Published in final edited form as:

J Adolesc Res. 2013 November 1; 28(6): 642–663. doi:10.1177/0743558413480834.

“You Must Know Where You Come From”: South African Youths' Perceptions of Religion in Time of Social Change

Aerika S. Brittian¹, Nina Lewin², and Shane A. Norris²

¹University of Illinois at Chicago, IL, USA

²University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

This study examined South African youths' perceptions of religion during a period of social and economic transition. In-depth interviews were conducted with 55 Black South African youth (age 18) living in the Johannesburg-Soweto metropolitan area. Data were analyzed in a manner consistent with grounded theory methodology and structural coding. Beliefs about the function of religion were captured by the following themes: provides support, connection to the past, moral compass, promotes healthy development, and intersections between African traditional practices and Christian beliefs. Themes are discussed and directions for future research are presented. In addition, applications of the current research and implications for promoting youths' resilience are offered.

Keywords

religion; culture; positive youth development; South Africa

The study of youths' religious development has burgeoned over the past 30 years, with an increasing number of disciplines recognizing the importance of this aspect of human development. Specifically, there has been noticeable interest in religion and spirituality in the social sciences around positive youth development (King, 2003). For example, prior literature suggests that religious participation fosters identity development, a critical aspect of youth development (King, 2003; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). In multicultural societies, religious participation gives young people the opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs and values as they develop worldviews about other faith traditions and cultures (Smith & Snell, 2009). Furthermore, religious communities may foster intergenerational relationships and provide youth with opportunities for building social capital (e.g., expanding support networks; King, 2003).

© The Author(s) 2013

Corresponding Author: Aerika S. Brittian, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1040 W. Harrison St. (mc 147), Chicago, IL 60607, USA. brittian@uic.edu.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Despite this growing interest in religiosity, few studies within the social sciences have examined the meaning of religion among youth beyond a Western context (e.g., Dollahite, Layton, Bahr, Walker, & Thatcher, 2009; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Layton, Dollahite, & Hardy, 2011). Researchers cannot assume that religious and spiritual development is the same for those in high-income countries compared to those in developing countries (Imam, Nurullah, Makol-Abdul, Rahman, & Noon, 2009). For example, as will be discussed later in this review, South African youth are exploring their religious beliefs in a context that is marked by social, political, and economic changes. Therefore, to address this gap in the literature, the current study examined South African youths' narratives about religion in a changing social environment and gave voice to youths' perceptions of religion in their national context.

The Study Of Religion From A Developmental Systems Framework

The current study is theoretically based in two developmental perspectives: the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer, 2008), and the Positive Youth Development perspective (PYD; e.g., Benson, 1997). PVEST provides a useful, integrative framework for examining developmental outcomes among people living under conditions of high stress, inequality, and violence, which characterize the living conditions of Soweto/Johannesburg. For example, a large proportion of Black South African youth reside in stressful conditions that expose them to risks, such as high crime, violence in and around the home, and a failing school system (Seedat, Nierkerk, Jewkes, Suffla, & Ratele, 2009; Steyn, Badenhorst, & Kamper, 2010). However, we are aware that living in such conditions does not directly lead to negative outcomes for youth. The PYD perspective asserts that, whether it is through the influence of youths' own individual characteristics, or through the involvement of ecological supports, such as religious participation, all young people have the capacity for healthy development (Benson, 1997; Damon & Gregory, 2002; Lerner & Benson, 2003). Therefore, the current study was designed to investigate sources of resilience among these youth.

An Overview of South Africa's Social, Political, and Economic Climate

With the collapse of apartheid in the early 1990s came a new understanding for South African life, in terms of policy implementation and socially acceptable practice. The idea of the “rainbow nation” and the emphasis on a South African national identity emerged after the democratic elections of 1994 (Peberdy, 2001). Under apartheid, the previous political system, White South Africans were awarded the most privileges, followed by people of mixed ancestry (Coloureds), Asians (mostly Indian but including Chinese immigrants), and finally Black South Africans.

Black South Africans now represent not only the numerical majority but the political majority as well (79.5%). White South Africans (9.2%), people of mixed ancestry (8.9%), and Asians (2.5%) generally have higher social and financial status (Appelgryn & Bornman, 1996). Despite opportunities for upward mobility under the current political system (e.g., legislation for equality, financing to improve utilization of public health and education services, and Black economic empowerment), the social dynamics in South Africa have not

fundamentally changed (Charasse-Pouele & Fournier, 2006). It remains to be seen what influence this environment has on youths' religious development.

Religious Climate in South Africa

In addition to the changing political and social climate, the history of religion in South Africa is complex and contentious (Gunner, 2005). Until the last decade, the South African religious landscape was dominated by the integration of traditional practices and Christianity within the “African Independent” churches. For example, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) is currently the largest denomination of this kind in South Africa. Although Christianity is the dominant force in religious life, other religious groups are present as well (e.g., Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and African traditionalism). The most rapidly growing churches appear to be Evangelical/Pentecostal (Ganiel, 2010), which seem to draw youthful congregations (Johnson, 2009). This movement is credited with a profound reworking of the attitudes, knowledge, and behavior necessary to articulate with a third stage of capitalism (Schlemmer, 2008). These churches are, to some extent, globalized products of international Christianity (Frahm-Arp, 2010). Nonetheless, they are in the complex process of developing a local cultural identity within South Africa, have generated a number of unaffiliated mega churches, and are often entrepreneurial in both theology and construction of congregations (Schlemmer, 2008).

African traditional religion refers to a set of beliefs, customs, and practices indigenous to Southern Africa. It is similar to folk versions of Hinduism, not “an organized religion based on shared doctrines of faith” with a hierarchy of authority, but rather the sacred is “embedded in diverse ritual practices and ancestral traditions” (Hansen, 2006, p. 12). It is considered to be an expression of ethnic cultures (e.g., Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa). African traditional religions are constructed around fluid oral traditions that manifest as a set of interacting practices, worldviews, and beliefs that create multiple life worlds (Germond & Cochrane, 2005; Olivier, Cochrane, Schmid, & Graham, 2006). In addition, African traditional religions have been described as positing a unity between the social, natural, and the supernatural world, and are deeply concerned with disturbances in this harmony (Selepe & Edwards, 2008). Respect for ancestors and a centralization of their importance, a belief in the possibilities of witchcraft, evil forces, malignant and protective ceremonies, the importance of dreams, the possibilities of information being received via divination, and the primacy of healing are reoccurring concepts of African traditional religions (Anderson, 2000).

It has been difficult to accurately estimate the prevalence of African traditional religion in present-day South Africa, because it is often not reported due to social desirability bias (Haron & Kipton, 2008). Furthermore, it is unclear how much the deeply urbanized young people in the current study still hold a “typically African” religious worldview or have integrated other-faith traditions. It has been suggested that African traditional beliefs are slowly being eradicated among young South African urbanites due to social change and adoption of Western worldviews, particularly Christianity.

Religion and South African Youth Development

Information regarding South African youths' religious participation is sparse. However, largely due to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, more attention has been given to religion in and across Africa with regard to its impact on adolescent and adult sexual behavior (e.g., Gyimah, 2007; Takyi, 2003). Previous research has indicated that religiosity has the potential for buffering stress among South African women (Copeland-Linder, 2006), but little research on youth development has been explored. A longitudinal study of South African youth and parents found that "More than 73 percent of mothers indicated that religion is very important in the household" (Barbarin & Richter, 2001). Affiliation to church was among adolescents' top-rated social relationships, in addition to racial and language group affiliation (Norris et al., 2008). Results from a demographic study in Cape Town reported adolescents' religious affiliations as 34% Protestant, 12.4% Catholic, 9.4% Muslim, 4.4% traditional, 35% other, and 5.9 % no affiliation (Gana, 2004). The 2006 Usuboma Youth Fund reported that 62.6% of youth attended religious services at least once a month, and of those who attended, 10.9% attended daily or almost daily. In the same sample, 20.2% reported that they never attend religious services. However, youth were not asked about participation in traditional ceremonies. Thus, the limited research that does exist has been largely descriptive in nature (e.g., count of religious affiliation) and has not been able to elucidate the process through which South African youth draw meaning from their religious experiences.

It is against this unique background that the potential social, psychological, and material resources that churches offer may become critically important for youth development. Churches may be well equipped to help youth maximize available opportunities while avoiding the many threats to their successful adult development. South African townships with the mix of pervasive problems and occasional opportunities might be compared to the social and structural context of minorities in urban America and the United Kingdom. Among these communities, Wallace and Williams (1997) found that religion buffered the impact of resource-restricted environments by creating what is in effect a virtual neighborhood.

Current Study

Adolescence is an ideal time in the life span to examine the formative stages of religious development. For example, enhanced cognitive abilities permit young people to begin thinking about abstract ideas, such as religion (Kuhn, 2009; Steinberg, 2005). Smith and Denton (2005) noted that religion influences adolescents' lives in a number of ways, including enhanced development of moral order, promoting learned competencies, increasing social and organizational ties, and providing emotional and social support (Smith & Denton, 2005). We sought to examine if religion influences the lives of South African youth in similar ways.

Participants in the current study were selected from a cohort of youth who were born in 1990, at the end of apartheid. Youth in the current study have been exposed to the "rainbow nation" climate of equality but have experienced the legacy of the apartheid system. While

previous studies have focused primarily on Western population samples (e.g., Layton et al., 2011; Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009), this study sought to examine the influence of religion among a sample of African youth, specifically those living in an urban region of South Africa. Given the context in which our participants were residing, mainly underdeveloped locations in a middle income nation, we propose that a better understanding of mechanisms through which positive development may be promoted is in order.

Given previous literature, we expected a description of practices, beliefs, and values to emerge out of youth' religious experiences that is both consistent with U.S. studies but we believed some descriptions would be uniquely South African, such as a description of African traditional practices. We further expected to find that adolescents would affiliate with one faith tradition or none. However, given the qualitative nature of our study, it was possible to capture dual affiliations as well. Based on the findings of previous research, we expected that youth would gain a variety of benefits from their religious participation, such as emotional and social support. In addition, we expected that adolescents' religious experiences would generally be positive. Finally, given the history of religion in South Africa, we expected that adolescents would perceive a contentious relationship between mainstream religions (e.g., Christianity and Islam) and African traditional religious practices.

Method

Study Design and Participants

Participants for the current study were recruited from a 20-year longitudinal study of child and adolescent health and development in South Africa, the Birth to Twenty Longitudinal Study (BT20; Richter, Norris, Pettifor, Yach, & Cameron, 2007). The BT20 cohort was defined by the timing of a singleton birth within a 7-week period between late April and early June of 1990, as well as continued residence for at least 6 months after the birth of the child within the metropolitan area of Johannesburg-Soweto, South Africa ($n = 3,273$; Richter, Norris, & De Wet, 2004). The cohort was initially recruited from antenatal and public health facilities, and cross-checked with all the government birth notifications during the 7-week time period. The pilot studies, research goals, and enrollment methods of BT20 have been documented in detail in several publications (e.g., Richter et al., 2004; Richter et al., 2007). To date BT20 has a 70% follow-up rate, with attrition occurring for reasons, such as death, abandonment or adoption, and migration; the latter being the most common (Richter et al., 2004).

For the current study, a purposeful sample of 55 Black South African youth (all age 18) were selected varying by geographic location (50% participants from historically disadvantaged neighborhoods and 50% from Johannesburg suburbs) and gender (33 females and 22 males). We purposefully attempted to sample equal number of participants from historically dis-advantaged neighborhoods (low to very low SES) and suburbs (e.g., middle to high SES), to draw a range of experiences that adolescents may encounter in such an economically diverse setting. The adolescents living in the suburbs can be said to have experienced a complete transition from apartheid conditions to those in Soweto who might

still be disadvantaged. However, we did not find any major neighborhood effects, indicating that transition seems to have affected all of this generation equally.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand Committee for Research on Human Subjects (i.e., M081029, the equivalent of IRB approval), and all participants provided written informed consent to be interviewed and recorded. Provision was made for psychological counseling but it was not used by any of the participants. For their participation, adolescents were given travel reimbursement, a movie voucher, and a popcorn and coke voucher.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted in a private room at the BT20 offices at Baragwaneth Hospital or the University of Witwatersrand medical school, by two doctoral student researchers in 2008. Translation services were available to the participants; however, all the youth refused the service and all interviews were conducted in English. The full interview consisted of open-ended questions around the normative meaning of religion, the functional uses of religion, youths' personal experiences, and thoughts about religion and spirituality in South Africa. For the present study, we report on the pertinent results. Additional data were collected on other topics, such as in-group/out-group bias, dating preferences, stereotyping, and volunteering. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company in South Africa.

Data Analysis Plan

Our analysis of the data focused on content within the interviews related to the research question (Saldaña, 2009) in two stages. The first stage involved open coding performed independently by two doctoral research assistants on a subsample of the interviews (5%) to develop an initial codebook which was based on local knowledge and published literature. The first round of coding, with a subset of data, resulted in 65% agreement between the coders. In cases where there was disagreement, the principal investigator reviewed the data and together the group agreed upon coding for data in question. In the second round of open coding, the data were recoded using the revised codebook and interrater agreement reached 90%. Once an acceptable level of interrater agreement was established, one researcher coded the full data set (all 55 interviews) using the list of available codes. Over the course of a year the two research assistants corresponded regularly to discuss revisions to the code-book, if needed, to discuss recurring themes, and to identify new themes.

In the second stage of data analysis, a code tree was developed to link individual codes to general themes and concepts. For example, experiences such as “coping through prayer” “deal with grief through belief” and “gained healing” were classified under the theme *Provides support*. Experiences such as “know yourself,” “know where you come from,” and “concern for loss of values” were classified under the theme *Connection to the past*. Analytic memos were used to document ideas and concerns regarding the research project. Qualitative data were analyzed with Atlas.ti software.

Results

We found an array of religious beliefs, ranging from intense and deeply involved to nonchurch goers and a few nonbelievers, among our sample of youth. Self-identified religious affiliations included African independent ($n = 2$), African traditional ($n = 4$), Anglican ($n = 1$), Apostolic ($n = 5$), Catholic ($n = 3$), Christian ($n = 28$), Jehovah's Witness ($n = 1$), Methodist ($n = 1$), ZCC ($n = 2$), refusal/pass ($n = 2$), and no religious affiliation ($n = 6$). Among those who identified as religious, 67% reported dual affiliations (e.g., Catholic and African traditional, Christian and African traditional). As will be discussed, youth provided novel insight into religious experiences based in their particular social context and cultural orientation. Youth were asked a series of open-ended questions about the role of religion, such as "What role, if any, do you think religion plays in your life?" Results were captured in five themes: provides support, connection to the past, moral compass, promotes healthy development, and intersections between African traditional practices and Christian beliefs.

Provides Support

Many studies show that religion serves as a type of support in terms of providing emotional, social, and sometimes financial resources. For South African youth, the findings were no different. We expected that low-resourced participants would report receiving financial support, but this type of support was rare. Religious youth reported that engaging in acts of prayer and belief in a Higher Power helped them to cope with difficult situations. For example, Makane (female, township) stated, "When I read the Bible, sometimes I feel inspired." Lerato (female, suburb) replied, "You must tell God everything and then I did that. I mean, after that I felt, like, relieved. I felt relieved, I felt happy, and I said okay, fine, it is the way like to follow, it is the right way to follow." Tale (female, township) reported that religion protected her. When asked to describe the types of things she was protected from, she stated "like getting mugged, getting raped you know things like that. Like... like spoiling my future you know, so like, I just believe that God is there you see."

With regard to social support, youth almost uniformly described religious communities as supportive. For example, some youth perceived support from multigenerational religious communities. Thembe (female, suburb) explained, "At church, the pastor's there, like the pastor is just around the corner, like he knows, the community is one loving community. Our pastor is around the corner, our youth leaders are a phone call away. They are also my father figures." Another youth, Matimba (male, suburb) stated "I don't live with my father and stuff but for the mere fact that I get to see him once in a while and I do have that father, like fatherly people around me." Simphiwe (male, township) replied, "The people you have around you [church community], they influence you and they help you grow."

As stated above, a small number of youth reported receiving some type of financial assistance from their religious communities. Among these cases, youth typically received financial means to purchase religious clothing or books (e.g., a Bible), as Mafuane (female, township) explained "[When] we go to church we are wearing a uniform, so some of our church members didn't have like that uniform, so our church, we were combined, some of those who don't afford to buy that uniform, I mean it is like 400 bucks, so they donate to

them that uniform you see.” More commonly adolescents and their families were contributing financially to their place of worship through tithes and offerings instead of receiving financial means from their religious community.

A small number of youth reported negative religious experiences involving their religious community. For example, negative interactions with religious communities were related to the belief that adults were hypocritical and that adults do not listen to young people. For example, Modiehi (female, suburb) told us: “I have had experiences where adults have told me not to do a certain thing and then they go around the corner and they do the exact same thing you know. They tell me not to do this, but then they carry on doing it.”

Connection to the Past

In the current study, youth indicated that religion connected them to the past. Topics discussed under this theme were ideas such as, the importance of knowing where you come from and concern about the loss of traditional values. The idea of “know where you come from” was a topic often discussed among youth in this study. This finding was particularly interesting given that the participants in this study were relatively young in age. For example, Lerato (female, township) explained “I think religion is important because you have to know where you are coming from and where you are going, you know, to succeed in your life and have a better future. When the interviewer asked, “Have you gained anything from being a part of your religion?” Katleho (male, township) replied, “Yes, because I know where I come from and I know myself, I know things I must do and what I must not do.” Another youth, Nokuthula (female, suburb) stated, “You need to know the Lord and you need to know where you come from.”

With regard to loss of traditional values, Kagiso (female, township) explained, “There are less people now [engaging in cultural practices] because this all touches, it is just that all people are losing their culture. They are not going back to their grandmother and grandpa the way they did in their culture. They do not do that. They just follow this thing of the universal churches [an Evangelical/Pentecostal denomination] because they do not believe in ancestors.” Thandiswa (female, suburb) stated, “Everybody is looking at money now. If we are all for money, we have forgotten our roots, it doesn't matter what roots you are from, you just want to know if you have got enough money for tomorrow. If I can get on that seat and kind of push him away, that is what we believe in now.”

Moral Compass

Religion provided some youth with a moral compass by providing guidance, direction, and crystallizing their sense of right and wrong. For example, responses related to “sense of purpose” and “provide discipline” were coded under this theme. When asked what have you gained from being a part of this religion, Dimakatso (female, township) responded “I have gained. That you must respect one another and you must not lie at church and about the word of God, but you must respect him, and always try to do the good things, not the bad.” Lefu (female, township) reported “I learn more to build my own self, to know what is wrong, what is right and which is which, ja.”¹ When the interviewer asked “So when you say build yourself, in what ways?” she replied “Like I have to learn that if I have done a

mistake, I have to forgive somebody. Because I do not know, but God has forgiven me, because if you are a child of God you have to accept each other, White, Black or coloured.”

Promotes Healthy Development

The fourth theme related to the function of religion was around healthy development. This content was originally included under the theme *moral compass*. However, an overwhelming amount of responses pertained to abstaining from risky behaviors, indicating that this content went beyond knowing what is right or wrong (e.g., helping others in need), and specifically focused on physical and psychosocial health-related behaviors. Topics discussed under this theme were related to the reduction of negative behaviors and promoting positive behaviors. Some youth explained that religion was helpful to them because it deterred risky behaviors, such as drinking, drugs, and unprotected sex. Kagiso (female, township) explained “... if you are with God always, you are in a safe place, but if you are going partying, forgetting about your family and your relatives, you are going to get in a position where you are going to be pregnant, you are going to get all these diseases or you can die.” Other youth focused on the promotion of positive behaviors, stating that religion encouraged hope, love, gratefulness, and motivation to succeed. Mafuane (female, township) explained “I gained hope [from her faith], because I lost my hope, I lost my strength, I used to judge myself, say that I am a failure, but since I am a Christian, I am like no, there is nothing like that. I am not a failure.” This theme encompassed youth who responded that religion either promoted positive life outcomes, deterred negative behaviours, or both.

Intersections Between African Traditional Practices and Christian Beliefs

Some youth thought that cultural practices and religious values should coexist. For example, Vangile (female, suburb) stated “You can mix culture and Christianity together because there are things you have to do in your culture and you can go to church at the same time.” Matimba (male, township) explained, “I am Zulu and at the same time Catholic, it blends in together.” Lebohang (female, suburb) stated, “I made it to fit in because well. I believe in my culture. I also believe in Christianity and you get Tswana's from Botswana, Rustenburg, in my church, you know? So ja, I kind of made it to fit in. I can balance both.” Nobanzi (female, suburb) elaborated:

“In a way it is related, because if you think about the Catholic Church, they pray to saints and stuff, and saints were people that used to live on earth that died. So in a way it is nearly the same thing, but I just think the ancestral is a bit more prominent, because it is someone close to you, that you have had in your life, you know that person has also done good and bad, which is a reflection of how life is, because no one is perfect, you know. And more, the Catholic Church, the saints are always perceived to be perfect people, so I tend to have my ancestral beliefs more because it is people that I have known and knowing the wrong they have done and all that stuff, so it is easier for me to accept them for who they are and ask them for

¹Notes: Ja is a grammatical term, synonymous in South Africa with yes.

help when I am going through my own thing because I know that they are real in a way.”

Other youth asserted that culture and religion should be separate. For example, Sandile (male, township) stated, “We [church] only pray, but in the culture they will tell you, you have to cut off a chicken's neck, drink the blood and smoke that snuff and stuff. At church we don't do those things.” Thandiswa (female, suburb) replied, “They [church] do not want you to believe in ancestors. They said they are dead people.” According to these youth, cultural practices did not fit in with religious practices.

Discussion

The current study examined South African youths' religious experiences in their own words. Going beyond what demographic studies have done, we examined what meaning youth derived from their experiences. Interviews conducted with 55 Black South African youth revealed a number of themes consistent with previous literature and that contributes a unique perspective from a developing country context. In this section, we provide explanations for research findings, limitations of the current research, suggest directions for future studies, and make recommendations for application.

Similar to previous studies on religious development (e.g., as discussed by King & Roeser, 2009; see too Warren, Lerner, & Phelps, 2011), we found that religion and spirituality provided youth with emotional and social support. Youth in the current study drew an immense amount of resources from their religious participation (e.g., guidance, direction, hope). In some cases, youth perceived protection from risk through a Higher Power, and in other cases the church strengthened social networks and served as an extended family. For these youth, religious experiences were deeply meaningful and well-articulated. On the other hand, religious communities were a source of conflict when adults did not respect youths' views or exhibited hypocritical behavior as perceived by the youth. Independence and autonomy seeking is one of the key developmental tasks of adolescence (e.g., McElhaney & Allen, 2001), and our young people were on the verge of late adolescence/emerging adulthood. Therefore, we expected to find some variation around separation from adults and youth viewing adults as fallible (Steinberg, 2001). Furthermore, we anticipated talks around religion becoming less important when youth became more independent of adult influence. However, we found that when conflicts between youth and adults in a religious congregation existed, youth reported choosing to attend elsewhere. These experiences did not diminish youths' religious experiences. Rather, most youth attributed these behaviors to the individual and not to religion itself. Therefore, future research may want to examine how religious youth cope with negative religious experiences around issues such as hypocrisy and religious doubts.

One novel contribution of this research is that, by interviewing adolescents, we were able to identify a construct that has not been examined in previous surveys; specifically, religion provides youth with a connection to the past. The idea of past connecting to future is an African-centered theme. For example, Parham, White, and Ajamu (2000) posited that one of the tenants of an African worldview is the belief that “time is marked by a series of events

that have been shared with others in the past or are occurring in the present (p. 13).” This finding may be uniquely South African or it may exist in other cultural groups as well. We believe the latter to be true. However, only through additional research will we be able to determine if these assertions are correct. While some studies have linked religiosity to youths' future orientation (e.g., King & Furrow, 2004), to our knowledge, no studies have examined the influence of religion on past orientation. However, we posit that it is important to know where you have come from in order to know where you are going, and this sentiment was also echoed by youth in our study.

Similar to prior research, results of the current study indicated that youth believed that religion promoted positive behaviors, such as avoiding drugs and alcohol, and discouraging risky sexual behaviors. Therefore, it appears that religion functions as a source of social control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). This should not be interpreted as promoting religious attendance to aid healthy development; rather, we are presenting one possible pathway through which positive development may occur for some youth. In addition, religion served as a moral compass for youth by promoting a sense of direction and self-control which was reflected in youths' religious narratives. Similarly, we found that religion did not just reduce negative behaviors, but that youth reported that their religiosity fostered positive behaviors, such as hope and love. Therefore, future studies should consider the role of religiosity as one avenue for youth development in South Africa, and identify under what conditions this aspect of development relates to the reduction of risk and under what circumstances it is promotive of positive characteristics.

This study offered an additional theme related to the broader context that has not been explored in previous studies on youths' religious development, mainly by elucidating the intersection between African traditional practices and Christian values. The concern that African traditional beliefs are in conflict with Christian values was a recurring theme among many topics of discussion. Youth experienced this tension and were aware of its presence in the broader historical, social, and cultural context. Many of the charismatic churches that have recently emerged and expanded in South Africa have denounced the use of cultural practices (Matsaneng, 2010). Therefore, we were not surprised that a contentious relationship existed between various denominations of Christianity and African traditional religion. An interesting finding was that some youth reported that within some denominations a fusion of practices, rather than a separation, appears to have been achieved almost seamlessly.

We expected that South African youth would belong to one faith tradition or another (e.g., Christian, Muslim, or African tradition), as suggested by previous religious demographic studies in South Africa (e.g., Rule & Mncwango, 2006; Venter, 2002). Contrary to our hypothesis, youth and religious communities may be fusing practices and beliefs across denominations. We found that some religious communities were receptive to youths' cultural beliefs and practices, while others were not. Given that two thirds of religious youth in the current study reported dual affiliations, future research may benefit from further investigating the intersections between culture and religion among youth, and implications of these intersections for youths' mental health. In addition, future studies may want to

examine the process through which youth decide to affiliate with one denomination over another and what meaning they draw from this experience.

This concept, while understudied in the literature, is not a new finding. In countries where colonization has taken place, it is not uncommon to find an array of relationships. In fact, we think of this relationship as similar to that of acculturation and enculturation (Berry, 2003) that exists in many cultures. In heterogeneous societies, individuals cope with ethnic differences through a number of strategies, such as accepting the dominant beliefs, rejecting such beliefs, or adopting both. For example, a study by Jacobson (1997), examining intersections between religion and ethnicity among British Pakistanis, found that religiosity was a more salient social identity for youth than ethnicity. Each type of strategy has different implications for mental health and well-being (e.g., Obasi & Leong, 2009). Therefore, future studies would benefit from examining how these types of affiliations relate to psychosocial and psychological outcomes. Furthermore, each type of value system may represent aspects of South African youths' religious and cultural identity. Often aspects of identity are interrelated. In fact, previous research suggests that aspects of ethnic identity and religious identity may exist in a number of combinations with each other, and serve varying functions for diverse people (Brittian & Spencer, 2011; Juang & Syed, 2008).

Emerging Adulthood and Religious Development

We received extensive, spontaneous, and detailed responses to questions of faith in the current study. Our participants had a set of concepts that allowed many of them to express the meaning of their faith. Many had a concept of spiritual/religious processes and gave a number of independent “professions” of faith/no faith. We believe youth in the current study were much more articulate in this area than the Smith and Denton (2005) study would lead us to expect. However, one explanation for this finding is that our participants (age 18) were a bit older than the Smith and Denton sample of American youth (ages 13-17). Smith and Snell (2009) offered an alternative study on emerging adulthood by following up with the same youth at ages 18 to 23, which resonated with some of the findings of the current study. For example, one of the characteristics of religious development among emerging adults is combining beliefs from many sources into one's worldview which was present among our interviewees.

Although all participants in the current study were 18 years of age, half of the participants in the current study were still attending high school and all were still living at home. It is common for South African youth to live at home until they are married and often afterward. Despite being described in this study as youth, some of our young people may be on the precipice of emerging adulthood. While the majority of identity research has focused on this aspect of human development among adolescents, there is evidence to suggest that identity formation continues and may perhaps be even more salient into emerging adulthood (generally encompassing ages 18-25; Arnett, 2006). Given the cross-sectional nature of the current study, it was not possible to determine how many of our participants would transition into emerging adulthood and what percentage would transition directly into adult roles. However, as longitudinal quantitative data on the full BT20 cohort are presently

available, one avenue for future research is to examine developmental profiles of emerging adulthood in relation to South African youths' religious development.

Limitations

In the current study, we were able to interview a large number of young people for qualitative review, which gave us incredible insight into the lived experiences of religious South African youth. However, the nature of such research limits our ability to make generalizations to the larger population, including White, mixed ancestry, and Asian South African youth, as well as to other national groups. Although, we suspect that some themes may be unique to an African population (e.g., fusing of African traditional beliefs with Christianity), many of the themes that emerged from the data are consistent with U.S. findings (e.g., Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2010). We suggest that the themes from this research be used to inform research design and methodologies for future studies, as only through empirical testing and replication can it be determined if such themes are present in other cultural and national groups.

Language was another limitation of the present research. While all participants were offered the use of a translator in the appointment-making process and at the time of the interview, all participants refused the use of such resources and chose to complete the interviews in English. The interviews revealed a notable difference in language ability. Those with advanced language ability provided us with more detailed information. For example, fluency, vocabulary, the extent of nonstandard grammar structures, and familiarity with concepts varied widely (e.g., spirituality). Therefore, it may be useful for future research to consider interviewing participants in their native language; as such an approach may yield additional findings. However, we caution that interviewing participants in their native language may pose additional challenges (e.g., issues with translation).

Application

This research has application for youth development. Religious and spiritual youth gained a great deal of support through their faith beliefs, such as emotional and social support. Youth living in high-risk environments, such as Johannesburg-Soweto, and we believe many other urban U.S. cities, are more likely to experience greater internalizing behaviors, such as depression and anxiety (Murry, Berkel, Gaylord-Harden, Copeland-Linder, & Nation, 2011). However, young people in this particular study informed us that religion gave them a sense of support and comfort, assisted in deterring risky behavior, and promoted positive behaviors. Although youth were living in a high-stress environment, consistent with the positive youth development perspective, religion served as an individual characteristic that fostered healthy development. Therefore, youth development programs should consider what individual and environmental supports exist for young people that are already present in their particular context that may buffer the stress and adversity associated with urban living.

We would particularly like to highlight the effects of religion on coping and providing a sense of external and internal purpose for young people. There may be a possibility to include emotional and social life skills training into religious settings. For example, grief,

which tragically affects many of the young people in current study, seems to be an issue that demands to be dealt with in a manner that takes into account the complexity of both African traditional and Christian beliefs and the relations between both faith traditions. However both of these systems, whether separate or together, offer great resources for adolescents to deal with loss. It is our hope that these findings would enable culturally competent programs to take into account of all these issues to be developed.

Conclusions

This study provided a rich description of youths' religious and spiritual experiences living in an urban South African context. We found similarities related to normative experiences reported from U.S. samples, such that religion provided some youth with a sense of purpose, guidance, and meaning in life, as well as offered emotional and social support. The unique contributions of this work were that religious beliefs and practices often overlapped with cultural behaviors. We find this discussion to be missing from the current literature on youths' religious development. In addition, youth in the current study were aware of the contentious and sometimes delicate relationship that exists between cultural practices and religious denominations in their national context. We believe that future studies would benefit from a consideration that such a relationship may exist and to consider how such friction may influence youths' religious identity formation. Moreover, we invite future studies to examine these relations in other populations, varying by ethnicity, religious landscape, and nationality.

Acknowledgments

We thank Robert W. Roeser and Dr. Fr. Peter Knox for assisting in development of the interview questions. In addition, special thanks to Martin Manikye, Rhulani Mkansi, Magang Molobela, Ruth Phetwane, Simphiwe Gabelane, Mat Mainwaring, and the Birth to Twenty Research Team for their assistance in recruiting young people. We also thankfully acknowledge the youth who participated in this study.

Funding: The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by a grant from the South Africa Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development awarded to Dr. Norris. Writing of this report was supported in part by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health T32 MH018387 (PI: Chassin).

References

- Anderson, A. Zion and Pentecost: The spirituality and experience of Pentecostal and Zionist/Apostolic churches in South Africa. Pretoria: University of South Africa; 2000.
- Appelgryn AEM, Bornman E. Relative deprivation in contemporary South Africa. *Journal of Social Psychology*. 1996; 136:381–397.
- Arnett, JJ. Emerging adulthood: Understanding the new way of coming of age. In: Arnett, JJ.; Tanner, JL., editors. *Emerging adulthood: Coming of age in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 2006. p. 3-20.
- Barbarin, O.; Richter, L. *Mandela's children: Growing up in post-apartheid South Africa*. New York, NY: Routledge; 2001.
- Benson PL. Spirituality and the adolescent journey. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*. 1997; 5:206–209.
- Berry, JW. Conceptual approaches to acculturation. In: Chun, KM.; Balls Organista, P.; Marín, G., editors. *Acculturation: Advances in theory, measurement, and applied research*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 2003. p. 17-37.

- Brittian, AS.; Spencer, MB. Assessing the relationship between ethnic and religious identity among and between diverse American youth. In: Warren, AEA.; Lerner, RM.; Phelps, E., editors. *Thriving and spirituality among youth: Research perspectives and future possibilities*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; 2011. p. 205-230.
- Charasse-Pouele C, Fournier M. Health disparities between racial groups in South Africa: A decomposition analysis. *Social Science and Medicine*. 2006; 62:2897–2914. [PubMed: 16431005]
- Copeland-Linder N. Stress among Black women in a South African township: The protective role of religion. *Journal of Community Psychology*. 2006; 34:577–599.
- Damon, W.; Gregory, A. Bringing in a new era in the field of youth development. In: Lerner, R.; Jacobs, F.; Wertlieb, D., editors. *Handbook of applied developmental science*. Vol. 1. New York, NY: John Wiley; 2002. p. 407-420.
- Dollahite DC, Layton E, Bahr HM, Walker AB, Thatcher JY. Giving up something good for something better: Sacred sacrifices made by religious youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*. 2009; 24:691–725.
- Frahm-Arp, M. *Professional women in South African Pentecostal charismatic churches*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Pub; 2010.
- Gana, TC. *The influence of peer, community and religion on adolescent substance use in the Cape Metropolitan area*. Cape Town, South Africa: University of the Western Cape; 2004.
- Ganiel G. Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in South Africa and Zimbabwe: A review. *Religion Compass*. 2010; 4:130–143.
- Germond, P.; Cochrane, JR. *Reasons of faith: Religion in modern public life*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Witwatersrand; 2005.
- Healthworlds: Ontological, anthropological and epistemological challenges on the interface of religion and health.
- Gunner L. Remapping land and remaking culture: Memory and landscape in 20th-century South Africa. *Journal of Historical Geography*. 2005; 31:281–295.
- Gyimah SO. What has faith got to do with it? Religion and child survival in Ghana. *Journal of Biosocial Science*. 2007; 39:923–937. [PubMed: 17359561]
- Hansen TB. On the complexities of being Hindu: A battle over souls. *WISER Review*. 2006; 2:12.
- Haron MJ, Kipton E. Religion, identity and public health in Botswana. *African Identities*. 2008; 6:183–198.
- Imam SS, Nurullah AS, Makol-Abdul PR, Rahman SA, Noon HM. Spiritual and psychological health of Malaysian youths. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*. 2009; 20:85–101.
- Jacobson J. Religion and ethnicity: Dual and alternative sources of identity among young British Pakistanis. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 1997; 20:238–256.
- Johnson TM. The global dynamics of the Pentecostal and charismatic renewal. *Society*. 2009; 46:479–483.
- Juang, L.; Syed, M. Ethnic identity and spirituality. In: Lerner, RM.; Roeser, R.; Phelps, E., editors. *Positive youth development and spirituality: From theory to research*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press; 2008. p. 262-284.
- King PE. Religion and identity: The role of ideological, social, and spiritual contexts. *Applied Developmental Science*. 2003; 7:197–204.
- King PE, Furrow JL. Religion as a resource for positive youth development: Religion, social capital, and moral outcomes. *Developmental Psychology*. 2004; 40:703–713. [PubMed: 15355160]
- King, PE.; Roeser, RW. Religion and spirituality in adolescent development. In: Lerner, RM.; Steinberg, L., editors. *Handbook of adolescent psychology: Individual bases of adolescent development*. 3rd. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley; 2009. p. 435-478.
- Koenig, HG.; McCullough, ME.; Larson, DB. *Handbook of religion and health*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; 2001.
- Kuhn, D. Adolescent thinking. In: Lerner, RM.; Steinberg, L., editors. *Handbook of adolescent psychology, vol 1: Individual bases of adolescent development*. 3rd. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; 2009. p. 152-228.

- Layton E, Dollahite DC, Hardy SA. Anchors of religious commitment in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*. 2011; 26:381–413.
- Lerner, RM.; Benson, PL., editors. *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy, and practice*. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers; 2003.
- Matsaneng P. Spiritual direction in Africa: A need for a different approach. *The Way*. 2010; 49:53–64.
- McCullough ME, Willoughby BLB. Religion, self-control, and self-regulation: Associations, explanations, and implications. *Psychological Bulletin*. 2009; 135:69–93. [PubMed: 19210054]
- McElhaney KB, Allen JP. Autonomy and adolescent social functioning: The moderating effect of risk. *Child Development*. 2001; 72:220–231. [PubMed: 11280481]
- Murry VM, Berkel C, Gaylord-Harden NK, Copeland-Linder N, Nation M. Neighborhood poverty and adolescent development. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. 2011; 21:114–128.
- Norris SA, Roeser RW, Richter LM, Lewin N, Ginsburg C, Fleetwood SA, van der Wolf K. South African-ness among adolescents: The emergence of a collective identity within the birth to twenty cohort study. *Journal of Early Adolescence*. 2008; 28:51–69. [PubMed: 19461896]
- Obasi EM, Leong FTL. Psychological distress, acculturation, and mental health-seeking attitudes among people of African descent in the United States: A preliminary investigation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. 2009; 56:227–238.
- Olivier, J.; Cochrane, JR.; Schmid, B.; Graham, L. African religious health assets programme. 2006. Retrieved from http://www.arhap.uct.ac.za/downloads/arhap-bibliog_oct2006.pdf
- Parham, TA.; White, JH.; Ajamu, A. *The psychology of Blacks: An African centered perspective*. 3rd. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall; 2000.
- Peberdy S. Imagining immigration: Inclusive identities and exclusive policies in post-1994 South Africa. *Africa Today*. 2001; 48:14–33.
- Richter LM, Norris SA, De Wet T. Transition from birth to ten to birth to twenty: The South African cohort reaches 13 years of age. *Paediatric and Perinatal Epidemiology*. 2004; 18:290–301. [PubMed: 15255883]
- Richter LM, Norris SA, Pettifor JM, Yach D, Cameron N. Mandela's children: The 1990 birth to twenty study in South Africa. *International Journal of Epidemiology*. 2007; 36:1–8.
- Rule, S.; Mncwango, B. Rights or wrongs? An exploration of moral values. In: Pillay, U.; Rule, S.; Roberts, B., editors. *South African social attitudes: Changing times, diverse voices*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press; 2006. p. 252–276.
- Saldaña, J. *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE; 2009.
- Schlemmer, L. Under the radar: Pentecostalism in South Africa and its potential social and economic role. Centre for development and enterprise: Informing South African policy. 2008. Retrieved from http://www.cde.org.za/attachment_view.php?aa_id=219
- Seedat M, Niekerk AV, Jewkes R, Suffla S, Ratele K. Violence and injuries in South African: Prioritising an agenda for prevention. *The Lancet*. 2009; 374:1011–1022.
- Selepe MC, Edwards SD. Grief counselling in African indigenous churches: A case of the Zion Apostolic Church in Venda: Socio-cultural life. *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*. 2008; 7:1–6.
- Smith, C.; Denton, ML. *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2005.
- Smith, C.; Snell, P. *Souls in transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2009.
- Spencer, MB. Phenomenology and ecological systems theory: Development of diverse groups. In: Damon, W.; Lerner, RM.; Eisenberg, N.; Kuhn, D.; Siegler, RS., editors. *Child and adolescent development: An advanced course*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; 2008. p. 696–740.
- Steinberg L. We know some things: Parent-adolescent relationships in retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. 2001; 11:1–19.
- Steinberg L. Cognitive and affective development in adolescence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. 2005; 9:69–74. [PubMed: 15668099]
- Steyn M, Badenhorst J, Kamper G. Our voice counts: Adolescents' views on their future in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*. 2010; 30:169–188.

- Takyi BK. Religion and women's health in Ghana: Insights into HIV/AIDS preventive and protective behavior. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2003; 56:1221–1234. [PubMed: 12600360]
- Venter D. What is sociology that religionists should be mindful of it? The relevance of the sociology of religion for studying change in South Africa. *Journal for the Study of Religion*. 2002; 15:167–189.
- Wallace, JM.; Williams, DR. Religion and adolescent health-compromising behavior. In: Schulenberg, J.; Maggs, JL.; Hurrelmann, K., editors. *Health risks and developmental transitions during adolescence*. Cambridge, UK: University Press; 1997. p. 444-468.
- Warren, AEA.; Lerner, RM.; Phelps, E. *Thriving and spirituality among youth: Research perspectives and future possibilities*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; 2011.
- Youniss J, McLellan JA, Yates M. Religion, community service, and identity in American youth. *Journal of Adolescence*. 1999; 22:243–253. [PubMed: 10089122]

Biographies

Aerika S. Brittian Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She received a doctoral degree in 2010 from Tufts University. Her research investigates risk and protective factors, specifically aspects of identity and culture, among urban ethnic minority youth and families, and makes recommendations for culturally informed practice and prevention.

Nina Lewin is an honorary Ph.D. fellow in the MRC/Wits Developmental Pathways for Health Research Unit at the University of Witwatersrand. She has a master's degree in sociology of religion. Her research focuses on religion and health, including healing, risk factors, and prayer. She is currently working in the field of research data management, specifically investigating the challenges of managing large and complex mixed-methods datasets in low resource settings.

Shane A. Norris Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Paediatrics and the Director of the MRC/Wits Developmental Pathways for Health Research Unit at the University of Witwatersrand. His research interests lie within the area of child and adolescent health with a specific focus on growth and development, and obesity and metabolic disease risk.