An analogy

Imagine conducting a study to evaluate an academic intervention but inadvertently recruiting a sample composed solely of academic high achievers. Naturally, these students respond positively to the intervention. You conclude that the intervention is effective and recommend its implementation in schools. High-achieving students benefit, but lower achievers struggle to engage. Subsequent studies repeat the same mistake, widening the gap between high and low academic achievers.

This scenario illustrates the potential consequences of inadvertently recruiting only high-achieving students. In this paper, I argue that many character education studies make a similar mistake: they inadvertently recruit character high achievers, risking the creation of an ever-widening "character gap".

Character high achievers

Character educationists often discuss character development in terms of virtue *internalisation* (e.g., Berkowitz, 2021; Jubilee Centre, 2022). A "character high achiever" might therefore be understood as someone with a high degree of virtue internalisation.

But what does it mean to "internalise" a virtue? Among the various components of virtue – perception, emotion, desire, motivation, and behaviour (Kristjánsson, 2017) – only motivation can meaningfully undergo a process of internalisation. This process is described by Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), which situates four types of motivation along an autonomy continuum: *external* (least autonomous), *introjected*, *identified*, and *integrated* (most autonomous) (Pelletier & Rocchi, 2023). Virtue is internalised as its motivation progresses along this continuum. For example, if a child initially practices kindness to earn rewards (external regulation) but later comes to personally value kindness (identified/integrated regulation), this shift in motivation constitutes an internalisation of virtue. Thus, a character high achiever is someone whose virtue motivation is highly autonomous.

Participant recruitment

In line with ethical research guidelines (e.g., British Educational Research Association, 2024; British Psychological Society, 2021), most character education studies recruit *voluntary* participants. Voluntary behaviours are, by definition, autonomously motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2017). If autonomous participation in a character education study correlates with a high degree of autonomous virtue motivation, it follows that most character education studies inadvertently recruit character high achievers.

A potential solution

To avoid discriminating against those who do not autonomously volunteer (lower character achievers), character education studies could motivate participation through extrinsic rewards, ensuring a more representative sample. However, this strategy also has risks. Rewards can undermine autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017), so character high achievers would need to be excluded. Yet exclusion itself risks undermining their autonomy (Gubler et al., 2017).

Character education thus seems to face a dilemma.

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