

## SPIRITUALITY AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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### 1. Introduction :

There are research studies showing that spiritual and religious involvement is an important dimension in adolescent development. For example, Gallup and Bezilla (1992) reported that 95% of American adolescents believed in God. Based on the data collected from "The Project Teen Canada", Bibby (2006) found that 75% of the respondents regarded themselves as members of a religion, 60% viewed spirituality as important, and 48% indicated that they had spiritual needs. In a study based on 112,232 freshmen in 236

colleges and universities in the United States, Astin (2005) et al. reported that 77% of the students agreed that they were "spiritual beings" and roughly four-fifth of them indicated that they had interest in spirituality and they believed in the sacredness. These findings are consistent with the view of Benson and Roehlkepartain (2008) that "most young people view spiritual development as an important part of their lives" (p. 14). King and Boyatzis (2004) similarly commented that adolescence "may be a particularly important time period in which to study spiritual and religious development" (p. 2).

Using life meaning as an illustration, adolescents tend to think in abstract terms and explore future possibilities when they are cognitively mature. They commonly ask questions about life, including the following: What is the meaning of life? What is a meaningful life? Why do we exist? What should we accomplish in life? These questions commonly fall within the large scope of "meaning of life" or "purpose in life", which addresses three interrelated issues which are the meaning of life (e.g., what life signifies, personal reasons, and importance of existence), meaningfulness of life, (e.g., whether life is worth living or purposeful), and purpose in life (e.g., life goals, life purpose, things to be accomplished, ideals to be attained). The importance of the meaning of life in adolescent behavior is clearly reflected in human history. For example, in the 1930s, young people supported Hitler in Nazi Germany when they believed that building an ethnically superior Germany was their life mission. During the Cultural Revolution in Communist China in the 1960s, the Red Guards fiercely fought against "enemies" of the proletarians when they saw that building a Communist utopia was their sacred life goal. In the contemporary world, many young people in Africa participate in military activities to look for changes for their countries.

Unfortunately, despite the importance of spirituality in adolescent development, a review of the literature showed that less than 1% of the literature on children and adolescents had examined issues on spirituality and religiosity. As commented by King and Boyatzis (2004), "adolescents' spirituality and religion have been relatively neglected in the developmental sciences" (p. 2). In addition, there is a huge research gap in the study of spirituality in the clinical literature. Against this background, this paper attempts to review the concept of spirituality in adolescence. Besides definitions and theories, antecedents of adolescent spirituality and its effects on developmental outcomes are presented. Finally, ways to promote adolescent spirituality are presented.

### 2. Spirituality

Various definitions of spirituality have been put forward by different researchers. Based on qualitative analyses of various definitions of religiousness and conceptions of spirituality, Scott (1998) reported that the conceptions were distributed over nine content areas, with no category containing most of the definitions. These content areas include (1) connectedness or relationship, (2) processes contributing to a higher level of connectedness, (3) reactions to sacred or secular things, (4) beliefs or thoughts, (5) traditional institutional structures, (6) pleasurable existence, (7) beliefs in the sacred or higher being, (8) personal transcendence, and (9) existential issues and concerns. Markow and Klenke pointed out that there were more than 70 definitions of spirituality at work [2005].

Perhaps the first clarification that should be made is the distinction between spirituality and religion. Pargament (1999) argued that religion is "the search for significance in ways related to the sacred" whereas spirituality is "the search for the sacred". What one views as sacred is often a socially influenced perception of either (a) a divine being or object or (b) sense of ultimate reality or truth" (p. 205). With reference to this conception, while

religion is related to institutional beliefs and the sacred, the divine and institutional religion is not necessarily related to the definition of spirituality. According to Worthington et al., there are four types of spirituality, with the first one more related to religion: religious spirituality (closeness and connection to the sacred defined by religion), humanistic spirituality (closeness and connection to mankind), nature spirituality (closeness and connection to nature), and cosmos spirituality (closeness and connection to the whole of creation). Austin and his associates distinguished spiritual attributes and religious attributes. While spiritual attributes include spiritual quest (answers to life's questions), ecumenical worldview (transcendence of ethnocentrism and egocentrism), ethics of care (compassion), charitable involvement (services to others), and equanimity (inner peace), religious attributes include religious commitment (degree of identification with the religion), engagement (behavioral aspect of religion), conservatism (identification with orthodox beliefs), skepticism (questions raised on the beliefs), and struggle (unsettlement about religion).

Broad as well as narrow definitions of spirituality exist in the literature. An example of a broad definition was put forward by Myers et al., (2000) who defined spirituality as “personal and private beliefs that transcend the material aspects of life and give a deep sense of wholeness, connectedness, and openness to the infinite” (p. 265). According to this conception, spirituality includes (a) belief in a power beyond oneself, (b) behavior in relation to the infinite such as prayer, (c) meaning and purpose of life, (d) hope and optimism, (e) love and compassion, (f) moral and ethical guidelines (g) transcendental experience. Another broad definition can be seen in Lewis who conceived spirituality as the life affirmed in a relationship with God, self, community, and environment which leads to the nurturance and celebration of wholeness. Within this context, spiritual needs include meaning, purpose and hope, transcendence circumstances, integrity and worthiness, religious participation, loving and serving others, cultivating thankfulness, forgiving and being forgiven, and preparation for death and dying. On the other hand, there are relatively narrower definitions of spirituality such as focus on existential or transcendental questions, belongingness to involvement of cardinal values underlying every aspect of life, and self-reflective behavior.

An integration of the literature shows that several elements are commonly employed in the definition of spirituality. These include meaning and purpose of life, meaning of and reactions to limits of life such as death and dying, search for the sacred or infinite, including religiosity, hope and hopelessness, forgiveness, and restoration of health. Lau pointed out that three key elements of spirituality had been identified in the literature. The first element is horizontal as well as vertical relationships in human existence. While horizontal relationships are related to oneself, others, and nature, vertical relationship involves a transcendental relationship with a higher being. The second element is beliefs and values which are integral to answers to spiritual questions such as life and death. The third element is the meaning of life. In this paper, a broader conception of spirituality (i.e., horizontal and vertical relationships, beliefs, meaning of life) is adopted.

### **3. Antecedents of Adolescent Spirituality**

Benson and Roehlkepartain concluded three processes intrinsic to adolescent spirituality. The first process is awareness or awakening which contributes to the development of spiritual identity, meaning, and purpose. The second process is interconnecting or belonging which involves seeking or experiencing relationships with others, including divine beings. The final process is a way of life where a person expresses one's spiritual identity through different activities and relationships. This model further proposed that these three processes shaping adolescent developmental outcomes are related to other dimensions of development which are influenced by context (e.g., family, peers, and neighborhood), culture (e.g., media), and metanarratives (e.g., stories). Besides ecological models, there are other accounts on the factors influencing adolescent spirituality. For the channeling hypothesis, it is stated that children are “channeled” into different social groups based on the religious expectations of the parents. The spiritual modeling perspective based on the social learning premise indicates that adolescents model their religious behavior of their parents. The role of significant others in shaping adolescent spirituality is also highlighted by Fry who explicitly stated that “it is through supportive and sharing relationships within a trusting and accepting atmosphere that the adolescent gains the courage to explore what experiences make sense or providing meaning even in the face of doubts” (p. 98), thus emphasizing the role of intimate relations in the development of adolescent purpose in life.

There are research findings showing that family and peers exert influence on the spiritual development in adolescents. In a longitudinal study based on individuals, parents, peers, schools, and community found that while parents and friends strongly influenced religious behavior of adolescents, county level influences were weak. In these Study of parent and peer relationships and relational spirituality in adolescents and young adults showed that parents and peers, particularly maternal communication and paternal affection, facilitated the

development of relational spirituality.

Regarding gender differences, there are research findings showing that male adolescents displayed a higher level of life purpose than did female adolescents, although such gender differences are not consistent across studies. Within the family context, two types of family experiences that may shape the meaning of life in adolescents are dyadic family processes (e.g., parent-child relationship and marital quality of the parents) and systemic family attributes (e.g., family functioning and communication patterns). Shek shows that there were several cross-sectional studies showing that the quality of parenting was positively related to adolescent meaning of life indexed by the Chinese Purpose in Life Questionnaire. Besides, in a series of studies examining the relationship between family processes and adolescent development, positive parenting attributes (such as parental support and involvement) were related to existential well-being in several samples. There are longitudinal research findings showing that parenting characteristics and parent-adolescent conflict were related to adolescent life meaning. Finally, research evidence also supporting that family functioning is related to adolescent meaning in life, both cross-sectional and over time.

#### **4. Spirituality and Adolescent Developmental Outcomes**

Regarding the relationship between spirituality and quality of life, there are four possibilities. First, spirituality is a cause of quality of life. Second, spirituality is a concomitant of quality of life. Third, spirituality is a consequence of quality of life. Finally, spirituality and quality of life are moderated and/or mediated by other factors. While studies have been conducted to examine the first two possibilities, research on the latter two possibilities is almost nonexistent.

In the area of adolescent spirituality, despite their findings that spiritual attributes were related to global and life domains. There are few studies on spirituality and quality of life in adolescents and the mechanisms underlying the relationship remain relatively unknown. They remarked that “few studies have examined the relevance of spirituality in adolescents with respect to their quality of life (QOL), despite empirical literature suggesting that religion and spirituality are important to adolescents”.

The role of spiritual intervention has also received increasing attention in the literature. On one hand, patients expect helping professionals to address their spiritual needs. On the other hand, different professional bodies give more attention to spiritual care. For example, the National Consensus Project for Quality Palliative Care regarded spiritual, religious, and existential aspects of care as a domain of quality palliative care requiring spiritual care. In addition, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives was established in the Bush administration. Theoretically, Lent argued that it is important to understand spiritual variables such as meaning in life so that client growth and rehabilitation can be promoted.

#### **5. Promotion of Spirituality in Adolescents**

Given the importance of spirituality, there are several ways to promote adolescent spirituality. The first strategy is to understand different forms of religions and spirituality via different media, including print and nonprint media. Enhanced understanding is important as far as religious and spiritual beliefs are concerned. However, understanding alone is not enough. Active reflection and experience are important processes in the development of spirituality. “Why do we exist? Where are we going? Is there any life after death? What should we do when we are still conscious?” These are important spiritual questions demanding conscious reflection. Besides gaining more experience and having personal reflections, joining religious groups, church activities, and spiritually related gatherings provide a good opportunity to develop spirituality.

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