Adolescent Moral Development: Effects of Engaging Youth in the Critical Appraisal of Theological Content

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Purpose:

Approximately one out of every six individuals globally are adolescents, between the ages of 10 to 19. Promoting health and reducing risks for this age group has life-long health and societal benefits. Research suggests the physical maturity of adolescents is accelerating. However, the psychological and behavioral development of this age group is slowing in comparison to former decades, creating new challenges for promoting health and minimizing risk. Evidence suggests positive and negative risk-taking behaviors cluster in this population. Pittman’s four categories of Competence, Connectedness, Confidence, & Character have been widely applied to organize health-promoting and risk-reducing strategies targeting youth. Meta-analyses conducted on adolescent moral development have described morally relevant behavior as being either pro or antisocial. Prosocial behavior is broadly defined as engaging in behavior that benefits others; in contrast, antisocial behavior is that which causes physical or psychological harm to others. Positive youth development programs and policy research recommendations suggest targeting strategies which facilitate adolescent competence in prosocial behaviors including social, cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and moral dimensions. While considerable research has been conducted on strategies to promote the physical determinants of adolescent health, limited research exists investigating strategies to positively impact youth moral development and prosocial behaviors linked to well-being. The purpose of this project therefore, is to report the effectiveness of a High School Youth Theology Institute, designed to engage adolescents in the critical appraisal of theological content on moral development as a strategy to promote positive youth development.

Methods:

This study used a longitudinal, mixed-methods qualitative approach. A cohort of (n = 27) youth, 14 – 18 years of age from 3 southwestern states, volunteered to participate in a week-long summer intensive followed by a monthly online discussion as a part of participation in Vocati, a High School Youth Theology Institute in 2016-2017. The program was designed to engage high school youth in the discussion and critical appraisal of theological content and spiritual development. Core program content included the reading, critical appraisal and discussion of seminal works from a wide-range of theologians and philosophers including Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, C. S. Lewis, and other notable intellectuals who address human morality. Institutional Review Board approval and informed adolescent assent and parental consent was obtained. The Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT-2) and Vocati Instrument Questionnaire (VIQ) were administered in-person at time 1 before the program began and online using Qualtrics at time 2, six months after the week-long intensive. The reliability and validity of the DIT-2 with adolescent populations is widely established and has been reported elsewhere. The VIQ has six Likert-type questions and seven open-ended questions requiring a written, narrative response. The content validity index for the VIQ was determined to be .94. Initial reliability of the Likert-style questions in the VIQ had a Cronbach’s alpha of .86 and has been reported to the Lilly Endowment, Inc., responsible for funding this project.
Results:

Study data were analyzed using SPSS version 24. Demographic, descriptive data and frequency distributions, and Q-Q plots were analyzed and determined to meet assumptions of normality. Sixteen (57%) were male and 12 (43%) were female. Data from the DIT-2 were scored by the University of Alabama Center for the Study of Ethical Development. The results of the DIT-2 mean scores at time one and at six months were compared to the aggregated national normative (NN) scores (Stage 2/3: T1: 29.08 - T2: 29.29 compared to NN: 27.7; Stage 4: T1 32.46 - T2: 32.94 compared to NN: 35.3; P Score: T1: 33.46 – T2: 35.06 compared to NN: 31.64; and N2 Score: T1: 30.71 – T2: 36.14 compared to NN: 30.97. The N2 score indicates the acquisition of more sophisticated moral thinking and the extent to which individuals reject ideas because they are simplistic or biased rose from T1, 30.71 to T2, 36.14 as compared to the national norm, 30.97. The VIQ data was analyzed using a paired t-test. Data supported a statistically significant difference in mean scores between T1 and T2 in four of six areas: 1) increased ability to engage in culture (t (18) = 2.926, p < .009), 2) increased familiarity with primary theological thinkers and wisdom from the Christian tradition (t (18) = 2.935, p < .009), 3) increased ability to practice spiritual disciplines (t (18) = 2.357, p < .030), and 4) increased ability to intentionally engage with issues of morality, ethics, justice and broader vision of the world (t (18) = 2.731, p < .014). Qualitative data was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim from a focus group conducted at the end of the week-long summer intensive. Focus-group participants were asked seven open-ended questions derived from the VIQ. Three members of the research team independently read and reflected on the data using a qualitative interpretive approach. Similar ideas were noted, clustered, coded and categorized thematically. Eleven themes emerged from the narrative, focus-group data. “Awareness of self” and “Awareness of others”, “Be Present”, “Use Talents”, “Erase Boundaries”, “Break Barriers”, “Listen”, “Empathy”, “Eye Contact”, “Accepting”, and “Trusting”. The qualitative themes were examined in relationship to Pittman’s categories. Four of the qualitative themes reflected the concepts found in the category of “Competence”, three mirrored “Connectedness”, two paralleled “Confidence” and two were determined to align with “Character”.

Conclusion:

The findings from this small, longitudinal study suggest engagement of youth in the critical appraisal of theological content may promote increased adolescent moral development and prosocial concepts linked to positive youth behaviors and well-being. Future research is needed to determine the potential mediating effect increased moral development may have overall on adolescent health.

Title:

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Keywords:

adolescents, moral development and theology

References:

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**Abstract Summary:**

Research suggest an acceleration of adolescent physical maturity and a slowing of psychological and behavioral development compared to prior decades. This project reports the effects of engaging youth in the critical appraisal of theological content on adolescent moral development as a strategy to promote adolescent well-being and health.

**Content Outline:**

I. Introduction and background on adolescent health 
   a. Trends in adolescent moral development 
   b. Global adolescent health risks 
   c. Preventable and treatable causes of adolescent illness and death associated with behavioral risk and known protective factors 
   d. Clustering of adolescent health promoting and risk-taking behaviors
II. Research and measurement of adolescent moral development

a. Meta-analyses on adolescent judgment and emotion

b. Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2) reliability & validity

c. Research on youth development programs and strategies

III. Effects of engaging youth in the critical appraisal of theological content as strategy for moral development

a. Vocati project longitudinal findings from cohort 1 – DIT-2 measurement

b. Focus group findings from cohort 1

c. Future research directions and implications for adolescent moral development

First Primary Presenting Author

Primary Presenting Author

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Professional Experience: Currently serve as Director of Nursing Research & Development at Lubbock Christian University. Experience in teaching evidence-based practice and research and the development of online EBP teaching tools for nurses. Thirty-nine years of experience as a registered nurse working in clinical, academic, and research positions.

Author Summary: This author is the Director of Nursing Research & Development at Lubbock Christian University. This individual has experience teaching evidence-based practice and research to nurses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. She is the co-author of an online EBP teaching tool used to assist faculty in teaching online search and critical appraisal skills to nurses.

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Author Summary: Dr. Steven Bonner obtained his Doctorate of Ministry of Youth, Family, and Culture
from Fuller Theological Seminary. He holds a Masters of Divinity, MA in Biblical Interpretation, and BA in Biblical Studies and Youth Ministry.

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**Professional Experience:** Ms. Silva has been a practicing registered nurse for 15 years. She is currently employed in a community-based education program focused on the health promotion of youth and families wherein the majority of her clients are adolescents. Mrs. Silva is a post-graduate research Assistant on the Vocati project.

**Author Summary:** Samara Silva has over 15 years of experience in the care and health promotion of families and adolescents. She is a post-graduate research assistant on the Vocati project.

Fourth Author

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**Professional Experience:** Hope Cimino is a Graduate Research Assistant in the Vocati project. She has participated in the data entry and analysis of the quantitative data derived from this longitudinal study. Ms. Cimino has been a practicing registered nurse in medical surgical and emergency specialties for approximately 2 years and has provided care to an adolescent population as a front-line nurse. Ms. Cimino is currently pursuing her masters of science in nursing. She has presented an original integrative research review in a Research Symposium as a part of her graduate studies.

**Author Summary:** Hope Cimino, BSN, RN, is a Graduate Research Assistant on the Vocati project. Her current clinical practice is as a front-line nurse in the Emergency Department.