COMMENTARY

On the Qualitative Transformation of Developmental Science: The Contributions of Qualitative Methods

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The articles in this special issue underscore the contributions to developmental theory and methodology that can be made by qualitative research elucidating the mutually influential relations between individuals and their contexts. The articles provide important, new information about how individuals, through active, positive engagement with their context can be active agents in their own, positive development. The articles illustrate that the nuances of how agentic youth contribute to their worlds, at the same time that they are influenced by their settings, would be difficult if not impossible to capture richly and scientifically with only quantitative methods. The articles in this special issue powerfully illustrate that, today, qualitative research is an essential part of mixed-method approaches to developmental science, and that such approaches are regarded as defining the cutting edge of methodological innovations needed to understand intra-individual change across the life span.

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Across the last half century, developmental science has passed a tipping point—it has undergone a transformational (qualitative) change (Overton, 2015)—and the important and timely collection of articles in this special issue is a product of these changes and, as well, we predict that they will produce the continuation of this trajectory. The articles in this special issue underscore the contributions to theory and methodology that can be made by qualitative research elucidating the mutually influential relations between individuals and contexts that constitute the fundamental analytic target of research about the relational developmental system (e.g., Lerner, 2012, 2015).

The articles’ focus on the strength-based positive youth development (PYD) perspective is itself a notable benchmark of the changing of developmental science from preoccupation with risk and problems, bringing capability and adaptation front and center (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015). Furthermore, the rich and varied studies reported in this special issue illuminate the idea that development across the human life span is marked by mutually influential relations between agentic individuals and the people and institutions in the proximal and distal levels of organization in their world. These relations, brought to the fore in theoretical models derived from relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory, may be represented as individual ↔ context relations. One finds this framework across these articles, explicitly so in some and emergent in the focus of others.

When the authors of this commentary entered the developmental science field (which was then labeled, most often, as child psychology), scholarship was characterized by interest in testing Car-
tarian-split conceptions of what were termed developmental mechanisms, a search for universals and an assumption of singular or fundamental causes that could be isolated, with differentiation into primarily nature or nurture variables (Overton, 2015; Tolan, Chertok, Keys, & Jason, 1990). The chapters in the 1970, third edition of the Handbook of Child Psychology, edited by Musen, illustrate the split approach to the description, the explanation, and (in the 1970s, occasionally) the optimization of human development (Damon, 2015; Lerner, 2015).

Methods used to elucidate these purported mechanisms were almost exclusively quantitative ones, with the numbers derived from this research coming from either the results of experiments or from findings derived from inter-relational studies using questionnaires, surveys, psychometrically refined tests, or quantitative codes from structured interviews. Cronbach (1957, 1975) characterized this split approach to methodology as the two disciplines (or worlds) of psychology. Even when recognized as inherently limited in capturing richness of variation or complex interrelations, the prevailing view was that quantitative methods were superior in reliability, validity, and utility than other approaches (e.g., case studies, narrative analyses).

There was no “third world” of qualitative research in developmental science and barely any reach to anthropological studies and sociological efforts. Despite the burgeoning influence of Piaget, beginning in the 1960s (e.g., Flavell, 1963; Piaget, 1970), and the reliance on case methods in psychoanalytic formulations (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1965), when incorporated into U.S. child psychology, these were reduced (or, perhaps better, assimilated) to secondary value because of the privileging in this country of quantification in scholarship. In particular, objectivity was valued and was seen as more a part of quantitative methods. When and if any qualitative research was published in the journals that were regarded as top tier during this period (e.g., Child Development, Developmental Psychology, or—perhaps—the Journal of Experimental Child Psychology), it was typically anchored with some quantitative basis (e.g., chi-square analyses). It would have been hard to envision change from that status to the rich diversity and sophisticated applications of qualitative methods used in the articles in the present special issue. Indeed, nowhere in the top-tier research journals in the developmental science of this era were there studies that used participatory action research (Katsiaficas et al., 2016), thematic analysis (Arbeit, Hershberg, Rubin, DeSouza, & Lerner, 2016), interpretive phenomenological analysis (Zaff et al., 2016), narrative analysis (Putch Ehrlich, Deutsch, Fox, Johnson, & Varga, 2016), critical youth study approaches (Fox, 2016), or retrospectively constructed graphical representations (Griffith, 2016) to describe and explain individual development. Indeed, each of the present articles brings forth understanding that would be difficult if not impossible to capture richly and scientifically with quantitative methods.

Today, however, as powerfully illustrated by the research presented in this special issue, such methods are more than accepted. They are seen as essential parts of mixed-method approaches to developmental science, and such approaches are regarded as defining the cutting edge of methodological innovations needed to understand intraindividual change across the life span (Tolan & Deutsch, 2015). Indeed, doctoral training programs would be seen as inadequate if they excluded from the methodological training of students either education in some or all of the instances of qualitative methods included in this special issue, or if these training programs failed to instruct students on how to productively integrate qualitative and qualitative techniques in mixed-methods research.

This transformation in the tools understood to be essential for well-trained developmental scientists occurred because qualitative methods worked in concert with theoretical transformations in the understanding of developmental processes. As illustrated beautifully by the articles in this special issues—which all focus on understanding the individual ↔ context relations involved in putting diverse youth on positive developmental trajectories—the nuances of how agentic youth contribute to their worlds at the same time they are influenced by their settings cannot be understood alone by quantitative estimates of the strength of pathways within tests of structural equation models. The RDS metamodel that, today, defines the cutting edge of theory in developmental science (Overton, 2015) eschews the splits of reductionist, positivist, and mechanistic models of mechanisms. Instead, these models focus on the change processes through which individuals and contexts co-act to construct a developmental system that
integrates the intentional and goal-directed actions of an individual seeking to contribute positively to the complex and changing context acting on him or her. The holistic and self-constructing character of this autopoietic, relational development system requires understanding of the meaning-making processes and purposes of the person, and of the phenomenological experience of the ecology within which he or she is developing (Spencer, Swanson, & Harpalani, 2015). Often, as well, the meaning, purpose, and phenomenological understanding of the key people in his or her context (e.g., in the case of adolescents, parents, peers, teachers, coaches, mentors, and faith leaders; Lerner et al., 2015) may be part of the assessments included in research aimed at understanding the relational developmental system.

The qualitative methods used by the developmental scientists contributing to this special issue were (are) better suited than are quantitative methods to identify many qualities of individuals and of their social worlds. This work illustrates the importance of using the proper method for the study at hand, the value of recognizing that each method brings capabilities and limitations, and that multiple methods are needed to transcend the inevitably piece-meal understanding that is gained from a specific scientific test (Tolan & Deutsch, 2015). These articles demonstrate the need to utilize qualitative methodology to triangulate with (rather than simply complement) quantitative assessments of the role of individuals as producers of their development through mutually influential individual ↔ context relations. As illustrated by the articles in this special issue in regard to understanding positive youth development (PYD), qualitative findings were necessary to enhance the evidence base that the cognitions and emotions of diverse individuals framed the way they acted on the context that was acting on them. As such, the more that qualitative methods were a part of this evidence base, the more they were needed to further refine understanding of the nuances of the creative ways in which the process of individual ↔ context relations moderated the course of development.

Qualitative research provided significant portions of the evidence base pointing to the fundamental importance of agency in understanding the mutually beneficial individual ↔ context relations that comprised the process of positive development. Moreover, qualitative research provided some of the earliest elucidation about how such bidirectional relations could also be mutually beneficial to both person and context and how adaptive exchanges regulated the ways in which individuals could thrive through their impacts on the settings that were impacting them (Brandtstädter, 1998). Indeed, some of the early contributors to the formulation and advancement of the PYD perspective—Larson (2000) and Damon (2004), in particular—shaped the field through conducting qualitative research about these individual ↔ context relations (e.g., Ballard, Malin, Porter, Colby, & Damon, 2015; Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon, 1990; Damon & Colby, 2015; Larson & Angus, 2011; Larson & Brown, 2007; Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker, 2009; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). In fact, it is possible to argue that the study of PYD served as a key sample case for enhancing the role of qualitative methodology in elucidating the mutually beneficial individual ↔ context relations brought to the fore of scientific concern by RDS-based models of the thriving process. Certainly, the excellence of the qualitative research about the PYD process that is found in this special issue has as its implicit intellectual heritage the vision of the active individual shaping and being shaped by his or her context that is found in the aforementioned qualitative work of Larson, and Damon and their respective colleagues. Their foundational work, which was joined by the more quantitatively oriented colleagues studying PYD (e.g., Benson et al., 1998; Callina, Meuller, Napolitano, Lerner, & Lerner, in press; Lerner et al., 2015; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), and by prescient colleagues who represented mix-method approaches to PYD (e.g., Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2015; see too Ballard et al., 2015), provided an intellectual foundation for presenting an entire issue of a scholarly journal aimed at elucidating the PYD process and having it regarded as a significant scientific advance within the mainstream of the field!

Conclusions

The scholars contributing to this special issue have provided important, new information about how individuals, through active, positive engagement with their context can be active
agents in their own, positive development. From the vantage of scholars who began to study human development at a time when the creative and convincing scholarship provided by these scholars would have had no visible outlet within the field, it is gratifying to be able to conclude that their contributions are singularly important, not despite their being derived from qualitative methods, but because their findings are derived from qualitative methods.

The field of developmental science as it exists at this writing would not be the vibrant and productive area of scientific inquiry it now is (Damon, 2015; Lerner, 2015) had not the evidence base shaping the core, process-relational ideas (Overton, 2015) of the field been textured by findings from qualitative research. As scholars whose own history has been primarily quantitative in character, and who came of age professionally when the hegemony of quantitative research was not even open to debate, it seems remarkable that the field has been so thoroughly and significantly transformed by the contributions of colleagues conducting qualitative research. This transformation reflects an inestimable benefit for the nature of our science (e.g., given the central importance of triangulation across multiple methods as a requisite for establishing the validity of findings; e.g., Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Perhaps more important, this transformation is beneficial because it advances understanding of what is meaningful and what matters to the active young people who, through positively engaging their world, enhance themselves and make the lives of their families, communities, and societies better. It through qualitative research that we can best understand what makes “human beings human” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

References