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It Seems Like Déjà Vu All Over Again: A (Friendly) Rejoinder

Most journal articles are published, read by relatively few people, cited by even fewer, and remembered by still fewer. We suspect that chapters in edited books, and perhaps edited books themselves as well, suffer even crueler fates, insofar as either immediate or enduring impacts on scholarship. It is rare, therefore, and in our view a distinct honor, when an article is selected by an editor of a distinguished journal for commentary by eminent colleagues. That our article was selected for such an honor, and given such visibility, by Professor Blume is humbling, and we are very grateful.

We appreciate, as well, the opportunity to respond to the comments provided by Professors Boss (2015), Lamb (2015b), and Perlman (2015). A major theme across their remarks, however, poses a dilemma for us. How do we write a traditional rejoinder when all of these colleagues are very complimentary about our article and, as well, about the Lerner and Spanier (1978a) book and chapter (Lerner & Spanier, 1978b) our article discussed?

Of course, we thank these colleagues for their generous evaluations of our current and past work. In addition, we are grateful for the points they make about how both the work of Lerner and Spanier and our current discussion of the contribution of this past scholarship to current theory and research in human development can be improved or extended. We find little to disagree with here. Indeed, the comments made

by Professors Boss, Lamb, and Perlman are not dissimilar to comments made decades ago by colleagues discussing the ideas of Lerner and Spanier. In addition, the points raised in regard to current instantiations of theoretical models associated with the relational developmental systems (RDS) metamodel discussed by Overton (2015) and treated in our article (Lerner, Johnson, & Buckingham, 2015) correspond to what, at this writing, are current comments made by other colleagues about RDS-based ideas (e.g., Mascolo, 2014).

Given, then, the positive evaluations of our work expressed by Professors Boss, Lamb, and Perlman, and the commonality of their views and ours, our dilemma is that it would be not only ungracious but also impossible for us to find fault with any facets of their remarks. As such, this brief response is not cast as a traditional academic rejoinder. Instead, we discuss each of our colleague's comments in order to supplement the important points they have made. We turn first to Professor Boss, then to Professor Perlman, and—for reasons we shall discuss later—last to Professor Lamb.

PROFESSOR BOSS'S COMMENTS

Professor Boss was “there at the beginning.” She wrote a review of Lerner and Spanier (1978a) for *Contemporary Psychology* (Boss, 1979) shortly after the book's publication. As she noted then, and as she continues to emphasize now, the theoretical ideas expressed by Lerner and Spanier more than three decades ago, and the theoretical ideas forwarded in current (at this writing) discussions of RDS (e.g., Overton, 2013, 2015), need to be coupled with both research and

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application—for instance, with preventive interventions and with therapy—to demonstrate their value to the breadth of scholarship involved in developmental science. We agree.

The goal of developmental science is to describe, explain, and *optimize* intraindividual change and interindividual differences in intraindividual change across the life span (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselrode, 1977; Lerner, 2012). Boss notes that “optimizing human development is not accomplished solely in theory but also in practice” (p. 106), and she points out that we, in our recent article (Lerner et al., 2015), did not specify how RDS-based ideas can be used for prevention efforts or for therapy. She is correct about both points.

Whereas the purpose of the Lerner et al. (2015) article was limited to discussing the correspondence between the theoretical ideas of Lerner and Spanier (1978b) and the ideas associated with the RDS metamodel, there have in fact been several discussions of (a) the use of RDS-based concepts and research to frame evidence-based efforts to promote positive human development (e.g., J. Lerner et al., 2013; Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015), and (b) the bidirectional relation that exists between RDS-predicated research and applications to practice and policies. Indeed, a key feature of the mission of the journal that one of us edits (*Applied Developmental Science*) is to further the theory ↔ practice connection to which Professor Boss points.

Professor Boss offers a very insightful and important list of seven points that need to be addressed to enhance the theory ↔ practice connection. Her ideas range from building mutually influential collaborations between scholars and practitioners to enhancing social justice and human agency. Her ideas constitute a compelling, indeed critical, set of action items for deepening and extending the theory ↔ practice connection. Other applied developmental scientists, notably Celia B. Fisher and her colleagues, have forwarded comparable agendas (e.g., Fisher, Busch-Rossnagel, Brown, & Jopp, 2013) and reviewed the progress that is being made in pursuing these goals. Nevertheless, as Boss emphasizes, more work needs to be done.

Finally, Professor Boss discusses the concept of human agency as “the fulcrum for application of the RDS metamodel” (p. 000). Once again, we could not agree more. In fact, it is possible

to view the career of one of us (RML) as involving nothing more than trying to understand the role of agency in providing a basis of health and positive development across the life span (e.g., Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999; Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2008; Lerner, 1969, 1982; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981; Lerner, Freund, De Stefanis, & Habermas, 2001; Lerner & Gellert, 1969; Lerner & Korn, 1972; Lerner & Walls, 1999). In turn, Lerner (2014) has explained that his focus on human agency was derived from the comparative psychological research of Schneirla (1957), who identified agentic processes as a ubiquitous part of the behavioral repertoire of organisms as different as army ants and kittens. Indeed, although changing developmentally, and potentially constrained by organismic and contextual circumstances, agency is identifiable from the first moments of neonatal life (e.g., Lewis & Rosenblum, 1974) through the rest of the life span, including among the old and the very old (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006).

Accordingly, we concur with the concluding statement of Professor Boss: the goal for applying the RDS metamodel “is to increase human agency despite what is so often a less than optimal context” (p. 107). Indeed, work at the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University, at which all of the authors of the present article currently are affiliated, has been aimed at providing tools to practitioners (mentors or leaders of youth development programs) to enhance the agency—operationalized as intentional self-regulation skills—of diverse adolescents (e.g., Bowers, Wang, Tirrell, & Lerner, in press; Napolitano et al., 2014).

PROFESSOR PERLMAN’S COMMENTS

Professor Perlman (2015) observes that the emphasis on RDS metatheory may herald the end of a focus on grand theories of human development (e.g., Piaget, 1970). We agree and, in turn, we would point out that RDS metatheory provides “design criteria” for more content-specific models of developmental processes, for example, as may be involved in positive human development (e.g., Lerner, Lerner et al., 2015), thinking, feeling, and skill development (Mascolo & Fischer, 2015), moral development (Turiel, 2015), and agency (Sokol, Hammond, Kuebli, & Sweetman, 2015). Thus,

in a “developmental science funnel,” that has at its wide end paradigmatic and metatheoretical constructs, and at its narrow end theory-derived and methodologically rigorous data, the models associated with RDS metatheory constitute midrange theories.

However, Professor Perlman (2015) appropriately cautions scholars who are enthusiastic about using RDS-derived models to frame their research so that the data arising from such work (what comes out of the funnel, so to speak) will not depict the relative influence of “multiple levels all at once,” at least not “in any given research project” (p. 112). As such, Perlman points to the need for programmatic and systematic research to elucidate the “relative influence of the different forces” (p. 112) across the multiple, integrated levels of organization within the ecology of human development. We endorse this approach to RDS-derived research.

Professor Perlman, in turn, endorses our emphasis on the importance for developmental theory of several of the fundamental concepts associated with RDS metatheory. These concepts include, for instance, plasticity, diversity, the role of temporal variation, and agency. Although he notes that we did not discuss the foundational contributions of Albert Bandura in our present paper (Lerner et al., 2015), we nevertheless agree with Perlman’s appraisal of the profound significance of Bandura scholarship (e.g., Bandura, 1978, 1986, 2001) and can only point out here that we have in fact recognized and used his theory and research in many other works we have published (e.g., Lerner, 2002; Lerner & Callina, 2014).

Indeed, in the section of Professor Perlman’s comments wherein he compares the ideas of Lerner and Spanier (1978b) with current RDS concepts, the ideas of Bandura (e.g., 1978, 1986, 2001) are central in the history of the evolution of theory, from the dynamic interactionism of Lerner and Spanier to the relational thinking involved in RDS (Lerner & Callina, 2014). The reciprocal influences between the person and the context (i.e., individual ↔ context relations), and the role of human agency, so clearly and compellingly articulated by Bandura (e.g., 2001), have served as a basis for the descriptive, explanatory, and optimization efforts of developmental scientists using RDS metatheory to frame their work. In fact, and as emphasized by Perlman, it is possible to argue that the major way that the evolution from the ideas of Lerner

and Spanier (1978b) to the concepts associated with RDS metatheory has been manifested is in regard to efforts to optimize human life. In fact, and as also noted by Fisher et al. (2013), the application of developmental science—to promote both individual thriving and to foster social justice—is predicated on the optimism about improving human life that is rationalized by the concept of relative plasticity in individual ↔ context relations that characterizes the RDS-based approach to research, practice, and policy.

Professor Perlman notes as well that what scholars may regard as optimization depends on value judgments about which features of human behavior and development are regarded as positive or healthy. As Elder, Shanahan, and Jennings (2015) remind us, such judgments vary across time and place, for instance, across historical eras and cultures. Enhancing literacy among diverse youth may, at this writing, be valued as an endeavor that contributes to the optimization of their development. However, in pre-Civil War America (and, unfortunately, for some time in post-Civil War America) such actions not only may have been seen as counter to prevailing values in some parts of the nation but were illegal as well.

Accordingly, we applaud Professor Perlman for underscoring the central role that the values of a scientist play in the application of developmental science, a point also emphasized by Fisher et al. (2013). Our agreement with this point by Perlman leads us to concur also (and perhaps surprisingly) with his (2015) point that the Five Cs model of positive youth development (PYD) used by Lerner and Lerner and colleagues (e.g., J. Lerner et al., 2013; Lerner, Lerner et al., 2015) is a narrow view of positive mental health. Indeed, Lerner and Lerner make a similar argument, noting that, whereas all contemporary models of PYD are derived from RDS metatheory, there are several different and useful conceptualizations of the PYD process, for example, ones forwarded by Benson (2008), Catalano et al. (2002), Damon (2008), Eccles (2004), Flay (2002), Hamilton and Hamilton (2009), Larson (2000), Masten (2001, 2014), and Spencer (2006).

A final point raised by Professor Perlman is that the contributions of Lerner “have primarily been to developmental science and to that part of

family studies concerned with parent–child relations. I would welcome him further illuminating aspects, especially developmental aspects, of close relationships” (p. 13). We note here that, in fact, Lerner (1979) has presented a model of such relationship development—in a book that appeared a year after the publication of the Lerner and Spanier (1978a) volume. However, the paper that became the 1979 chapter was actually first presented at another Penn State conference held the year prior to the Lerner and Spanier conference that led to the publication of their 1978 volume.

In the 1979 chapter, Lerner uses the theoretical model that he and Spanier presented (1978b) to offer a conception of the development of close relationships that interrelates (a) the developmental levels of dyad members at the time of relationship initiation (e.g., involving dating partners, professors and graduate students, or mentors and mentees more generally) with (b) the rate of development of dyad members, in order to understand (c) the exchanges in and the outcomes of the relationship. Lerner (1979) discussed four types of close relationship symmetry that were formed by dichotomizing both the developmental levels of dyad members (same or different) and the developmental rate of dyad members (also same or different). Using concepts of change—systematic change occurring through the globality to differentiation-hierarchical integration pattern associated with the orthogenetic principle (Werner, 1957) and stochastic change that may produce oscillation (variability) levels in relationships—Lerner (1979) offered then-untested hypotheses about how the two types of changes shape the course of close relationships for dyads within different symmetry types.

Unfortunately, the hypotheses about the development of close relationships forwarded by Lerner in 1979 have remained untested in ensuing decades, as he and colleagues and students in fact focused on the other domains of contribution noted by Professor Perlman (2015). Because of this inattention, the dynamic interactional ideas Lerner (1979) applied to understand the development of close relationships never evolved in the context of RDS metatheory. As such, it is uncertain what the 1979 set of ideas would now look like when interpreted through a contemporary RDS framework. Perhaps the opportunity to remind family scientists about

this 1979 chapter, given to us by Perlman’s comments, may result in the generation of a more refined, RDS-based midrange theory of the development of close relationships, one that could be used in new dyadic developmental research.

Such future possibilities are raised as well in the commentary by Professor Lamb (2015a). We turn now to a discussion of his remarks.

PROFESSOR LAMB’S COMMENTS

Professor Boss was there at the beginning, at the time when the Lerner and Spanier (1978a) book was published. However, Professor Lamb was a key shaper of the beginning! He attended the conference from which the Lerner and Spanier volume was derived, and he contributed a very significant chapter to the book (Lamb, 1978), one that underscored and extended the ideas that Lerner and Spanier (1978b) attempted to forward. In turn, he has remained a close colleague across the ensuing decades and, most recently, edited Volume 3 of the *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science*, seventh edition (Lamb, 2015a). Lerner served as editor in chief of this edition of the *Handbook*, and Lamb’s volume used RDS-derived ideas to frame the scholarship about social and emotional development that is present in the chapters in this book. Because of his history of engagement with the ideas presented by Lerner and Spanier (1978b) and Lerner et al. (2015), it is useful to discuss Lamb’s ideas as a means to view the past, present, and future of RDS metatheory.

In regard to the past, Professor Lamb recounts his personal history as intertwined with the evolution of the field of developmental science. In reflecting on Professor Lamb’s (2015b) advice to developmental scientists that we “be wary of self-satisfied hubris” (p. 116), he too modestly describes what has been the enormous role his ideas and research have played in shaping modern developmental science. With very few others to even compare him to, we regard his theory-predicated research as having a profound influence on the descriptive, explanatory, and optimization pillars of developmental science. Indeed, among his many other accolades and awards, he is the recipient of a Gold Medal for Life Achievement in the Application of Psychology, from the American Psychological Association. We mention his past accomplishments and current scientific stature only to underscore

the authoritative nature of his often quite critical views on the current status of RDS-based models, methods, and research, as well as the wisdom involved in his vision for the future of the field.

Professor Lamb's commentary is replete with rich and important insights about where developmental science stands at this writing as a field that many claim is framed by RDS metatheory. He reminds us that RDS is a metamodel and not a specific theory or model. As such, RDS-based thinking "needs to be translated into more precise and specific models in order to yield testable hypotheses. The vast majority of studies, however, are, at best, *inspired* by RDS thinking, and the specific theory embraced in published studies is often generated post hoc, at least with respect to detail" (Lamb, 2015b, p. 116). In turn, reminding contemporary developmental scientists of the critiques of the field forwarded by Urie Bronfenbrenner (e.g., 1974, 1979), Lamb (2015b) correctly notes that many researchers have yet to embrace Bronfenbrenner's call for an emphasis on ecological validity of research with children and families and continue to "derive measures from brief and often artificial periods of assessment and remain more concerned about reliability and statistical testing than about validity" (p. 116). Moreover, Lamb laments the fact that these statistical tests are often conducted in ways that make "it possible for eager, naive, and sometimes frankly dishonest researchers to analyse their data in numerous ways until 'significant' findings emerge" (p. 117) and to only analyze parts of their data set with relatively small and nongeneralizable samples. As do Duncan, Engel, Claessens, and Dowsett (2014), Lamb explains that these shortcomings of theory-predicated research mean that the contemporary literature of developmental science is filled with findings that are neither robust nor replicable (and are typically never tested for replicability).

In short, Professor Lamb cautions developmental scientists to do better in regard to integrating theory and method in order to produce research that matters for the actual lives of diverse children and families. His criticisms of the problems in contemporary theory-based research in effect constitute a pathway forward in using RDS-based ideas to enhance the quality and contribution of developmental science. In addition, however, he points to a future field that will be marked by two fundamental

features of RDS thinking. First, as suggested also by Professor Perlman, Professor Lamb emphasizes the importance of midrange theories of developmental processes in framing rigorous developmental research. In addition, he closes his comments by returning to the importance of integrating the multiple levels of organization that, in the RDS metamodel, constitute the ecology of human development. He emphasizes in particular the need to bring the contributions of biological processes into such relational models—and therefore to eschew the past errors of biological reductionism (Lerner, in press).

In summary, Professor Lamb integrates past, present, and future in his comments in a manner that chastens development scientists to do better. At the same time, he provides an authoritative road map for making such progress.

CONCLUSIONS

The article eliciting the comments of our three colleagues (i.e., Lerner et al., 2015) took a path that, in different ways, is reflected as well in each of their commentaries. Professors Boss, Perlman, and Lamb discussed the links among the past, present, and future of the theoretical models discussed by Lerner et al. (2015). In that all of these colleagues are distinguished and senior scholars, their discussions were both personal and professional. Their own careers evolved at the same time and, as we have noted, often in close connection to the history we recounted (Lerner et al., 2015).

We are honored that these esteemed colleagues took the time to read our work and to provide such creative and insightful comments. Their responses are pieces that, quite independent of our own article, make important contributions to developmental and family science. It is appropriate, then, to reiterate that we are grateful for and humbled by their efforts on our behalf.

It is also appropriate to note that we are inspired and hopeful about the future of developmental and family science—and about their greater integration in future decades. Professors Boss, Lamb, and Perlman are models of integrative scholar excellence. With such models, future cohorts of scholars have a beacon to guide them as they seek to conduct and apply increasingly more refined theory-predicated research. With such exemplars, future family and developmental scientists have a standard of excellence that,

in the words of Professor Lamb (2015b), will enable them to run toward the future and “to do so gracefully” (p. 117).

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