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# Introduction to Mentored Scholarship: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors to Understanding and Supporting Research in Human Development

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Prior scholarship, especially in the behavioral and social sciences, has been based on narrow views of human development and particularly marked by the invisibility of minoritized youth. Responding to the call to reframe and broaden human development research, this special issue features four manuscripts led by undergraduate student-scholars with diverse lived experiences and social identities completing human development coursework and mentored by more senior scholars. The manuscripts represent interdisciplinary perspectives on human development and share an applied element, while including multi-method research designs and diverse populations in manners that are culturally, contextually, and developmentally grounded. In addition, this volume focuses on how emerging adults address misrepresentations and engage in narrative repair through critically studying human development theories, integrating these perspectives with their own lived experiences, and developing scholarship that promotes their development as well as the individuals or groups they seek to support. The mentored scholarship illustrated in this special issue provides mirrors so that diverse students can see themselves and their experiences reflected in developmental scholarship, windows for the field to see authentic representations of communities and experiences that are often marginalized, and doors that enable the co-construction of knowledge and engagement in research and practice. Together, this approach re-envision the potential of scholarship and contributes to understanding and supporting innovative research, theory, and practice in human development in an inclusive and reciprocal manner that helps address pressing problems of inequities, inequality, and marginalization.

*If the student is understood as occupying a dwelling of self, education [and research] needs to enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his [their] reality reflected.* (Style, 1988, p. 35)

Research in human development should provide us with mirrors that reflect aspects of our own lived experiences, windows to glimpse into and learn from other people's lives, and doors that allow us to enter and engage with others in scholarship so that we may act intentionally on personal, social, and structural occurrences in the world (Bishop, 1990; Style, 1988). Conducted over time, drawing from a range of methods and designs, and embedded in a critical understanding of ecological contexts, research should help us examine, understand, and represent the totality of human development and experiences. Unfortunately, much prior research and literature, especially in the behavioral and social sciences, have been based on narrow views of human development. For instance, research has largely focused on ahistorical and context-eliminating perspectives, providing inadequate attention to the role of social positions and context when considering the development of diverse youth (García Coll et al., 1996; Spencer, 2006, 2017). Furthermore, research on minoritized communities and social groups is often conducted with little input from members of those groups.

A continued disservice to the field has been the invisibility of minoritized youth in developmental scholarship. We consider minoritized youth as young people who are under- or misrepresented in the extant behavioral and social science literature. When they are represented, their challenges are often portrayed without equal attention to their successes or perspectives (Spencer, 2006, 2017). These youth are often racial and ethnic minorities and students who reside in low-income neighborhoods (García Coll et al., 1996). While not the focus of this issue, other underrepresented populations include individuals with disabilities, religious minorities, sexual minorities, and the intersection with several minoritized identities (Velez & Spencer, 2018). Rectifying the (mis)representation requires challenging "how dominant [research] practices serve to overlook, silence, or dismiss knowledge by and for racial/ethnic minority populations" (Syed, Santos, Yoo, & Juang, 2018, p. 2) and incorporating inclusive ways of conducting and disseminating research.

Thus, responding to this call to reframe and broaden human development research, the co-editors of this special issue (Abo-Zena and Loyd) gathered four manuscripts led by undergraduate student-scholars with diverse lived experiences and social identities completing human development coursework and mentored by more senior scholars. Emerging student scholars represent the concentrated potential we have for developmental science to grow in dynamic and innovative ways, but their scholarship is often not nurtured, recognized, or disseminated through publications. Typically, when students are involved in research that is published, they work as research assistants, supporting the research agenda of a more senior scholar. The goal of this issue is to explore what would happen if students drew from their lived experiences to inform research. What questions would they pursue? What types of studies or action research would they design? What methods would they use and how would they recruit and involve participants? Finally, what are the implications of their research approaches to furthering our understanding of human development?

## REFLEXIVE STATEMENTS INFORMING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL TRAJECTORIES

To illustrate how the roles of social position, identity, and lived experiences affect a program of research, consider the reflexive statements of the coauthors of this introduction (Abo-Zena,

Loyd, and Cunningham). This task highlights the inter-play between a phenomenon and the individual who is approaching it, also known as *reflexivity* or *positionality*; a practice that is applied more frequently in anthropology and sociology, but infrequently reported in human development research (e.g., Milner, 2007). We modeled for students what we asked them to engage in, the practice of naming's one social position, which provides proximity that allows for culturally and contextually sensitive approaches to social issues, and names biases and how to manage them (Maxwell, 2005).

Although the first author (Abo-Zena) was an experienced educator, she had not studied human development until feeling overwhelmed parenting premature twins. Initially drawn to a developmental perspective, she experienced microaggressions engaging with the scholarship. The largely non-inclusive methods and samples seemed to resist the nuances of the lived experiences of the diverse individuals and groups she sought to better understand from an intersectional perspective (i.e., like herself, minoritized because of religious, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and other marginalized identities and experiences). When these social groups were represented in the literature, it was often from a deficit perspective. Eventually, she encountered grounding scholarship that reframed assets and vulnerabilities by producing compelling counter-narratives (e.g., García Coll et al., 1996; Gilligan, 1993; Spencer, 2006). Instead of banking models of education (and research) that perpetuate the hegemony of scholarship on the shelves, she committed herself to transformative teaching and research methods that attend to the scholarship of the self (Freire, 1970/1994; Style, 2014).

For the second author (Loyd), learning about Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development and philosophies about identity (Erikson, 1968, 1980) as an undergraduate student drew her to a career in developmental research. She also noted that educational spaces often force Black students to assimilate to mainstream cultural values and practices (e.g., speech, dress, hair, etc.) at the cost of their culture of origin, a process she now describes as the price of "success." Even though she did not see herself reflected in the discussion, she was drawn to theory around the idea of thinking about the self, and one's self in context and in history, and how she, as a Black female student, existed and created space in the world. However, not seeing herself or her community accurately represented in the literature and subsequently being heavily inspired by Margaret Beale Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) prompted her to become a developmental scientist and pursue questions around how race, ethnicity, and identity relate to health and development in Black and Latinx adolescents and young adults (e.g., Brittan, 2012; Loyd et al., 2019).

The third author's (Cunningham) journey to understand human development from a holistic perspective is similar to the first two authors. As a first-generation college student who was raised by divorced parents, he began college with a focus on computer science and mathematics. His initial idea of college was to prepare him for the workforce. After taking an elective course in educational studies during his third year that required him to complete a service-learning experience, his desire for education and human development changed. He took more child development courses when he noticed that his experiences of being an African American male were not represented in the literature. In the 1980s that extant literature did not fully explore the complexities of divorced families. Cunningham's read of the literature was that his divorced parents and cisgender Black maleness should have put him at risk for educational challenges and social problems. This was not the case for Cunningham and most of his Black male friends. While being raised by a single mother, his father was his best friend. He was an

honor student who excelled. Yet, these experiences were not represented in the literature. He began to work with his mentor, Margaret Beale Spencer, as an undergraduate student and continued work with her for his graduate work. Spencer's co-edited volume, *Beginnings: The Social and Affective Development of Black Children* (Spencer, Brookins, & Allen, 1985) was foundational to how he started to question the status quo. Along with the edited volume, he was heavily influenced by his mentor's (Margaret Beale Spencer) research and writing. Drawing on Spencer's seminal research (e.g., Spencer, 1984) that broadened our understanding of the classic doll preference studies (Clark & Clark, 1939, 1940) to more recent scholarship that broadens PVEST to explicitly include intersectionality (e.g., Velez & Spencer, 2018), Cunningham has a program of research that examines African American youth's experiences of resilience and vulnerability. He also uses this foundation of scholarship to guide his research to understand phenomena from the participants' perspectives as well as acknowledging balance in understanding personal male privilege and exposure to racial minority oppression (Cunningham & Rious, 2015).

### MIRRORS: A REFLECTION OF THE SELF

*When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.* (Bishop, 1990, p. 1)

Although Bishop's scholarship focused on children's literature, students in higher education contexts may have similar experiences engaging with scholarship, including developmental research. Whether and how issues reflecting minoritized groups and experiences are included in scholarship affect the individual/group depicted, as well as others consuming implicit messages about the nature of portrayals or their omissions. The way we see ourselves in the world impacts our performance and whether we think we can be successful, as does the way others see and value us (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). Because the student-authors featured in this issue did not see themselves or their affinity groups adequately represented and served by the developmental literature, the students sought to insert themselves into the scholarship. Essentially, they created mirrors to see their experiences accurately and authentically reflected.

### WINDOWS: A VIEW OF OTHERS AND SOMETIMES A MIRROR THAT REFLECTS HOW OTHERS SEE US

*Half the curriculum walks in the room with the students, in the textbooks of their lives.* (Style, 1982, p. 18)

Unfortunately, course materials presented in human development classes are based on research scholarship that does not authentically encompass all individuals and social groups. For example, given these omissions, textbooks that seek to provide students with a scholarly foundation that reflects contemporary research may instead perpetuate a hegemony (Navab, Koegel, Dowdy, & Vernon, 2016) that centers on "normative" development of "mainstream"

populations. For example, in a chapter on families in a popular adolescent development textbook, the first author's students pointed out how the chapter begins with hetero-normative depictions of families, and in the second half includes same-sex, single-parent, and grand families. One student noted that she is used to how the "default" families are presented initially, and she must flip toward the back of the chapter to see a multi-racial family (like hers) represented, if at all. Another robust class discussion surrounded the textbook's presentation of research of adolescents' self-report of the age of sexual debut by race. Students discussed challenges to the validity of data, given social pressures both to underreport and exaggerate sexual experiences as well as the reliability of measuring specific behaviors. The discussion of alternative research designs that might more validly capture the phenomena was transformed by one student's poignant question: "Does the sexual debut need to be consensual?" Representing students' lived experiences provides windows for others to see a range of human developmental trajectories, and simultaneously presents a mirror reflecting underrepresented individuals, groups, or experiences. Historically, developmental scholarship has failed to address how diverse youth, varying in degrees of privilege or marginalization, encounter normative and adverse experiences (e.g., relating to peers and families, encountering violence), and navigate systemic inequalities (Spencer, 2006; Velez & Spencer, 2018). To be representative, developmental scholarship needs to provide a window wide enough to include all the individuals it encompasses and a perspective dynamic enough to account for all the variations in contexts and interactions within them.

## DOORS: AN OPPORTUNITY TO FACILITATE EXCHANGE BETWEEN SELF AND OTHERS

*Research is a fundamentally relational project – relational to ways of knowing, who can know, and to place. (Patel, 2016, p. 48)*

Because colonizing influences permeate ideologies and practices such as research, not all individuals see themselves in research or relate to their depictions in it (Patel, 2016). Such systematic omissions in the literature may be seen as a form of oppression that fails to capture the phenomenological nature of the development of diverse youth (Spencer, 2006). "Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970/1994, p. 33). Toward this goal, in this special issue, we seek to highlight how innovative research projects led by emerging scholars and intentionally mentored by senior scholars promote the development of students, facilitate the reframing of historically marginalized groups and processes through culturally and contextually sensitive research, and enhance the ecological validity and quality of developmental scholarship given students' relative proximity to the ages and experiences of the populations they serve (Abo-Zena & Pavalow, 2016).

## MENTORED SCHOLARSHIP

The articles presented in this special issue are projects conceptualized within human development study by four undergraduate students and highlight salient aspects of each first author's educational journey and story (Rodriguez, 2018). Consequently, this issue gives us an opportunity to learn in partnership with students as producers of knowledge who share their work with the academic community, beyond their own institution as well as with the field more broadly. The articles represent interdisciplinary perspectives on human development drawing from Africana studies, gender studies, education, psychology, sociology, social work, and business. While the articles share an applied element, they represent multi-method research designs and diverse populations. The methods include critical literature reviews, academic assessments, interviews, ethnographic data, narrative reflection, oral history, portraiture, and evaluation. The student-directed research encompasses lifespan development and involves other adult stakeholders (e.g., teachers, caregivers, participants, and university faculty) as well as diverse youth. Each article provides mirrors for the student-researchers to see themselves and others like them in the scholarship, windows into diverse lived experiences underrepresented in the research literature, and doors that allow for engaged scholarship with a range of stakeholders.

Drawing from developmental scholarship and noting the degree to which it is aligned with their own lived experiences, students transformed an aspect of research initially developed as a course paper, honor's thesis, or capstone project. Martin, Loyd, and Abo-Zena (2020) describe an online educational tool that Martin developed that bridges developmental and educational science, instructional design, and business. Mirroring the look and feel of standardized tests, the tool was designed to teach Black and Latinx youth advanced vocabulary through hip hop lyrics. Essentially, Martin created the tool that he needed as a youth to connect his home culture to school and academic learning. Besana, Katsiaficas, and Loyd (2020) discuss the findings of Besana's Honors College capstone project addressing the historic relative invisibility or misrepresentation of Asian Americans in U.S. films. Besana recognized gaps in the literature and in positive media representations of Asian Americans. Consequently, she conducted a film analysis to understand representations of Asian Americans in films over the last 25 years that confirm or resist stereotypes. Jamarillo, Scott, Johnson, and Martin (2020) examine a program initially constructed as an academic intervention, but that was expanded to be trauma-informed and more holistically support youth who are refugees. This article examines how university-based volunteers engaged with youth in reciprocal exchanges to support youth given varied social positions, culture, and access to language. Boyne, Hamlin, Cunningham, and Abo-Zena (2020) chronicle how stereotypes make their way into our psyches, but can be challenged such as through an applied project that brings together portraiture and oral history. Informed by feeling invisible and privileged given her identities, Boyne integrates Africana studies with developmental scholarship to highlight stories of other individuals who may be marginalized by others (i.e., reduced to stereotypes) and illustrates the humanizing and developmental potential for herself and others.

Alongside the scholarship that the emerging scholars reported in their articles, we asked each lead author to reflect on how conducting the research affected their own identity development. We intended for the reflection on practice to help document how such engagement affected the identity and praxis of the lead author (acknowledging that all involved in the

research process are informed by it). While identity development is considered a lifespan process (Erikson, 1968), many individuals are challenged to integrate their identities across different domains (e.g., political, vocational, personal), particularly given the socio-political context within Western contexts that has altered the timeline and negotiation of these tasks (Arnett, 2015). Given that individuals navigate toxic social messages about minoritized and privileged identities, these research projects may serve as interventions for the lead authors to help repair assaults on their identity and self-author counter-narratives (Nelson & Lindemann, 2001) contributing to their own development, and to others with whom they engage in the critical scholarship.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Historically, the scholarship on human development has provided an inadequate and inaccurate representation of the complexity of the lived experiences of all youth. Minoritized youth and communities regularly navigate harmful social messages about their identities, including ways that their differences are pathologized and strengths overlooked. Importantly, the emerging scholars included in this special issue addressed such omissions and misrepresentations and engaged in narrative repair through critically studying human development theories, integrating these perspectives into their own lived experiences and scholarship (or critiquing them), and doing work that promotes their development as well as the individuals or groups they seek to support.

As such, this volume is a manifestation of applied developmental science predicated on questioning the legitimacy of separating knowledge from the pressing human problems of the world and utilizing the bidirectional relationship between knowledge production and its applications to promote positive development (Lerner, 2018). The articles represent burgeoning developmental science that is not often seen in the extant literature, thus allowing us to grow developmental science and adapt methodologies and theories to our changing society. In addition, providing emerging scholars with multiple and varied mentorship opportunities along the academic pipeline, like the ones featured in this special issue, contributes to the capacity for field advancing given calls to diversify faculty.

We acknowledge that like any research endeavor, the process of mentored scholarship is a messy one. There is no single model or way senior scholars and student-scholars should engage. From the perspective of students, given the power differential between students and faculty, there might be the risk of feeling “silenced” or marginalized by well-intentioned faculty who may be overzealous in approaches that students experience as heavy-handed or overly directive. From the perspective of faculty, even highly committed students (like other collaborators) may vary in their work style, adherence to timelines, and definitions of quality. For a range of pedagogical and other reasons, some faculty and students may be more comfortable with conventional assignments such as final exams and literature reviews. However, faculty who seek to promote students’ applied scholarship might consider providing alternative assignment options that promote students’ engagement (e.g., applied research projects, development of a product such as a website, zine, or spoken word related to a program or issue a student identifies that reflects developmental concepts and theories). Innovative or creative assignments generally need to be supported by discussions and resources in and out of class beyond the



typical assignment, which may be challenging for faculty given a heavy teaching load and a range of contextual factors (e.g., professional responsibilities, departmental norms). For students, through active engagement in selecting and developing a project, they develop and apply their knowledge of human development. Although few in-class projects may be developed into publications, there are other opportunities to bring student-led, engaged developmental scholarship forward (e.g., poster sessions, publication venues that privilege undergraduate scholarship).

In summary, the mentored approach featured in this special issue highlights the potential of inclusive research practices that are grounded in the engaged scholarship of human development students and their lived experiences. This approach facilitates greater self-reflection for the individuals leading the research and allows diverse scientists to see themselves and their communities reflected in the work – a *mirror* – which is central across all four papers. It gives the field insights into lines of inquiry or communities that we may have not yet explored with such nuance. In this case, the research becomes a *window* for the field to see authentic representations of communities and experiences that are often marginalized or invisible. Working with emerging scholars allows senior scholars to co-construct knowledge and indirectly engage with the individuals and groups represented in the research, and essentially the research becomes a *door*. In this scenario, we are no longer merely observing. We are opening a space for more balanced collaboration and co-constructed ways of understanding that re-envision research partnerships in a more inclusive and reciprocal manner with enhanced potential to address pressing problems of inequities, inequality, and marginalization.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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