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## **The Cultural Psychology of Religiosity, Spirituality, and Secularism in Adolescence**

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### **Abstract**

Cultural psychology has raised awareness of religiosity, spirituality, and secularism in people's psychological lives. This article takes a cultural-developmental approach by examining the development of religiosity, spirituality, and secularism among culturally diverse adolescents. At the outset, an explanation is provided as to why the valid study of peoples' psychological lives necessitates taking culture into account, and of key implications for theory and methodology. Throughout research on adolescent religiosity, spirituality, and secularism is described, including studies on conceptions of God, afterlife beliefs, the development of an Ethic of Divinity in moral reasoning, recent increases in spirituality and secularism, and the impact of globalization on worldviews and religiously-based puberty rituals. While the focus is on adolescents, the article includes relevant research with children and emerging adults. Concrete future research directions are proposed, including a call to address the extent to which effects of religion on adolescents are dependent on culture and globalization.

*Keywords:* Adolescence; Cultural psychology; Cultural-Developmental Approach, Emerging adulthood; Globalization; Religiosity; Secularism; Spirituality.

## Introduction

More than 80% of the world's population identify with a religion (Pew-Templeton Global Religious Future Project, 2020). At the same time, almost 20% indicate that they are religiously unaffiliated. The proportion of unaffiliated persons is rising in many countries, and this rise is led by adolescents and emerging adults (Bullard, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2018; Poushter & Fetterolf, 2019). Being religiously affiliated and religiously unaffiliated may seem like two distinct categories. However, research that delves into the beliefs and practices of cultural groups and their individual members finds that boundaries are porous between religiosity, spirituality, and secularism. For example, an Irish adolescent can self-identify as atheist and simultaneously be nominated by his community as a spiritual exemplar (King, Clardy, & Ramos, 2014). An Australian Aborigine adolescent may take active part in collective puberty rituals that involve the teaching of long-standing religious beliefs, called the "Law," while simultaneously being in the process of developing different beliefs that are more individualistic (Eichelkamp, 2013). A Danish emerging adult may self-identify as agnostic but also profess a belief in life after death (Arnett & Jensen, 2015).

The present article will provide a cultural psychology perspective on the development of religiosity, spirituality, and secularism in adolescence. While the focus of this special issue of *Adolescent Research Review* is on adolescent religiosity and spirituality, this article will also address secularism because of its worldwide growth and the fact that it sometimes intersects with religiosity and spirituality. The focus will be on adolescent development, but relevant research with children and emerging adults will also be included.

## Definitions and Organization

Defining religiosity, spirituality, and secularism in a way that has validity across cultures is a challenge. Here, religiosity and spirituality will be understood to entail belief in the supernatural, or sacred, or “ultimate reality” (King, Schnitker, & Houltberg, 2020, p. 593), while secularism will refer to the absence of such belief (Zuckerman & Thompson, 2020). Religiosity involves an affirmative relationship with one or more religions, where a religion typically entails a set of doctrinal beliefs and behaviors that are shared by a community. Spirituality will refer to an individual’s search for or sense of connection with the sacred, supernatural, or ultimate reality. Social science definitions of religiosity, spirituality, and secularism are plentiful, and adolescent researchers have been moving toward flexible and multidimensional definitions (Hardy, Nelson, Moore, & King, 2019). The present definitions are intended as a starting point, yet it needs to be acknowledged that they may not apply equally well to all cultural groups (Eller, 2017). Terms and meanings pertaining to religiosity, spirituality, and secularism are varied and multifaceted across cultures. As will be discussed later, investigating such cultural diversity is precisely part of cultural psychology.

Cultural psychology aims to understand the diverse psychologies of different peoples. The field of cultural psychology has burgeoned in recent decades. Initially, as cultural psychologists were focused on carving out a discipline, some distinguished cultural psychology from cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Stigler, Shweder & Herdt, 1990). The central argument was that cross-cultural psychology—like cultural psychology—involved the study of peoples of different cultures, but that its central aim—unlike cultural psychology—was to document universal psychological phenomena. Critics of cross-cultural psychology also noted that often concepts and measures developed in the United States were exported without adequate consideration of their relevance to local conditions. By now, the boundaries between cultural and

cross-cultural psychology have become less sharp. Cross-cultural psychologists are showing increased attention to cultural diversity and ecological validity, perhaps partly in response to the cultural psychology critique (e.g., Kühnen, Deutsch & Boehnke, 2009). While this article uses the term cultural psychology, it is important to note that this burgeoning field includes scholars from many disciplines, including not only psychology but anthropology, communications, education, linguistics, political science, social work, sociology, and neuroscience (Jensen, 2015a).

Culture is defined here as symbolic, behavioral, and institutional inheritances that are shared and co-constructed by members of a community (Goodnow, 2010; Jensen, 2015a). Culture is not synonymous with country or ethnicity, but rather describes communities whose members share key beliefs, values, behaviors, routines, and institutions. Of course, cultural communities include heterogeneity within groups, as scholars addressing cultural issues have long observed (Gramsci, 1971). Variation also exists between cultural communities, including on their degree of heterogeneity and change over time (Weisner, Bradley, & Kilbride, 1997; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). An important source of variation both within and across cultures is access to power. Power differentials occur along lines such as region of the world, nationality, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, gender, and religion (e.g., Abo-Zena & Ahmed, 2014; Hammack & Toolis, 2015; Kapadia & Gala, 2015; Super, 2010).

The articles in this journal issue present different disciplinary approaches to the study of religious and spiritual development in adolescence. Since the charge of the present article is to introduce the cultural psychology perspective, rationales as to why this perspective is necessary will be the starting point. Next will follow a section that describes key theoretical and methodological considerations when conducting cultural psychology research. While the key

points of these first two sections are germane to research with all age groups, the explanations and examples provided will focus on adolescents. The third section highlights additional important cultural psychology studies that have contributed to the study of the development of religiosity, spirituality, and secularism in adolescence. Suggestions for future research will be presented at the end.

### **Cultural Psychology: Three Rationales**

One reason that cultural psychology is necessary is that humans have evolved to be a uniquely cultural species, capable of inhabiting almost any part of the globe (Tomasello, 2010). Our large brains have enabled us to adapt to most environments by inventing new methods of survival and passing them on to our children as part of a cultural way of life. The less mature brain of the human child at birth relative to other species also makes for a longer period of dependency and for extensive brain maturation and learning within local physical and cultural environments (Jensen & Arnett, 2020). Successfully surviving in vastly different environments, from equatorial Africa to the Arctic, requires the highly flexible set of cognitive and emotional skills afforded by the human brain and the ability to create cultural communities. The extent to which religion was a part of this evolutionary process is currently being debated, but it undoubtedly became a salient component of culture over time (e.g., De Waal, 2013; Turner, Maryanski, Petersen, & Geertz, 2017). Apart from adapting to new environments, humans have also become capable of altering their environments, such that it is no longer natural selection alone but also the cultures we create that determine how we live. In short, being cultural is a fundamental part of what it means to be human, and cultural psychology addresses this fact.

A second reason for the necessity of a cultural psychology perspective is that today we live in a globalizing world where people from different cultures constantly come into contact

with one another, in both the physical and the digital worlds (Jensen, in press). The flow of ideas, goods, and people across the world is not new, but the current extent and speed of globalization are unprecedented. In many ways, adolescents and emerging adults are at the forefront of globalization with their openness to new ideas, consumption of global brands, facility with use of new global technologies, and migration from rural to urban areas in search of new work opportunities (Jensen & Arnett, 2012). Interestingly, psychological research on young people's orientation to religion in the context of globalization is scarce, although one recent study in Thailand found that urban adolescents with extensive exposure to globalization emphasized individualized views of religion whereas rural adolescents with minimal exposure to globalization regarded religion as a relational experience that includes friends, family members, and teachers (McKenzie, Tsutsui, & Prakash, 2019). Globalization calls for a cultural psychology perspective that helps us understand people from diverse cultures, including their religious, spiritual, and secular thoughts and behaviors. It is important to note that globalization has an impact across the world, not just in some countries, rendering a cultural psychology perspective relevant for all of us.

A third reason for a cultural psychology perspective is that most of the world's population lives outside the West, yet most psychological research only includes samples from North America and Europe (Heine, 2020). There is an urgent need to know more about the psychology of the majority world. Moreover, almost all future population growth is projected to take place in economically developing countries (Population Reference Bureau, 2014). Some of the economically developing regions of the world are seeing an increase in religious affiliation in their adult populations. For example, this is the case in Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa (Bullard, 2016). Does this mean that adolescents in these regions are also becoming more

religious? If so, what forms are their religious beliefs and practices taking? And what are the implications for a global world where adolescents and emerging adults in other regions are becoming more secular? From a cultural psychology perspective, social science becomes more valid and more relevant when it includes the full scope of the human population.

### **Cultural Psychology: Theoretical and Methodological Implications**

Psychology has long sought to provide nomothetic and idiographic knowledge; that is, knowledge of what all humans have in common and how individuals are unique, respectively. Cultural psychology adds a point in between these two ends of the spectrum, namely, the aim of knowing the diverse psychologies of cultural groups. Certainly, through the study of different cultures, cultural psychologists may point to human commonalities that carry across cultures. Also, cultural psychologists may provide case studies of individuals within groups or highlight how individuals within a culture vary. Nonetheless, the crucial contribution of cultural psychology is to point out that humans are cultural, and that attention to cultural diversity makes social science better able to accomplish its key goals of contributing knowledge and improving people's lives. In order to reach these social science goals, cultural psychologists employ ecologically sensitive theoretical and methodological approaches.

### **Implications for Theory: Beyond One-Size-Fits-All**

From a cultural psychology perspective, one-size-fits-all theories are insufficient. Psychology has a history of universalistic theories (e.g., Freud, Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler, Maslow), and research based on these theories has contributed valuable insights. This research, however, has been ineffective at capturing diversity. For example, a long psychological research tradition on the development of conceptualizations of the supernatural has employed a Piagetian framework (Bassett et al., 1990; Elkind, 1970; Goldman, 1965; Harms, 1944; Nye & Carlson,

1984). Most of this research has examined how children and adolescents think about God, often by asking them to describe God in interviews or depict God in drawings. In line with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, researchers have habitually concluded that children up until the age of about 10 or 11 view God in concrete ways (e.g., a man with a white beard), whereas adolescents have much more abstract images (e.g., God is everywhere).

There is a paucity of research on how culture may impact conceptualizations of God, but available studies call into question wholesale Piagetian conclusions and indicate that children from different religious cultures produce different images of God. For example, a study found that children from Latter-Day Saint, Lutheran, and Mennonite families drew pictures of God with more concrete features (God as a person), as compared to children of Jewish background (Pitts, 1976). Another study showed that Hindu children, more than Baptist, Catholic, and Jewish children, described a many-sided God (Heller, 1986). The Hindu children said they felt close to God while also portraying God as an abstract form of energy. Across these studies, children's drawings and statements reflected the different images of God that distinguish their religions, including notably abstract ideas within some religious cultures.

Research that has extended these veins of inquiry to include additional age groups and to inquire about additional supernatural entities has shown that different religious cultures give rise to different psychological realities. For example, one study compared children (7-12), adolescents (13-18), and adults (36-57) from evangelical and mainline American Protestant communities on their conceptions of God and the Devil (Jensen, 2009). Analyses of interviews showed differences along four dimensions. First, religious culture has an impact in terms of what supernatural entities populate one's psychological reality. For almost all evangelicals, the Devil was real, whereas the majority of mainline participants repudiated the existence of the Devil.

Second, religious culture makes a difference in terms of how one characterizes supernatural entities. Evangelicals conceived of God more in terms of power and judgment than mainline Protestants. They were also more likely to see God as male, whereas mainline Protestants often described God's gender in terms of the abstract idea of "something else". Third, religious culture affects how one evaluates supernatural entities. For evangelicals there was a particularly large within-subject difference in their evaluations of God and the Devil, as compared to mainliners. Evangelicals evaluated God far more positively than the Devil, and the Devil far more negatively than God. Fourth, religious culture makes a difference in the relationship that one has with God. The two groups differed strongly on how much control they saw God as having over their lives. This difference is exemplified by an evangelical adolescent who stated that "God controls everything, the kind of people I meet, how I react in situations", and a mainline adolescent who said "I think God leaves ourselves to make our own decisions" (Jensen, 2009, p.142).

In short, religious cultures differ on conceptions of supernatural entities. This includes which supernatural entities are believed to exist, how supernatural entities are characterized, and the nature of the relationship between humans and supernatural entities. These findings illustrate the limitations that one-size-fits-all theories place on obtaining knowledge across cultural groups that is valid and can meaningfully be applied to diverse peoples' lives.

### **Implications for Theory: Toward Multiplicity**

In lieu of one-size-fits-all theories, cultural psychology theories typically involve multiplicity. For example, they differentiate between multiple kinds of identities, intelligences, parenting styles, and creativities (e.g., Kağıtçıbaşı & Yalin, 2015; Mourgues, Barbot, Tan, & Grigorenko, 2015; Nsamenang, 2011; Sternberg, 1985). The differentiation between religiosity and spirituality can also be taken to represent a movement toward multiplicity, since it aims to

better reflect the different ways that cultural groups and individuals believe in the supernatural or sacred or ultimate reality, and the diverse behaviors in which those beliefs find expression.

Cultural psychology has called attention to religious and spiritual concepts in research areas where they had not received much attention, thereby introducing multiplicity to these areas. One example is the area of moral development. For many decades most of the research on moral development was based on Kohlberg's universalistic stage theory (Kohlberg, 1984). The coding manual used for research with Kohlberg's theory includes 708 criterion judgments for coding moral reasoning but only two pertain to religiosity, spirituality, or divinity (Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1995). Other moral development theories that arose during the heyday of Kohlberg's theory, such as Gilligan's and Turiel's theories, also did not code divinity considerations as part of moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982; Turiel, 1983).

Aiming to broaden the area of moral development, cultural psychology researchers have introduced a tripartite differentiation between three ethics: Autonomy, Community, and Divinity (Jensen, 1995; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). Briefly, the Ethic of Autonomy—which is prominent in Kohlberg's theory—involves a focus on persons as individuals. Moral reasons within this ethic include the interests, well-being, and rights of individuals (self or other), and fairness between individuals. The Ethic of Community focuses on persons as members of social groups, with attendant reasons such as duty to others and concern with the customs, interests, and welfare of groups. The Ethic of Divinity focuses on persons as spiritual or religious entities, and reasons include divine and natural law, sacred lessons, and spiritual purity. Research has shown the presence and reliable differentiation of the three ethics across diverse cultures, including groups from Brazil, Finland, India, New Zealand, the Philippines, Turkey, and the

United States (Guerra & Giner-Sorolla, 2010; Hickman, 2014; Kapadia & Bhangaokar, 2015; Padilla-Walker & Jensen, 2016; Vasquez, Keltner, Ebenbach, & Banaszynski, 2001).

The broadening of moral development theory to include an Ethic of Divinity has generated new lines of research. Studies have shown that moral reasoning in terms of the Ethic of Divinity is present across many cultures, even as it varies considerably in frequency between cultures (Jensen, 2015b). Research has also shown that some cultural groups use the Ethic of Divinity when reasoning about public issues where their moral judgments apply to everyone, whereas other cultural groups privatize this ethic and use it only when judging their own moral behaviors (Jensen & McKenzie, 2016).

Bridging cultural and developmental psychology, theory utilizing the three ethics has also proposed that divinity reasoning may be particularly likely to rise in adolescence. According to the cultural-developmental theory of moral psychology, use of the Ethic of Divinity will often be low among children but will increase in adolescence and become similar to adult use (Jensen, 2008). This infusion of divinity reasoning in adolescence may especially characterize religious cultures that emphasize scriptural authority, or where people conceive of supernatural entities as largely distinct from humans, such as being omniscient and omnipotent. The reason is that these culturally articulated religious concepts are of such an abstract nature that they may be readily translated into moral reasoning only by adolescents, whose cognitive skills allow for more abstraction than those of younger children (Trommsdorff, 2012). Research has begun to support this cultural-developmental hypothesis regarding the infusion of divinity in adolescents' moral reasoning (DiBianca Fasoli, 2018; Jensen & McKenzie, 2019; Vainio, 2015).

However, in cultures where scriptural accounts of supernatural entities are less salient or where people regard such entities as less distinct from humans, it is possible that Ethic of

Divinity concepts are more accessible to and hence used more by children in their moral reasoning from an early age (Saraswathi, 2005). In some Hindu Indian communities, for example, religious devotion finds expression in tangible and recurrent activities (e.g., bathing, dressing, and feeding the gods), there are many places within and outside the home for worship (e.g., household and roadside shrines, temples), and there are a variety of persons seen to have god-like status or special connections with the gods (e.g., gurus, *sadhus* [renouncers], temple priests) (Jensen, 1998; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1990). In such cultures, children may reason about moral issues in terms of Ethic of Divinity concepts from fairly early on because these concepts are tied repeatedly to specific everyday activities and objects. Then, in the course of adolescence and adulthood, additional Divinity concepts may become part of a person's moral reasoning. Research is currently under way to examine this hypothesis (e.g., Pandya, Jensen, & Bhangaokar, 2020).

In sum, from a cultural psychology perspective, theories need to go beyond one-size-fits-all universalism to include cultural diversity. Because of their attention to diversity, cultural psychologists have contributed to highlighting the role of religion and spirituality in people's lives, including how beliefs about the supernatural and divine contribute to different psychological realities and ways of thinking about morality.

### **Implications for Methodology: Working With Diverse Samples and Colleagues**

A cultural psychology perspective has implications for who is studied and how they are studied. With respect to sampling, the still limited amount of psychological research on religiosity, spirituality, and secularism in adolescence (and all other periods of the life course) entails a need for research with samples from all over the world. The role of culture, however, needs to be considered explicitly in the conceptualization and write-up of the research.

Conducting research with an American sample, for example, and presuming generalizability of results to everyone else is unscientific. Yet, it is an approach that has been common and continues to be so. Cultural psychologists who seek to publish research from the majority world are routinely asked by reviewers and editors to justify their samples and to explain the cultural context. Research conducted in the United States is not necessarily held to the same standard. Studies are often published that provide no justification for the selection of an American sample and no information about the cultural context. Not only is that unscientific, it misses an opportunity to adequately inform readers from different parts of the world about American culture or cultures.

Instead, researchers need to consider and explain how results are shaped by culture. One example of a study in the United States that took a cultural psychology perspective sampled evangelical families. This study aimed to identify “social-communicative” processes that promote the development of the Ethic of Divinity in children's moral reasoning. It purposefully sampled American evangelical families because they belong to a religious culture known for its emphasis on considerations pertaining to divinity (DiBianca Fasoli, 2018). The study compared the moral reasoning of parents and children, and it delved into the ways they responded to one another in conversations about moral issues. Findings showed that the evangelical adults reasoned more in terms of Divinity than their children. The results also revealed that the parents regularly sought to reroute their children’s reasoning from a focus on the Ethic of Autonomy to the Ethic of Divinity, and that they did so through processes such as “scaffolding” Divinity considerations and “countering” Autonomy considerations. For example, one mother and her daughter discussed why someone should put off an outing to the movies and instead visit a friend who had just been hospitalized (Hickman & Fasoli, 2015, pp. 161-162).

Mother: Who is she thinking about if she goes to the hospital?

Child: Her friend.

Mother: And who is she thinking about if she goes to the movie?

Child: Herself.

Mother: And what does God ask us to do?

Child: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Mother: Mmm. Or to serve others, right?

The author framed the results of the study from the perspective of cultural psychology, stating that they “illuminate the processes through which children rationalize their developing moral outlooks in culturally distinct ways” (p.1671). The author also specifically suggests that parental socialization by means of everyday moral discourse contributes to the rise in the Ethic of Divinity from childhood into adolescence within conservative religious cultures in the United States.

While research attuned to the role of culture within Western societies contributes importantly to our scientific knowledge, there is also a profound and urgent need to know more about the psychology of people from outside Europe and North America (Heine, 2020). As noted earlier, the majority world is underrepresented in psychological research. Through the inclusion of understudied samples, we stand to gain new knowledge. For example, a recent study used archival data from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (a database of coded variables from approximately 200 highly diverse cultures) to determine the most common religious “traits” among 33 hunter-gather societies and by implication, according to the authors, the origins and evolution of religion (Peoples, Duda, & Marlowe, 2016). Animism was present in all of the societies, closely followed by belief in an afterlife and shamanism. Ancestor worship and belief in high gods were present in somewhat fewer than half of the societies, and belief in high gods who involve themselves actively in human affairs was rare (15% of societies). If we compare the meanings of religion in these hunter-gather societies with its meanings among other cultures

described so far, the sheer diversity of religious beliefs across the world becomes apparent. This demonstrates how invaluable studies of majority world cultures are in broadening and deepening our knowledge of psychology.

When working in economically developing societies, it is worth noting that there is often an especially sharp divide between the high-SES urban elite and the relatively poor majority of the population. While the high-SES urban samples are often less difficult to recruit and less time-consuming to work with, they are also the ones most likely to resemble samples from the West because they have the most exposure to globalization. Thus, similarities across these samples cannot be interpreted as pointing to universalism, as sometimes happens. Instead, similarities are more likely to point to ways that urban elites in economically developing countries are becoming Westernized. For example, globalization is contributing to some urban adolescents in Thailand becoming more critical of religion. This cultural shift is vividly exemplified by an adolescent who said: “It’s easy to get bored with Buddhism.... There’s nothing new—there are no updates in religion. Like a new iPad—iPad 2, iPad 3—there’s not Buddhism 1, Buddhism 2” (McKenzie et al., 2019, p. 81).

For psychology to become inclusive of samples across the world and attuned to culture and cultural change, researchers from different countries will benefit from collaborating, something globalization has made easier than ever before. This provides opportunities for research in places that are understudied. Such collaborations can also generate particularly rich insights, as researchers who have insider and outsider perspectives develop and complete projects together. Furthermore, such projects may also lead to explicit consideration of ways that research participants’ behaviors may be influenced by the cultural (or religious) backgrounds of the researchers.

**Implications for Methodology: Working with Indigenous Concepts and Languages**

Cultural psychologists differentiate etic and emic concepts. Etic concepts are the ones that researchers have formulated prior to going into a culture to do research, and which they now intend to use in studying a new culture. In contrast, emic concepts derive from the study of a culture. They are concepts that people in the culture use. While cultural psychologists may use etic concepts, the use of emic ones is necessary in order to achieve ecologically valid knowledge.

Returning to the Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity, described earlier, measurements of the three ethics assess the degree to which a person uses each ethic, and also specific types of reasons used within an ethic. The coding manual for open-ended oral or written responses differentiates 13 to 16 subcodes for each ethic, such as “Self’s Psychological Well-Being” and “Rights” for Autonomy, “Duty to Others” and “Social Order or Harmony Goals” for Community, and “Scriptural Authority” and “Natural Law” for Divinity (Jensen, 2015c). The differentiation of types of reasons within each of the three broader ethics facilitates the valid assessment of all the reasons utilized by persons of different cultural backgrounds. (A questionnaire that measures the use of the three ethics, The Ethical Values Assessment, includes fewer specific types of reasons than the coding manual but provides space for open-ended responses in order to be inclusive of emic concepts; Padilla-Walker & Jensen, 2016).

The types of moral reasons detailed in the coding manual for the three ethics have been generated over time through research with diverse cultural groups. As new cultures are studied, however, new emic types sometimes become necessary to add. Currently, for example, interviews with children and adolescents from low- and high-SES backgrounds in India are highlighting the importance of the emic concepts of *dharma*, an idea pertaining to the obligations

of an inner self or soul, and *paap*, an idea pertaining to sin and divine punishment (Pandya et al., 2020).

In order to arrive at emic concepts, it is necessary for researchers to elicit them through their measurements and methods. This may involve having open-ended questions on surveys. It may involve ethnographic research. It may involve naturalistic observations aimed at generating knowledge of culturally-situated behaviors. It may involve using culture-sensitive prompts in experiments or interviews. In the interviews with low- and high-SES Indian children and adolescents, for example, they respond to scenarios constructed on the basis of local knowledge (Pandya & Bhangaokar, 2015). One of these scenarios reads:

A group of children is playing soccer in their society garden. The festival of Ganesh Chaturthi is being celebrated and an idol of Lord Ganesha has been installed near the garden. While playing, one of the children—Nikhil—kicks the ball hard and it accidentally hits the idol. As a result, the idol breaks and soon residents of the society come to know it. They wonder who is responsible for this. None of the children speak up. Nikhil has to decide whether to tell that he broke the idol by mistake or stay quiet.

In addition to ensuring that their methods and measurements are designed to elicit emic concepts, cultural psychologists will want to consider the extent to which they rely on English in their research. English is becoming an international language. By the year 2050, half of the world's population is projected to be proficient in English (Rubenstein, 2017). Children, adolescents, and emerging adults are particularly likely to learn English as part of their education and through the internet. While relying on English for research simplifies the process for English-speaking researchers and when studying cultures with different native languages, researchers need to bear in mind that use of English may change the nature of participants' responses. For example, a well-known study of Chinese emerging adults who resided in Canada found that they provided different descriptions of themselves depending on the language used

(Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002). Emerging adults provided more individualistic attributes when responding in English (e.g., “I am intelligent”) and more descriptions pertaining to their relationships with others when using Cantonese or Mandarin (e.g., “I am an obedient child”). English, perhaps especially as conveyed through popular culture, is not simply a neutral means of communication. English is to some extent tied to certain messages and meanings that originate in an individualistic North American and Western worldview. As multilingual, multicultural, and globalized research participants switch into English, they also switch into a mindset that some extent is different from mindsets linked to their other languages (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; McKenzie, 2019).

Meanwhile when indigenous languages are not used, there are invariably words and meanings that do not get communicated. Languages have words, expressions, and oral and written products that convey cultural meanings. The Danish word *hygge*, for example, has no equivalent English translation, and its meaning in Denmark is infused with cultural ideas and habits. The Hindu words *paap* and *dharma*, described earlier, are two other examples. From a cultural psychology perspective, words, expressions, stories, and conversations in peoples’ local languages—including untranslatable words—are rich sources of understanding emic concepts. This includes what people have to say about religiosity, spirituality, and secularism in their native tongues (c.f., Lomas, 2019).

### **Cultural Psychology:**

#### **Highlighting Religiosity, Spirituality, and Secularism in Adolescence**

Cultural psychology research has called attention to the widespread presence of religion, and how adolescence is an important time for the development of religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors across cultures. Cultural psychology research has also called attention to the rise

in secularism among youth, and ways in which their secular beliefs overlap with religious and spiritual notions. We now turn to a description of some of this research which, in turn, informs subsequent recommendations for future research.

### **Developing a Worldview: Collective Rituals and Individual Identity Formation**

Surveys across cultures have documented the presence of puberty rituals across the vast majority of traditional cultures (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). These puberty rituals, which take place in early or mid-adolescence, mark the departure from childhood and the entrance into adolescence. The rituals convey key elements of a culture's worldview to adolescents, and often they confer moral responsibility on adolescents and link that responsibility to knowledge of religious teachings. The rituals involve a lot of time and effort on the part of the adolescents and the community as whole. Sometimes the hope is that ancestors or gods will reciprocate with blessings (Schlegel & Barry, 2015). Certainly, the efforts involved contribute to collective solidarity and to making adolescents feel invested in the worldview of their culture.

Researchers have also observed that contemplation of beliefs and values rises as part of identity development during adolescence, and that this process may include religious, spiritual, and secular beliefs and values (King et al., 2014; Levesque, 2002; Saroglou, 2012; Trommsdorff, 2012). The nature of adolescents' thoughts and questions depends on their culture. For example, research shows that Bahrain, American, and Finnish adolescents ask different questions such as "Do I get a chance to go to Mecca", "Does the Devil exist", and "[In the future], will we still have religion", respectively (Tirri, Tallent-Runnels, & Nokelainen, 2005, p. 212).

In cultures with no or relatively limited puberty rituals and without one widely endorsed religious worldview, there is more room for individualization of beliefs. The individual nature of this process in adolescence is evident across economically developed countries. The United

States provides one example. While Americans are more religious than people in virtually any other economically developed country, the beliefs of American adolescents do not tend to follow traditional religious doctrines. The National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR), which involved over 3,000 adolescents ages 13 to 17 in every part of the United States, found that American adolescents embrace “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (Smith & Denton, 2005). This includes the belief that a God exists who created the world and watches over human life; that God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other; and that the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. The NSYR, which included not only questionnaires but also interviews with a subset of its sample, found that American adolescents were increasingly likely to say that they are “spiritual, but not religious”. They understood spirituality to involve a person’s individual quest for meaning and happiness. As we will discuss in the next section on future research directions, more and more adolescents in traditional cultures may also be developing individualized beliefs.

In part because identity achievement in economically developed countries is increasingly reached in emerging adulthood rather than adolescence, the NYSR conducted a longitudinal follow-up at ages 18 to 23 (Smith & Snell, 2010). Beliefs in emerging adulthood remained highly individualized. Few emerging adults accepted a standard religious doctrine; instead, they took pieces of beliefs that they had learned from their parents and many other sources and puzzled them together into their own individual creations. Consequently, religious denomination did not hold much meaning for most of them. They could state they were “Catholic” or “Presbyterian” or “Jewish” without believing much of what is stated in the traditional doctrines of these religions, and without participating in religious activities and rituals. This individualized approach to religion in emerging adulthood has also been found in other studies and is

exemplified by an emerging adult man who described himself as Christian, but also said that he believed that “you don’t have to be one religion. Take a look at all of them, see if there is something in them you like—almost like an a la carte belief system. I think all religions have things that are good about them” (Arnett & Jensen, 2002, p. 459).

### **The Rise of Secular Worldviews**

While cultural psychology research shows the salience of religious and spiritual development in adolescence, it also documents a rise in secularism among adolescence in a variety of countries. In American studies, religiosity has been declining among adolescents and emerging adults in recent decades (Pew Research Center, 2020; Twenge, Exline, Grubbs, Sastry, & Campbell, 2015). Religiosity also generally declines from adolescence through emerging adulthood. A recent national poll found that half of 18- to 29-year-old Americans did not consider themselves to be a member of any religious denomination or organization (Pew Research Center, 2020). These “Nones”, when asked what religion they are, respond with some version of “none”—atheist, agnostic, spiritual but not religious, or just not religious.

In general, adolescents and emerging adults in developed countries are more secular than their counterparts in developing countries. Religious beliefs and practices are especially low among adolescents and emerging adults in Europe. For example, in Belgium, only 8% of 18-year-olds attend religious services at least once a month (Goossens & Luyckx, 2006). In Spain, traditionally a highly Catholic country, only 18% of adolescents attend church regularly (Gibbons & Stiles, 2004). A recent interview study in Denmark, one of the least religious countries in the world (Haraldsson, 2006; World Population Review, 2020), found that almost 80% of emerging adults described themselves as either agnostic, atheist, or as having no religious beliefs (Arnett & Jensen, 2015).

Traditionally, religion has provided answers to questions about the meaning of life and death. How do secular adolescents and emerging adults think about these questions? In that same interview study in Denmark, emerging adults were asked what they believe happens after death (Arnett & Jensen, 2015). Despite unbelief being the norm, 62% of the Danish emerging adults nonetheless believed in some form of afterlife. They were vague about what form it might take. To some, it seemed illogical that death should be the end of existence (“I find it difficult to accept that it’s just over and done”). For others, it was emotionally unpalatable to believe that there is no life after death (“I can’t tolerate the idea that if someone in your family dies, there’s nothing more”). Still others stated a belief in a soul that goes on in some form (“Our soul can’t just disappear. It lives on, in one place or another, but I don’t know how”).

The absence of religion in the worldviews of today’s Danish emerging adults can be explained partly on the basis of their society’s affluence and stability. Cross-national studies have found that, although within many countries religiosity is associated with well-being and serves a protective function against risk behavior, the countries that are the most prosperous also tend to be the least religious (Diener, Tay, & Meyers, 2011; French, Eisenberg, Purwono, & Sallquist, 2012; Lun & Bond, 2013; Saroglou & Cohen, 2014). Yet even for the Danish emerging adults who have had all the advantages of coming of age in a wealthy and stable society, the majority believed in some kind of life after death. As described earlier, belief in life after death is also highly common in hunter-gather societies, whereas belief in high gods—especially high gods who are actively involved in human affairs—is far less common. The everyday lives of Danish emerging adults are very different from the lives of young people in hunter-gather societies, but some of the existential questions they contemplate are similar. From the point of

view of cultural psychology, the rise of secularism in many parts of the world merits future research, as does the intersection of secularism with religiosity and spirituality.

### **Future Research Directions**

Cultural psychology research has shown that religiosity, spirituality, and secularism are not as sharply differentiated as might be expected. Research in purposefully selected cultures that examine the meaning of these concepts and their intersections is a promising future direction. This research needs to move beyond a previously common focus on conceptualizations of God and cast a much broader and culturally inclusive net. Clearly, research on beliefs about life after death, animism, and ancestor worship would be useful, as would research on other ideas about the supernatural such as ghosts, witches, and guardian angels.

Cultural changes seem to take place more rapidly than ever, in part due to technological advances and globalization. These changes precipitate questions about the beliefs, practices, and values espoused by traditional worldviews, including religious ones. Seldom do adolescents come of age anymore with knowledge of only one traditional worldview. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are periods of life when there is newfound ability to contemplate and decide upon one's worldview. Many examples exist of how individualism is on the rise, even in traditional cultures. For example, the Aborigines of Australia were nomadic hunters and gatherers until about 70 years ago (Burbank, 1988). A key part of traditional childhood socialization among the Aborigines involved the teaching of a set of beliefs and values known as the Law, including an explanation of how the world began. Traditionally, socialization of the Law also included elaborate puberty rituals. To many adolescents today, however, the Law seems irrelevant to the world they live in, which is no longer a world of nomadic hunting and gathering but of schools, a complex economy, and modern media. Aborigine children and adolescents now show increasing

resistance to learning and adhering to the traditional beliefs and values, and they develop more individualistic values based not just on the Law but also on their other experiences. How cultural changes are impacting the religiosity, spirituality, and secularism of adolescents is a timely topic of research.

In turn, this also raises questions about the extent to which positive contributions of religiosity to adolescent development are dependent on the changing meanings and evaluations of religion within a culture. A meta-analysis of 75 studies conducted with more than 66,000 adolescents and emerging adults between 1990 and 2010 found that religiosity was modestly associated with lower levels of risk behavior and depression, and higher levels of well-being and self-esteem (Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012). The 75 studies were conducted in the context of an American society that is fairly high on religiosity. As described, however, American emerging adults are increasingly secular. They also evaluate religion more negatively than older generations. For example, 59% of 18- to 29-year-olds say religious people are generally less tolerant, in comparison to 34% of persons over 65 years (Cox, 2019). Fifty-five percent of emerging adults also say that religion causes more problems for society than it solves, as compared to 32% of older adults. If religion takes on negative connotations broadly within a society, will religion nonetheless contribute positively to youth development?

Finally, for any question that addresses the intersection of development with cultural change, the field is ripe for cross-sequential research which studies different age-cohorts longitudinally. Cross-sequential research is the only way to document both developmental changes as well as the impact of cultural change over time. Such studies are costly, but they would greatly aid in addressing some of the most interesting questions about the future of religiosity, spirituality, and secularism in the lives of culturally diverse adolescents.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural psychology has raised awareness of religiosity, spirituality, and secularism in people's psychological lives. Cultural psychologists have also called attention to adolescence and emerging adulthood as important periods for the development of worldviews. As adolescents and emerging adults formulate answers to existential questions, they may draw on the religious, spiritual, and secular ideas and practices within the culture in which they live. They may seek answers collectively or individually. Increasingly, their questions and answers occur in the context of a globalizing and rapidly changing world. While cultural psychology may point to developmental commonalities, cultural psychology research provides the theoretical perspective and research tools to delve into the diverse ways that religiosity, spirituality, and secularism develop among adolescents across the world.

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### **Author's Research Interests**

My theoretical goal is to advance a “*cultural-developmental approach*” to theory and research on human development. One-size-fits-all theories—popular in the social sciences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—are often too broad and too biased to adequately capture the complexities of human selves and relations. On the other hand, one-for-every-culture raises the specter of theoretical pandemonium. The challenge and opportunity that we face in today’s globalizing world is bridging universal and cultural perspectives. My empirical research addresses moral, civic, and cultural identity development in the context of culture, migration, and globalization. I often combine qualitative and quantitative methods.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author reports no conflict of interest.