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To cite this article: Celia B. Fisher & Richard M. Lerner (2013) Promoting Positive Development Through Social Justice: An Introduction to a New Ongoing Section of *Applied Developmental Science*, *Applied Developmental Science*, 17:2, 57-59, DOI: [10.1080/10888691.2013.779159](https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2013.779159)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2013.779159>



Published online: 05 Apr 2013.



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EDITORIAL

Promoting Positive Development Through Social Justice: An Introduction to a New Ongoing Section of *Applied Developmental Science*

Celia B. Fisher and Richard M. Lerner

Editors

One of the defining characteristics of Applied Developmental Science (ADS) is that theory, research, and its application in the real world are interwoven, each informing and enriching the other (Fisher & Lerner, 2005; Fisher et al., 1993; Lerner, 2010; Sherrod, Busch-Rossnagel, & Fisher, 2004). Over the past three decades this orientation has transformed how investigators and policy makers conceptualize and strive to optimize development across the life course. The field has had significant accomplishments in identifying and strengthening developmental assets in marginalized communities, understanding the effects of poverty and discrimination on individual and family well-being across the lifespan, and in advancing research methodologies that can illuminate the multilevel and reciprocal dynamic systems that influence developmental pathways by limiting or fostering equal access to resources essential to health and wellbeing (e.g., Browning, Buntington, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Scales et al., 2008). The designs of ecologically relevant prevention programs by applied developmental scientists have also illuminated the need for social policies that are sensitive to diverse developmental challenges and inclusive in their offering of opportunities for individuals who are socially and economically marginalized on the basis of factors such as class, race/ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, age, gender, and physical and developmental ability status (Bruce & Harper, 2011; Kenny, Horne, Orpinas, & Reese, 2009; Timberlake, 2007).

Amidst these great strides in conceptualizing, operationalizing, and empirically disentangling multi-level effects on development, challenges remain in identifying empirical and practical ways to address the pervasive systemic disparities in opportunities for development and to

contribute to the promotion of equal access to resources and experiences promoting positive development (Fisher, Busch-Rossnagel, Jopp, & Brown, 2012). In this issue we introduce a new and ongoing section for our journal that represents a vision of applied developmental science as a means of promoting positive development through the lens of social justice (Fisher et al., 2012; Krieger, 2012). Through this new section on *Promoting Positive Development Through Social Justice*, we seek to publish original papers that have broad implications for investigation of the origins, structures, and consequences of social inequities in human development and to highlight potential linkages among ADS and other fields working to identify and eliminate societal barriers to health and well-being.

The first goal of our new section is to provide a forum for scholarly debate on overarching theories of social justice as they pertain to and influence the evolving mission and methodologies of ADS. Articles reflecting this first goal will bring readers up-to-date with emerging theoretical perspectives on how social justice is conceptualized within national and global contexts. For example, definitions of social justice have focused on the rights of all groups in a society to have fair access to and a voice in policies governing the distribution of resources essential to their physical and psychological well-being (Braverman et al., 2011). Social justice definitions have also focused on social inequities, characterized as avoidable and unjust social structures and policies that limit access to resources based solely on group or individual characteristics such as race/ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical or developmental ability status, and/or immigration status, among others (e.g., Adler, 2009; Kenny et al., 2009). Articles meeting this first goal may also illuminate philosophical arguments for a social justice imperative in the responsible conduct of applied developmental science. For example, contributors may consider challenges

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to social/behavioral and medical scientists to ask whether simply observing and reporting on mechanisms contributing to social injustices is morally tenable in the absence of complimentary efforts to reduce the social inequities that render life painful (Farmer, 2003; Prilleltensky, 2003).

The second goal of our *Promoting Positive Development Through Social Justice* section is to publish articles that highlight contextual challenges and opportunities for multilevel methodologies that can illuminate barriers to fair allocation and access to resources essential to positive development (Krieger, 2012). Several fruitful areas of research related to this second goal may build on Sampson's seminal work on social disorganization theory (Sampson, 1992, 1997, 2001), drawing attention to how collective and aggregate community characteristics influence developmental outcomes in the United States and abroad (e.g., Hart, Atkins, & Matsuba, 2008; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000a; Singer, 2009). Contributors to this new section are also invited to report on novel empirical approaches to studying how racism, heterosexism, classism and other forms of chronic and acute systemic inequities and political marginalization can have a "weathering effect" on physical and mental health across the life span (e.g., Brown, Meadows, & Elder, 2007; Bruce & Harper, 2011; Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Gee, Walsemann, & Brondolo, 2012; Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, & Bound, 2006; Henry & Sears, 2009; Moody-Ayers, Stewart, Covinsky, & Inouye, 2005; Utsey, Payne, Jackson, & Jones, 2002). In addition, submissions may include studies that converge with data from other areas of the social sciences to illuminate how racist and other prejudicial ideologies and behaviors develop in majority groups through intra- and inter-racial group contact and friendships (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002; Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007; McGillicuddy-De Lisi, Daly, & Neal, 2006; Molina & Wittig, 2006; Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2010).

In applying developmental science to the study and alleviation of developmental harms caused by structural injustices, ADS is at the leading edge of creating empirically based interventions that nurture the sustainability and continued evolution of a civil society that supports freedom and social justice (Lerner, 2004; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000b). The third goal of our new special section is to highlight evidence-based prevention and policy research aimed at moderating the influence of systemic oppression and promoting psychological and political liberation in the personal, relational, and collective domains (Adams, O'Brien, & Nelson, 2006; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Sherrod, 2005). For example, there is a growing and significant body of empirical research illuminating the importance of civic engagement to positive youth development and adult functioning (Balsano, 2005; Lerner et al., 2009;

Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Obradović & Masten, 2007). Yet, the field is only beginning to tackle methodologies to change the systemic political structures that support and sustain racism and other unjust disparities in opportunities for health and human development (Adams et al., 2006). Contributors are encouraged to submit empirical studies that take a systems-level approach to reducing unjust institutional practices and promoting individual and collective political empowerment within organizations, communities, local and national governments. Griffith et al. (2007), for example, takes a systems-level approach to combatting institutional racism by promoting individual and collective political empowerment through a nested ecological systems intervention model that simultaneously operates through three levels of organization, individual, intra-organizational, and extra-organizational.

Applied developmental science has entered the 21st Century with a foundation of scientific knowledge and emerging theories and methods ripe with opportunity for promoting development through a social justice agenda (Fisher et al., 2012). In introducing this new section we hope to encourage developmental scientists to generate knowledge on the sources, experiences, and consequences of social inequities and the processes that can lead to social equality. In applying developmental science to the study and alleviation of developmental harms caused by structural injustices, our new section on *Promoting Positive Development Through Social Justice* will introduce readers to articles at the leading edge of generating knowledge and creating empirically based interventions that promote a just society that nurtures life-long healthy development in all of its citizens.

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