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

Steven Bonner, DMin, MDiv, MA, BA

JoAnn Long, PhD, MSN, MA, RN, NEA-BC

Samara Silva, MSN, RN

Hope Cimino, BSN, RN

2015-2019 Funding for this project is made possible by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. to Lubbock Christian University, Lubbock, TX, United States
The purpose of this presentation is to report the preliminary findings of Vocati, a youth intervention designed to engage U.S. high school students in the critical appraisal of theological content, on adolescent moral development as a strategy to promote adolescent health and well-being.
Background & Significance

Promoting health and reducing risks for this age group has life-long health and societal consequences.

Positive and Negative risk-taking behaviors cluster in this population.

Globally 1 in 6 People are Adolescents age 10-19

Meta-analysis of 50 studies investigating the cognitive-developmental approach to adolescent moral judgment showed lower stage moral development in youth with delinquent behaviors as compared to non-offenders.

(Busch, Van Stel, Schrijvers & de Leeuw, 2013; Stams, Brugman, Dekovic, Rosmalen, van der Laan, & Gibbs, 2006; World Health Organization, 2018)
Adolescent research suggests

Acceleration

Adolescent physical Maturity

Slowing

Psychological and behavioral development

Multiple Social Identities

Intersectionality

Multiple identities

Historical background to present

Prosocial behavior = benefits others

Antisocial behavior = harm to others

(Malti & Krettenauer, 2013)
Vocati Intervention

The Vocati Institute is an inter-generational program designed to engage high-school aged youth in:

1) A week-long summer residency focused on critical appraisal of theological content and engagement
2) A year-long once monthly dialogue/discussion related to theology and culture
3) Implementation of a community-based service project
Critical Appraisal of Theological Content

Vocati scholars critically appraise program content by engaging with an interdisciplinary team comprised of Analytic Theologians, Youth and Family Ministry, Dance, Theater Fine Arts, Arts and Humanities experts, and an embedded Nursing Scientist.
Method
Longitudinal, Mixed-Method

- Cohort 1: n=28
- Youth 14-18
- 3 southwestern states
- Institutional Review Board approval
- Adolescent Assent
- Parental Consent

Research Question: How does participation in *Vocati* impact youth moral development?

- Measurement:
- Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT-2)
- Vocati Instrument Questionnaire (VIQ)
- Focus Group
Defining Issues Test Version 2 (DIT-2)

- 1999 Neo-Kholbergian measure of moral cognitive sophistication
- Activates use of moral schemas to the extent that a person has developed them
- High reliability (.78 -.82) and published national norms
- Range 20-70

(The University of Alabama Center for the Study of Ethical Development: http://ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu/about-the-dit.html)
The developmental indices in the DIT-2 are categorized considering Kohlberg’s developmental model as follows:

- The Stage 2/3 score considers fairness, good/evil intentions, concern for maintaining good relationships, and personal approval.
- The Stage 4, Maintaining Norms score represents consideration of maintaining social norms, including legal systems, and roles in existing formal organizational structures.
- The P-Score/Post Conventional score is categorized as Stage 5/6 in Kohlberg’s model. This score is focused on consideration on societal organization through appeal to consensus, due process, and safeguarding of minimal basic rights.
- The N2 score is a relatively newer, sophisticated combination of items and reflects the acquisition of more sophisticated moral thinking and the extent to which individuals reject ideas because they are simplistic or biased. The N2 Score is generally considered the most powerful index of moral development.

(The University of Alabama Center for the Study of Ethical Development: http://ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu/about-the-dit.html)
Vocati Institute Questionnaire (VIQ)

VIQ consists of six Likert-type questions and seven open-ended questions developed as a content-specific measurement

- Test-retest reliability of Likert-type questions
  - Cronbach’s Alpha of .86
- Content Validity Index .94
16 (57%) were male and 12 (43%) were female

Results of the DIT-2 mean scores at time one and 12 months were compared to the aggregated national norms (NN)

The greatest change compared to NN was seen in the N2 score

- Cohort 1 - T1 (baseline) 30.71
- Cohort 1 - T2 (12 months) 36.14
- Compared to NN of 30.97
A paired t-test was conducted to compare VIQ scores prior to summer residency (baseline) and at 6 months. The mean scores increased in 5 of 6 VIQ questions suggesting a significant difference in participant self-reported practices 6 months following the summer residency.
VIQ-T1 & T2 RESULTS

Self-reported increased ability to:

Q1: Understand theological wisdom of Christian tradition ($t(18) = 3.897, p < .001^{**}$)

Q3: Ability to engage in my culture ($t(18) = 2.926, p < .009^{**}$)

Q4: Familiarity with primary thinkers, theology and wisdom from the Christian tradition ($t(18) = 2.935, p < .009^{**}$)

Q5: Practice private and communal spiritual disciplines ($t(18) = 2.357, p < .030^{*}$)

Q6: Intentionally engage with issues of morality, ethics, justice and broader vision of the world ($t(18) = 2.731, p < .014^{*}$)

*p < .05, **p < .01
### VIQ

**T1: Baseline  T2: Six Months**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% CI Lower</th>
<th>95% CI Upper</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1: T1-T2</td>
<td>1.053</td>
<td>1.177</td>
<td>.270</td>
<td>.485</td>
<td>1.620</td>
<td>3.897</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2: T1-T2</td>
<td>.263</td>
<td>1.284</td>
<td>.295</td>
<td>-.356</td>
<td>.882</td>
<td>.893</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3: T1-T2</td>
<td>.737</td>
<td>1.098</td>
<td>.252</td>
<td>.208</td>
<td>1.266</td>
<td>2.926</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.009**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4: T1-T2</td>
<td>.895</td>
<td>1.329</td>
<td>.305</td>
<td>.254</td>
<td>1.535</td>
<td>2.935</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.009**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5: T1-T2</td>
<td>.579</td>
<td>1.071</td>
<td>.246</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>1.095</td>
<td>2.357</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.030*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6: T1-T2</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td>1.344</td>
<td>.308</td>
<td>.194</td>
<td>1.490</td>
<td>2.731</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.014*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01*
Focus-group participants were asked 7 open-ended questions derived from the VIQ.

Three members of the research team independently read and reflected on the data using a qualitative interpretative approach.

Similar ideas were noted, clustered, coded, categorized and cross-checked for comparison.
“Awareness of self”
“Eye Contact”

“Be Present”
“Use Talents”

“Listen”

“Erase Boundaries”
“Break Barriers”

“Empathy”
“Awareness of others”
Pittman’s 4 Categories of Positive Youth Development

- Competence
- Connectiveness
- Confidence
- Character
Community Service Project Examples

LZ: Worked with homeless organization to help educate the community in how to relate to and communicate with homeless individuals.

EC: Created a roofing project for his community. EC was voted the “Outstanding Citizen of the Year” in his city, the first time in the history of his town a youth, rather than adult was given this recognition.

AJ: Increased her volunteerism throughout the year in local events to help children.
Synthesized literature reporting mediators of health promoting healthy adolescent lifestyle behaviors

Significant mediators of nutrition
Increased:
- Self-efficacy
- Pros and forward stage movement
- Planning
- Perceived parental support
- Goal intention
Decreased:
- Perceived barriers with outcome expectation
Self-efficacy and autonomous motivation indirectly mediating outcome

Significant mediators of physical activity
Increased:
- Perceived environmental barriers
- Goal intention
Decreased:
- Perceived barriers with outcome expectations
- Self-efficacy and autonomous motivation indirectly mediating the outcome

Significant mediators of screen time
- Autonomous motivation

(Kelly, Stephens, Hoying, McGovern, Melnyk, & Militello, 2017)
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. It is not yet known how increasing adolescent moral development may mediate other healthy lifestyle behaviors in youth and is a research question in need of further investigation.
Limitations

- Our preliminary findings are from a small sample of adolescents from 3 states self-selecting into the program

https://schoolofauthors.wordpress.com/2017/03/02/importance-of-expressing-study-limitations/
Future Direction

- Future research is needed to determine the potential mediating effects increased moral development may have on adolescent health.

- Continue to track study findings over time.

- In the fall of 2018 cohort, we will add a comparison group to flesh-out impact of Vocati as an intervention to enhance the moral development of youth.

THANK YOU!
References


