# Charting the moral life courses: A theory of moral development in U.S. evangelical and mainline Protestant cultures

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## Abstract

Drawing from qualitative analyses of interviews, ethnographic data, and a review of inter-disciplinary literature, this manuscript puts forth a theory of moral life course narratives among U.S. evangelical and mainline Protestants. This theory delineates the relationship between religious worldviews and conceptions of moral behaviors, and the manner in which these worldviews and attendant moral conceptions change across the life course for community members. Grounded theory analyses of 32 participants' divinity-based moral discourses were interpreted in conjunction with their worldviews, as well as church, home, and school contexts. Analyses indicated that evangelical children high-lighted their moral transgressions because they regarded themselves as still quite close to a sinful birth. Evangelical adults, who had been saved and were moving toward God, temporally and spiritually distanced themselves from the morally wrong deeds of their youth. Meanwhile, mainline children and adolescents rarely reasoned about their moral experiences in terms of divinity. This finding is understood in light of their church's emphasis on developing an individualized relationship with God over time. The study and resultant theory elaborate cultural constructions and transmissions of moral life course narratives that, in turn, provide a framework for understanding when, why, and how divinity enters into moral meaning making for cultural community members. We conclude by advocating for theoretical, methodological, and analytical approaches that expose the cultural nature of developmentally dynamic moral selves.

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Vygotsky (1978) famously stated that, "children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p. 88). This study, and the theory that it has inspired, suggests that children also grow into the *moral* life of those around them. Grounded in empirical data, the moral life course narrative theory described in this manuscript provides a framework for this process among U.S. evangelical and mainline Protestants. By linking divinity-based moral reasoning and religious and metaphysical worldviews, this study demonstrates how cultural definitions of the divine inform developmental trajectories of moral reasoning. Such work is critically important in fusing disciplinary lenses to generate a theoretical understanding of the interrelationship between moral psychological development and cultural socialization.

In this study, we investigated how children, adolescents, and adults from evangelical and mainline Protestant communities reasoned about their private moral experiences. Our research questions included: (1) How do divinity-based moral discourses change with age for members of these two religious cultures? and (2) How are developmentally shifting moral discourses informed by their overarching cultural conceptions of the life course? To address these questions, we conducted grounded theory analyses of discourse surrounding participants' private moral experiences and their views of human nature, belief in God, and conceptions of the afterlife. Integrating these two sets of findings enabled an understanding of how divinity-based moral discourses are tied to participants' locations along distinct moral life course continua envisioned by members of these cultural communities.

## Developmental perspectives on morality, and cultural critiques

Developmental psychologists have long focused on changes in moral reasoning across the life course (e.g., Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Jensen, 1997a; Kohlberg, 1969, 1981; Piaget, 1932; Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1995). Here, we briefly review the origins and foci of moral development research and describe more recent scholarship that has broadened early culturally bound definitions of morality.

Moral development pioneer Jean Piaget (1932) argued for developmental commonalities across cultures, including a key shift in early adolescence, with moral reasoning becoming increasingly abstract and concerned with fairness and reaching democratic agreement. Extending Piaget's work, Lawrence Kohlberg (1969, 1981) put forth a six-stage sequence of the development of moral reasoning. This sequence begins with children's focus on avoiding punishment by authority figures

(Stage 1) and potentially ends with an endorsement of universal principles of justice and rights (Stage 6) at some point past childhood. Kohlberg shared Piaget's view that moral reasoning becomes increasingly concerned with justice and fairness with age. For decades, empirical work by—or inspired by—Kohlberg dominated moral development research.

Beginning in the 1980s, concerns were raised regarding the failure of these theories to account for the moral concepts and discourses of individuals across diverse cultures (e.g., Dien, 1982; Eberhardt, 1993; Edwards, 1981, 1997; Huebner & Garrod, 1991; Trommsdorff, 2015). These scholars contended that focusing on concepts of justice, fairness, and harm to individuals and excluding concepts such as interdependence, social harmony, religion, and the role of cultural socialization more generally, rendered Kohlberg's approach problematic when applied in non-Western settings.

Aiming to broaden the theoretical scope, Richard Shweder and colleagues (Shweder, 1990; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997) provided a pluralistic "big three ethics" framework from which to examine moral reasoning across cultures without envisioning morality as linear individual development towards justice-based reasoning. Bred from a broad survey of literature and analyses of interviews conducted in the U.S. and India, this framework suggests that, to varying degrees, Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity undergird moral thought and conceptions of the self across diverse cultures.

*The Ethic of Autonomy*, which links to Kohlberg's conceptualization of pre- and post-conventional reasoning, focuses on the individual self. Autonomy-based reasoning includes moral concepts such as individual rights, fairness, and harm to self and other individuals. *The Ethic of Community* focuses on the social self and includes moral concerns such as group welfare, role obligations, and social hierarchy. *The Ethic of Divinity* focuses on the spiritual self and includes moral concepts such as scriptural injunctions and virtues of holiness, purity, and sanctity.

## Cultural–developmental approach and the ethic of divinity

Extending Shweder and colleagues' cultural theory into the field of developmental psychology, the cultural-developmental approach maps the use of the three ethics across age groups and cultural communities (Jensen, 2008, 2011, 2015a). Using this approach, research has shed light on distinctive developmental patterns of moral reasoning and conceptions of the self in locations such as the U.S. (Hickman & Fasoli, 2015; Jensen & McKenzie, 2016; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2015), India (Jensen, 1998; Kapadia & Bhangaokar, 2015; Pandya & Bhangaokar, 2015), Brazil (Guerra & Giner-Sorolla, 2015), Finland (Vainio, 2015), and Thailand (McKenzie, 2016).

Although research focusing exclusively on divinity-based moral reasoning is scant, analyses in evangelical and mainline U.S. communities have revealed that evangelical Protestants of all ages use more Ethic of Divinity than mainline

Protestants (Jensen, 1997b, 2012; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2015). Recent research focusing on the development of divinity-based moral reasoning has shown that evangelical Protestant adolescents and adults use the Ethic of Divinity frequently, and that they draw upon this ethic more when considering public moral issues (i.e., where judgments are applied to people in general), rather than private moral issues (i.e., where judgments are made for oneself about one's own experiences). Among mainline Protestants, this ethic is primarily used by adults, but mostly in contemplating private, rather than public, moral issues (Jensen & McKenzie, 2016). These findings point not only to cultural and developmental differences in divinity-based moral reasoning; they also suggest that, particularly for older members of each cultural community, the Ethic of Divinity belongs in public and private spheres of morality to differing degrees.

To develop a theoretical understanding of the overall patterns of private moral reasoning described above, a qualitative analysis of shifting divinity-based moral discourses across the life course is needed. The present study heeds this call by delineating cultural moral life course narratives and investigating how these narratives guide interpretations of private moral experiences among evangelical and mainline Protestants of diverse ages.

# Empirical study

## Participants

A total of 120 participants, including 60 evangelical Presbyterians and 60 mainline Presbyterians, were interviewed for this study. In each religious group, there were 20 children (ages 7 to 12), 20 adolescents (ages 13 to 18), and 20 adults (ages 36 to 57). Participants were recruited from churches on the East Coast of the U.S. The two groups differed in self-reported religious affiliation and attendance of religious services. All but one evangelical Presbyterian participant described themselves as "evangelical Protestants" and all mainline Presbyterian participants described themselves as "mainline Protestants." Evangelical participants also reported more frequent attendance of church services than mainline participants.[1] Before describing the interview procedure, we will first turn to a description of participants' ethnographic contexts. Such ethnographic situatedness is critical for understanding interview findings.

## Evangelical and mainline ethnographic contexts

Drawing from data gathered over the course of one year, during which the research team regularly attended church services and events, and visited participant homes, an ethnographic description of the two religious-cultural communities will now be provided. We will first describe the denominational history, followed by the unique church missions, and home and school environments.

Mainline participants attended a church affiliated with The Presbyterian Church–USA (PCUSA), the largest Presbyterian denomination in the U.S. Evangelical

participants attended a church that identifies as evangelical and is affiliated with The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the second largest Presbyterian denomination in the U.S. (Presbyterian Church in America, 2014). Although distinct denominations today, both originated from The Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). PCA was founded in 1973 when a group of church members left PCUS due to disapproval of alleged theological liberalism. PCUSA was established 10 years later. In spite of the historical overlap, a modern ideological bifurcation exists between these denominations (e.g., Bellah, 1987; Jones, Cox, Navarro-Rivera, Dionne, & Galston, 2012). The theological differences that have come to characterize these denominations are reflected in a variety of church practices. For instance, approximately 33% of active ministers in PCUSA are women, including the senior pastor at the PCUSA-affiliated church in the present study; PCA ordains only men. In 2011, PCUSA voted to modify its constitution to allow openly gay people be ordained as ministers, elders, and deacons (Goodstein, 2011; Van Marter, 2011). PCA, meanwhile, teaches that homosexuality is a sin.

Differing views of faith and its purpose are also revealed in the mission statements of the church communities from which participants were recruited. The mainline church's mission statement reads, "a joyful community of spiritual friends proclaiming the Living Christ in our everyday lives: Curious to learn, inspired to worship, energized to serve, all to the Glory of God." It emphasizes curiosity, inspiration, and energy as faith-based virtues and highlights the importance of Christ in everyday life. The evangelical church's mission statement reads:

> a community of Christ in which worship and the word, fellowship and ministry come together in the power of the Spirit, so that peoples of differing backgrounds and gifts, being reconciled to God and each other, are impacting their families, communities, city, nation, and world with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the glory of God.

This statement highlights the role of the Bible and the goal of spreading the gospel worldwide.

We now turn to a brief discussion on church service handouts, which also aligned with church mission statements. Mainline handouts focused on inner individual explorations, while evangelical handouts focused on commitment to spreading "the word." For example, materials provided to mainline church members included a compilation of "Statement of Faiths" written by adolescent members of the most recent Confirmation and Commissioning Class. Perspectives included: "God is everywhere. He causes everything to happen. Everything is an act of God," "I experience God mostly in nature," and "I experience God once a week [at church]... This is the only time, though, that I experience God." Inviting young congregants to reflect on God's role in their lives speaks to the mainline church's emphasis on active contemplation and curiosity about faith. Materials provided to evangelical church members included pamphlets on "Praying for Missionaries," "Servants in Missions Abroad (SIMA)," and a small pocket guide ("Ready Reference for Your Pocket Testament") that offers

psalms and Bible quotes for congregants to consult during specific life situations (e.g., What to read when God seems distant...Psa. 139). These materials highlight the evangelical church's missionary emphasis and encouragement to consult the Bible when questions arise.

Symbolic representations of religion in participants' homes also varied across religious communities. Ninety-five percent of interviews took place in participants' homes; for each in-home interview, the researcher recorded details about the number and types of religious items on display. Mainline participants had few—if any—religious objects in their homes, and religious objects that were displayed often included the occasional holiday item such as a manger scene or a Christmas tree. Evangelical participants, however, had many religious objects in the home, ranging between two and 10 for most participants. Only one family had less than two religious objects on display. Religious items were diverse and included hymnals, catechisms, crosses, framed Bible quotes, Noah's Arc window hangings, posters with religious sayings, and framed religious needlepoints. One such framed needlepoint that hung by a front door read: "As for me and my household, we shall serve the Lord."

Youth in these cultural communities also experienced distinct school environments. The vast majority of mainline children and adolescents attended public school (82%), with the remainder attending religious (10%) and secular private schools (8%). In contrast, most evangelical children and adolescents attended a religious private school (58%), with the remainder attending public school (34%) or being homeschooled (8%).

Evangelical and mainline youth, then, are socialized into distinct church, home, and school contexts. Community members receive distinct messages about the role of God and religion in their daily lives. They also differ in the extent and type of religious artifacts in their home environments and in the type of schools they attend. These distinct material cultures and socialization environments point to the key role of divinity from a young age for evangelical community members.

## Interview procedure

Over the course of one year, all participants took part in one-on-one semi-structured interviews consisting of two sections: moral issues and worldviews. This paper presents analyses of one topic from each section.

The topic analyzed in the moral issues section was a self-generated private moral experience. The prompt was as follows:

> Can you tell me about a time when you had an important experience that you think involved a moral issue? It could be a time when you did something that you think was morally right, or it could be a time when you did something that you think was morally wrong.

After a description of the event was offered, follow-up questions were asked, including: "Do you think that you behaved in a way that was morally right or

morally wrong?", "Why?" and "Are there any other reasons you would like to mention?" The goal was for participants to discuss all of their moral reasons, and to elaborate on each reason as thoroughly as possible.

The topic investigated in the worldviews section included questions pertaining to participants' views of human nature, belief in God, and conceptions of the afterlife.

Transcribed interviews amounted to an average of 32 single-spaced pages per participant, for a total of 3,840 pages of text to code. From those pages, a total of 1,817 reasons were identified and coded for use of the Ethics of Autonomy, Community, Divinity (Shweder et al., 1997) and specific subethics according to the Three Ethics Coding Manual (Jensen, 2015b). The Ethic of Divinity taps some 16 subethics that capture highly varied ways of talking about divinity, including "Authority of Natural Law," "Scriptural Authority," and "God-Given Conscience." This ensures that, irrespective of denomination and age, diverse ways of conceptualizing and talking about divinity are included in the present analysis. Two coders assessed inter-rater reliability for 20% of randomly selected interviews, and Cohen's Kappa for agreement on three ethics coding was 81.3%. Differences in coding were resolved through conversation between the coders.

Given our interest in the role of divinity reasoning in participants' private lives, the 32 participants who used divinity language to reason about their private moral experiences were selected for the present analysis.

## Analytical approach

Grounded theory analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze participants' moral discourses and worldviews. Using the constant comparative method, we began open coding by iterative readings of all 32 participants' private moral experiences, summarizing and conceptually labeling divinity-based moral discourse. During axial coding, we then identified relationships between codes, which revealed distinct divinity reasoning codes among evangelical and mainline participants.

To investigate these distinct codes and the relationship between participant worldviews and moral reasoning, we analyzed the worldviews portion of the interviews. Here, we repeated the steps described above, with open coding based on iterative readings and constructing summaries of participants' views of human nature, God, and the afterlife. In the axial coding phase, distinctions were noted across evangelical and mainline community members.

Finally, in the selective coding phase, interviews were arranged according to age group and cultural community, re-read, and core categories that linked moral discourse with worldviews discourse for members of each community-members were determined. We then constructed diagrams to aid the process of integrating categories. From this final analytical step, distinct cultural moral life course narratives emerged.

## Evangelical divinity-based moral discourses

Twenty-four evangelical Presbyterians—eight children, seven adolescents, and nine adults—used divinity discourse to reason about their private moral experiences. Given the overlapping analytical categories derived for child and adolescent community members, those of both age groups will collectively be referred to as "youth." We will first describe private moral experience findings, then worldviews findings. Finally, moral experience and worldviews analyses will be understood in tandem, via an evangelical moral life course narrative.

### Evangelical youth

Prior to discussing categories and the relations between them, it should be noted that evangelical youth—and particularly children—focused on their morally wrong behaviors. Sixty-three percent of children and 43% of adolescents who used divinity discourse to reason about their private moral experiences discussed instances in which they behaved in a morally wrong way. The focus on immoral acts is a striking contrast to evangelical adults, only 22% of whom discussed morally wrong behaviors.

Evangelical children and adolescents shared a range of morally wrong acts, which tended to coalesce around issues of lying, stealing, and rule breaking. The individual who was lied to, stolen from, or whose rules were broken were typically the youth's parent(s). The categories derived from our grounded theory analysis, described below, aid in understanding evangelical youth's focus on moral transgressions.

*Perceived prohibitive quality of the Bible.* The predominant explanation that evangelical youth provided for *why* their behaviors were immoral had to do with perceptions of the prohibitive quality of the Bible. Some focused on the prohibitions of God or the Bible more generally. A 10-year-old boy who discussed beating up a bully expressed that this was the wrong thing to do because "it's against the Bible to hurt another human being." Similarly, a 16-year-old boy who discussed lying to his mother about completing homework said that this was wrong because it is "against the law of God." Interestingly, disobeying one's parents was often deemed immoral due to God's dictate. One 11-year-old girl, for instance, explained that eating chocolate when her parents had forbidden it was immoral because "God tells us to obey them."

Other evangelical youth focused more specifically on prohibitions stated in the 10 commandments. A 9-year-old boy who stole candy from his parents expressed that this was wrong because "it's one of the commandments: Thou shall not steal." Like the girl who linked disobeying her parents' chocolate ban to disobeying God's rules, this boy explained that the Bible "says God put parents there to control and punish the children." Hence, failing to obey one's parents is also a failure to obey God's law. Recalling an incident of having stolen a chocolate bar from a classmate,

a 13-year-old girl stated that she broke two commandments: "I stole, and I coveted because I wanted something that didn't belong to me." Stealing the chocolate was wrong, she said, because jealousy and deceit are clear violations of the commandments. These examples highlight the great deal of prohibitive language that often accompanied divinity reasoning when evangelical youth discussed their moral experiences.

*God sees you and knows when you've done something wrong.* Evangelical children and adolescents also uniquely expressed the belief that God sees you and knows when you have done something wrong. For example, a 17-year-old boy who discussed having smoked cigarettes underage pointed out that God "knows everything." Similarly, an 11-year-old girl who recalled having told her father that she had dropped lifesavers on the ground when she had actually eaten them relayed the incident in this manner:

> And I came inside weeping to my dad, saying "Daddy, daddy, all my lifesavers are gone." And he said "What happened?" I said "Well, they dropped when I fell on the ground." And he said "Well God saw everything; did God see you eat them?" And I said "Yes." So he just told me that God does see everything I do in mysterious ways.

Also evident in the above account is the moral socialization by a father of his daughter. He encourages her to think of God, and moreover, to think of Him as possessing the ability to "see everything" and to know about her moral misbehaviors. We see, too, his daughter's adoption of this belief, as demonstrated by her admission of wrongdoing and belief in God's omniscience.

Such discourses demonstrate the difficulty of ignoring morally wrong acts when it is believed that one's every action is witnessed. With God looking on, there are no secrets.

*Comparing oneself to God or Jesus.* Several evangelical children and adolescents referred to comparing themselves to God or Jesus. This again helps explain their focus on wrong acts, as one's acts are bound to seem morally lacking when comparing oneself to perfection.

Let us return first to the testimony of the 11-year-old girl who recalled lying to her father about having eaten the dropped lifesavers. She expressed that lying is wrong because, "Jesus was perfect and never lied, so you need to try to follow in his footsteps. None of us are perfect, but we need to at least try." The 13-year-old girl who stole chocolate from a classmate also stressed how important it is that we are "aware of how to act around people. Try to be Jesus-like or God-like." Though sharing a behavior he deemed morally right (turning in a lost wallet), a 12-year-old boy reiterated that "you want to try to be more like God" so "you should try to do stuff that he would do in a position like that."

For these children and adolescents, embodying Godliness is the ultimate goal, but of course, it is also an extremely difficult goal to achieve. In many ways, this

category is reminiscent of the popularized phrase "What Would Jesus Do?" which encourages religious adherents to consider whether their actions mirror Jesus' actions.

In sum, not only were evangelical youth focused on acts prohibited by the Bible but they also considered God's knowledge of their wrongdoings and God's perfection and falling short of that. Such concerns are not reserved for unusual or exceptional moral experiences; they also guide reflections of rather common issues such as lying or eating chocolate when it is forbidden.

## Evangelical adults

Contrary to evangelical youth, adults overwhelmingly focused on morally right acts. In fact, just two evangelical adults shared morally wrong acts. The right acts were extremely diverse, ranging from giving groceries to those in need, to being honest by returning incorrect change, to adopting a child. As described below, the divinity discourse surrounding their experiences was also distinct from that of evangelical children and adolescents.

*From prohibitive to proactive: The shifting role of God and religion with age.* Whereas evangelical youth focused on prohibitions of religion, adults tended to focus on the proactive nature of religion, including what God wants or intends. For adults, the discussion typically revolved around God's desire for people to perform morally upright acts and their obligation to uphold His teachings.

Some evangelical adults shared instances in which they upheld obligations to God during interactions with strangers. A 45-year-old man, for instance, explained that when panhandlers stand in front of the grocery store, he asks them what they need and purchases a few items for them. It is morally right, he said, because he gives to others "in the name of Jesus." The focus here, then, is on Jesus's intent that we share resources with others. Similarly, a 47-year-old woman who recounted an instance in which she corrected the cashier who gave her too much change explained that she had a "moral obligation" to God to do so.

Family-based moral behaviors also elicited discourse focusing on God's intent. A 48-year-old man described voicing disapproval of his sister's cohabitation before marriage. Doing so, he explained, was morally right because it was his duty as a Christian. Not having discussed his concern with her, he suggests, would have made him "less than a brother, less than a Christian, less than a responsible adult." God is not simply "an ogre creating rules," he continued; the rules are there for our benefit. So by sharing his concerns, he fulfilled role-based obligations as a Christian, a brother, and an adult. The notion of upholding obligations to God also came up in the discourse of a 53-year-old woman who discussed adopting her son. She expressed, "I think we stand before God," and continued to discuss what God might say when she "go[es] to [her] maker." Here, then, her duty to God is framed as directly linked to her life after death, and to God's awareness of her moral uprightness during her time on Earth.

We see here evidence of the different quality that divinity appears to take with age for members of this cultural community. Talk of the ten commandments does not drop out with age, but participants' interpretations of the commandments shift from an obligation to avoid wrong acts to an obligation to perform right acts. This theme helps make sense of what appears to be a decreasing likelihood of evangelical participants to discuss wrong acts across the lifespan. As evangelical youth thought about how the Bible prohibits certain things, they were likely to discuss their personal violations of those prohibitions. As adults considered how the Bible and God intend for a certain orientation to the world and to others, they were likely to discuss their personal striving to meet such goals.

*I was (or should have been) a different person then: Temporal and spiritual distancing.* The two evangelical adults who *did* share behaviors they deemed morally wrong both drew attention to their temporal and spiritual distance from these immoral behaviors. One 36-year-old woman, for example, described drinking in college: "Well, in college, before I became saved, they had bars at the clubs so I felt—so I felt [OK] having an alcoholic beverage at a club." Not only did she highlight the fact that this happened many years ago, but in pointing out that she was not yet saved when this event occurred, she also highlighted her spiritual distance from the event. Similarly, a 43-year-old man who passively witnessed a theft in France began his story: "One thing that I feel, that's still in my conscience you know, is that when I was a teenager, after I became a Christian..." This morally wrong behavior, then, is "still in [his] conscience" not only because it was wrong but also because he had already been saved and should have known better.

We will later return to a discussion of this category and its unique prevalence among evangelical adults by tying it to the evangelical moral life course narrative.

## Evangelical worldviews

To better understand the developmental patterns with respect to divinity revealed in the analysis of private moral experiences, we turned to an analysis of evangelical divinity users' worldviews. Here, we briefly describe participants' perceptions of human nature and the afterlife.

### Humans are born in sin

Participants were asked if they think that humans by nature are mostly good or mostly bad, and in what ways they are good or bad. The overwhelming majority of evangelical youth and adults alike expressed that humans are "mostly bad" by nature, pointing to inherent sin. Youth used strong language to describe this; an 11-year-old girl explained, for instance, "They're born bad. Because as soon as you're born, you sin... When you're a baby, you sin." A 15-year-old girl shared a similar view: "We're sinful creatures. We don't want to accept Jesus into our heart...even though we may still sin." Evangelical youth—and particularly

children—described in vivid detail the various ways in which inherent sin is expressed, focusing on hurting others through moral misdeeds such as stealing, cheating, killing, and not obeying authority figures (i.e., parents and God). The few children who suggested that people are mostly good explained that people are not born good but that they become good as they grow up. One such child shared the following caveat immediately after voicing his perspective: "I mean, everybody sins. There's not a single person who hasn't sinned." The sinful nature of human-kind is at the fore of evangelical youth's minds and tongues.

Older evangelical participants shared the belief that human nature is mostly bad, and used equally strong language (e.g., humans are "sinful by nature," "flawed by sin," and "in need of redemption"). Adults suggested that human sin pertains primarily to selfishness and self-centeredness by putting oneself—not God—at the center of one's universe. A 48-year-old man explained that "the essence of sin" is setting oneself first: "I do what I want to do, I am the moral center of my existence, I do what benefits me." Interestingly, he proceeded to link inherent sin to the moral socialization of children, explaining, "You don't have to teach a child to do bad things, you have to teach them to do good things. They don't do good things but you've really got to work on that." A 47-year-old woman similarly spoke about children's disobedience when referring to inherent sin: "You only have to have a child to know that it's not very long before they don't want to obey, they want to go their own way. I think that's just a reflection of man's rebelliousness against God." For these evangelical adults, putting oneself at the center of the universe is akin to claiming that one is God, and one only has to look to her or his own children to see a reflection of inherent sin.

## Joyful anticipation of the afterlife

Participants were also asked what happens after death, as well as which part of existence (here and now or the afterlife) is the most important, and which part is likely to be their favorite. Evangelical youth and adults agreed on both the nature of the afterlife and the relative importance of life on Earth in comparison to the afterlife. All participants agreed that there *is* an afterlife and that it consists of Heaven and Hell. Participants spoke at length about the nature of each. Children explained that Hell is a "lake of fire" where people "burn up," and a place where "everything's sinful—people sin and do evil things." Heaven, on the other hand, involves "sing[ing] praises to God," "streets of gold," and a place where "you don't think of anything bad [and] you don't get sick." Adults, too, described Heaven in a variety of ways, such as "[living in] paradise for eternity," "[being] with your creator," and "no more worrying about being tempted to sin." Hell was described as "eternal damnation," "eternal separation from God," and "an undesirable place . . . outside of God's presence." Many participants—youth and adults alike—referred directly to the scriptures when describing Heaven and Hell. There was also a consensus across age groups that one's afterlife destination depends on whether or not one believes in Christ. Holding the belief that Heaven is

designated for those who have been saved, going to Heaven requires that youthful sinfulness be redeemed by "accepting Jesus into [one's] heart," "listening to God," and "becoming Christians." One adult expressed her anticipation of the afterlife when describing the features of Heaven: "God is building my mansion right now."

Not only were evangelical participants clear on the nature of the afterlife and how it is determined, but they eagerly anticipated the afterlife. All youth expressed that the afterlife is bound to be "their favorite." There was a split regarding whether the afterlife or here and now is most important; those who suggested that here and now is most important expressed that this is the case because it is here that our afterlife is determined. Some referred to the unique opportunity to help others find God here and now: "God put us believers here to help out . . . to witness the people who don't believe so that they could be saved too." Evangelical adults furthermore tended to point out that here and now and the afterlife is one in the same as "eternal life begins when you know God and Christ." And yet adults spoke of their eagerness to arrive at the afterlife, so as to be united with God and no longer tempted by sin. For instance, one participant explained, "The more I come to know God, the more I am anxious about being in His presence because I think my eyes are open more and more to His greatness." Another excitedly explained about the afterlife, "I can hardly wait . . . I'm willing to wait, but I can hardly "wait"; another still expressed eagerness in "knowing that I will come face to face with my creator. There's curiosity, a joy to go before Him." Evangelical adults, frequently referred to their own journey towards God, and spoke of their union with God as soon approaching.

For evangelical participants, the ultimate purpose in life is to please God and reach ultimate salvation by joining Him in Heaven. Whether 7, 17, or 47, one's life on Earth is framed as serving the afterlife—a place free of human sin.

## Evangelical moral life course narrative: From the hands of sin to the kingdom of God

Synthesizing participant worldviews and divinity-based moral language and judgments, the evangelical Protestant moral life course narrative is as follows: One is born in sin, becomes saved and morally redeems oneself, emulates God by way of living a morally pure life, with the ultimate goal of joining God in Heaven (see Figure 1). Although humans are born sinful, there is enormous potential to move away from sin and toward God. The way to do this is through belief in God or Jesus as one's Savior.

The focus of evangelical children on their morally wrong behaviors should be understood in light of the fact that they are temporally nearest what is regarded as their sinful birth and still have quite a ways to travel before joining God in the afterlife. This is furthermore reflected in evangelical youth's moral discourses, such as their focus on the Bible's prohibitions, instances of disobeying God's commandments, and comparing themselves to God. In fact, the child whose moral experience entailed lying about eating lifesavers went on to link lying to Satan and Hell,
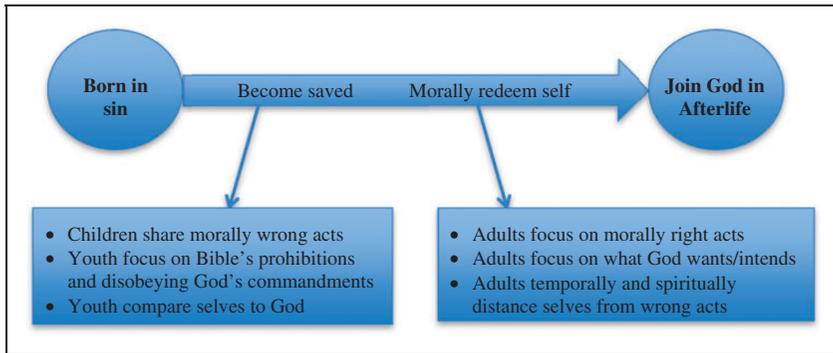
Figure 1. Evangelical Protestant moral life course.

indicating that she was considering a potentially very unpleasant afterlife while relaying her immoral behavior.

Although adolescents continued to focus on the prohibitive nature of the Bible when relaying their moral behaviors, several also focused on what God would want. A 13-year-old girl, for instance, expressed that cleaning up elderly people's yards is something that God would want done. Similarly, a 14-year-old girl explained that giving money to beggars is good because "Jesus says to give money to the poor" and "in the Bible, they gave money to people—poor people that needed that money." Already in adolescence, then, some consider the proactive nature of religion, even if it is not until adulthood that this perspective fully takes hold.

Throughout the life course, the expectation is that one becomes saved and morally redeems oneself in preparation for ultimate union with God. Becoming saved is at once a requirement for joining God and a moral marker. Their increasing proximity to God helps make sense of adults' focus on morally right acts and upholding God's wishes and intent, as well as their unique tendency to discuss the temporal and spiritual distance from the morally wrong deeds of their youth. These findings are emblematic of the movement away from sin and toward God that occurs after having been saved, and they serve as a stark contrast with children's focus on wrongdoings and God's prohibitions. For evangelical Protestants, becoming saved serves as a key temporal and moral marker in traversing the path from one's sinful birth to the promised land of Heaven and joining God in the afterlife, which participants reported expectantly awaiting. Becoming saved is also a symbol of redemption that indicates movement toward God; it is for this reason that an evangelical adult reports still carrying in his conscience his immoral behavior of passively witnessing a theft after having been saved.

We argue that temporal and spiritual distancing allows participants to benchmark their position along the moral life course both then and now. For evangelicals, there was a redemption narrative of moving away from original sin and

toward God through faith in Jesus as one's Savior. Hence, it is through Jesus's sacrifice on the cross that the faithful are able to overcome sin and join God in the afterlife. By highlighting their temporal and spiritual distance from moral misbehaviors, adults demonstrated that being saved has enabled them to turn away from their sinful youth and move closer to eternal life with God.

In short, the evangelical view of the life course—for this life and beyond—undergirds how one judges one's actions, who knows about one's actions, who is deemed a moral exemplar (e.g., Jesus), and one's moral explanations to oneself and others. It is important to note, though, that the present depiction of the evangelical life course as linear and forward moving is in some ways deceptive. For these participants, the focus—from a young age—is on the afterlife. Even children expressed an expectation that the afterlife will be preferred over life here and now. So it is the case that a person's time on this Earth is but a preparation for the afterlife, and that the more time one has spent on this Earth, the closer one is to this ultimate aim.

## Mainline divinity-based moral discourses

Eight mainline Presbyterians—one adolescent and seven adults—used divinity discourse to reason about their moral experiences. The conspicuous absence of mainline youth in this sample led us to structure this section somewhat differently than the evangelical section above. That is, rather than discussing moral discourses by age group, they will be addressed as a whole, making direct comparisons to evangelical community members when relevant. Participant worldviews will then be described, and finally, moral experience and worldviews analyses will be understood in tandem, and a mainline moral life course narrative will be delineated.

Like their evangelical counterparts, mainline moral experiences were diverse, ranging from returning incorrect change and lost bankcards, to losing one's temper, to searching for birth parents. An analysis of mainline participants' moral reasoning and discourse revealed one overarching category, which will now be described.

### God's role in reasoning about moral experiences is individualized and grows over time

A great deal can be learned about the role of divinity in moral reasoning through both what mainline divinity-using adults had to say, and the fact that mainline children and adolescents had almost nothing to say in terms of the Ethic of Divinity.

The single mainline youth, a 15-year-old girl, who reasoned in terms of divinity emphasized her personal relationship with, and construction of, God. Focusing on seeking help for a friend who was cutting, she explained God's involvement by referring directly to her Statement of Faith:[2] ''He was in my Statement of Faith.

I put in [that] Jesus is a friend and I do lean on Him all the time." She continued, "I really leaned on Jesus and said, 'I need your help, can you help me? I need empowerment.' I had my little push and I went." As a close friend and confidant, Jesus possessed the unique ability to empower her to confide in trusted adults about this situation. When reflecting on her decision, she explained:

> Now that I look at her, I say to myself, "Wow—thank you God for having me go, for pushing me and going to tell a teacher to get her help because I know she was going to turn to drugs and I was going to lose a friend."

Although reasoning in terms of divinity was rare indeed for mainline youth, nearly as many mainline adults invoked divinity reasoning as did evangelical adults. Mainline adults focused on instances in which they behaved in morally right and wrong ways to relatively equal degrees and discussed a variety of divinity-based justifications for their behaviors. Like their evangelical adult counterparts, some described the righteousness of their actions in terms of what God wants or intends. For instance, a 46-year-old man discussed his decision to return someone's lost ATM card after "a micro-second" of temptation. Preparing the interviewer for the religious reference to come, he said, "I mean . . . it gets kind-of religious there, but I basically think that God intends for us to be looking out for one another." Similarly, a 44-year-old woman who described her search for her birth parents explained that doing so fulfilled a moral obligation to her children and as such was right to do "in the eyes of God."

Other mainline adults, like evangelical youth, focused on the Bible's prohibitions. A 41-year-old woman referred to scriptural prohibitions when describing having had sex with her boyfriend during a trip paid for by her parents who did not know about the boyfriend travelling along. She explained, "Lying breaks a commandment," and added, "What I was doing with my boyfriend was breaking a commandment also." Reflecting on stealing a pair of earrings from a department store as a teenager, a 40-year-old woman similarly stated that stealing breaks one of God's ten commandments. She temporally distanced herself from this incident by highlighting her age (15-years-old or younger) at the time of the incident three times. She was, however, the only mainline participant to highlight the temporal distance from a wrong act; no mainliners spiritually distanced themselves from a wrong act.

Still others brought up additional religious considerations, including expectations of elders to behave in a Christ-like manner and stealing as "hurt[ing] God." The fact that a dominant divinity-based justification did not emerge, as it did for evangelical youth and adults, suggests a personally constructed role of religion for each participant. The near absence of mainline youth in this divinity-using sample is not merely a developmental pattern, for evangelical youth invoked divinity reasoning to a similar degree as evangelical adults. Rather, this likely speaks to divinity considerations as developing over time for members of this cultural community.

## Mainline worldviews

To better understand the moral experience findings described above, we turned to an analysis of mainline divinity users' worldviews. Here, we briefly describe participants' perceptions of human nature and the afterlife.

### Humans are mostly good

All mainline Protestants believed that human nature is mostly good, save a 46-year-old participant who expressed that he "doesn't know the answer" but explained that it is a "question [he] ponder[s] about." The remainder of mainline participants held optimistic views of human nature, with several reflecting on humans' intentions and aims of enacting good. The adolescent in this sample, for instance, explained that people are good because "we have mostly good intentions." A 52-year-old woman suggested that people "try to do what's morally right" by being helpful and "do[ing] their personal best in their jobs"; a 44-year-old man similarly reasoned that humankind is good because we "try to do what's right" by treating others fairly. The good deeds that mainliners focused on coalesced around helping others, being good to others, and treating others well. Some offered general explanations, such as the fact that people help those in need, trust others, set up families "where important things are taught," have strong character, and "conduct themselves honorably."

Still others offered very specific descriptions of the propensity of humans to help and treat others well. A 52-year-old woman suggested that humans' inherent goodness is evinced in the helpful and principled nature of people, including an individual with a talk show that aims to help people "do what is right." A 40-year-old woman also cited an example of people's honesty, decency, and kindness: an incident from the night before, in which her 5-year-old son went missing and "everybody just pulled right together" without even knowing them. She explained being very touched by this caring gesture because "it wasn't even their child." The goodness of humans was framed as inborn; in the words of one participant, "they're born with a need to do good things . . . cruel, immoral things are learned." Mainline Protestants' focus on an inherently good humankind with instincts and intentions to help others is quite a departure from the evangelical focus on inherent sin and its expression through selfishness.

### Diverse and nebulous conceptions of the afterlife

Mainline participants all believed in some sort of afterlife, but the specifics were often unclear and each person held a distinct conceptualization of what the afterlife entails. Many did not refer to Heaven at all; some, in fact, pushed back against the notion of Heaven and Hell. Others expressed their views of the afterlife in language such as "our soul join[ing] other souls" and "energies uniting." Some who did refer to Heaven suggested that nearly everyone goes there; others suggested that only

believers do. In short, nebulousness, uncertainty, and diversity characterized mainline participants' beliefs about the afterlife.

Uncertainty about the afterlife was evinced by the pervasiveness of mainline participant phrases such as "I don't know," "I have no idea," "I'm not sure," "I'm still wrestling with that," and "I haven't really figured that one out yet." In fact, all but one mainline adult used language such as this when describing what they believe happens after death. Furthermore, such language was often reiterated several times. For instance, a 44-year-old man explained, "I believe in the continuum of the soul. I'm not sure what that means exactly, but life after death at some point. I'm not sure what it is though." A 42-year-old woman similarly explained, "... the soul goes somewhere. It goes somewhere, and I guess to a place kind-of called Heaven." When asked if different people go different places, she first sighed, then replied, "I don't know about different places. I don't know. I don't know if they're different experiences. I don't know. I don't believe in Hell, if that's what you're asking." The 44-year-old woman who suggested that, "our soul joins other souls" further explained:

> Ah, I'm not exactly sure what happens. I just think they join together somehow. And they are part of this world somehow or part of, um, they're some sort of entity, some sort of energy. I'm not sure exactly where it is, but there is some sort of joining together.

The vagueness and lack of certainty suggests that even mainline adults are still cultivating an understanding of their unique religious beliefs.

In the above paragraph, there are hints of most mainline believers' rejection of the Heaven and Hell distinction, with Heaven being reserved for believers. One 46-year-old man put it bluntly: "I have no idea, [but] I don't buy the 'it's Heaven or Hell' thing." Mainliners who mentioned the possibility of Heaven seldom mentioned the possibility of Hell. The adolescent believed that "no matter who you are, you go to Heaven." For her, Heaven is not only for Christians, but for everyone. She acknowledged that an exclusive belief in Heaven is unusual given her faith, "Ah ... on this topic I might not sound too Christian." She even went on to share a story of a person who no longer attends church, but she believes will still be going to Heaven as he has not "completely forgotten God." Those who expressed with certainty that believers go to Heaven did not believe that non-believers necessarily go to Hell. Another participant expressed that Hell is reserved only for those "bad enough to suffer capital punishment"; for her, one's afterlife is determined not by belief in God but by the morality of one's actions during one's time on Earth. Although faith in God is a factor in some mainliners' conceptions of the afterlife, it is certainly not the only factor.

It should be clear by now that mainline interpretations of the afterlife were both individually defined and incomplete. Language such as "[I'm] still wrestling with that" and "I haven't really figured that one out yet" evinces the belief that one's conception of the afterlife is to be determined for oneself. Recall that for

evangelicals, "going your own way" is a reflection of inherent sin and "man's rebelliousness against God." This is not the case for mainliners; in fact, a personalized version of the afterlife and of one's relationship with God is one of the few consistencies among mainline participants.

Mainliners' belief in the inherent proclivity for goodness, paired with their nebulous conceptions of the afterlife, translates more broadly into a focus on this world and doing good here and now. For mainline participants, the "here and now" was universally considered more important than the afterlife. The majority suggested that "here and now" will also be their favorite, though some indicated that they "don't know" which will be their favorite. The dominant reason provided for this preference revolved around the belief that it is here and now that one can make a difference in the world. One participant explained, "I don't think I'll be making much of an influence in the afterlife." Others focused on the unique opportunity to help others here, and still others focused on particular helping roles, including parenting and family matters. Mainliners were overwhelmingly focused on the present; a 42-year-old woman explained, "I'm struggling with having four children. I actually find myself not thinking about Heaven." The adolescent suggested that the challenges and obstacles encountered in this life help her and others grow; "I know this one," she said, "The other, I'm not too sure about."

Mainline Protestants' worldviews, then, are wholly distinct from that of evangelicals. For one, their focus on an inherently good humankind with instincts and intentions to help others contrasts with evangelical participants, whose ultimate focus was on the afterlife. Mainliners also held uncertain conceptions of the afterlife and were not eagerly awaiting the afterlife; rather, they were focused on here and now, and on the moral goods possible in this life.

## Mainline moral life course narrative: Building an individualized relationship with God to bring out inner good in this world

Synthesizing worldviews and moral discourse, the mainline Protestant moral life course narrative is as follows: Human nature is mostly good, a highly individualized relationship with God grows over time, and the nature of the afterlife is uncertain. Hence, enacting good in this world is of utmost importance (see Figure 2).

The near absence of mainline youth in this divinity-using sample should be understood in light of the mainline belief that one's individualized relationship with God and religion grows over time. All mainline adults reported believing in, but all had different understandings of, God. One participant referred to the presence of God in nature, another referred to Him as scientific ("a scientific . . . sort of all-encompassing power"), another wept as she described God as a loving, helpful nurturer. The single divinity-using mainline youth referred to God as a "big face" of kindness to whom people can "go up to . . . and just spill your guts." Further describing her private relationship with God, she explained, "When
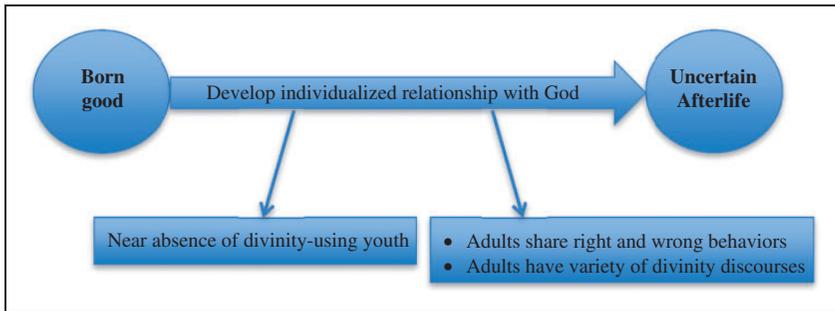
**Figure 2.** Mainline Protestant moral life course.

I get in bad situations or something...I sort-of write Him a letter and tell the whole situation.'' Without the insistence that all mainliners hold similar views of the divine, and do so from a young age, mainline youth do not reason in terms of divinity at this point along the moral life course.

The variety of divinity discourses and mixed moral judgments of their behaviors suggests variable conceptualizations of God. Just as mainline participants offered distinct descriptions of God and of the afterlife, they drew from distinct lines of divinity discourse when recounting their behaviors. Some framed God as an example for others to follow. Others considered God's intent and wishes, and still others considered His emotions. Some referenced the commandments. One participant referred to Jesus as a friend and motivator. The diversity of discourses when considering both their own behaviors and their worldviews is a stark contrast to the uniformity of evangelical participants' discourses about morality, religion, and the afterlife.

Mainline participants further rarely temporally distanced, and never spiritually distanced, themselves from wrongdoings. This lack of atonement, we suggest, did not arise because being saved and moving away from sin are not components of the church-wide discourse or of their moral life course narrative. For mainline Protestants, the developmental trajectory does not entail a gradual movement away from sin (given the belief that people are mostly good) in order to reach the end goal of residing with God in the afterlife (given that Heaven and Hell are not certain). Rather, acting upon inner good in this life is both the means and the end of faith and the moral life course. An individualized relationship with God, cultivated over time, helps fulfill life's purpose of being a good person and helping others here and now.

## Discussion and ethnographic situatedness

The moral life course theory speaks to the constitutive role that religious and metaphysical worldviews play in conceptions of morality and immorality, and the manner in which these worldviews and attendant moral conceptions change across the life course. Framing participants' moral discourses in light of religious

worldviews, we have shown how the development of these discourses is predicated on distinct cultural systems of meaning. In order to more deeply understand our findings, the evangelical and mainline Protestant life course narratives delineated must be interpreted in light of ethnographic data, which points to divergent moral socialization experiences for youth in each cultural community.

Evangelical youth were exposed to messages about the powerful and omniscient nature of God across church, home, and school contexts. In this paper, we have shown that such messages are integrated into their moral and worldviews discourses from a young age. Recall the young girl who recounted her father's reaction to her lie about eating lifesavers, "He said, 'Well, God saw everything. Did God see you eat them? And I said 'Yes.' So he just told me that God does see everything I do in mysterious ways." Evangelical children are socialized by parents and community members to see God as a guardian, and to nurture their relationship with Him from a young age in order to move away from inherent sin and toward eternal salvation. Our analyses furthermore revealed that evangelical children highlighted their moral transgressions because of their worldviews according to which they are closer to a sinful birth. This runs contrary to longstanding psychological views that people present themselves as good persons (Festinger, 1957) and current developmental views that "even young children strive to present themselves as morally good persons, thereby showing a basic understanding of what a moral audience expects of them" (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Gasser, & Malti, 2010, p. 29). In fact, we have shown that religious culture is critically important in this respect.

For many mainline youth, tactile religious reminders were reserved for the church context. In the mainline church, the understanding that questioning and developing an individualized relationship with God over time is evinced in the church's tagline, "Worshipping. Questioning. Serving" and in the cultural practice of adolescent congregants writing "Statements of Faith." One such statement written by a particularly reflective adolescent member read: "I have done a lot of growing between 5 and 15. In that decade, I have discovered that I cannot believe in that kind of detached, objective God who looks down on me from above." We propose that mainline youth in our study were socialized to roughly appropriate their church's message that religion is a personal experience arrived at over time through careful consideration. It follows, then, that youth in this religious community did not yet use divinity discourses to frame their moral experiences. Furthermore, the mainline moral life course did not entail an urgency toward divinity in order to overcome childhood sinfulness as it did for evangelical youth.

Our work suggests that religious communities hold implicit epistemological assumptions, which in turn affects moral meaning making. Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship (2004, 2014) provides a theoretical starting point from which to understand the profound role of religious cultures in structuring personal epistemologies and moral meaning making. Briefly stated, the theory holds that there are different phases on the road to self-authorship, which entails an "internal capacity to define one's belief system, identity, and social relationships" (Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 69). The initial phase involves following *external*

*formulas*. This first phase is typified by reliance on authority figures to provide knowledge that is certain, as well as the definition of oneself through external others. In the next *crossroads* phase, a tension arises between external influence and an emergent internal voice, and the knowledge and beliefs of external authorities are called into question. *Becoming the author of one's life* entails establishing one's own beliefs, values, and identity and recognizing the contextual nature of beliefs; finally, *internal foundation* is characterized by groundedness in one's own internal belief system. In this final phase, the solidification of the internal self enables security in exploring others' perspectives and openness to ambiguity, change, and uncertainty (Baxter Magolda, 2014). The theory holds that developing a self-authored internally focused belief system requires an epistemological shift from external reliance on 'how you know' to the cultivation of internal convictions about 'how I know' (Bryant, 2011).

The mainline moral life course delineated in this manuscript is founded upon a cultural valuation of a self-authored belief of, and relationship with, God. Our study suggests that mainline youth are socialized into a moral system that prioritizes the establishment of one's personalized internal beliefs about the divine, and the cultivation of an openness to ambiguity and uncertainty with regard to the nature of God and the afterlife. In this study, we have seen the implications of such an emphasis on community members' meaning making about their own moral experiences, as well as the increasing proclivity to consider their moral experiences in light of divinity across the life course. Results suggest that for mainline Presbyterians, self-authorship is a divine developmental aim toward which its constituents are socialized from an early age.

With a cultural orientation toward a certain afterlife and a focus on "the word [of God]" to arrive there, the evangelical moral life course does not similarly hinge upon cultivating a personalized, self-authored belief in the divine. And yet, our theory suggests that the evangelical epistemological and moral belief system is no less internally focused. In fact, our results demonstrate that God was deeply involved in the private moral worlds of even young evangelical children, serving as a moral compass and symbolic perfection according to which they compared themselves. On one hand, evangelical participants of all ages shared a focus on external formulas when considering their own moral behaviors, focusing on the Bible and God's prohibitions (children) and intent (adults). Their worldviews furthermore evinced a certainty and shared belief system across age groups with regard to the nature of humans, of God, and of the afterlife. On the other hand, evangelical participants of all ages shared a focus on internal foundations of the divine, as indicated by the extensive interweaving of God into community members' recollections of their private moral experiences.

For evangelical Presbyterians, then, knowledge of the divine is at once revealed externally and manifested internally from an early age. As such, tension and resolution between external influence and internal voice (as in Baxter Magolda's *crossroads* phase) is not a critical component of the evangelical developmental trajectory, for the external and internal are to walk in tandem throughout the

life course. Our study further suggests that for evangelicals, developing an authentic, internal belief in, and relationship with, God requires neither an abandonment of external formulas in favor of an entirely self-constructed belief in the divine, nor a belief in the ambiguity of divine knowledge, as was the case for mainliners. The evangelical life course narrative delineated in this manuscript demonstrates the implications of socialization into a moral system that at once privileges the external and internal on how community members make meaning of their moral experiences while on Earth. Taken together, the divergent life course narratives point to the intimate relationships between cultural and personal epistemologies, beliefs about the divine and the cultivation of the divine self, and the ways in which one makes sense of one's own moral behaviors across the life course.

The present grounded theory also helps us make sense of quantitative moral reasoning findings with members of the same cultural and age groups. In previous work (Jensen & McKenzie, 2016), we found that mainline Presbyterian children and adolescents used Divinity reasoning infrequently for private moral issues (the same moral experiences that were examined qualitatively here) and public issues. Mainline adults, though, used the ethic more for private than public issues, which we have reasoned indicates that mainline adults have privatized the Ethic of Divinity. The present study has enabled an understanding of *why*. It has demonstrated, for instance, that the assumption of a privatized divine moral self is etched into the moral life course, and that this is—in fact—the developmental goal towards which community members are socialized to strive. Such a privatization assumes, and perhaps requires, precisely what we found in the present study: a diversity of divinity discourses based on one's individualized relationship with God that develops over time.

In the same study (Jensen & McKenzie, 2016), we found that mainline children did not reason in terms of the Ethic of Divinity, and that evangelical children did. We also found that evangelical adolescents and adults used Divinity more when reasoning about public than private issues. With knowledge of the divine presumed to be certain and absolute, considerations of God and the scriptures can presumably be readily applied onto not only one's own (private) moral behaviors but also onto how everyone (public) out to think and behave. Meanwhile, for adult mainliners who focus on constructing personalized belief systems and conceive of the divine as fundamentally uncertain, suggesting that their considerations of the divine should map onto others' thoughts and behaviors is far less plausible—and as our study found, rare. The moral life course theory delineated in this manuscript helps us understand why differences in divinity-based moral reasoning between evangelical and mainline religious cultures become more pronounced with age: they are moving towards distinct cultural, epistemological, and developmental aims.

## Conclusions

Combining cultural analyses of ethnographic contexts and developmental analyses of participants' worldviews and moral discourse, this study has shed light on

cultural transmissions of distinct moral life course narratives. The moral life course narrative theory provides a framework for understanding when, why, and how divinity enters into moral meaning making for cultural community members, and for particularizing how religious culture structures the moral life course of its adherents. In addition to exposing our participants' own meaning making strategies and their cultural origins, we propose new ways for researchers to generate, and make meaning of, rich qualitative data.

This study extends previous cultural and developmental scholarship and provides methodological suggestions for meaningful integration. The methodology presently used—in-depth interviews about private moral experiences—offers insights into both explicit and implicit reflections. The clinical interview, a longstanding staple of moral development research (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992; Kohlberg, 1958; Piaget, 1932), potentially elicits what anthropologist Zigon (2008, 2010) terms a "moral breakdown," where a person or event elicits conscious reflection upon one's embodied dispositions. We have shown that when this interview method is applied to private moral experiences, it breaks open both conscious and less conscious moral conceptualizations. It is unlikely, for instance, that the evangelical children in our sample deliberately elected to describe moral transgressions, or that evangelical adults consciously emphasized their spiritual distance from transgressions. Rather, the initiation of moral breakdowns via in-depth clinical interviews facilitated the emergence of such implicit or subconscious psychological phenomena. In short, moments of moral breakdown both speak to participants' conscious reflections and present a unique opportunity to go beyond that which participants consciously explain.

Synthesizing cultural and developmental perspectives has extended previous work on morality by showing the dynamic nature of moral discourse across the life course within communities. For example, evangelical children had a different sense of their relationship with God than did evangelical adults, and hence they interpreted and framed their moral experiences in different ways. Our developmental perspective also enabled an understanding of when divinity enters the moral realm for mainline Protestants, and why this occurs quite a bit later than for evangelical Protestants. Had we examined moral discourses of just one age group, we would have missed both how individuals in each religious community move towards the divine and how their developing moral discourse reflects this movement.

This work illustrates the value of thinking across disciplinary, methodological, and analytical boundaries in order to elaborate cultural constructions of developmentally dynamic moral selves. Here, we utilized the cultural–developmental approach (Jensen, 2008, 2011, 2015a), examining divinity-based moral reasoning and grounding conclusions in participants' ethnographic contexts. The present findings add to our understanding of the Ethic of Divinity by demonstrating that the divinity-based moral discourses of evangelical and mainline youth are framed by worldviews distinctive to both their age and culture. The theoretical and methodological approach of the present study contributes a new understanding of how cultural moral life course narratives help people of different ages interpret their private moral experiences. In turn, we propose that future research fuse

cultural and developmental lenses of analysis to investigate the intimate and evolving relationships between cultural worldviews, individual conceptions of the divine, and individual conceptions of the divine self.

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## Notes

1. $M = 6.1$; $M = 5.4$, respectively, where $1 =$ never and $7 =$ more than once a week, $F(1, 119) = 13.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$.
2. As described in the section on evangelical and mainline ethnographic contexts, mainline adolescents write Statements of Faith. Such a practice provides space for young church members to reflect on God's role in their lives and promotes the notion that everyone experiences God differently.

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