An Introduction to Exemplar Research: A Definition, Rationale, and Conceptual Issues

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Abstract

The exemplar methodology represents a useful yet underutilized approach to studying developmental constructs. It features an approach to research whereby individuals, entities, or programs that exemplify the construct of interest in a particularly intense or highly developed manner compose the study sample. Accordingly, it reveals what the upper ends of development look like in practice. Utilizing the exemplar methodology allows researchers to glimpse not only what is but also what is possible with regard to the development of a particular characteristic. The present chapter includes a definition of the exemplar methodology, a discussion of some key conceptual issues to consider when employing it in empirical studies, and a brief overview of the other chapters featured in this volume. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
Although exemplar research and methods have been more prominent in the last two decades within the developmental sciences (i.e., Bronk, 2008; Colby & Damon, 1992; Frimer & Walker, 2009; Hart & Matsuba, 2009; Reimer, Goudelock, & Walker, 2009), the strategy of using expert participants in research emerged early in the 20th century (see Allport, 1942; Murray, 1938). Such methods have been used effectively to explore lesser-understood and multifaceted domains of development by engaging the exemplar-participant as a collaborator in investigation. This volume seeks to introduce exemplar research to a wider audience. As a means of introduction, this chapter includes a definition of the methodology, an explanation of why it is important, and a discussion of some of the key conceptual issues to consider when applying it.

**Definition and Use**

The exemplar methodology has been around since Aristotle’s time. While Aristotle did not conduct empirical studies, he was interested in, among other things, the study of ethics. He believed that ethics was a practical rather than a theoretical matter, and as such, to learn about the development of ethics, virtues, and character, he examined highly ethical, virtuous, and wise individuals. In *Nicomachean Ethics* he wrote, “We approach the subject of practical wisdom by studying the persons to whom we attribute it” (trans. 1962, 6.5 1140a25). In other words, to understand how a complex construct functions and develops, it made sense to examine that construct in the lives of individuals who exhibited it in an intense and highly developed manner.

Maslow (1971) was one of the earliest scholars to actually employ an exemplar methodology in a research context. Interested in understanding how people achieve self-actualization, Maslow focused his research on individuals he believed were fully self-actualized. Development, he claimed, “is learning to grow and learning what to grow toward” (p. 169). Like Aristotle, Maslow argued that if we want to learn about ultimate human potential, we should study highly functional and enlightened individuals. The exemplar methodology represents an approach to research based on this philosophy.

More specifically, the exemplar methodology is a sample selection technique that involves the intentional selection of individuals, groups, or entities that exemplify the construct of interest in a particularly intense or highly developed manner (Bronk, 2012b). In using the exemplar methodology, researchers deliberately identify and study a sample of individuals or entities that exhibit a particular characteristic in an exceptional manner. In this way, the exemplar methodology features participants who are rare, not from the perspective of the characteristics they exhibit, but in the highly developed manner with which they demonstrate those particular attributes.

The primary strength of exemplar research is its ability to reveal what the leading edge of development entails. Exemplars reveal what complete or
nearly complete development looks like in real life. Whenever more typical individuals become capable of exhibiting actions indicative of the construct of interest, they are tracing the steps of where the exemplars have already been (Damon & Colby, this volume).

However, exemplars are not necessarily far removed from more typical individuals. For instance, they exhibit the same characteristics as others, only in a more highly developed manner. Further, while their development is exemplary in at least one area, it is likely to be typical or even deficient in other areas. For example, moral exemplars exhibit highly developed commitments to moral aims, but they do not necessarily have particularly highly developed social or cognitive abilities.

Because exemplars are similar to typical individuals in other regards, what we learn from them can be applied to people who demonstrate less complete but more common development around the construct of interest. In other words, what we learn from the exemplars can illuminate more typical developmental processes. Colby and Damon (1992), in writing about moral exemplars, note that “Great moral acts... spring from the same source as lesser ones” (p. 4). Put another way, moral exemplars are likely to perform more consequential moral acts than typical individuals, but they do so in essentially the same way.

Use of the exemplar methodology has increased in conjunction with the growth of the positive psychology movement (Benson & Scales, 2009; Damon, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon & King, 2001). Historically, psychologists have been concerned with understanding what can go wrong with regard to human behavior, emotions, social interactions, and cognition. The focus of this one-sided field of human functioning has brought about a highly developed knowledge of people's mental vulnerabilities, deficiencies, and illnesses, but it has largely ignored issues of human thriving and flourishing (Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010; Seligman, 2011; Wissing, 2000). Leaders in the field of psychology, recognizing the need for a deeper understanding of people's inner strengths and overall well-being, helped establish the new paradigm of positive psychology. As the number of studies based on this new paradigm has increased, so too has use of the exemplar methodology. The exemplar methodology lends itself to the study of optimal human development because of its focus on highly developed individuals. As a result, recent exemplar studies have tended to focus on “positive” constructs.

The exemplar methodology has been employed in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research designs. Historically, the exemplar methodology was used most commonly in qualitative studies situated within the broader case study tradition. Gordon Allport (1942), one of the early proponents of case study approaches, argued that idiographic methods were useful for countering the “thinness” of nomothetic methods.

In qualitative exemplar studies, researchers first design nomination criteria that will be used to qualify potential participants as exemplars.
Ideal nomination criteria are as concrete as possible, and at once narrow enough to be descriptive of a particularly highly developed group of individuals, but at the same time broad enough to capture a range of experiences and characteristics within the exemplary sample (Bronk, 2012b). In some cases, nomination criteria are generated by the researchers themselves (e.g., Damon, 2008), and in other cases, they are generated by relevant experts (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992). The precise nature of the nomination criteria is determined by the nature of the study. For example, a study of young care exemplars used the following as its nomination criteria: Youth care exemplars are involved in community, church, or youth group activities that benefit others; they have unusual or admirable family responsibilities; they exhibit a willingness to help those in need; they volunteer their time to help others; they display emotional and social maturity; they lead others; they practice open-mindedness about others; they demonstrate a willingness to look beyond the difficulties of living in an urban locale to a better future; they show compassion; they display a sense of humility about themselves; and they demonstrate a commitment to friends and family (Hart & Fegley, 1995, p. 1350). A study of youth purpose exemplars used the following criteria: Youth purpose exemplars demonstrate an enduring commitment to a long-term aim; they report that the aim is central to who they are; they are actively involved in working toward that aim and have plans for continuing to do so in the future; and they are committed to that aim at least in part because it allows them to contribute to the world beyond themselves (Bronk, 2012a, pp. 83–84).

Once nomination criteria have been established, they are shared with nominators who use them to identify potential exemplars. Nominators typically include relevant experts. Accordingly, in a study of moral exemplars, nominators included moral philosophers, ethicists, theologians, historians, and social scientists (Colby & Damon, 1992), and in a study of spiritual exemplars, they included spiritual leaders and scholars from a wide range of religious and spiritual backgrounds (King, 2010). Researchers then select a sample from the pool of nominated exemplars that is typically balanced for age, gender, ethnicity, or other relevant demographic variables.

Often qualitative exemplar studies are longitudinal and follow individuals over the course of a particularly important developmental period (Bronk, 2008, 2011, 2012a; Damon, 2008). Other times interviews are conducted only once, but in these cases they typically last several hours and feature accounts of participants’ developmental journeys (Colby & Damon, 1992; Hart & Fegley, 1995; Matsuba & Walker, 2005). In keeping with the Aristotelian tradition, many qualitative exemplar studies have focused on aspects of moral and ethical development. For example, recent qualitative exemplar studies have featured samples of purpose exemplars (Bronk, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2012a), moral exemplars (Colby & Damon, 1992; MacRenato, 1995; Mastain, 2007; Matsuba & Walker, 2005), spiritual exemplars (King, 2010), altruistic exemplars (Oliner & Oliner, 1988), bravery exemplars...
(Walker & Frimer, 2007), and care exemplars (Hart & Fegley, 1995; Walker & Frimer, 2007).

There are many strengths of case study exemplar studies. First, they represent a person-centered approach to research. As such, they can provide a rich and textured view of the whole person and the entire construct. Because case study exemplar research avoids the granularity inherent in many other methodologies, it has been used with some regularity by developmental psychologists interested in seeing how individuals who demonstrate virtues, developmental assets, indicators of thriving, and other positive characteristics develop and change over time (see Bronk, 2008, 2011, 2012a; Colby & Damon, 1992; Hart & Fegley, 1995).

Next, case study exemplar research provides an opportunity to view the leading edge of development in a real-world context. Whereas other research approaches often try to strip away the potentially muddying influences of experience, context, and confounding variables, the case study exemplar approach does not. As a result of focusing on the lived experience, the exemplar methodology can provide insights into the processes and experiences of a particular phenomenon that likely could not be gained in any other way. What does it look like to lead a life of caring (Hart & Fegley, 1995)? How do individuals who have dedicated their lives to service develop a moral sense (Colby & Damon, 1992)? How do young environmental exemplars view their work in relation to their emerging sense of self (Pratt, 2011)? Case study exemplar research is immensely useful in answering these types of process-oriented and experience-oriented developmental questions in real-world settings.

While the exemplar methodology is more commonly used in qualitative studies, it has also been used in quantitative research. In these cases, nomination criteria are intentionally broader in scope to produce a larger sample of exemplars. In a recent quantitative exemplar study (Matsuba & Walker, 2004), researchers asked the executive directors of a variety of social organizations to nominate young adults within their groups who had demonstrated “extraordinary moral commitments.” An interpretation of what constituted an “extraordinary moral commitment” was left up to the lay nominators. Because the research team sought to identify exemplars who reflected a “folk” conception of moral excellence, the decision to use fairly vague nomination criteria and to include lay individuals as nominators was an intentional one; the team was concerned that expert nominators and more prescriptive nomination criteria would reflect too narrow a conception of morality. Other studies have similarly employed a folk psychology approach. For instance, Walker and Pitts (1998) polled college students to identify a normative understanding of morality. In other quantitative exemplar studies, nomination criteria have been based on winning a particular award. For example, Walker and Frimer (2007) selected a sample of care and bravery exemplars from a pool of individuals who had won care and bravery awards given out by the Canadian government.
Quantitative exemplar studies similarly offer clear advantages. With larger sample sizes, researchers are able to make predictions about the frequency and prevalence of their findings with the possibility of generalizing their results more broadly. Nevertheless, gathering larger samples of exemplars can be challenging depending on how restrictive researchers are in their conceptions of exemplarity.

Finally, the exemplar methodology is particularly useful in mixed-methods approaches (e.g., Matsuba & Walker, 2004; Walker & Frimer, 2007). For example, in a three-pronged approach to the study of youth purpose, researchers at the Stanford Center on Adolescence conducted a nationwide survey of young people’s purposes in life (Damon, 2008). Surveys administered to a national sample of youth revealed the forms and prevalence of purpose among American youth today. A subset of individuals, whose survey responses suggested they were either deficient or typical in their commitment to purpose, was invited to participate in interviews. Finally, a small sample of highly developed purpose exemplars participated in in-depth, case study–style interviews, and this line of inquiry provided key insights into what the leading edge of the development of purpose looks like in practice. Taken together, this mixed-methods approach sheds light on deficient, typical, and exemplary forms of purpose among youth today. Accordingly, researchers were able to glean critical insights into the full spectrum of purpose development.

**Strengths of the Exemplar Methodology**

Whether as a part of a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods study, the exemplar methodology offers an effective means of exploring unfamiliar areas of development. The moral exemplar studies published in the 1990s (i.e., Colby & Damon, 1992; Hart & Fegley, 1995) challenged the field of moral development and Kohlberg’s reigning stage theory of the day. These studies expanded the current understanding of morality and introduced the importance of moral identity and moral judgment. Conclusions from these studies began to illuminate the complexities of the moral life and of living with sustained moral commitments.

A key strength of exemplar studies is the way they include participants as collaborators, considering participants’ perspectives in investigation and analysis. Participants’ experiences, beliefs, values, and meanings represent seminal data. The exemplar methodology rests on the assumption that participants manifest the phenomenon under investigation in a highly developed manner and are therefore experts who can provide valid input through surveys, questionnaires, and interviews. A study of youth purpose exemplars generated interesting and important findings regarding the origins of purpose that would not have been possible without including participants as co-collaborators. In interviews with the youth, researchers and participants discovered that the young people’s purposes sprang from
opportunities they encountered to apply their personal skills and talents to address personally meaningful social needs (Bronk, 2012a).

The nominating procedures inherent in an exemplar methodology are also useful for operationalizing complex psychological constructs. The emergence of the study of positive psychology, positive youth development, and human thriving ushered in a focus on optimal development and positive outcomes in children, youth, and adults. Although this “new vision” for what children and youth can become is inspiring, defining and operationalizing positive constructs in contextually and developmentally appropriate ways represents a significant challenge. Many of these constructs are informed by philosophical, ethical, cultural, or religious traditions in which psychologists are not well trained. For instance, psychology as a discipline is not equipped to define what ought to be moral, or what ought to constitute thriving, or what it ought to mean to have purpose. However, the exemplar methodology sets out a useful process for operationalizing these complex constructs. Identifying and applying nomination criteria, with input from relevant and well-informed scholars and practitioners, allows cultural and contextual norms to influence the operationalization of these constructs and to inform the nature of exemplarity. For example, in a recent study on spiritual exemplars, the research team turned to specific monotheistic congregations to identify criteria for nominating exemplars within their own congregations (Reimer & Dueck, 2012). Muslim congregants designed the criteria for nominating Muslim exemplars, and members of a synagogue identified the criteria for nominating Jewish exemplars. The criteria were intentionally nonstandard across religious traditions, since what it meant to be a religious exemplar varied by faith tradition. King (2010) used a different approach to designing nomination criteria to identify adolescent spiritual exemplars from six different countries. She and her team used an iterative process that drew on the current psychological literature and incorporated the perspective of expert panels of diverse scholars and practitioners. The result was a set of culturally sensitive nomination criteria that selected for more general expressions of spirituality in a wide range of faiths.

Conceptual Issues in Applying the Exemplar Methodology

While the exemplar methodology has many strengths, certain conceptual issues need to be considered before effectively employing it. Included in this are a number of key decisions that must be made, including the decision to focus on ideal states rather than more typical ones, the decision regarding who will identify exemplars, and finally the decision of whether to use a comparison sample.

An overarching assumption behind studying exemplars is that we can learn from individuals who demonstrate a particular characteristic in a highly developed way. However, while we argue there is much to be learned
by studying these individuals, this issue has been a source of some debate. In Susan Wolf’s (1982) article “Moral Saints,” the author philosophically questions whether moral perfection is something to which we ought to strive so as to improve our well-being. In her portrayals, moral sainthood, which is represented by people who place priority in living according to set moral principles, such as moral utilitarianism, is both unappealing and unrealistic. Rather, most researchers who study exemplarity adopt a more naturalistic perspective and believe that more typical individuals possess, to a degree, the same capacities and traits as exemplars, and that through their own character or with the aid of social support, they too can realistically attain the level of exemplarity (Flanagan, 1993). While achieving exemplarity may not always be desirable, attaining fuller development of a particular characteristic may be, and exemplar research can be used to identify individual differences and social support factors that foster further growth within a specified domain.

Another salient conceptual issue involves who defines and operationalizes the exemplar construct. That is, who defines who and what an exemplar is. Typically, this process involves a number of steps. As previously outlined, individuals design the nomination criteria; nominators apply the criteria to identify a pool of potential exemplars; and researchers select a sample from that pool to include in the study. Researchers typically determine who is involved in each of these three steps. Take, for example, Colby and Damon’s (1992) study of moral exemplars. In this study, the researchers influenced the selection process by determining who would generate the criteria, who would apply it, and which individuals from the pool of potential exemplars would be included in their study. In the case of Matsuba and Walker (2004), the researchers had people from municipal social organizations nominate moral exemplars within their organizations, and then justify their nominations. Finally, Walker and Frimer (2007) selected bravery and care exemplars based on national awards given by the Canadian government. However, it is unclear which exact criteria were used and who applied the criteria in choosing the award recipients.

What these examples from the moral field demonstrate is that how one selects exemplars will invariably influence how exemplarity is conceptualized in the study. For example, by asking social organizations for nominations, Matsuba and Walker (2004) captured the beneficent-caring facet of morality. Walker and Frimer (2007) captured both the caring and brave-courageous facets. Further, other people besides the researcher contribute to the nomination process and thus influence how exemplarity is conceived. In Colby and Damon’s (1992) study, nomination criteria were generated by individuals who were highly educated in ethical matters, whereas Matsuba and Walker (2004) relied on lay conceptions of morality. Each group of individuals provided its conceptual understanding of moral exemplarity, and so the kinds of people nominated reflected each group’s understanding of the morality construct.
Not only do researchers need to consider who is involved in the sample selection process, but they also need to consider what constitutes being “highly developed” in some area. Conceptually and methodologically, exemplars are different from more typical individuals on some domain dimension. But, what point on this dimension do people have to pass in order for them to fall within the exemplar category? In most exemplar studies this is not clearly defined. For studies that use a list of criteria, nominators tend to simply check “yes” or “no” with regard to whether potential participants meet each criterion. In other studies, individuals rely on their intuition to determine whether potential participants meet the criteria. Whatever the strategy, what typically is not discussed is the mental standard upon which nominators are comparing their nominee. Researchers using the exemplar methodology should strive to make this clear.

In addition, researchers interested in using the exemplar methodology need to consider whether it makes sense to include a “comparison” group. Methodologically, many studies have included a normative group of individuals against which to compare exemplars. These have been useful in illustrating whether exemplars do, in fact, differ on the domains of interest and on other dimensions of interest to the researcher. However, one confound that typically is not controlled is the “placebo effect.” Typically, researchers reveal to the exemplar participants the fact that they have been nominated as exemplars. Such an effect may account for the significant differences between the two groups. Few studies have addressed this issue.

Finally, the studies on exemplarity in this volume focus on positive, prosocial domains. What has not been integrated into this body of work are exemplarity studies in less positive, less prosocial domains. For example, what does exemplarity look like in the domain of business, sports, politics, organized crime, sociopathy? Certainly, there have been studies looking at exemplars in each of these areas. However, no other domain of exemplar studies—at least to our knowledge—includes the variety of methodological strategies or discussions of relevant conceptual issues.

It is important for researchers to consider these practical and conceptual issues when conducting exemplar research. We raise them not because we can offer easy or consistent solutions to them, but because we believe any study will be more effective if researchers have first thoughtfully considered them. The best solution is likely to be determined on a case-by-case basis, influenced by the particular nature of the exemplar study being conducted.

The Current Volume

Other chapters included in the current volume explore some of these conceptual issues in greater detail, highlight particular strengths of the methodology, and address some of the approach’s more significant limitations. The
second chapter, by William Damon and Anne Colby, provides an important rationale for the necessity of exemplar research. The authors argue that the use of high-performing exemplars as participants allows for an investigation of a complete account of an area of human functioning. They point out that social science studies without exemplar subjects can only yield a picture of deficient and typical growth; exemplars are needed to provide a picture of complete or nearly complete development. The third chapter by Lawrence J. Walker reviews a program of research that has led to the identification of motivational factors associated with moral behaviors. Specifically, the work of Walker and his colleagues identify agentic and communal motivations as predictors of moral behaviors, and they propose that within moral exemplars it is this synergy between these two motivations that forms the moral core.

The next chapter considers spiritual exemplars. Chapter 4, by Pamela Ebstyne King, Ross A. Oakes Mueller, and James Furrow, highlights the potential strengths of exemplar studies in exploring both common and particular expressions of human development. The authors discuss how the method’s focus on exemplarity allows for the exploration of cultural ideals that are often overlooked by current developmental methodologies. By examining some of the distinctions between cross-cultural, cultural, and indigenous psychologies, the authors explain how nomination procedures, data gathering, and data analysis allow for universal and culturally specific investigations.

The fifth chapter, by M. Kyle Matsuba and Michael W. Pratt, offers insight into the development of environmental activists. Specifically, this study of committed environmental exemplars illuminates the processes and pathways leading to positive environmental behaviors. The authors offer a review of a sample of activists’ lives, focusing on early childhood and adolescent experiences that contribute to a developmental model and identify pathways to developing an environmental identity.

The final contribution, by Daniel A. Hart, Theresa Murzyn, and Lisa Archibald, offers a critical commentary on the previous chapters and on use of the method in general. In addition to highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the exemplar methodology, Hart and his colleagues draw important distinctions between exemplarity research and biographical and psychobiographical research. They offer insight into why interest in this approach has grown recently and discuss the inspirational quality of exemplar studies.

Not only are exemplar strategies being used in developmental psychology, but they are also being used in neuropsychology and are relevant to social science researchers working in a variety of domains. This unique approach is timely, allowing for in-depth exploration of multifaceted and less understood domains of development that take personal, contextual, and cultural complexities into consideration.
References


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