



A qualitative study of coping with religious minority status in public schools



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore coping and impacts of religious difference and discrimination among a sample of 50 middle and high school Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Universalist Unitarian adolescent public school students. Content analysis employing grounded theory strategies resulted in 7 themes: 1) Importance of religious affiliation and community; 2) Influence of parental religiosity; 3) Parents as advocates and expert consultants; 4) To have or not to have friends from other religions; 5) Response to negative incidents; 6) Perceptions of teachers; and 7) The school culture needs to change. Implications for interventions aimed at promoting resilience and positive religious identity are discussed in addition to recommendations for making schools a welcoming and safe place for students of all religious backgrounds.

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1. Introduction

Adolescents whose identities place them in oppressed and marginalized groups are at elevated risk for experiencing bias, discrimination, and a range of adverse emotional, health, and behavioral problems (Brody et al., 2006; Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). One important dimension of adolescent identity is religious affiliation, and young people who are members of religious minority groups often face challenging, sometimes painful, incidents at school because of their religious status (Blumenfeld, 2006; Dupper, Forrest-Bank, & Lowry-Carusillo, 2015; Kuusisto, 2010). Schools play a major role in adolescents' identity development since they spend such a large amount of their time in the school context. Therefore, painful incidents at school often have a significant and adverse effect on development and well-being (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006).

Few research studies have examined the experiences of religious minorities in schools, and even fewer have specifically addressed the impact of religious bias and discrimination on youth development. A substantial body of research shows that religiosity is often a protective factor in adolescent development as they cope with negative influences and challenges (Salsman, Brown, Brechting, & Carlson, 2005; Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2011). A better understanding of how development is impacted by religious difference and experiences of intolerance and discrimination could help inform interventions that promote resilience and positive adolescent development. The purpose of this study is to examine the

coping processes used by religious minority middle and high school students (Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Unitarian Universalist) to counter religious bias and discrimination. Students were from a region of the U.S. where a majority of persons identify themselves as Evangelical Christians. Implications for intervention with parents, adolescents, and schools to prevent discrimination and promote positive coping and resilience in religious minority youth are noted.

2. Religious minority youth in schools

Few studies have investigated the experiences of religious minority adolescents in schools. The largest study to date involved a survey of over 800 British schoolchildren. The findings from this study indicated that one in four children who practice a religion have been bullied because of their faith or the wearing of religious symbols (Beatbullying, 2008). A small body of qualitative research and anecdotal evidence support the notion that minority religious youth attending public schools often experience discomfort, hostility and discrimination (Basford, 2010; Dupper, et al., 2015; Gilbert, 2004; Nadal, Issa, Griffin, Hamit, & Lyons, 2010). Some incidents are extreme and overt and congruent with common definitions of bullying or hate crimes. An example might be a situation in which a youth is physically assaulted or verbally harassed because they are wearing traditional garb or religious symbols that differs from the majority religious culture (Dupper, et al., 2015; Marcus, 2011). Particularly disturbing is that teachers sometimes misuse their power to disparage or humiliate students (Dupper, et al., 2015; Twemlow & Fonagy, 2005). Most incidents, however, appear to be more subtle, consistent with the concept of *microaggression*, a term for small, everyday slights or insults that communicate hostile or derogatory messages based upon marginalized group membership (Dupper,

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et al., 2015; Kuusisto, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, et al., 2007). For example, minority religious youth in public schools in many southern states in the U.S. may be expected to participate in Christian-based activities that occur during the school day or receive casual derogatory comments about their religion (Dupper, et al., 2015). The dynamics involved with microaggressions can be complex and stressful. Microaggressions tend to be perpetrated unknowingly and without intent to harm, and recipients of microaggressive acts often have trouble discerning if they are intended to be harmful or not (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions often are not addressed because confronting them is likely to result in uncomfortable dynamics, potential discord in relationships, or social exclusion. At worst, there is a potential for intensified discrimination or escalated conflict (Sue, 2010).

The severity of discriminatory incidents seems to be related to the extent to which a student's religion deviates from the majority religion, and well as the visibility (e.g. attire) of their minority religious status (Dupper, et al., 2015). Current events play an important role as well, such as the surge of negative experiences of Muslim people following the attacks on September 11, 2001 (Basford, 2010; Dupper, et al., 2015; Gilbert, 2004). Some minority youth describe a tension between the pressure to adopt norms of their majority religious peers in order to fit in, and risking social exclusion when choosing to maintain their religious practices (Basford, 2010; Gilbert, 2004).

3. Religious identity development in adolescence

Identity development is shaped by biological, cognitive, and social changes associated with adolescence (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). A positive identity is a sense of coherence and integration that provides direction for life choices (Eichas, Meca, Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2014). Positive identity development occurs through choosing goals, roles, and beliefs that are congruent with the concept of self. This sense of self continues to develop into adulthood while gaining increasing complexity and cohesion. Optimally, positive identity will provide a steering mechanism throughout the life course toward life goals, prosocial participation, and contribution, and away from negative life trajectories (Eichas, et al., 2014).

Religious identity is a central facet of identity (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010), and religion plays an important role in the lives of many adolescents (Smith, 2003). Religious identity can be understood along four dimensions: 1) affiliation and belonging; 2) behaviors and practices; 3) beliefs and values; and 4) religious and spiritual experiences (Hemming and Madge, 2012). It is important to recognize that a person may have a strong religious identity on one or more dimensions but not on others. For example, a youth may regularly attend religious community events and participate in associated rituals but at the same time not experience high levels of affective religiosity (Hemming & Madge, 2012). Religious identity serves a protective influence for many adolescents (Marks, 2005; Yonker, et al., 2012). For example, participation in religion is related to positive emotional and prosocial behavior (Yonker, et al., 2012). Findings from a meta-analysis by Yonker et al. (2012) found that religion/spirituality was associated with reduced risk for depressive and anxiety symptomatology and increased self-esteem. Higher positive affect and life satisfaction have been found among highly identified religious individuals in representative national samples in the U.S. (Greenfield & Marks, 2007; Lim & Putnam, 2010). The positive influence of strong religiosity has also been found across various religions (Ysseldyk et al., 2010; Vilchinsky & Kravetz, 2005).

Children receive messages from their parents about what religion is and what it means to be religious, as well as from social interactions, and from exposure to religious rituals, beliefs, and institutions. As they develop, youth attach their own meaning and importance to certain things related to their religious experiences that may or may not be intentional or aligned with the messages they receive or they

were expected to adopt (Hemming and Madge, 2012). For example, children might enjoy friendships or music they were exposed to at a religious service and develop positive connection and affection toward their religion. Conversely, children might have a negative social experience at a religious youth group function that, in turn, affects their understanding of what it means to be religious. Young people also may exercise agency, and negotiate and change what they think and feel and how they practice religion. For example, young people may pretend to pray at a school assembly, or find spaces where they pray on their own terms and to their own God (Hemming and Madge, 2012).

One of the primary indicators of religiosity in young people is their participation in religious services and youth organizations (Denton, Pearce, & Smith, 2008). Involvement in a religious organization is associated with decreased likelihood of substance use in teens and to increased prosocial attitudes (Bahr et al., 1998). This may be because religiosity creates an opportunity to develop social support and friendship with adults and peers, or perhaps they are spending time in religious activities instead of other contexts where drug and alcohol use might occur (Bahr et al., 1998). Additionally, the participation and commitment to a religious organization may offer purpose and meaning in life that is not congruent with antisocial behaviors (Bahr et al., 1998).

Parents have a strong influence on religious observance in adolescents (Lees & Horwath, 2009). Parental influence begins at an early age, and young children who display religious beliefs and practices are likely to maintain these beliefs over the life course (Rymarz & Graham, 2005). The extent to which young people identify with their parent's religion is related to religious identity during adolescence (Rymarz & Graham, 2005). Yet the role of family religiousness in shaping adolescent emotional well-being is complex (Ahmed, Fowler, & Toro, 2011). In many cases, young children who attend religious activities do so largely out of familial ritual and obligation and tend to reduce their participation as they become adolescents (Rymarz & Graham, 2005). While some research indicates that many youth perceive religion as a positive influence of family life (Lees and Horwath, 2009; Rymarz & Graham, 2005), there is also the potential for family expectations of religiosity to create or exacerbate stress (Ahmed, Fowler, & Toro, 2011). To illustrate, parental religiousness and shared familial religious experiences are associated with less frequent substance use in some studies (Bahr, Maughan, Marcos, & Li., 1998; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Gunnoe, Hetherington, & Riess, 1999). At the same time, greater family religiousness has been found to amplify the effects of stress on emotional distress. For example, Ahmed et al. (2011) found that youth with high levels of family religiousness exhibited greater increases in emotional problems than other youth when under more stress. The authors speculated that adolescent perceptions of their parents' religiousness may reflect a unique stressor on development because teens may struggle to incorporate their own religious beliefs with those of their parents (Ahmed, et al., 2011).

Considering the centrality of peer relationships during adolescence, it is not surprising that friends also influence young people's patterns of religious observance, beliefs, and practices (Denton, et al., 2008; Tortenson-Ed, 2006). Dynamics of peer interactions about religion are important in shaping identity because peer relationships have a powerful influence on adolescents' sense of belonging to a group (Hemming & Madge, 2012; Rymarz and Graham, 2005). Friends can be the source of meaning of religion to youth, as well as a source of information about religions (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008; Tortenson-Ed, 2006). In addition, youth who identify as religious are more likely to talk about religion with their peers (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008; Tortenson-Ed, 2006).

Finally, adolescents' experiences in the overall school culture also play an important role in influencing how religious difference is perceived and constructed (Hemming & Madge, 2012). The religious climate and culture determine how and what information about religions is disseminated, and the norms and values of the school culture (Hemming, 2011; Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008). School cultures that

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