Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth

Pamela Ebstyne King¹, Casey E. Clardy¹, and Jenel Sánchez Ramos¹

Abstract
This qualitative study aimed to develop theory about psychological constructs relevant to spiritual development in diverse adolescents. Exemplar and Consensual Qualitative Research methods were used to explore 30 interviews of adolescents aged 12 to 21 years (M = 17.73 years) representing eight religions and six countries from around the world. Participants were nominated for living with profound spirituality within their own culture and completed semistructured interviews in their country of origin. After several iterations of analysis, participants’ discussions of spirituality in their lives were explored in terms of three dimensions of spirituality present in their lives: transcendence, fidelity, and behavior. Findings are considered in light of existing developmental theory, and implications for adolescent development are discussed.

Keywords
adolescence, spirituality, spiritual development, religion, transcendence, fidelity, contribution

It (spirituality) makes me feel like I’m in a great orchestra of people who have always been so tight and had this great sense of morality and community. And I’m just glad that I can contribute to that.

—17-year old poly-religious boy, United States of America

¹Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Pamela Ebstyne King, Fuller Theological Seminary, 180 N. Oakland, Ave., Pasadena, CA 91101, USA.
Email: pamking@fuller.edu
Although the literature demonstrates a growing body of research on adolescent spirituality (King, Ramos, & Clardy, 2013; King & Roeser, 2009; Oser, Scarlett, & Bucher, 2006; Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006), few theoretical formulations about spiritual development and little empirical research on the nature of adolescent spirituality exist. Not only does research suggest that spirituality and religion are central to the lives of many young people (Lippman & Keith, 2006; Sallquist, Eisenberg, French, Purwono, & Suryanti, 2010), but also, like the quotation above, a growing body of literature within developmental psychology demonstrates that adolescents are concerned with issues of transcendence. Specifically, research within the fields of positive psychology and positive youth development shows that young people search for purpose (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003), ask questions about ultimate concerns in life (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006), experience connection to something beyond the ordinary of everyday life (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Scales, 2010; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Rich & Cinnamon, 2007), endeavor to contribute to the world (Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2006), and affiliate with religious traditions (Lippman & Keith, 2006; Smith & Denton, 2005). Recent scholarship suggests that these findings may be reflective of a unique domain of development, namely spiritual development (King & Roeser, 2009; Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008; Lerner, Warren, & Phelps, 2011).

Our objective in the current study was to more fully understand the nature of adolescent spiritual development and to identify psychological concepts that might be involved. Although the existing literature offers some conceptualizations of adult, and in a few cases adolescent spirituality, the lack of empirical data substantiating the nature of spiritual development in adolescent populations led us to choose a hybrid methodology drawing from exemplar (Colby & Damon, 1992; Matsuba, King, & Bronk, 2013) and Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) strategies (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Exemplar methods are recognized to be an effective method for exploring psychological phenomena that are less understood (Matsuba et al., 2013). In this case, we examined the lives of youth who were recognized for their highly developed spirituality. Given the preliminary nature of our ideas based on existing literature, and our desire to examine the vantage point of the participant, we also used CQR methods (Hill et al., 1997; 2005) to examine the rich dialectic between the existing literature and the present data in order to generate theory.

**Spirituality and Religion**

The intention of this study was to specifically study adolescent spirituality, whether that occurred within or outside the context of religious traditions.
Although there is some conceptual overlap, within the existing literature, a distinction is made between religiousness and spirituality (see King et al., 2013; Pargament, Exline, & Jones, 2013). Religiousness refers to the extent to which an individual has a relationship with a particular institutionalized doctrine about ultimate reality. This relationship occurs through affiliation with an organized religion, participation in its prescribed rituals and practices, and assent to its espoused beliefs.

Spirituality is not necessarily dependent on a religious tradition, but is often expressed within a religious context. Within the existing literature, there are many conceptualizations of spirituality (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010). Most are found in the field of psychology of religion and spirituality and are conceptualized with respect to adult spirituality. An often-cited definition refers to spirituality as “the search for the sacred.” In this case, sacred refers to an individual’s concept of God or other areas of life that may take on divine character and significance by virtue of their association with divinity (Pargament et al., 2013). Other definitions emphasize the pursuit of meaning, ultimate belonging, existential beliefs, and transcendence (Benson et al., 2010; Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Lerner et al., 2008). Transcendence refers to an awareness of or connection to something beyond the self, which may or may not include God or a transcendent reality, but may also involve aspects of life that are imbued with divine-like qualities, such as immanence, boundlessness, and ultimacy (Pargament et al., 2013). Consequently, activities, such as politics or art may or may not be spiritual endeavors to different people, depending on the meaning and scope of influence they have in an individual’s life.

A rare study, including interviews with 36 Israeli and Jewish adolescents, revealed that these adolescents agreed that spirituality occurred outside of religion and involved transcendence, or a feeling of personal connection with something infinitely greater than themselves (Rich & Cinamon, 2007). In addition, in a study of the relationship between emotional coping and religion and spirituality in Indonesian adolescents, spirituality was conceptualized as emphasizing transcendence and spanning beyond traditional religious practices (Sallquist et al., 2010).

From a developmental systems perspective, spiritual development has been hypothesized to occur in the ongoing transactions between people and their multiple embedded contexts (Lerner, 2006). It is through these interactions that young people experience something of significance beyond themselves and gain a growing sense of transcendence in regard to God, a divine entity, humanity, a religious community, peers, or nature. Lerner and colleagues (2008) described this focus as shifting a young person’s cognitive and emotional orientation from the self to a transcendent other in such a way
that provides ultimate value and purpose beyond the mundane and material. As such, spiritual transcendence provides meaning and serves to motivate contribution to the well-being of the greater world (Lerner et al., 2008). A growing body of research has established the link between religion and various forms of contribution (see Donnelly, Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2006; King & Roeser, 2009; Lerner et al., 2011).

Consistent with this emphasis on contribution or “compassionate engagement” as an expression of one’s spirituality, Benson and colleagues (2010) have also acknowledged that spirituality may involve a young person’s pursuit of a passion or “spark” (p. 92). For example, spirituality can be experienced when one is deeply engaged in a passion, such as art or even playing a sport.

As demonstrated above, the current literature offers a myriad of definitions of spirituality that include pursuing meaning, purpose, belonging, relatedness, awareness, transcendence, existential questions, one’s passions, and service. Despite the growing attention to this area of human development, little empirical research explores or tests these conceptualizations of spirituality and spiritual development among adolescent populations.

**Adolescents and Spirituality**

An understanding of the major psychological endeavors of adolescence suggests that spirituality is especially pertinent to this stage of development. Specifically, as adolescents pursue the developmental task of identity formation in preparing for adulthood, young people seek an understanding of self that enables them to matter to self, family, and society. Moreover, this process of self-identification engenders more complex reflections about the world, solidifies plans for future work, and shapes plans for family life. In this process of creating a meaningful identity, adolescents are exposed to a variety of beliefs, values, and roles, and they begin to ask existential questions and search for purpose (Damon et al., 2003; Mariano & Damon, 2008; Markstrom, 1999). The search for identity can impel a young person to find meaning and “to seek to contribute in important, valued, and even noble ways to his or her world” (Lerner et al., 2008 p. 3). Youth embark on this psychological endeavor in order to consolidate and to understand their experience of self, as well as identify themselves in terms of familial, vocational, and societal roles. The quest for identity in adolescence is marked by yearnings and behaviors that simultaneously bond them to or locate them within something beyond themselves while affirming their sense of uniqueness and independence.

Simultaneously, science has revealed that specific features of brain development during adolescence may afford the ability for experiencing self-transcendence. Specifically, the continuous cortical maturation during
adolescence provides young people with the capacity for integrative cognitive functions. In addition, the development of neural networks enable the integrative regulation of emotion, attention, and behaviors (Keating, 2004). As such, spiritual development may involve a developmental change afforded by brain development. Adolescents are thought to have a brain capable of understanding the importance of a positive relationship between the self and the greater world, which is hypothesized to instigate and enable spiritual tasks, such as transcending the self (Lerner et al., 2011). Brain development occurring during adolescence may enable young people to engage in spirituality and religion more extensively than is the case among younger children.

Although spirituality is potentially relevant throughout the life span, because of the developmental tasks and increased capacities relevant to adolescence, we chose to explore this domain of development among highly spiritually developed adolescents. Given that adolescents may be less enculturated than adults, have increased cognitive and social capacities than children, and have a developmental need to engage in potentially spiritual endeavors, adolescence is a particularly opportune life stage to investigate the nature of spiritual development.

**Objectives of the Current Study**

Building on existing literature, the current study aimed to ascertain the psychological concepts that may be present in diverse adolescent spiritual development and propose preliminary theory for understanding the nature of spiritual development both inside and outside a religious context. This study draws from and complements previous studies, as well as existing conceptions of adolescent spiritual development (Benson et al., 2010; King et al., 2013; Lerner et al., 2003, 2008). We focused on the experiences of young people from around the world who were recognized as being spiritual because we were particularly interested in both how diverse adolescents experience spirituality in their lives and the psychological constructs that may consistently comprise spiritual development in diverse youth.

**Method**

In order to achieve these aims, we used a hybrid research design combining an exemplar methodology with CQR strategies. Both are well-documented methods for exploring less-understood psychological constructs by providing a structure to examine the internal experiences of participants. Exemplar methodologies are recognized for their unique sample selection processes that allow for investigation of exemplary lives and less specific in regard to data analysis, whereas CQR methods provide rigorous guidelines for qualitative analysis.
Exemplar methods involve the study and exploration of the lives of individuals who have been nominated for exhibiting model behavior in a specific domain of life (i.e., moral, thriving). In this way, they may be described as a form of intensity sampling. Exemplar methods have been demonstrated to be effective through examining the lives of individuals who embody a psychological construct in a highly developed manner. They allow for nomothetic and ideographic observations to be made about the phenomenon. Such methods have been successfully used in the field of moral psychology to challenge and expand the understanding of the nature of moral development (see Colby & Damon, 1992; Hart & Fegley, 1995; Matsuba et al., 2013). In this study, the exemplar method guided the selection of participants that intensely embodied the phenomenon of spirituality.

CQR strategies provide a method for rigorous analysis by building on existing literature, relying on the use of multiple researchers, reaching consensus on findings, systematically examining the representativeness of results across cases, and abstracting data directed toward theoretical conceptualization (see Hill et al., 1997, 2005). What follows is a description of our hybrid methods that resulted in a theory-generating analysis aimed at identifying preliminary propositions regarding adolescents’ spiritual development across different religious and cultural traditions.

**Participants**

The final sample included 30 youth, aged 12 to 21 years ($M = 17.73$), with 17 boys and 13 girls. The sample was geographically and culturally diverse, with six exemplars from India, two from Jordan, six from Kenya, four from Peru, six from the United Kingdom, and six from the United States. With respect to religious diversity, the sample contained one atheist, one Buddhist, four Catholics, three Hindus, six Muslims, 10 Protestants, one Jew, one Sikh, and one who was of mixed-religion. Exemplars ranged in education level from 1st year high school students up through 2nd year in university. Although all 32 exemplars were interviewed, two Protestant youth from the United Kingdom were dropped from the analysis in order to maintain balance in geographic and spiritual diversity. Participants were nominated based on 15 criteria, created to select for spirituality that included concepts, such as the sacred, purpose, beliefs, passions, virtues, suffering, service, and influence on others.

**Nomination and Selection Process**

A substantial effort was made to identify nomination criteria in order to select a sample of *spiritual* exemplars from different spiritual, religious, and
cultural traditions. Given the existing conceptual conflation of religion and spirituality, the limited contribution in the current literature on spirituality outside of non-Western or Judeo-Christian traditions, and confusion and disparity in understanding of the nature of spirituality in scholarly and conventional domains, a procedure for identifying nomination criteria was developed. It was based on previous exemplar studies (i.e., Colby & Damon, 1992; Hart & Fegley, 1995) and was expanded to include feedback from social scientists, theologians, and clergy-practitioners from different spiritual and cultural backgrounds.

Initially, the existing social science literature was explored for all concepts related to spiritual development. A set of nomination criteria was proposed and underwent four rounds of iterative review by 19 diverse advisers who lived in Brazil, Canada, India, Japan, Jordan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These advisers described themselves as Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Native American, mixed-religion, or secular. Of the 19, 7 were practitioners and 12 were theological or social science scholars. During this process, these advisers were invited to eliminate, refine, and add criteria based on their own contextual understanding of spirituality via an online questionnaire (including open-ended prompts), before the list was finalized.

Nominations occurred through a snowball sampling method. Initial recommendations for nominators came from members of the International Advisory Board of the Search Institute’s Center for Spiritual Development. More than 80 individuals were contacted to assist in the process of nominating, and eventually, 17 nominators submitted applications for 50 youth from six countries. In order to maximize cultural and contextual expertise, ensure spiritual and religious diversity, leverage the research team’s language competencies, and limit research expenses, six countries were selected from which nominations were sought. Nominators rated potential participants on 15 Likert-type scale items and wrote a brief essay describing why the nominee should be considered a spiritual exemplar. In order to attain the greatest degree of gender, age, socioeconomic, ethnic, and spiritual diversity, 32 of the 50 nominated youth were interviewed.

**Instruments**

The interview protocol was developed through an iterative process based on current literature and expert input from around the world and was designed for semistructured interviews (Colby & Damon, 1992; Piaget, 1929) that allowed participants to reflect on their own process of spiritual development and related constructs. The interview covered five major areas of inquiry,
including self-understanding, spirituality, pathways of spiritual development, future orientation, and purpose in life.

In order to explore how central spirituality was to each participant’s self-understanding and to avoid priming the participants to respond solely from a spiritual perspective, the interview began with questions from Damon and Hart’s (1988) “Identity Interview.” Next, the interview explicitly focused on participants’ experiences and understanding of spirituality. We also inquired about related issues, such as morality, service, and justice. The interview then addressed potential influences on their spiritual development, such as the role of suffering, social influences, and key events in the young person’s life. In addition, participants generated a timeline of critical events in their life and discussed the impact each had on their spiritual development (Flanagan, 1954). The final questions explored the exemplars’ thoughts and aspirations for the future, as well as their purpose and goals in life.

In order to create a protocol that was relevant and sensitive to diverse cultural and religious traditions, the protocol received 11 iterations of feedback from the advisers, social scientists experienced in exemplar methods, and researchers indigenous to the cities in which we conducted interviews. These sources included Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, and secular perspectives on spirituality as well as various cultural backgrounds, including Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the North and South America.

Procedures

Data collection. Trained interviewers from the U.S.-based research team conducted face-to-face, semistructured interviews with participants in their local communities. All interviews were coordinated and hosted by local research coordinators who were available for translation and assistance throughout the interview process. All interviews were conducted in English, except in Peru, where a member of the research team conducted interviews in Spanish, and in Jordan, where a hired translator provided spontaneous translation during the interviews. Each interview lasted between 2 and 3.5 hours, was audio recorded, transcribed, and translated if necessary.

Data analysis. Analyses of the data drew on procedures of CQR (for a full description see Hill et al., 1997; 2005) and aimed at identifying themes, patterns, structures, and processes evident in the narrative data. The general analytic strategy included identifying domains or primary topic areas, recognizing related core ideas within the transcripts, auditing of ideas, cross-analysis, and finally, abstracting to broader categories that linked together the processes of
spirituality within the data. This process emphasized the use of multiple researchers, reaching consensus on findings, and examining representativeness across findings. Across all rounds of analyses, transcripts were coded and data segments were assigned within each transcript to reflect the various domains, core ideas, and categories using NVivo 5 as qualitative coding and analytic software.

Each transcript was individually read and coded for domains, or primary topic areas. Original domains were derived from existing literature and salient themes found in the manuscripts. For example, domains included diverse, broad categories, such as seeking, purpose, openness, and spiritual practices. After each member of the research team read 25% of the interviews, interrater reliability was established among all three coders, with a Cohen’s kappa of .79. Remaining transcripts were divided among the three coders and read for line-by-line coding. Weekly meetings offered opportunities for coders to calibrate the coding process and refine codes.

Once the domains were coded for, the research team independently reviewed the transcripts a second time in order to identify core ideas within each domain in order to ensure that the domains represented the participants’ perspectives and minimized researcher bias and assumptions (see Hill et al., 1997; 2005). An external auditor then reviewed the set of domains and core ideas. The auditing resulted in the verification and clarification of the content and language of several domains, as well as the inclusion of one additional domain.

The cross-analysis, after the audit, involved comparing domains and core ideas across individual transcripts to determine a set of categories that reflected existing theory on the relationships and linkages within and across the domains and core ideas. During this process, the research team examined domains and core ideas across transcripts with an emphasis both on discovery of new ideas and distillation of theory based on comparisons and interpretation of the data. At this point, domains and core ideas were combined into a set of new more parsimonious categories reflecting a higher level of abstraction.

In the end, the analyses involved iterations of close examination of the interview transcripts alternating with formulation of categories based on theoretical comparisons and interpretation of the data. Our objective was to ground the analyses in the participants’ language and experiences, while comparing these findings with our engagement with the literature on spirituality and related constructs in order to generate a working theory. Results reflect the analyses of the 30 cases used to generate the themes discussed here. The use of literature, multiple researchers, consensus building, and systematically examining the representativeness of results across cases allowed
us to abstract data toward a general theory. As such, our analytic steps involved the progression from empirical analyses to theoretical postulation based on theoretical linkages found within the data. Therefore, our conclusions should be recognized not as research findings but as empirically grounded hypotheses.

**Results**

Although our study included several iterations of analyses using domains, core ideas, and cross-analysis, our final set of analyses focused on broad categories that captured the participants’ descriptions of core experiences of their spirituality. The initial categories used for coding were purposely broad in order to explore the breadth of experiences and processes relevant to adolescent spirituality. Subsequent analysis of the use and meaning of these categories for the participants revealed that the broader categories of transcendence, fidelity, and behavior provided a more parsimonious portrayal of the seminal dimensions of the participants’ experiences of spirituality. The following section reviews major findings within each of the categories of transcendence, fidelity, and behavior.

According to CQR protocol, the following sections provide frequency labels to summarize the occurrence of the themes discovered among the participants’ responses. According to Hill et al. (1997; 2005), *general* refers to a category endorsed by all or all but one of the participants (*N* = 30), *typical* refers to a category endorsed by more than half (or at least 15), *variant* refers to a category endorsed by four to up to half of the participants, and *rare* refers to a category endorsed by two or three participants in samples of this size.

**Transcendence**

A dominant theme within the analyses was that exemplars had a strong sense of awareness of something beyond the mundaneness of life, such as God or an absolute truth. The participants frequently used words like “connection” or “having a connection” in relation to their understanding of the divine or absolute. Given the prevalence of these words currently used to define transcendence in the existing literature, these descriptions were categorized as “transcendence.”

*Connection to other.* As a general finding, all the participants reported that transcendence was relevant to their experience of spirituality. The youth referred to experiences of being deeply aware or connected to something of significance greater than themselves. At the heart of their narratives was the role of
relationships—whether it was to a divine other, family, humanity, nature, or an absolute truth. Among the 30 participants, 26 reported the significance of the presence of God in their lives. In addition, two exemplars reported the significance of a higher or absolute truth without believing in a form of God or deity. Twenty-eight of the 30 exemplars mentioned being connected to other people. Specifically, exemplars described experiences of transcendence in relation to family (n = 25) and also to friends (n = 25). Some reported a connection to a more general sense of humanity (n = 17). Last, a few exemplars referred to transcendent experiences in regard to nature (n = 6).

God. As a typical finding, God was the dominant source of experiences of transcendence. Exemplars who were Christian, Hindu, Muslim, poly-religious, and Jewish reported being aware of or connected to God. A Catholic girl from Peru said, “One of the best things [in my life] is to get close to God.” A Hindu boy stated, “When I go to temple, I do have a strong religious connection, and I feel like I’m connected with God.”

God and others. As another typical finding, the exemplars described a simultaneous sense of connection to God and to other people. For example, many reported an awareness of God through family, friends, or faith community. One Hindu boy from India talked about his family and God in this way:

Yeah, there’s a sense of togetherness among family. And that’s a very important thing. It’s because of the ceremonies, which are held, and it makes people come together . . . and then sometimes you get a connection with God, a special time with God.

Exemplars also described a connection to others through God. For example, a Muslim girl from Jordan articulated, “I think people are connected with God through their worship, through their connection with each other . . . we are all connected in one way or another.”

Nondivine experiences of transcendence. As a variant finding, only two of the participants explicitly stated they did not believe in God. For these young people, a sense of connection to something meaningful and transcendent did not occur in the relationship to an expression of the divine. Often participants described a sense of belonging or connection that occurred through people or seeking truth or meaning. For example, a Jewish boy from the United States, who did not believe in the supernatural, described an experience of transcendence without the concept of God. He said,
Like when I’m singing a song, singing sort of sometimes feels divine and supernatural to me. It just feels like I connect with people on a different level, on a level that I wouldn’t necessarily be able to connect otherwise. That’s how I feel about religion in general, again. But I’m not big into the supernatural transcendent. But I think that’s something that might come later.

**Humanity.** Often participants referred to being connected to a general body of people. A Hindu boy from the United States described,

> Here’s a kind of analogy: You’ll be in the lake and you’ll be a drop of water in that huge ocean, and that’s how I view humanity. We’re all just little drops of water in the ocean, and so we’re all connected; and we’re all 99.999% the same.

**Nature.** A variant finding was that certain exemplars articulated a sense of transcendence occurring in the context of nature. A male teenager from the United States who described himself as a “poly-religious person” spoke of a specific connection through nature:

> When I was in Ecuador, in the mountains, I have my little *Dao De Jing* with me and I was reading it on this hill and just sitting and the sun was slowly rising . . . And I just sort of felt the wind come . . . And it just sort of gave me this great feeling of universal connectivity.

A Catholic boy from India described his general connection to God in the outdoors, “Just being in this world, just in that place where there are trees and the beaches, I just feel the presence of God in those places.”

In summary, based on the exemplar interviews, transcendence was apparent in the participants’ descriptions of their growing awareness and a connection to another, whether it be with other people, a sense of the divine, or even nature. In face of these interactions, the narratives also depicted an awareness of self, especially around issues of ideology. We labeled this finding “fidelity.”

**Fidelity**

In addition to transcendence, a central theme that emerged from the interviews involved commitment to beliefs, worldviews, and values. All participants demonstrated an awareness of and conviction to their personal beliefs, including how they made sense of the world, and what was important to them. Consequently, we labeled this category fidelity in order to capture these young people’s certainty of beliefs and values and their commitment to them. Specifically, within the category of fidelity, we found descriptions of beliefs, values, morals, devotion, purpose, and openness.
Beliefs. All the exemplars articulated beliefs about how they made sense and found meaning in the world. A general finding was that they had religious beliefs that defined their worldview \((n = 29)\). For example, a Christian boy from Kenya stated, “God has a plan for all things . . . My religion tells me about why we are here.” The poly-religious boy from the United States described a pie to illustrate how different religions provide the “filling” for his ideology:

> We’re [the Jews] a people who suffer . . . I get my social consciousness, my beliefs, my view of humanity from my Jewish traditions. I see Judaism as a good community to work through, but not the only one. This community is just particularly important to me because it was to my grandpa . . . I see my Judaism as the crust of my spirituality and everything else - Buddhist, Taoist, personal experience . . . all that becomes the filling inside the pie.

The atheist from the United Kingdom was the exception to articulating religious beliefs. However, he articulated the importance for seeking for the truth. He explained,

> I think if we’re not searching for something . . . we don’t have a belief in something, well, then why are we here? Why do we continue to exist? Maybe that’s why suicide exists: maybe people realize . . . that’s why I search anyway.

Values. In addition to stating beliefs about their worldview, a typical finding was that the participants also clearly articulated what was important to them \((n = 28)\). For example, some stated that they valued aspects of their religion, some relationships, and many virtues and morality. A Muslim boy from Kenya said, “What matters to me most is how I conduct my prayers.” When asked what he valued, a Hindu boy from India explained, “I’d say, ‘knowing what is important at the given point of time’ . . . So being alert and more vigilant, and acting accordingly.” An American Buddhist exemplar explained, “Compassion. You need to be fair. You need to be just and honest. I think those are some values I treasure, and that shouldn’t be forsaken, or taken for granted or anything. So I aspire to be those.”

Morals. Twenty-six of the exemplars also described clear moral convictions. Many were concerned about not doing the wrong thing, and others articulated a desire to live righteously and morally. Some described morality as a central component of their spirituality. For example, a Hindu boy from the United States explained, “I do believe in everything the Vedas teach and everything, but I take it more for the moral value. So I would consider myself modern because I only take the morals as opposed to everything.”
Devotion. In exploring the presence of spirituality in the lives of the exemplars, the concept of devotion emerged as a typical finding in the exemplars’ interviews. In addition to being clear and intentional about their worldviews, the exemplars also articulated a sense of commitment to their belief and value systems ($n = 25$). Some of them described how their spirituality was a way of life. A Christian in Peru explained, “My religion makes me have more responsibility for my life.” In describing how his faith affected his whole life, a Muslim participant stated, “There are no fluctuations at all in my spiritual life, there’s nothing like that because I constantly remind myself that there is a God, and that I have to worship him, and I have to thank him.” The exemplars’ commitment to their beliefs was further evident in the motivating role that their beliefs served. A Kenyan Christian girl said, “I have this mentality of my God . . . I think it’s what gives me a driving force, because I know he’s just there, no matter what.”

Purpose. Having a sense of purpose was a typical finding subcategory of fidelity. All but one of the exemplars ($n = 29$) mentioned statements involving their intention to pursue goals that give their lives meaning. Most often these statements were informed by their religious commitments and beliefs. Often these statements were long on conviction, but short on specifics. Many spoke of wanting to glorify God, help others, or live intentionally; yet few were able to clearly articulate actual goals or means of achieving those desired ends. A Muslim boy from the United States explained, “It’s kind of like . . . I know why I was put on earth, but I don’t know my specific job . . . the main thing I know is I was put on earth to serve God. And that’s it. That’s all I know. And to be a good person. But then the other stuff will come later. I can’t see into the future.”

Openness. Despite the exemplars’ clarity and conviction of their stated beliefs overall, a notable variant category emerged among a handful of participants. For these exemplars, they explicitly expressed an openness to and respect of other belief systems. Several were involved in ecumenical programs or attended schools with students of different religions. One Catholic exemplar from Peru stated, “I want to be firm about my faith. Not being radical about my beliefs, but rather an open and willing person, open to changes, to people, to their opinions and ideas, yet still firm about my beliefs.” An atheist explained, “I would never like to shut someone’s idea just because it’s not the same as mine. I’d always like to listen to what people have to say.”

In summary, fidelity provided a broad category to capture the participants’ descriptions of their commitment to a specific belief system, values, morals, and sense of purpose. Analyses also revealed that spirituality included not
only devotion to an ideology, but also to behaviors consistent with one’s beliefs.

**Behavior**

The third category to emerge from participant responses was behavior. All the participants described their spirituality in terms of intentional living. For almost all the participants, spirituality involved a behavior response to their experiences of transcendence and their spiritual convictions. For example Joel, a Christian British boy, expressed a common sentiment among exemplars, that spirituality involved responding to one’s beliefs. He said, “My spirituality is just doing what He [God] wants me to.” Most of them described intentional efforts to make different forms of contribution. In addition, they generally all articulated a commitment to being intentional about living a moral life.

**Contribution.** A general finding was that the vast majority of participants reported intentionally making a contribution through acts of service or acts of leadership ($n = 28$). Many of the participants expressed commitment to caring for others and serving others less fortunate than themselves. The poly-religious American boy articulated, “My spirituality motivates me to provide impassioned service from a religion of compassion, not of compulsion. I take all that is a part of who I am and put it into a life of service work.” A Jewish American boy explained how his experience of service through the ecumenical Chicago Youth Council was a reflection to his Jewish beliefs, “We worked with Somali Bantu refugees . . . social action and being committed to social justice is another belief of Judaism that I hold true to myself.” A Muslim girl from Jordan explained that as a leader of a group of young people, “We sat with them, we listened to them, we listened to their problems and circumstances, and we offered them solutions for their problems.” A Christian girl from the United Kingdom described her spiritual motivation and commitment serving the poor in Uganda. She explained,

I’m really, really passionate about justice. And I think when people look at me that’s the one thing they see: I’ve just got loads of passion about sort of eradicating poverty . . . And I’m always challenging people about how they’re living, and how they’re spending their money, and things like that. That’s motivated me. I think God’s given me that passion.

**Leadership.** For some, especially Christians and Muslims, leadership involved directing younger people in religious settings. A British participant
described “discipling”—mentoring within a religious context to promote spiritual growth—younger teenagers in a small group. In addition, many of them provided worship leadership through playing instruments and leading in singing in worship services or youth groups. A Christian girl from Peru explained how she saw herself as a role model for younger youth.

My service was very important; getting involved helped my spiritual life because it was one more demand since I didn’t only have to respond to God, but also to the people I was working with. I had to maintain my testimony especially for the kids who were watching me since I was their role model.

**Moral living.** The majority of participants described the importance of living a moral life \((n = 24)\). They articulated their desire to live a life of “obedience” or “righteousness.” Some of the participants also emphasized that their spirituality guided them as to what **not** to do. Choosing to abstain from alcohol was a common theme across geographic and religious groups. Joyce, a Christian girl from the United Kingdom, stated, “I don’t swear. I don’t drink. I don’t smoke.” A Muslim boy in Kenya described a temptation to play video games instead of participating in the prayer ritual of *salat*. Others spoke of being conscious about doing the right thing. An American Buddhist said, “I just do the best I can in whatever I do . . . I try not to gossip about people or be mean to people.” A Hindu from the United States explained,

Spirituality means how well, to me, you can follow a set of morals that everyone pretty much has in common, and how well you can live up to I guess good standards for moral settings. So, that would be kind of “spirituality.”

The interviews suggested that transcendence, fidelity, and behavior are important aspects of spiritual development for these young people. This sample of exemplars described not only their connection to God or a truth beyond themselves, but also an understanding of themselves that was informed by their spirituality. They reported clarity and devotion to an ideology, as well as a commitment to pursuing lines of action consistent with their beliefs. The findings from these exemplary youth may provide valuable insight into understanding key concepts of adolescent spiritual development.

**Discussion**

No doubt this sample includes a unique group of adolescents. Although diverse in their geography and religious affiliations, collectively, these exemplar interviews reveal both the complexity and commonality of their
experiences of spirituality. The initial question of this investigation was, “What are the psychological constructs involved in adolescent spiritual development?” Although a small sample of spiritually exemplary youth was not intended to draw conclusions about the universals of spiritual development, the lives represented in this study provide evidence for considering the roles of transcendence, fidelity, and behavior as important dimensions of spiritual development in culturally and religiously diverse youth.

The strength of our qualitative approach is that it provides an account of potential psychological constructs relevant to spiritual development as experienced by young people across diverse contexts. The consensual qualitative strategies used two types of “experts” of spiritual development—those that have been nominated for living it (i.e., the exemplar participants) and those that study it (i.e., researchers and scholars as represented in the existing theoretical and empirical literature). The CQR method created an important dialectic between the data and the literature by bringing new insight into this lesser understood domain of development. The study not only identified psychological constructs relevant to spirituality, but also revealed specific examples of how these are manifested among diverse youth. The study was intended to take preliminary, empirical steps toward examining recognized aspects of spirituality in the literature as they are lived out in or represented in adolescents’ ways of talking of their experiences. The use of existing scholarship, multiple researchers, and systematically examining the representativeness of themes across cases enables us to abstract data toward theory and generate empirically grounded hypotheses. Consequently, in the discussion, we summarize the conclusions of our analyses by offering three propositions about three domains that may be involved in adolescent spiritual development.

*Proposition A: Adolescent Spiritual Development Involves Transcendence*

Seminal to the youths’ experience of spirituality was transcendence. Although the participants did not always use the word “transcendence” in their explanations of their self-understanding, key life experiences, and what they valued most in life, there were descriptions of being acutely aware or feeling a part of something bigger than themselves.

Central to these exemplars’ lives were interactions and relationships characterized by being with another that was experienced as either infinite, or eminently bigger than the self. For most youth, this referred to an experience of God. For others, it involved searching for an absolute truth or moral order.
Still, other exemplars described an acute sense of connection with people in general—whether referring to all humanity or within their particular ethnic or religious communities. Participants from different spiritual traditions also spoke of experiencing transcendence in nature.

In addition, interactions with specific people were often described in exemplar descriptions of spirituality. For example, exemplars described that engaging in rituals with their family, or sharing spiritual experiences with their friends often strengthened their personal convictions. Each of these forms of experiencing transcendence gave the young people a sense of being a part of something much bigger than themselves. These findings affirm the current literature’s tendency to include transcendence as an element of spirituality (Benson et al., 2003; King et al., 2013; Lerner et al., 2003; Rich & Cinamon, 2007). In addition, they offer specific explanations for how some young people experience transcendence through individual-other transactions. Given the tendencies of adolescents to seek belonging and to gain increased executive functioning enabling them to relate to people in more socially meaningful ways (Keating, 2004), these findings are not surprising. Youth are known for their propensity to pursue relationships and bonding with others. The findings of this study suggest that adolescents’ tendency toward belonging and connection also figures prominently in the spiritual development of these exemplars.

The findings from this study suggest that the intentional (or even unintentional) quest for spiritual development does not happen in isolation. The exemplars all commented that their journey of spiritual development occurred in relationship to others, and involved a strong sense of self-awareness. Simultaneously, the study raises empirical questions such as, Does the perceived nature or importance of the object of transcendence determine the influence of the relationship on a young person? What are the cognitive and social developmental trajectories of being able to comprehend a supernatural entity? How do experiences of transcendence influence positive or constructive self-awareness and identity formation?

**Proposition B: Adolescent Spiritual Development Involves a Growing Sense of Fidelity**

Unlike transcendence, which is frequently noted in the literature, fidelity is not often addressed in relation to adolescent spirituality (Lerner et al., 2008). Regardless, analyses of the transcripts evidenced a sense of fidelity as one of the most prominent aspects of adolescent spirituality among this exemplar sample. Our findings suggest that being committed to a worldview that
consisted of beliefs, values, morals, and purpose was critical to the participant’s experiences of spirituality. Some of the exemplars’ comments indicated that they had explored and reflected upon various ideological approaches, thereby integrating and internalizing their own personal understandings of the world. However, other exemplars seemed to have adopted much of their ideology from the people or culture around them. Nevertheless, the participants articulated a commitment or devotion to their stated beliefs and values. These young people strived to uphold their moral codes and to actively pursue specific values and goals. Similarly, being clear about one’s beliefs, values, and devotion to God or higher reality was consistent with living with a sense of purpose. Being clear about one’s morals or living “righteously” was also a dominant theme in these youths’ explanations of spirituality, whether or not they were in a religious context. These findings suggest that growing in a resolute commitment to one’s worldview is a seminal part of spiritual development.

These findings are consistent with Erikson’s (1959) recognition of fidelity as the basic virtue that results from the successful resolution to the identity crisis, as well as an important element of adolescent development. He defined fidelity as an unflagging commitment to an ideology that extends beyond the self. For example, Erikson suggested that when young people identify with ideologies of religious traditions, their identities can be placed within a social-historical framework that connects adolescents to traditions and communities that transcend the immediate moment, while providing them the impetus to internalize certain beliefs and values (e.g., King, 2008; Lerner et al., 2008). Central to the participants’ accounts of their spirituality was their gaining a clarity and conviction of beliefs, values, and worldviews through interactions with God and others.

Within the exemplar transcripts, fidelity was not only evident in the ability of youth to clearly voice their values, their beliefs, and their sense of morality, but also in their commitment and devotion to these ideals. In addition, although the exemplars articulated clarity of their ideological commitments, they also expressed the ability to doubt and explore. This finding may suggest an important quality of mature spirituality—a plasticity of beliefs that enables one to question convictions and to be open to the worldviews of others. This is consistent with Chadhury and Miller’s (2008) qualitative study of Bangladeshi American Muslim adolescents that found religious identity formation to include the processes of actively asking questions and attempting to determine one’s own unique religious identity, whether this was through an external (outside one’s religious community) or internal (within one’s religious community) process. Within our study, many of the exemplars who endorsed more fundamentalist religious beliefs even expressed an openness toward accepting and loving others who may hold different beliefs. Similarly,
the adolescent spiritual exemplars from this study echoed findings from Colby and Damon’s (1992) adult moral exemplars in regard to openness. Both samples demonstrated an ability to hold fast to their deepest spiritual convictions while maintaining open-mindedness about how these manifest in real life settings.

Although the current literature links spirituality with purpose and meaning, it does not acknowledge the role of beliefs and ideology. While beliefs are often associated with religion, the findings from this study indicate that exemplary adolescent spirituality may involve a clarity and commitment to personal beliefs and an integration of ideology. These findings suggest the importance of ideals and values, particularly with respect to shaping one’s behaviors.

**Proposition C: Spiritual Development Involves Specific Behaviors**

The analyses revealed that in addition to transcendence and fidelity, how one lives one life is integral to spirituality. While it is difficult to determine if behavior is entirely separate from beliefs, there can be a difference between having a belief and acting upon it. The behaviors mentioned in the participants’ descriptions of spirituality included service, leadership, and moral living. These youth articulated an intent and commitment to living a righteous or holy life, in such a way that honors God or Allah. Other exemplars spoke of their commitments to leading a life characterized by compassion and caring. Some were active in social justice. Many recounted the ways they served in leadership in their religious contexts through leading worship, religious classes, or small groups.

Youth explanations for why they acted a certain way often revealed the extent of their fidelity to their beliefs. Erikson (1959) theorized that when a young person resolved his or her sense of identity, he or she would naturally be committed to a prosocial ideology that would then lead to the attainment of a socially prescribed, positive role. For Erikson, such a role would result in behaviors that would serve, maintain, and perpetuate civil society (Lerner et al., 2003). The exemplars’ commitment to service and leadership is reminiscent of Lerner’s conceptualization of spirituality and thriving discussed in the introduction. Lerner and colleagues (2008) suggested that spirituality may provide the emotional and cognitive impetus for promoting adolescent behaviors that extend beyond the self, and are of benefit to others and society.

This finding raises several empirical questions that warrant further investigation. Although the exemplars’ descriptions include acts of service and leadership, further research could explore whether the behaviors noted in this study are a factor or correlate of spirituality. Does transcendence promote
beliefs and commitments that motivate these forms of contribution? And/or does service to others and spiritual practices promote transcendence and awareness?

Summary

Taken together, these propositions suggest that spiritual development occurs when a young person’s interactions with others result in a deeper connection to something beyond the self and awareness of self, which can lead to a growing clarity and commitment to beliefs, values, and purpose that in turn motivates a way of living that benefits others. Our analyses revealed that the exemplars’ spirituality consisted of heightened transcendence, resolute commitment to an ideology, and behaviors consistent with their belief system. Although the magnitude of spirituality evident in these exemplars’ lives is likely not typical of all adolescents, the findings from this study warrant further exploration to test whether transcendence, fidelity, and behaviors are constructs that undergird adolescent spiritual development more generally.

The conceptualization of spiritual development in the current study is consistent with relational developmental systems theories, which postulate that human development is based on an individual’s bidirectional interactions with the many systems in which they live (Lerner, 2006). As such, spiritual development is the domain of development that pertains to interactions that are characterized by the pursuit of the infinite, truth, sacredness, and meaning-making, and results in fidelity and prosocial contributions. From this perspective, the interaction between the self and some form of greater other that informs one’s beliefs and commitments, and propels the young person to live in a manner mindful of others, is seminal to spiritual development.

Given the conceptual overlap between spirituality and religiousness, we acknowledge that spiritual development refers to the interaction with the transcendent (supernatural or otherwise), fidelity, and behavior. While this may occur within the context of religious traditions and, therefore, seminal to the religious experience, religious development specifically involves the systematic changes in how one understands and uses the doctrines, practices, and rituals of a religion. Whereas spiritual development involves changes in how one experiences transcendence, commits to an ideology, and lives it out in the world.

As such, spirituality may engage many facets of the human experience. The exemplar narratives demonstrated the potential pervasiveness of spirituality. For these youth, spirituality was more than a feeling of transcendence; it was a means for understanding themselves and the world around them and also shaped their behavior. Although these youth may not be typical, they
exemplify the potential complexity and potential impact of spiritual development. The extent or maturity of these young people’s spirituality was evident in both the coherence and consistency of their lives. From this perspective, adolescent spiritual development is indicated by the extent of meaningfulness found in these exemplars’ experiences of transcendence, strength in their commitment to and conviction of particular beliefs, and the seeming consistency of their actions. Katherine, a Christian from England described this well:

And so becoming a Christian was about making God the center and living out a Christ-like life. It wasn’t about ‘doing this and not doing this.’ It was something . . . obviously those things, you did them, but you did them out of a love for God and because of who you were—not because it was the law.

As she explains, spirituality is not simply about following laws or “doing this and not doing that,” but instead, these narratives suggest that spirituality is about transcending the self, formulating an identity and belief system, and maintaining a lifestyle that is consistent with one’s worldview. As such, the extent of spiritual development pertains to the extent to which these transactions influence the beliefs, purpose, and behaviors of a young person.

**Limitations**

Our discussion of this study was driven by data obtained from a small and unique sample of youth nominated for intensely exhibiting the phenomena we intended to study—spiritual development. These data are not conclusive. We do not intend to imply that this group of exemplary youth is prototypic of other youth. They were, however, intentionally selected because they were expected to provide rich and insightful data to increase an understanding of the nature of spirituality as lived out by diverse youth. That said, we recognize that our propositions are a beginning and warrant empirical examination.

In addition, although extensive lengths were taken in order to maximize diverse representations of spiritual adolescents within the sample, we acknowledge that the nomination procedures may have resulted in overlooking other spiritual youth. Specifically, starting with established literature to identify nomination criteria and having limited funds to expand our geographic bounds may have constricted the possible range of spirituality surveyed, and therefore, hindered the inclusion of less understood or recognized forms of spirituality. Further research may benefit from considering more normative or folk psychology approaches within specific populations
(Matsuba et al., 2013). In addition, collaborative research teams that bridge developmental psychologists and indigenous or cultural psychologists would increase methodological sensitivity to specific developmental and cultural issues (Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2002; Jensen, 2012; King, Mueller, & Furrow, 2013). While we attempted to examine spiritual development around the globe, more comparative studies must be done to further examine the contribution of place and culture on spiritual development in larger samples.

In addition, longitudinal studies would be able to provide more than a “snapshot” of adolescent spiritual development, as they may provide key information about the processes prior to and during adolescence. Such research would also inform potential trajectories of spiritual development from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. What are the developmental precursors to these dimensions of spirituality in infancy and childhood? Although exemplar methods investigate highly developed psychological phenomenon—in this case spirituality—are these constructs relevant to adult spirituality? If so, how do they differ from during adolescents?

Conclusion

While there is much to be done, we think this investigation provides a helpful framework to begin conceptualizing spiritual development. The data resulting from the complex narratives and explanations of these exemplary young people, as well as the structured analyses enabled us to move from empirical analysis to theoretical postulation. Although we would argue that spirituality is a unique domain of human development that pertains to finding significance, meaning, and the sacred through connection to self and other, spiritual development is predicated on the same conceptions of developmental process forwarded by many contemporary researchers—the interaction of the person and context. In the case of spirituality, development involves transactions that are characterized by transcendence leading to a clarity and commitment of beliefs, and resulting in behaviors that contribute to the self and society.

The interviews of these exemplary youth point toward an important reality in their lives that has not been not well understood by developmental psychologists. To this point, the literature documents and explores many aspects of development that are relevant to their stories—identity, moral, emotional, cognitive, and civic engagement, to name a few. However, this study begs the question of whether or not there is something more that may offer coherence and understanding of the pursuit of transcendence, awareness, meaning, beliefs, devotion, and contribution in young people—namely, spiritual development? Although studying a small sample is surely not intended to be a method from which to draw conclusions about universals, it is clear that the
lives represented in this report serve as evidence for considering the roles of transcending the self, committing to an ideology, and living consistently within it as important pathways of spiritual development in culturally and religiously diverse youth.

Authors’ Note
This study is dedicated to the late and former President of Search Institute, Peter Benson, scholar and human exemplar. The Spiritual Exemplars Project was conducted in conjunction with the Thrive Center for Human Development at the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary and the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence at Search Institute. The authors wish to thank research assistants Ciprian Boitor, Drew Carr, and Lisa Criswell; research coordinators Colin Bennett, England; Bernard Boyo, Kenya; Curt Rhodes, Jordan; Rodolfo Salinas, Peru; and Sarah Sharma, India; and additionally, William Damon, Reed Larson, Richard Lerner, and Gene Roehlkepartain for their invaluable contributions.

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

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research was supported in part by the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation Grant 11944.

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**Author Biographies**

**Pamela Ebstyne King** is Associate Professor of Marital and Family Studies with the Thrive Center for Human Development in the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. Her research and teaching focuses on human thriving, positive youth development, and spiritual and moral development.

**Casey E. Clardy** received her M.Div. and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California and is currently a bilingual behavioral health provider at Lawndale Christian Health Center in Chicago. She specializes in providing clinical services and conducting research with multicultural, underserved population.

**Jenel Sánchez Ramos** received her Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology from Fuller Theological Seminary. She currently works as a clinician at Stanford University's Counseling and Psychological Services and has private practices in Palo Alto and San Jose, CA. Her research interests include cross-cultural psychology, adolescence and emerging adulthood, and spirituality.