

The Identity Formation Experiences of Church-Attending Rural Adolescents

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The purpose of this study was to access adolescents' voices regarding the impact of religiosity on everyday experiences of identity construction. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 22 adolescents ages 15–19 living in a rural community; half were regular and committed members of a local church, and the other half never attended church. We wanted to differentiate between the responses that were primarily related to rural culture, and those that were related to religion. Clear differences emerged between the church group and the control group with regard to role models, turning points, career goals, family goals, and commitment to Christian values. Results suggest that differences between urban and rural adolescents in identity-related domains (i.e., career, family) may be a product of religious rather than geographical factors.

Keywords: *identity; religiosity; adolescent; rural culture; qualitative research*

If the earliest stage bequeathed to the identity crisis is an important need for trust in oneself and in others, then clearly the adolescent looks most fervently for men and ideas to have *faith* in, which also means men and ideas in whose service it would seem worthwhile to prove oneself trustworthy.

—Erikson, 1968, p. 128–9

I got up near the stage to commit my life to God . . . I started getting really hot, and it felt like I was tingling, and my whole body went numb. I didn't feel heavy anymore. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt like a completely new person?

—17-year old Christian male, *Spin* magazine, 2000

The above quotes illustrate two different ways of conceptualizing the meaning of faith in the emerging identity of an adolescent. The first, written by psychoanalyst Erik Erikson more than four decades ago, reflects a theoretical understanding of faith and identity in which the style and language

are far removed from the actual lived experiences of young people. The second quote, spoken by a participant at a youth church service, is disconnected from theory and research but embodies the raw reality of the way in which faith or religion can influence an adolescent's sense of self. Both of these two perspectives are valuable in attempting to understand the relation between religious faith and identity development. Research on this topic, however, has focussed on the former perspective, and has been explored largely through the placement of religious versus nonreligious adolescents into theoretical categories of identity attainment such as identity statuses and identity styles (e.g., Duriez & Soenens, 2006; Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer, 2001; Lee, Miller, & Chang, 2006; Markstrom, 1999; Markstrom-Adams, Hofstra, & Dougher, 1994). This focus on categorization and a relative lack of qualitative research has resulted in a paucity of information on the unique lived realities of young people grappling with issues of identity construction and religious faith. In the present investigation, interviews were conducted to explore what adolescents themselves have to say about the impact of faith and religiosity on the ordinary, everyday experiences involved in identity construction. Special consideration was also given to the cultural context of the rural community in which these participants resided, and the ways in which this unique culture may have shaped their experiences.

According to Erikson, the ultimate outcome of the identity crisis is the ego-virtue of fidelity, which is defined as "the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems" (1964, p. 125). Fidelity is attained through a process of ideological exploration and subsequent commitment, and is thought to provide the basis for love, care, and wisdom in adulthood (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents who are identity achieved (who have gone through the process of exploration/crisis and subsequent commitment) are thought to possess the ego strength of fidelity (Erikson, 1968). Erikson's conceptualization of identity formation was operationalized by Marcia (1966), who developed four separate identity categories, based on the presence or absence of (a) a crisis in which alternate identity choices are explored, and (b) commitment to a particular identity. *Identity achieved* adolescents have experienced both a crisis and subsequent commitment to an ideology. Adolescents who are *identity foreclosed* have made a commitment in the absence of crisis or exploration, while adolescents experiencing *moratorium* are actively exploring alternatives without a current commitment to any one identity or ideology. Finally, adolescents who are *identity diffused* are neither committed to an identity, nor are they in the process of crisis and exploration.

Researchers have suggested that both public (i.e., church attendance) and private (i.e., prayer, personal faith) religiosity may be linked with identity achievement and fidelity (e.g., Markstrom, 1999; Markstrom-Adams et al., 1994; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). True dedication to a religious faith necessitates commitment to a particular worldview and set of ideologies concerning work, love, life, and death. Religiosity may therefore be a way in which adolescents express fidelity, as well as a means through which the development of fidelity is facilitated. Erikson himself conceived religious faith as a restoration of trust and hope stemming from infancy, and the oldest and most lasting way in which individuals develop and maintain fidelity (Erikson, 1968). When considering the fact that the average age of religious conversion is estimated to be between 12 and 18 years (Donelson, 1999), it is not surprising that the quest for identity may play a role in such commitments.

Several studies have found that church attendance is positively related to identity achievement, foreclosure, and fidelity (e.g., Hunsberger et al., 2001; Markstrom, 1999; Markstrom-Adams et al., 1994). These results provide support for the idea that religiously committed adolescents are more likely than youth without such commitments to occupy a committed identity status. Furthermore, young people whose religious commitments are intrinsic (where religious beliefs are pursued for their own sake) report more advanced identity formation than their peers whose religious commitments are extrinsic (where religion is used as a means toward some other end such as social gain) (e.g., Fulton, 1997; Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996). Personal exploration (e.g., asking questions, seeking answers) is another important aspect in the role of religiosity in identity formation. Individuals who have arrived at religious commitments through personal exploration are more likely to display successful identity outcomes than those who simply adopt the beliefs of their family or friends (Parker, 1985; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998).

Perhaps the most consistent finding throughout this body of literature is that adolescents with intrinsic religious commitments are less likely than youth with extrinsic commitments and youth without any such commitments to occupy a diffused identity status, which is associated with the least positive psychosocial adjustment (e.g., Hunsberger et al., 2001; Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996). Even if religious commitment does not *always* promote identity achievement, it seems to act as a protective factor against identity diffusion.

The impact of public and private religiosity on the identity development of young people is thought to be related to both ideological systems and

social connectedness. Commitment to an ideology is thought to be an essential component of identity formation. Erikson conceived the adolescent mind to be an ideological one, which is constantly engaged in a search for an inspiring unification of ideals and traditions. Adolescents have a need to make sense out of the world—to organize the experiences and information they encounter into a coherent, holistic construct (Erikson, 1968). The values, morals, and traditions inherent within a religious faith may provide an ideological context wherein a personal belief system can be formed and the world can be made meaningful (Erikson, 1968; Hall, 1904).

Kerestes and Youniss (2003) hypothesized that the role of religion in an adolescent's quest for ideological commitment may be particularly important in a postmodern society, where the self is often portrayed as a fluctuating individual who is constantly being shaped and reshaped according to different social and psychological demands (Gergen, 1991; McDonald, 1999). Kerestes and Youniss state that because religion offers a clear set of standards regarding what is right and wrong, it can play a central role in helping an adolescent construct one true, enduring inner self within the context of postmodern subjectivism. A fluid, postmodern individual is a stark contrast to the Eriksonian identity-achieved young person, and it is possible that when young people are attempting to figure out who they are and what they should do with their lives, a societal ideology that advocates an unstable and transitory self may be quite troubling. In contrast, commitment to a formal religious ideology may provide stability in this postmodern context, and could therefore serve as a catalyst in the attainment of fidelity.

Unique opportunities for social connectedness within religious networks are also thought to facilitate successful identity formation and protect against diffusion. Erikson (1965) posited that the formation of a legitimate identity for an adolescent is dependent upon support from the important social groups in his or her life, and the sense of collective identity he or she gains from identification with these supportive groups. Identity formation does not take place solely inside the individual; rather, it is a process by which the self turns outward to discover one's place in society. In this sense, faith communities could be considered optimal environments for the facilitation of identity development. In these settings, religious beliefs are affirmed through formal rites and rituals, as well as more informal social support and teaching (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). Religious adolescents may work toward identity achievement through communion and identification with others who share their beliefs. Smith (2003a) states that organized religion is unique from most other American societal institutions in that it is not stratified by age, and thus adolescents who are involved in

church groups have access to extra-familial, cross-generational networks that provide care, support, and knowledge.

It has been hypothesized that religion may provide adolescents with a historical connection that facilitates the union of individual identity and social history (Markstrom-Adams et al., 1994). Religious individuals share a common past, present, and future, and the kinship that is experienced through such a communal vision may be extremely effective in facilitating the development of fidelity in adolescents searching for a meaningful identity (Youniss et al., 1999). Religious commitments may also promote a sense of connectedness with God, Jesus, or a higher power. For instance, many Evangelical churches teach that God is a friend, and adolescents are instructed on how to have a "personal relationship with God." Smith (2003b) proposes that intimate encounters with a God figure such as conversion, healing, answer to prayer, or a word of divine guidance solidifies and legitimizes religious beliefs. A sense of personal connectedness to God, therefore, could solidify identity commitments.

The research reviewed above suggests that religiosity may play a role in adolescent identity formation, and it provides plausible hypotheses as to why this relation may exist. There are some issues, however, that have not been adequately explored in the existing literature. First, researchers have largely failed to access the actual voices of young people to investigate the personal meaning of religious faith in the process of identity construction. The placement of religious versus nonreligious, or intrinsic versus extrinsic adolescents into categories of identity attainment does not help us to understand, for instance, the unique challenges that religiously committed adolescents may face as they engage in identity exploration and commitment.

Furthermore, research is not as extensive on the way in which diverse cultural contexts may moderate the relation between religion and identity. Erikson (1965, 1968) placed a great amount of importance on the social context in which identity exploration and commitments occurred. One of his most important insights was the assertion that all intrapsychic functions take place within a social and historical context, and that successful identity synthesis can transpire only if the chosen commitments and identifications of an adolescent are legitimized within his or her particular culture (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Erikson, 1968). It would be beneficial, therefore, to work toward expanding our understanding of the relation between religiosity and identity to include how this relation may differ in the many diverse cultural contexts in which adolescents are situated.

The present study was designed to generate spontaneous and unprompted responses from a population of individuals that has been

relatively neglected by the research literature, rural adolescents. There is evidence that rural adolescents may differ from their urban counterparts in factors related to ideological (education/career, religion, and politics), and interpersonal (friendship, dating, and sex role) identity domains. For instance, rural youth tend to report slightly lower career/educational aspirations, express somewhat greater support for traditional gender roles, and show more interest in future family goals than urban adolescents (e.g., Carter & Borch, 2005; Looker, 2002; Nurmi, Poole, & Kalakoski, 1996; Rice & Coates, 1995). Religious individuals, similarly, also tend to hold more traditional views on family and gender roles, and, in some denominations, have less positive views about postsecondary education (e.g., Bryant, 2003; Darnell, & Sherkat, 1997; Sevim, 2003). Individuals residing in rural areas also tend to report higher levels of church attendance (e.g., Clark, 2000).

Given the disparities that exist between rural and urban individuals with regard to factors concerning religion and identity formation, it is important to examine the identity construction experiences of rural youth separately from those of urban youth, and to consider the ways in which "ruralness" may influence their experiences. In the present study, we were primarily concerned with how rural culture may influence the way in which religiously committed adolescents experience identity construction. We conducted interviews with two groups of young people: the group of primary interest was comprised of young people who were committed members of their church and youth group, while the other group was a control group comprised of adolescents from the same rural community who did not attend church or youth group. A control group was used because we wanted to consider the possibility that the responses of the group of interest (church attendees) may be highly influenced by the rural culture in which they lived. By employing a control group, we were able to differentiate between the responses that may have been primarily related to rural culture, and those that were primarily related to religious faith.

In the interviews that were conducted, participants were not directly asked about the influence of religion in their lives, or about the context of their geographical location. Rather, interview data were analyzed for how faith and/or religion were discussed spontaneously within responses to the general identity questions. Furthermore, special attention was given to the way in which the cultural context of the rural community in which these participants lived may have shaped their experiences.

Method

Participants

Participants included 22 adolescents who resided in a rural town in Canada. The population of this town at the time of the interviews was approximately 7,000. Its primary industries include manufacturing/construction, retail sales, and agriculture. In 2001, 11.9% of the population aged 20–35 held a university certificate, diploma, or degree, compared to the provincial average of 25.9 percent. The 2001 median household income was CAD\$50,917 (the median provincial household income in 2001 was CAD\$61,024). The nearest major urban center with a university is located approximately 65 miles from the town.

The group of primary interest (five males, six females) was comprised of adolescents who were members of the town's Evangelical church. The remaining adolescents constituted a control group, comprised of adolescents (six males, five females) from the same rural community who did not attend any church or youth group. In the church-attending group, eight participants were enrolled in secondary school (two juniors and six seniors), two were working full time, and one was enrolled in an apprenticeship program. There were three 19 year olds, one 18 year old, five 17 year olds, one 16 year old, and one 15 year old. In the control group, eight participants were enrolled in full-time secondary school (one junior, one sophomore, and six seniors), one was enrolled in a college program, and two were working full-time. There were two 19 year olds, three 18 year olds, four 17 year olds, one 16 year old, and one 15 year old.

Procedure

Adolescents in the church-attending group were identified by a church youth group leader to the primary researcher as regular and committed attendees at church and youth group. The control group was recruited with the help of two of the church-attending participants and the director of the downtown youth drop-in center. These three individuals provided the primary researcher with the phone numbers of individuals between the ages of 15–19 who never attended church or youth group. All participants who were approached agreed to participate in the study.

Participants in the church-attending group were given the choice as to whether the interview was conducted in the church or in their own homes

(permission was granted to the primary researcher by the church to conduct interviews in a private church meeting room). Three of the participants chose to be interviewed in the church meeting room, and eight elected to be interviewed at home. Individuals in the control group were given the choice to complete the interview in their homes or the downtown youth drop-in center (permission was granted to the primary researcher to conduct interviews in a private room in the drop-in center). Interviews ranged in length from 20 to 45 minutes, with the average length being 25 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The semistructured interviews inquired about the participants' thoughts and experiences concerning identity formation. Interviews consisted of five general questions, which were uniformly presented to each participant. The interviews specifically addressed: (a) present and future goals; (b) how present and future goals had been decided upon; (c) self-descriptions; (d) changes in self that have occurred over the course of their lives; and (e) turning points. Probes were used as needed, and varied slightly across participants. The complete interview schedule is presented in Appendix A.

This method of inquiry was chosen for two reasons. First, as was previously mentioned, there are very few studies that have qualitatively examined the role of religion in adolescent identity development. Second, in the limited amount of research that has qualitatively examined the role of religion in adolescent identity development, participants have been *explicitly* asked about religious influences in their lives (e.g., Peek, 2005; Sinclair & Milner, 2005). It is possible that questions that directly inquire about religion may produce responses that are influenced by social desirability or "scripts" that adolescents have learned from their parents and church leaders about how to talk about religion.

Analytic Approach

A content analysis approach was used to identify common themes among the interview responses (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2005). Segments of information (phrases or sentences) were identified and given labels (theme names) inductively from the data. First, the interview content of the church-attending group and the control group was examined for common elements that represented important or salient aspects within their stories of identity construction experiences. Within those common themes, the information (phrases and sentences) were examined and coded for differences that existed between the church-attending group and the control group. An

independent rater (graduate student) coded the interviews for the identified themes. Overall inter-rater agreement was 83.5%.

Results

Five common themes were identified as being particularly important to the participants' stories of identity construction experiences: (a) role models; (b) redemptive turning points; (c) occupational goals; (d) family goals; and (e) God and Christian morals. Within these common overarching themes, however, the specific content differed between the church-attending group and the control group.

The themes that were identified represent overarching similarities and differences within and between the two groups. There were some instances, however, where participants in the church-attending group gave responses that were quite similar to the responses of the control group, and vice versa. Responses about church-related issues and activities, however, were nearly exclusively mentioned by the church-attending group. This is not surprising, as the control group participants were selected on the basis of their nonchurch attendance.

Theme 1: The Importance of Role Models

Many participants acknowledged the importance of role models within their stories of identity construction. Role models were credited by both groups as being helpful in the development of their morals and values, as well as significant sources of information and encouragement regarding possible career paths and future goals. Where the groups differed within this theme, however, was in the type of role model relationships they considered most important. For the church group, Christian mentors and role models were most often mentioned when asked about people that contributed to their development as a person and their future goals. These role models were often older individuals such as pastors or youth leaders, but nearly as often, Christian friends were mentioned as being crucially important to their developing goals, values, and overall sense of identity.

"I would like to be a very wise person . . . that's what I try to achieve . . . I look at people who are wise and I admire that. For example, Pastor Eric. He's a really wise guy . . . I look at him I think that's someone I'd like to be like."
(Male, 17 years old)

"I'd say my small-group leaders have been important in helping me become the person I am today. They're like my friends, but they're older. I learn *a lot* from them. They are more experienced with things." (Female, 17)

"About two years ago we went to a youth group . . . they had a female pastor and she was really cool and she influenced me a lot. Because it was very cool to see a girl who was a youth pastor . . . She helped me out a lot spiritually." (Female, 17)

"Coming to youth group and having friends here . . . They've formed me in a way that I think I should be acting a different way than I am . . . John was also one of the biggest influences. If it wasn't for him I wouldn't be where I am. Like I wouldn't be in church and all that stuff . . . In grade nine I got into the whole party scene . . . now I don't even party anymore . . . he didn't want me drinking and then, I didn't need to drink to have fun." (Female, 19)

In contrast, the control group was much more likely to mention teachers and family members as being central in the development of their own values, morals, and career goals. None of the participants in the control group mentioned religious role models as being important in their lives.

"My mom is the biggest person that's helped me with that (becoming the kind of person I want to be). She's been the backbone for me." (Female, 18)

"My grade 8 teacher . . . encouraged my writing a lot. I won the creative writing award . . . She was the one who suggested I enter the contest, and she proofread all my work." (Male, 15)

"My whole family is hard workers . . . Just kinda passed it on to me . . . My teacher, Mr. Markson said that I should go into it, cause I'm really good at it . . . We talk a lot after class, and he's helped me a lot . . . he actually remembers and looks at the kids what they're like nowadays, instead of just judging them by what they act like or look like. He likes to see what they're like on the inside." (Male, 16)

It is not surprising that relationships with role models were of central importance in the identity construction stories of both the church group and the control group. Peers and older individuals who offer support for adolescents' exploration and affirmation for their chosen identity commitments are crucially important to young people (Berzonsky, 2004; Erikson, 1964, 1968; Matheis & Adams, 2004). The fact that the church-attending group identified Christian role models as being most salient within their identity construction stories is consistent with Erikson's notion that social contexts play a crucial

role in identity outcomes. Erikson (1968) posited that an adolescent must select identity commitments based upon “socially possible faces and voices” (Adams & Marshall, 1996, p. 431). Because the church-attending group was immersed in a subculture where religion and personal faith is of primary importance, it makes sense that these adolescents would consider Christian role models as the “socially possible faces and voices” to which they could look when considering what kind of people they want to become.

Theme 2: Redemptive Turning Points

For both groups, a major theme that came out in their identity stories was turning points, or change stories characterized by redemptive sequences. A redemptive sequence within a narrative is found when negative events are characterized in such a way that they are perceived to contain meaning and lead to positive change (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; McLean & Pratt, 2006). When comparing the responses of the church-attending group to those of the control group, it was evident that both were characterized by redemption; however, there were distinct differences in the content of the turning point stories. For the church group, major life changes were generally associated with a sudden or gradual increase in religiosity, often following a period of difficulty, rebellion, or questioning.

“There was a point a few years ago when I was really depressed, but that was just because I took my focus off God . . . That would be my turning point . . . Around that time I wasn’t focussed on God so a lot of things were going really bad in my life, and I was doing things that I knew were wrong.” (Female, 17)

“I remember there was a period of time where I was going through a really hard time. I was always depressed. It came to a point where I hated myself and I hated life. I don’t really know why, but I just like, cried out to God and said—I can’t handle this—and I really started seeking Him . . . I mean, I grew up as a Christian so it’s not like it was really foreign to me, but it was a huge turning point. God really just started showing Himself to me, like answering prayers and that.” (Female, 19)

“The week my grandpa died . . . I had a lot of non-Christian friends at that point, like all non-Christian friends. And I just realized that they’re not . . . going to support me in the same way that my Christian friends could. Because we don’t have the same values, we’re not on the same wavelength. So I went and got Christian friends. So that changes you, because it’s more

comfortable to be around them and you're more open to them about everything. I don't think it was a bad turning point. Like it was a bad situation, but I think it worked out for the best." (Female, 17)

In contrast with the church-attending group, the control group's redemptive turning points were devoid of religious content. When asked about events that they thought had altered who they were as individuals, most of these participants related stories of tragedies or hard times that prompted positive change in their thought or behavior.

"I wanted to be a firefighter. And then around grade 12 I was just kind of fading out of that idea. And the biggest thing was when 9/11 hit. As soon as that went on the news, and with all the firefighters dead. Something just hit me, and I said, I have to do this . . . That's probably been the biggest turning point . . . After that, it was for sure at that point that I did want to be a firefighter." (Male, 17)

"I've had friends that have got into trouble and stuff which has kind of made me reevaluate my life and what I was doing. And I've had a few turning point, because I've had so many different paths that I've gone down and turned around and come back . . . My friend was found in a field after drinking too much alcohol. That's one. She was almost dead, so it kinda made me reevaluate my life and my values, and who I was hanging around with, and how my parents have brought me up and stuff." (Female, 17)

"A big turning point in my life . . . when I was in my car accident. I finally realized that I wasn't invincible . . . I realized that I could actually hurt myself. Again, I took into consideration how other people would feel if I wasn't around anymore. So I'm just a lot more careful now." (Female, 17)

The fact that nearly all the participants in the church group mentioned religious change in their stories of personal change perhaps illustrates the centrality of commitment to the identities of these young people. They were not asked about turning points or changes in their faith, yet they saw these increases in the personal commitment to their faith as being essential to their self-identities. Interestingly, the two participants who said they had not experienced a major turning point explained that the reason for this was that their commitment to God had always been stable. It seemed that the phrase "turning point" was automatically linked to their commitments to God. This result may be again reflective of the fact that identity development is highly contingent upon social-cultural context, in which context

shapes beliefs and expectations about the identity options available to members of a group or society (Erikson, 1968; Grotevant, 1987). For adolescents immersed in a culture where much of their free time is spent at church events, and the majority of their family members and/or friends are religiously committed, it makes sense that faith-based turning points would be salient in their personal stories of how they became the people they are today.

Theme 3: Occupational Goals

Occupational plans and goals played a central role in the participants' stories of identity construction. The young people in both groups had clearly considered what they wanted to do after high school, and these goals appeared to be linked to their sense of self. Both groups also appeared to be quite similar with regard to the level of education/career goals they wished to pursue, with eight of the eleven participants in both groups stating that they aspired to undertake community college or apprenticeship programs and three participants planning to attend university. The difference between the two groups was primarily with regard to the geographic location in which they said they wanted to live to fulfill their career goals.

The church-attendees talked about having occupational or educational goals that would fit with their desired lifestyles, which, for several participants involved pursuing careers that would allow them to remain in the rural area where they had grown up.

"I was going to do design, but then I was talking to an designer from (nearby town) and she said that you can't really make a living around here doing that. There isn't a market for that in rural areas. So she said you'd have to live in the city, and so I thought about it, and I don't think I really want to live in the city my whole life so I kind of went back to the health field . . . I'm kind of thinking, like, dental hygienist or something like that." (Female, 19)

"One goal is to get an apprenticeship . . . in Toronto right now a minimum salary is \$175,000 after taxes . . . But that's in the city. Around here it's more like \$70,000. But I'm not going to the city! No way! I'll go to the city for the apprenticeship or the job, or if I have to, but there's no way I'm living there permanently. I like small towns; that's where I want to stay." (Male, 17)

The control group's stories about their career goals were, in virtually every case, linked to plans to move out of the rural area where they grew

up. Their responses contrasted with those of the church attendees primarily with regard to the enthusiasm with which they spoke about “getting out” of the small town. Not every church-attending adolescent explicitly said that they wanted to stay near the area where they were raised, but the church attendees did not passionately speak about moving to the city to pursue a career, as was the case with the control group.

“I plan on traveling for a year and working . . . In 5 years I definitely want to be in university to pursue a career . . . I’d like to live in the city. Probably Toronto or New York . . . I don’t like rural areas, definitely the city.” (Female, 17)

“I’d probably (do my college apprenticeship) somewhere else other than Canada . . . I’m going to get out of here. I don’t know where but it won’t be here!” (Female, 17)

“Once I have my college or university degree to fall back on, I want to tour the world . . . I don’t like small towns, I feel kind of ignorant cooped up here in (town).” (Female, 17)

The finding that the career goals of the church attendees were not linked to getting out of their hometown could be related to the social connectedness that they expressed they felt with their church community. Within their congregation, these young people stated that they had found meaningful friendships, received important guidance from role models, and developed skills, confidence, and leadership abilities through engagement in church-based extracurricular activities. Indeed, literature in this field supports the idea that church congregations can foster feelings of positive social connectedness (e.g., Roehlkepartain & Patel, 2006; Smith, 2003a, 2003b). The control group participants did not speak about feeling connected to any community-based institutions. This finding is consistent with research that has suggested rural adolescents who feel connected to community-based institutions (particularly church) are more likely than nonconnected individuals to report a preference to live near their parents after high school (Elder, King, & Conger, 1996).

The contrast between the two groups could also be related to the possibility that the church attendees may be less likely to explore diverse career options (particularly when such exploration may involve leaving the community). As was previously mentioned, several studies have found that religiously committed adolescents are less likely than their nonreligious peers to report engaging in identity exploration and more likely to report ideological foreclosure (e.g., Hunsberger et al., 2001; Markstrom, 1999).

Theme 4: Family Goals

When telling stories about the type of people they wished to become and the kind of lives they wanted to have, both groups of participants expressed that they wished to get married and have children at some point in time. Differences between the church group and the control group in this theme were regarding the certainty with which they spoke about family goals, and the centrality of their future family goals to their current identities. Nearly all the participants in the church-attending group voiced a fair amount of certainty regarding goals for their future families, and those goals appeared to be quite central to their sense of self. For instance, they spoke about getting married and having children with a great deal of enthusiasm, and many had very definite ideas as to what kind of family environment they wished to create.

“I’d like to get married someday soon!” (Female, 19)

“Hopefully by then (in 10 years) I’ll have a wife and kids. I’m not a person that’s going to wait to have kids until I’m 40. I want to be a young dad when my kids are my age. I don’t want to be like—oh, my legs hurt I can’t do anything!” (Male, 17)

“In 5 years . . . I would like to be married . . . In 10 years . . . I’d like to be done school . . . maybe have all my kids by then. I don’t think I want to have kids in my 30s.” (Female, 17)

“(In 10 years) I’ll probably be married, hopefully. For sure! . . . Have maybe two kids . . . I believe the guy should be the head of the household, but also the woman should have her own life, she should be able to have her own job, whatever. But I also think that, if she’s home with the kids then she should make supper, but if I’m home, then I’ll make the supper . . . It’s biblical, and also, that’s the way I’ve been brought up.” (Male, 17)

The control group spoke about family goals with much less certainty. Family goals seemed more peripheral to their sense of self, and much further from their minds than was the case with the church group. For instance, while the church group talked about the goals they had for a family life largely without probing from the interviewer, the control group tended to mention education and career immediately and often had to be prompted to talk about family goals.

“I want to be a professional . . . Perhaps with a family, I’m not sure yet, if my job will allow me to do that . . . I’m more career-oriented at this point.” (Female, 18)

"I'll buy an apartment then buy a house if I get the welding job, cause that's decent pay. Probably have a family. I'm not sure yet. I might have kids. It's hard to say." (Male, 16)

"I'm not looking forward to having kids soon, so maybe just a girlfriend, and something else along those lines if it ever came up!" (Male, 19)

"I'll hopefully be married, have at least one child, (by the time I'm) old! I don't know!" (Female, 18)

There are several possible explanations for the differences between the two groups. First, the church-attending adolescents were immersed in a culture where the family institution is perceived as the most important commitment an individual has in life, second only to one's commitment to God. Participants in the church group may have also been more likely than the control group participants to have had positive experiences with regard to family life. For instance, a large body of research suggests that young people who attend church regularly are more likely to report positive relationships with their parents (e.g., Good & Willoughby, 2006). In a meta-analysis of the relation between religiosity and family life, Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank (2001) stated that "studies consistently suggest that greater religiousness is tied to greater positivity in family relationships" (p. 581). Religiously committed individuals have also been shown to report greater marital satisfaction than nonreligious individuals (e.g., Mahoney et al., 1999, 2001). Positive family experiences may, in turn, foster greater optimism and eagerness towards becoming a spouse or parent.

Second, the certainty and enthusiasm expressed about family goals (particularly marriage) may be related to the fact that the religious beliefs of the church attendees prohibit premarital sexual intercourse. The thought of waiting to have sex until age 27 or 30 (the average age of first marriage in Canada for females and males, respectively; Wilson, 2001) may not be particularly appealing for any young person. For religiously committed adolescents, then, it would be adaptive for them to incorporate the goal of early marriage into their identities.

Theme 5: Commitment to God and Christian Morals

All of the participants in the church-attending group and most of the participants in the control group expressed that they believed in God and that Christian-based morals were important to them. The difference between the two groups with regard to this theme was in their opinions about organized

Christian activities (i.e., church or youth group). For the church-attending group, comments about their commitments to God and Christian values were almost always linked with their involvement in church.

“Church has been a huge influence. . . . A lot of the morals you learn at church are absolutely invaluable or priceless . . . that’s besides my relationship with God.” (Male, 17)

“Another goal I have is to grow further in my faith, to find out who I am and what I really want to be . . . Like, I’ve been reading the *Purpose Driven Life* [a devotional book that teaches on finding the unique purpose God has for each person’s life] . . . I guess the biggest thing is committing yourself—and I have—to the Lord.” (Male, 16)

“I’m really committed to this thing at my school, we go to the front of the school every day and pray.” (Female, 15)

In the church-attending group, not only were participants committed to God, but also they often spoke about their commitment to serving God through church-based extracurricular activities. Further, many of them seemed to view the activities as being a crucial part of who they were as individuals.

“I lead a small group with the junior youth girls. One time . . . one girl was asked who her hero was and . . . she said I was her hero. . . . I’m going to remember that forever. It’s pretty cool when you have people that look up to you because it makes you feel good, but it also challenges you to actually live a good life . . . Being a leader in junior youth has been such an influence in my life; it’s probably the highlight of my week!” (Female, 19)

“I am really committed to our church. My life revolves around that, basically, cause I go to senior youth, help out at junior youth, I’m on the missions team.” (Male, 17)

“My band . . . It’s an awesome ministry, like we go to different churches and play . . . And at our school Christmas assembly . . . we actually said in front of the whole school what the true meaning of Christmas was. So it was awesome . . . I’m sure that everyone knows that we’re Christians.” (Male, 16)

In direct contrast with the church attendees, when members of the control group spoke about their beliefs in God or the value they placed on Christian morals, they added a qualifying comment about how these beliefs were not necessarily tied to church or organized religion.

"I believe in God, I just really don't like organized religion. Um, I'm a Christian, but like I said, organized religion, I can't stand it . . . I don't like it around here. Maybe I could get into organized religion somewhere else but not here. Here it's just like a bunch of old people getting together singing praises and stuff . . . I just feel that since I dress different that they assume I shouldn't associate with them. I get kind of shunned." (Male, 15)

"I really value Christianity to a point. I don't believe all of it, but I believe most of it. Like I don't think you have to go to church all the time just to prove something." (Female, 18)

"You basically have to realize . . . just to treat everyone like, well the old Bible principle . . . I'm not extremely religious, but I think it's true, like to treat everyone the way you would want to be treated." (Female, 18)

It is not surprising that church-based extracurricular activities seemed to be such an integral component in the identities of the church attendees. In fact, according to Eccles and Barber, engagement in extracurricular activities may be intricately linked to an adolescent's sense of self (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999). It was somewhat surprising, however, that secular extracurricular activities were not mentioned more frequently in the control group's identity stories. The few times that extracurricular commitments were mentioned by this group, they were not spoken about with the degree of enthusiasm or sense of importance with which the church group spoke about their participation in church activities. The following three quotes represent the only instances where adolescents from the control group spoke about involvement in organized extracurricular activities:

"Um, commitment . . . I was in band . . . I played rugby for a year, I was on prom committee." (Female, 17)

"I have a commitment to . . . well I've been involved in students' council, athletic council . . . Basically anything that helps other people out. I think is really worthwhile, helping your fellow man." (Female, 17)

"When it does come to commitment, sports. That's the only thing . . . I'm going to give 100 percent, each and every game." (Male, 19)

Conversely, every adolescent in the church-attending group spoke about their involvement in church-based extracurricular activities, and how it was important to their sense of self and/or commitment to their faith. It is possible, of course, that more of the control group participants did have extracurricular commitments that were important to them and with which

they identified, but they did not mention this in their interviews. This difference between the church and control groups may also be reflective of a lack of school- or community-based extracurricular opportunities for youth in this particular community. Church involvement may give adolescents living in this area the chance to participate in activities that might not have otherwise been available to them. Finally, it is possible that involvement in church may be a form of extracurricular activity that is particularly conducive to the development of factors that promote identity formation (i.e., feelings of connection with peers, mentors, and God; the practical expression of beliefs, and intergenerational contact; Roehlkepartain & Patel, 2006; Smith, 2003a, 2003b; Templeton & Eccles, 2006).

Discussion

Analysis of the interview data indicated that there were clear differences between the church group and the control group. For the church-attending adolescents, religion (both public and private aspects) appeared to be a particularly salient feature of their identity construction stories. The church attendees appeared to have made personal decisions to become committed to their faith (as was evidenced by their turning point experiences), and their beliefs seemed to be maintained and expressed through relationships with Christian role models and participation in faith-based extracurricular activities. They also expressed positive feelings of connection to their community. In contrast, although the control group participants felt supported by and connected to their families, they did not express a great deal of connectedness to their community; rather, they stated that they wanted to migrate from their rural hometown to pursue careers in urban centers. The contrast between the two groups illustrates that feelings of connectedness to societal institutions other than the family may impact upon the identities of young people via the goals that they set for their lives. In particular, connectedness with a church may encourage an adolescent to remain within his or her community and choose an occupation accordingly, rather than migrate to the city in search of a career.

We are not suggesting that church involvement is the only way for a youth to develop connectedness to his or her community, or that non-church-going youth are at a disadvantage with regard to identity development. The purpose of this paper was to focus on the identity experiences of rural church-attending adolescents, and as such, church involvement emerged as an important issue. A great deal of research indicates that involvement in nonchurch activities (such as volunteerism) is also

associated with positive feelings of community connectedness and positive identity formation (i.e., Barber et al., 2001; Brodsky, O'Campo, & Aronson, 1999; Otomo & Malsch, 2005). Within this particular community, however, church involvement may have provided opportunities for engagement that were not available elsewhere.

The findings of the present study both support and challenge prior research on the relation between religiosity and identity formation. Themes of personal commitment to God within the church-attending group support the hypothesis that religiously committed adolescents are more likely to occupy committed identity statuses, and less likely to report diffusion (e.g., Hunsberger et al.; Lee et al., 2006; Markstrom-Adams et al., 1994; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). The interview data, however, offer a much more complex picture of the way in which religion plays a part in adolescents' emerging identities.

For instance, church attendees appeared to be identity achieved in the ideological domain of religiosity (as was evidenced by their turning points, their personal commitments to God, and the practical expressions of their faith through involvement in church-based activities). The primary reason for which we suggest that the church attendees appeared to be identity achieved within the religiosity domain is because, in their turning-point stories, they spoke about having experienced increases in their commitment to their faith, usually following a period of hardship, doubt, or rebellion. Their turning point narratives suggest that they have met the criteria for identity achievement in the religious domain, as Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966) posit that achievement involves a process of exploration or crisis followed by commitment.

It was not clear, however, whether the church attendees were achieved within occupational and interpersonal domains. Several expressed the desire to remain in their hometown and fulfill traditional family roles, but they did not state that they had explored alternatives before deciding upon these goals. In contrast, the control group participants were clearly interested in and enthusiastic about exploring new frontiers. This finding suggests that for adolescents with strong religious commitments, it may be possible to be identity achieved in the religious domain, yet remain foreclosed in the broader sense of the word. Traditional foreclosure (characterized by commitment in the absence of prior ideological exploration) may, in fact, be positive and adaptive for church-attending adolescents such as the participants in this study. For these adolescents at this point in their lives, their sense of self may be the healthiest and most positive if they feel that they are (and are viewed by their family, friends, and church as being)

intrinsically committed to God, rather than identity achieved in the formal, ideological sense.

Prior research offers some support for this hypothesis, as it has been reported that foreclosed adolescents may experience more positive mental health (i.e., lower anxiety) than other adolescents (e.g., Kroger, 1996). Similarly, Elder, King, and Conger (1996) found that adolescents who planned to migrate from their rural hometown to an urban center after high school graduation in search of careers reported greater depressive symptoms and pessimism than adolescents who did not plan to migrate after high school.

The results of the present study also challenge the previously stated suggestion that religious faith may foster identity formation through participation in traditions or rituals (Smith, 2003a, 2003b; Youniss et al., 1999). The identity construction stories of the church attending adolescents in this sample, however, were almost completely devoid of content related to rituals that are practiced in the modern Evangelical church (i.e., communion, adult baptism). Rather, the relational aspects of religious faith (friends, mentors, church involvement) appeared to be most important.

Finally, the results of the present study suggest that differences between urban and rural adolescents in identity-related domains (i.e., education, career, family/gender roles) may be, in fact, a product of religious rather than geographical factors. Future research should explore this possibility by comparing the identity construction experiences of religious and nonreligious urban adolescents.

The strengths of this study included a unique methodology, where participants were not explicitly asked about religiosity, but rather were invited to share their stories of general identity construction experiences. Furthermore, the use of a control group allowed us to ascertain if identity construction experiences were primarily related to the rural culture in which all of the participants lived, or, conversely, to religious beliefs—which only the church-attending group professed. This focus on cultural context contributes to the literature a more complex understanding of the way in which identity develops in context.

There are also several limitations of the present study. First, due to the small number of participants, the findings cannot be considered representative of all rural adolescents. A further limitation was that all participants in the church-attending group were members of the same church and youth group. Furthermore, three of the eleven church-attending participants were interviewed in a meeting room of the church they attended, which may have made religious considerations more prominent in the minds of these three individuals. Finally, in order for us to make definitive conclusions about the

role of religion in the identity formation of urban versus rural adolescents, it would have been beneficial to conduct interviews with religious and non-religious urban adolescents.

In conclusion, clear differences were observed between the identity construction stories of the church attendees and the control group, suggesting that the discrepancies were due to religious, rather than rural factors. The church attendees, in comparison to the control group, considered religious friends and mentors as vitally important in their identity development, felt that their major life turning points involved increases in personal religiosity, expressed greater connection to their rural community, saw future family goals as more central to their overall identities, and viewed their church involvement as an essential part of their religious commitment. The results illustrate that research on the topic of identity and religiosity may benefit from qualitative examinations of young people's own experiences, as well as a focus on the cultural context in which these identity experiences are situated.

Appendix

1. What are your goals for the present and for the future?
2. Probes:
 - a. Where would you like to see yourself in 1 year? 5 years? 10 years?
 - b. What are your work/career goals?
 - c. What are your family goals?
 - d. What kind of person do you want to be? What would you like people to say about you if they were making a toast to you at your wedding? At your 40th birthday party?
 - e. In a perfect world, if you could do anything you wanted, go anywhere you wanted, with no obstacles in the way, what would you do with your life?
3. So you just finished talking about what you think you want to do with your life. Do you think you could say how you decided upon your goals? (If interviewee is unsure about goals, focus will be on how/when they think they will eventually come to be more sure about their goals. In such a situation, questions below would be worded in the present tense, to focus on the current exploration process)
4. Probes:
 - a. When did you first start to think about what you might like to do with your life? How did this progress?
 - b. What kinds of experiences have you had that led to your decision? (i.e., watching parents, mentors, co-op programs)

- c. Does anyone help you with your decisions? If you have questions, do you ask anyone?
 - d. Did you ever have different ideas for your life, and then those ideas changed? Why do you think they changed? Do you think they will change as you get older?
5. If you were asked to write a paper called "Who am I?" what would you write about? *How would you describe yourself?*
 6. Probes:
 - a. What are your likes/dislikes?
 - b. How would you describe your personality?
 - c. What do you think you are committed to?
 - d. What do you think your values are?
 - e. What people/influences in your life have been the most important in helping you become the person you are today? Why?
 7. Do you think that you are different now than you were 4–5 years ago?
 - a. Probes:
 - i. Use probes from question 3. How are these things different now?
 8. Has there been a "turning point" in your life so far? If so, can you tell me about it?
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