among various other social groups and institutions in situ.

One elemental building-block of social ontology is that of coordinated behaviour in the form of interactional social episodes (Harré, 1993). Our task here is to understand how and why social episodes produce performances recognised as virtues; how a sequence of social episodes eventually lead to more stable judgements about individuals recognised as those having good character; and further, how these activities can result in the representation and reproduction of virtues. In regard to the first two objectives, neither of these kinds of recognition is merely subjective. Virtues must be attributed according to rules of application located in a moral order. It is because of the rooting of these processes in predictable social structures emerging from their constituent interactions that we can posit a social theory of character and elaborate it in diverse contexts.

Social role has been identified as an important but overlooked aspect of character, but this has yet to be fully explored (Chen, 2013). One obvious relationship between social role and virtue already discussed is that the expectations that go with certain social roles necessitate the exercise of certain virtues. Aristotle noted this of courage for soldiers in the face of battle, for example. However, social role in itself is not enough to explain virtue performance – soldiers may not always be brave and students may not always be responsible, etc. Nevertheless, virtues cannot be performed outside of any social role. For any account of

character in sociological context, the relationship between social role and virtues must be fully considered. Positioning theory (Harré& Van Langenhove, 1998) is one such development from classic role theory that gives a dynamic account of social role allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the multi-directional relationships between playing one's role, attaining virtue and achieving one's projects. According to this view, in any interaction, people position themselves, or are positioned by others within a moral order – a system of moral rights, responsibilities and obligations assigned to them. When a teacher asks students to read in class, she positions herself as a teacher with the right and responsibility to do so, and the student with the obligation to follow her command. The student, if accepting of the positioning of 'student', reads. A further useful distinction is that of first order positioning and second order positioning, the latter being a repositioning of the attribution of the first. For example, the student may not accept the positioning of the teacher and refuse to read because she read yesterday and it is someone else's turn, thus self-assigning a new position in the unfolding episode. Although this is an example with very distinct roles (as found in schools and other institutional contexts), positioning theory gives the conceptual apparatus to explore more complex and subtle interactions within a moral framework of rights, responsibilities and obligations which illuminate the performance of virtues. It provides a hermeneutic for empirical investigation into how the virtues may be practically applied (potentially allowing for further understanding into the complexities of phronesis – how an individual may respond to a given situation wisely).

Deciding how to position oneself in any episode requires agency, judgment and action in real-time – all of which depend on one's goals and one's position. While we cannot assume that always acting out the assigned responsibilities of a first order position may entail the correct performance of virtues, one's position in an unfolding sequence will always determine whether or not one has the opportunity to enact a given virtue. For example, it is

very difficult for modesty to be achieved by someone in a subordinate position. It can only be the responsibility of someone who is owed credit due to their positioning. A failing child cannot be modest on account of their poor exam performance. It follows that to acquire good character in respect to a given virtue, one needs to be positioned to allow for the execution of a virtue related to the practice of the rights and responsibilities that goes with that position. The performance of virtue is a positioned agreement or positioned contention based on assigned positions in a given sequence of social episodes which are co-constructed socially – what Harré terms a 'storyline' (1997). Positioning oneself well across multiple episodes constitutes good character. An otherwise generous act may smack of condescension, one-upmanship, or even contempt when attempted from the wrong position or at the wrong point in a sequence of episodes. The same is true for compassion, modesty, honesty. Aristotle's account also implies a narrative or historical approach is appropriate in this sense. (If we need to know why certain actions were chosen in order to evaluate their virtue, we need to know social actors' reasoning for their actions in context.) The creative ability to take a position and to innovate and thus re-form any given situation is the peculiar power of the human agent (as well as a central tenet of social constructionism, so conceived). Far from being subjective or relative, the meanings of interactions (verbal or otherwise) are usually unambiguous in this sense. If interactions were not mutually understood according to external templates of conduct, and if people were unable to elaborate on these and change unfolding storylines through contestation or agreement, good character would be impossible to achieve.

A more sophisticated understanding of role performance also allows for a more complex exploration of one of the most widely acclaimed social processes extolled by the character education movement: the transmission of virtue through moral exemplars, or role modelling. Philosophers and psychologists often rely on moral exemplars to explain virtue acquisition, while character education is often thought to take place through students'

emulation of their teachers' virtues (Arthur et al, 2016; Kristjánsson, 2017). However, empirical evidence of teachers' role modelling in schools is limited (Willems et al., 2012).Differences of age, gender, or other factors such as religion or ethnicity affect processes of identification between students and teachers (Moulin-Stożek & Schirr, 2017). Indeed, it seems few students want to be like their teachers, apart from those that would like to become teachers themselves in the future. These problems expose wider complexities with the theory of moral exemplarity that occur when there are differences between the social role and status of exemplars and their supposed emulators (Chen, 2013). Students occupy quite distinct positions in any given classroom episode to their teachers. Emulation may take place, but rather than through emulation of virtues by identification, it is through differentiation of positioning that the teacher makes requests from her students by the allocation of different rights and responsibilities to them than her own. They can choose to accept these, or, as Harré suggests they can face the penalties. The established moral order of a given context and its associated processes of representation will therefore likely give a more satisfactory account of virtue transmission than role modelling alone.

The concept of a moral order gives the means to explore how an individual's positioning may relate to a local social context in any given episode. A moral order is a co-constructed system of rights, responsibilities and obligations communicated through ritual and other symbolic means in a social group (Harré, 1983). Thus while an individual acts for him or herself, his or her actions often support existing moral orders wittingly or not. Social episodes take place following templates that sustain roles positioned within systems of assigned rights and responsibilities often according to status (Harré, 1993). General principles of conduct for interaction are often established by those higher in a given hierarchy (e.g. those who have more power to demand certain rights and exercise certain responsibilities). The concept of a moral order therefore gives a framework to understand which virtues are

prioritised and why in a given group or institution, such as a school as an official institution, or one of the many informal adolescent peer-groups within that school.

One key observation of those working in the symbolic interactionist and social constructionist traditions is that a given moral order is often more amoral than we would like to think, or at least more amoral than supposed by moral philosophers (Goffman, 1956; Harré, 1983). Rather than questions of justice, moral action is usually directed at giving respect and honour where it is due, and saving face when it is necessary. Honour codes thus function to preserve status hierarchies – of which there may be many even within the same social groups or institutions. People may vie to establish their respective positioning in a status hierarchy. We could add that this may even be dependent on the display and attributions of certain virtues. In the context of a school, for example, student sub-cultures create resistance strategies in contradiction with official expectations through the exhibition of alternative virtues (or anti-virtues). This can cause role conflicts that present dilemmas in the performance of virtues which are often about to whom virtuous behaviour is deserved: the moral order of the teacher, or that of one's friends. (As discussed previously in relation to Thoma et al.'s (2013) measure of moral reasoning). Duplicity is one often overlooked problem in the science of character to which positioning theory gives some satisfactory explanation.

Ritual sustains moral orders by reinforcing habitual behaviours and conditioning appropriate emotional responses through collective activities and day-to-day routines of interactions. Rituals also represent idealised representations of virtues through symbolic action and often assign honour on account of attributed virtues. Sport is one form of collective ritual which allows for honour to be paid for the display and cultivation of performative virtues such as determination, but also others such as fairness, responsibility and teamwork. In schools, as well as through sport, assemblies may have the ritual function of

celebrating, directly or indirectly, the performance of desired virtues. However, subcultures may develop their own symbolic defiance in response toofficial representations of virtues given in collective ritualsand by other means by which celebrity status (notoriety) can be achieved within alternative hierarchies. Greetings are one form of daily ritual interaction whereby virtues of friendliness and solidarity are performed. These can also be used to cement individuals' social statuses and group identifications, including sub-cultures, such as highly specific and technical handshake configurations used in the performative construction of gang boundaries.

So far, we have considered the dynamics of momentary interactions – repetitive, ritual disputed, agreed, or otherwise, and how they may bear on the performance of virtue. But a person's character develops over time and across multiple social contexts and moral orders. It is constructed through thousands of daily interactions. A useful way to conceptualise the ability of individuals to direct their own character development by the exercising of their own agency across multiple contexts is Harré's (1983) idea of an identity project – the use of social and linguistic conventions present in a moral order to become unique. Identity projects can be social or personal: the former pertaining to group practices and bonds (and their related symbolic displays), the latter to the development of a persona in a well-established role. Both types of project involve the cultivation of agreed attributions that sustain identity – including the performance and recognition of all kinds of virtues (and vices). Goffman's notion of a moral career explains how interactions may bear on an individual's character in the context of an institution in particular (Goffman, 1961; Harré, 1993). Aside from public recognition through various forms of ritual, position is attributed privately through the means of gossip, which remains an under-researched but key aspect of the social construction of character as reputation (Harré, 1993). This is marked in institutions such as schools, which in some ways function like Goffman's asylum, but often with the development of character as

one of their primary goals. Nevertheless, the family and other groups also act as institutions whereby character is socially constructed through the performance, assignment, adaptation, recognition and representation of virtues.

Virtues may be represented and engendered in institutions through materiality as well as performance. This can include practical means, such as the provision of spaces so they are amenable to certain kinds of interaction, and symbolic communication, like the use of slogans and personifications to communicate desired actions and patterns of thinking. In these ways representations of desired virtues in a given moral order are sustained and institutionalised. Religion, such as Catholicism, gives the most obvious example of how virtues can be institutionalised symbolically and transmitted through materiality, participative ritual and the attribution of moral status in a community. This perhaps explains findings of several studies that show positive associations between the virtues of given moral orders and religious practice or salience (e.g. Moulin-Stożek et al., 2018).

In regard to the two schools in which observations were made, it is worth noting that, following Durkhiem, representations of desired virtues were symbolically manifest in collective rituals central to both communities: the Catholic mass in a private school and the civic flag parade in a public school. In both cases, not only are representations of virtues articulated verbally and through the exhibition of moral exemplars; they are also embodied and ritually performed by personifications of virtues, including the parade of exemplary students. Indeed, in schools, virtue words – 'honesty', 'punctuality', 'responsibility' etc. – are often used to invoke abstract ideals or imperatives of behaviour quite distinct from the trait of any particular individual. One good definition of them would be that they are social representations or imaginaries rather than anyone's specific 'traits'.

Social representations of virtues will play a key part in the way a given moral order will impact on an individual's self-image directly. But more important will be the part a

person actually plays in the moral order and their elaboration of its constituent structures (their repeated positioning over time and their negotiation of role-conflicts etc.), and the consequences of these actions in the esteem reflected back at them. An identity project is not a subjective process, but a dialogic one. Flourishing may be the result of the correct performance of virtues, but in every case, a person needs to exercise their agency and be in the social position to do so. This simple point opens up the science of character to a whole area of the social sciences concerned with cultural representations – substantively, methodologically and conceptually. For example, the work of Charles Taylor (1994) and Stuart Hall (1996) build upon symbolic interactionism to develop sophisticated hermeneutics to explore how systems of representation may impact on the character of minority groups in specific ways. These issues are important for the study of character across cultures, and in plural contexts, particularly to understand how gender, social class, religion and cultural background may impact on character, virtue and flourishing in specific social settings (Moulin, 2015). If the social construction of character is in any sense true, it warns us that any individual will need repeated social permissions to flourish. This important point gives a theoretical weight to concerns already aired about the growing global character movement (Camfield, 2015; Alexander, 2016; Kirchglasler, 2018).

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF VIRTUE RESEARCH

Given the aim of many in the character movement to not only research, but promote wellbeing, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been a focus on measuring the capacities of individuals in order to apply what are presumed to be the methods of natural sciences to give the science of character credibility. However, it is worth considering the constructionist approach because it exposes substantial gaps in the science of character, most notably the social processes by, and the social contexts in which, good character is chosen, attributed and

achieved. Positive psychology can be critiqued on the grounds of working on a too narrow conception of legitimate science which if broadened to include alternative modes of analysis, such as observation of social life, or a detailed study of the intentions and beliefs of social actors in regard to virtue development in distinct contexts and institutions, would be strengthened. Research designs that aggregate data relevant to multiple social episodes and show that they are related on balance to certain beliefs of social actors about themselves is one way to study character. However, there is more to be explained. Good character cannot be reduced to supposed individual capacity because correct behaviour must also comply with the correct way of doing something as determined by external rules (Harré, 1986). In addition to psychological approaches therefore more work is needed to establish how virtues are adopted, attributed and cultivated through symbolic means, and how individual agency is involved in the context of such interactional processes. The study of individuals' variances in terms of their supposed psychological traits and dispositions may not be as profitable as studying their motivations in social context and how virtues are attributed, chosen, exhibited and communicated between individuals. That virtues are co-constructed, innovated and improvised among individuals does not mean they are relative or subjective: they are the result of stable, observable and predictable social structures and practices.

As Aranguren (2017) observes of emotion, the suggestion that good character and virtue are socially constructed will not be surprising to sociologists and anthropologists, but maybe perplexing for most psychologists and biologists. However, exploring questions about character by applying insights from the social constructionist tradition opens up the possibility of making a strong argument for a realist account of virtues and explaining how they are collectively achieved in different contexts without collapsing into individualism, situationism or relativism. Virtues are socially realised, attributed and enacted. They are produced dialogically between pre-existing performed traditions of social praxis on the one

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hand, and through the intentions, aspirations and projects of individuals on the other. While further work is necessary to explore the social practice of specific virtues in context, as a general approach, social constructionism gives scope for exploring how institutions and their associated social practices impact on human flourishing. It considers how social context influences individuals, and how individuals may influence their social context. This is important because enhancing character through institutional change is the principal and end goal of many character researchers' efforts (Miller & Prentice, 2016).

The job of the researcher of character is to consider how social processes function in any given context, and for any given virtue, among a group or for an individual. While this may involve interpretation, this does not imply that such interpretations are not logically related to a researcher's observations of an objective and predictable social reality. An account of character and virtue founded on a study of social processes and practices, and the agency of social actors in relation to them, is therefore, in the realist tradition, empirically testable. While the argument given in this present article draws on literature in the interpretative tradition, there is scope to operationalise and evaluate the social processes suggested using quantitative methods of data generation. Aristotle observed in The Nichomachean Ethics, 'it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs' (2009, p. 4). In regard to the second clause, the same could be said of a positive psychologist and an interpretative sociologist, but perhaps both would benefit from more opportunity to converse with one another.

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