Reframing Religious Formation Developmentally

Abstract

Developmental psychology has significant research implications for religious education. New findings can challenge long-standing assumptions about identity formation, relational interactions, and ethical decision-making, requiring religious practitioners to reimagine faith formation across the lifespan. This paper explores three horizons in developmental psychology research – selective social learning, narcissism/self-esteem, and future self connectivity – and suggests how current findings might reshape religious teaching and learning. It also offers a framework that practitioners might use to transpose other research findings into religious education contexts.

Introduction

For decades, many religious leaders have relied primarily on the work of a small set of social scientists (e.g. Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, Gilligan, Fowler) to guide developmental ideas about teaching and learning within religious education. These stage theories permeate much of the Christian denominational curricula generated in the last 30 years, with the addition of more specialized frameworks such as Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory. More recent research in the field of developmental psychology, however, has moved well beyond these straightforward, universalizing, linear, and inherently progressive views of human growth. While still developmental in the sense that these theories are concerned with psychological change over time, they now focus more on micro-models that are socially influenced as well as biologically and neurologically driven. If religious educators want to work knowledgeably with persons across the lifespan, we need to recognize the significance of newer findings, translate these findings into effective educational practices, and learn ways of monitoring and transposing emerging research into theories of religious education.

Toward that end, this paper explores three new horizons in developmental psychology research – selective social learning, narcissism versus self-esteem, and future self connectivity – and suggests how current findings on these topics might reshape teaching and learning in congregations. It also offers a simple framework that practitioners might use to transpose other research findings into religious education practices in their ministry settings, encouraging them to imitate psychological behavior analysts who “engage in the specific and comprehensive use of principles of learning…in order to address behavioral needs of widely varying individuals in diverse settings…building the skills and achievements of children [and teens]…and augmenting the performance and satisfaction of” adults (Cherry 2017).

Methodology

The paper is primarily constructed as a constructive (speculative) literature review, in which articles exploring selected themes in developmental psychology are considered in relation
to how contemporary research findings might challenge current religious education approaches and suggest more effective faith formation practices. Some of these ideas were identified and discussed during a scholar and practitioner working group session held February 1, 2018 during the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators Annual Meeting in Louisville, Kentucky. I also use a conceptual analysis of behavior framework (characterized as applied behavior analysis by the American Psychological Association, 2017), in which I take social science ideas about behavior and imagine how they might be applied in religious communities as particular sociocultural contexts. This framework is widely used in health psychology programs; since spiritual and religious formation can be viewed as aspects of psychological health and well-being, importing this approach seems defensible as a way of tying developmental theories and religious formation together.

**Selective Social Learning**

Social learning is an umbrella term used to describe “learning that is influenced by observation of or interaction with another individual” (Poulin-Dubois & Brosseau-Liard, 2016, p. 60). While persons of all ages engage in social learning, it is a particularly powerful influence on young children’s development as they look to peers, older siblings and adult caregivers to demonstrate how to think and act in the world. Much of what they observe proves helpful, but social cues can also provide misinformation, which means children need to cultivate an “ability to detect ignorance, inaccuracy, incompetence, deception, and distortion” (Mills, 2013, p. 404). Recent studies (Mills, 2013; Over & Carpenter, 2013; Harris & Lane, 2014; Poulin-Dubois & Brosseau-Liard, 2016) show that children figure out in infancy that they cannot trust everything they see or hear. They learn quite early in life to “make rational inferences about the reliability of testimony based on their prior knowledge plus new evidence about the informants they interact with” (Poulin-Dubois & Brosseau-Liard, 2016, p. 62), thus employing selective social learning rather than an uncritical acceptance of social input.

Children’s burgeoning theory of mind (i.e. their ability to take another’s perspective and imagine her or his internal notions and motivations) contributes to this critical approach, which involves “weigh[ing] multiple pieces of information in order to determine the truth value of encountered claims” (Mills, 2013, p. 404). Studies with children as young as 8 months suggest that even infants practice forms of selective skepticism. Very young children pay attention to emotional signals and the reliability of their interactions with the people around them. Toddlers note competence and consensus among the adults they observe. Poulin-Dubois and Brosseau-Liard note, “[C]hildren gradually integrate their initial ability for selective trust with their richer understanding of mental states and their increasing comprehension of pragmatics and communication…[which] accounts for more sophisticated and nuanced selectivity in the later preschool years” (2016, p. 62). They learn to be selectively skeptical, to consider new information cautiously and recognize situations where doubt is more appropriate than trust. From infancy to middle childhood, children “shift from making binary decisions regarding whom to doubt based on whether or not a sign of incompetency is present to recognizing that some incompetent informants are more problematic than others before finally understanding how intentions and motivations can influence someone’s trustworthiness” (Mills, 2013, p. 421).

Children use a variety of cues to decide from whom to learn and who to discount as an untrustworthy teacher. Familiarity is a primary factor (Mills, 2013; Over & Carpenter, 2013; Harris & Lane, 2014). Children give the benefit of the doubt to those with whom they have
existing relationships. This finding reinforces a longstanding belief among religious educators that teacher continuity in religious programming benefits children, despite the challenges many communities face regarding teacher recruitment and retention. Children also prefer to learn from those whom they perceive as part of the same sociocultural group as themselves. This latter bias can have negative implications for intercultural interactions if a child’s in-group is not racially and ethnically diverse (as many religious congregations are not). Imitative behavior is frequently motivated by the social pressure to belong to one’s perceived group. Over and Carpenter (2013) found “that young children imitatively learn actions in such a deeply social way that when someone later performs the learned action differently, children go so far as to protest against the use of the different action and insist on the proper way of doing it (p. 8). One potential guard against this narrow norming of ‘correct’ religious behavior is the use of diverse forms of religious practice (e.g. varieties of prayer forms and holy meal formats) in communal devotional spaces.

Even young children are more inclined to trust informants who have been correct in the past (i.e. have a record of Accuracy), demonstrate Expertise, and offer Reliability as an informant over time (Harris & Lane, 2014, p. 455). By eighteen months, toddlers “are less willing to imitate a novel action or learn new labels from inaccurate than accurate speakers” and, from eight months, infants have some ability to track reliable informants versus unreliable ones (Poulin-Dubois & Brosseau-Liard, 2016, p. 61). Determining expertise is trickier for children; however, four-year-olds are able to “use their understanding of different domains of knowledge and expertise to determine which speaker will be more likely to provide an accurate answer to a question” (Mills, 2013, p. 413). Taken together, children’s use of these cues strongly suggests that faith teachers need a basic level of faith knowledge and experience if children are to accept their words and actions as trustworthy. Religious educators will need to find ways to overcome volunteer resistance to teaching preparation curricula and design such curricula to emphasize knowledge about scriptures, devotional practices, and communal rituals so that children have less reason to doubt the faith education they receive.

An informant’s episodic knowledge or awareness of children’s sociocultural experiences and symbolic worlds, also communicates trustworthiness to a child (Mills, 2013). Such knowledge suggests to young children that the informant’s input is more likely to be relevant to their lives. Thus, it is not enough for faith teachers to know scripture, doctrine, ritual, and faith practices; they need to be able to teach religious stories, spiritual concepts, and faith symbols using links to common and contextually relevant childhood experiences. Age matters, too, but perhaps not in the way we would assume. Young children prefer to follow the lead of adults for novel actions (e.g. using hands or bodies in ritualized rather than day-to-day ways) but look to their peers to reinforce repertoire (i.e. every day routine) actions (Poulin-Dubois & Brosseau-Liard, 2016, p. 61). This suggests that adult modeling of faith practices is quite significant in the beginning of religious socialization, but peer practice is a better reinforcement tool if prayer practices, for instance, are to become routine.

Another cluster of cues that children use is social competency (the use of speech and actions that match social expectations), emotional signals (particularly the congruence or incongruence of emotions with a context or action), confidence (especially in relation to demonstrated actions), and language (e.g. using the words “I know” over “I think” or “I guess”). Emotional signals are used the earliest, by infants as young as eight months, whereas children are almost two years old before they can readily discern confidence (Poulin-Dubois & Brosseau-Liard, 2016, p. 61). Faith teachers who are invested in their own faith formation and have a wide
range of religious knowledge and experience are best able to provide most of these cues. Perhaps most difficult to communicate are reliable emotional signals, as religious experiences generate a wide range of emotions that may or may not be acknowledged as congruent in a particular community. However, religious educators can communicate the value of authenticity in religious expression, which children may recognize as congruent at a more intuitive level. They might also focus on how teachers might present stories of faith and theological ideas in ways that effectively cue trust rather than doubt. For instance, exploring how children’s preference for “I know” rather than “I think/guess” language challenges the popularity of wondering questions as a primary teaching tool in the Godly Play approach and other children’s curricula. Teachers might need to couple more authoritative language with wondering questions in their lesson plans to reinforce their trustworthiness as religious informants.

Three negative cues influence children’s level of doubt as well. An informant who is perceived as ‘mean’ (negativity cue) is assumed to be less trustworthy than a ‘nice’ person. Informants who practice deception are doubted by four and five-year-olds, who base their assessment primarily on a person’s disposition rather than her or his intentions (Mills, 2013, p. 408). Children in middle childhood (six to eleven years olds) also consider potential distortion of an informant’s input because of reporting that is self-serving, demonstrates partiality (i.e., predictable bias), or is designed to persuade through advertising-like influence rather than demonstrable facts or experiences (Mills, 2013, p. 410). Religious educators need to impress on volunteers that respect for children is a factor in teacher trustworthiness, and perceptions of betrayal or bias undermine trust.

There are several caveats to keep in mind when translating selective social learning research into religious education practice. First is an awareness that children may copy others’ behaviors not because they consider those persons trustworthy informants about religious life but because imitation is also tied to children’s strong desire for affiliation and belonging (Over & Carpenter, 2013, p. 6). Second, both children and adults have a strong bias toward trusting new information if they have no clear reason to doubt that information, particularly when what they are told is about general knowledge that is difficult to acquire on one’s own rather than episodic knowledge that one can acquire through first-hand experience (Mills, 2013, p. 411). Third, personal relevance affects how carefully children (and adults) process implicit and explicit truth claims (Mills, 2013, p. 420). Fourth, in-group bias, or tending to trust in-group members over those outside the group, is not a reliable cue for trust and may contribute to racial-ethnic mistrust and sociocultural tensions. Fifth, selective social learning is not the only educational influence on religious learning. Scientific reasoning ability, optimism, caregiver-child attachment style, and working memory capacity also affect the acquisition of social (religious) knowledge and identity (faith) formation. Particularly with young children, religious educators may be tempted to play on these developmental biases in ways that create future problems. However, children who are encouraged to engage in a spiritual practice primarily to ‘fit in’ to a group may grow to resent the practice and those who taught it. By emphasizing choice and personal agency instead, teachers help children cultivate a more “critical stance” that allows them “to determine the truth value of encountered claims, [and be] prepared to doubt if necessary” (Mills, 2013, p. 404). Similarly, knowledge based on in-group bias can fuel ‘us-them’ negativity toward other spiritual or religious traditions. Religious education needs to offer children reasons that spiritual practices and ideas are personally relevant without reinforcing in-group biases by attaching relevance to group identity. Educators can also shift as much spiritual exploration as possible into first-hand
(episodic) experience so that less of children’s religious understanding depends on general knowledge that hasn’t been tested via experience.

**Narcissism versus Self-Esteem**

Narcissism is commonly misidentified as a form of excessive self-esteem, but contemporary social learning research strongly suggests that the two are distinct personality traits. Whereas persons with high self-esteem feel good about who they are as people without feeling superior, narcissists are rarely happy with themselves but still “feel superior to others, believe they are entitled to privileges, and crave respect and admiration from others” (Brummelman, Thomaes & Sedikides, 2016, p. 8). Thus, narcissists have a vertical, hierarchical view of themselves in relation to others: high self-esteemers have a more horizontal, egalitarian view. They “desire to establish deep, intimate bonds with other…to get along rather than to get ahead,” in contrast with narcissists, who “strive to surpass others, to dominate others, and to use others to attain social status…to get ahead rather than to get along” (Ibid., p. 9). Although both narcissism and self-esteem can first be measured in middle childhood, narcissism tends to increase until adolescence and then decrease during adulthood. Self-esteem follows a reverse trajectory: lowest in adolescence and gradually higher in adulthood (Ibid.), although with a decline again after age sixty (Orth & Robins, 2014, p. 382).

Individuals largely derive narcissism and self-esteem from their perceptions of others’ regard for them (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek & Bushman, 2015, p. 3660). Narcissism seems to be encouraged by regular acts of *parental overvaluation*, in which parents overestimate and overpraise children intelligence and skill (Brummelman, Thomaes & Sedikides, 2016, p. 9) and describe them “as more special and more entitled than other children” (Brummelman et al., 2015, p. 3659). The effects of this parental overvaluation, coupled with the shame narcissistic children feel when they publicly fail to live up to this hype, can lead to greater aggression toward others (Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge & Olthof, 2008, p. 1793). Self-esteem, on the other hand, is cultivated by acts of *parental warmth*, in which parents show affectionate appreciation for children and encourage them to feel as if they matter (Brummelman, Thomaes & Sedikides, 2016, pp. 9-10). Substituting words of appreciation for hyperbolic praise generates “feelings of self-acceptance and self-respect, in contrast to the excessive self-regard and self-aggrandizement that characterizes narcissistic individuals” (Orth & Robins, 2014, p. 381).

Religious education has fallen prey to the same well-meaning but problematic form of child and adolescent nurture that plagues families in Western societies: encouraging children to see themselves as “special and extraordinary” in comparison to others rather than as “worthy individuals” among other worthy people (Brummelman, Thomaes & Sedikides, 2016, p. 10). By teaching parents and ministry volunteers to express affection and appreciation for children and youth without praising them for being superior to others, religious educators can foster a more appropriate approach to fostering high self-esteem. Faith stories involving heroes and divinities can be told using messages of appreciative warmth rather than overvaluation and can attend to the ‘whys’ of various actors’ actions (e.g. why does Jesus choose certain actions over others?) Educators can also nudge individuals away from a narcissistic belief in their own superiority by inviting them to think about what makes them similar to others, particularly from a transcendent perspective. Helping people internalize others’ appreciation by having them describe the
meaning and significance of others’ kind words about them is a potentially effective approach for reducing narcissism at all ages.

**Future Selves**

How much do people weigh future consequences when making decisions? Recent research suggests that the answer to this question depends on how much of a connection people see between who they are in this moment (present self) and who they expect to be later (future self) (Urminsky, 2017; Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; Urminsky & Zauberman, 2016). Such connections depend on a perceived overlap in “memories, intentions, beliefs, and desires... between one’s present and future self” (Urminsky, 2017, p. 34). If people imagine few overlaps because they assume personal identity shifts over time – think of the Taylor Swift lyric: “I’m sorry, the old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now. Why? Because she’s dead!” (Swift, 2017) – then they are said to have low psychological connectedness to their future self. They are typically “less willing to sacrifice their own resources to benefit more socially distant other people,” including their future, presumably distant, self, versus making decisions that benefit their present self (Urminsky, 2017, p. 35). Developmental psychologists call this disinterest in one’s future self *interpersonal selfishness*, and it can lead to higher levels of present material consumption (Urminsky & Zauberman, 2016, p. 156). High psychological connectedness to the future self is associated with a stable sense of identity over time and a greater willingness to defer gratification for one’s longer-term good.

While high future self connectedness is generally considered a positive aspect in terms of helping people make good farsighted choices, studies show a mixed set of consequences for religious education. For example, persons who view their identity as stable over time tend to have lower levels of charitable giving, choosing instead to save more money for the future (Urminsky, 2017, p. 36). This perspective may cut against religious teachings about tithing (Christian giving), *tzedakah* (Jewish philanthropy or charity), or *zakat* (Muslim almsgiving). At the same time, high future self connection means that organizations with whom people expect to have long term relationships benefit from those persons’ more positive views of the institution and its contributions to their lives (Ibid.). Membership retention and regular attendance may thus be byproducts of high future self connection, which means religious educators can build relationships and plan sequenced programming over time with higher expectations of participation. This may also translate to concerns about legacy, in which people are “willing to invest not only in their own future self but also in the people (e.g. their children) and institutions that their perceived future self is connected to” (Ibid., pp. 37-38). High future self connection also prompts more ethical choices in the present, higher faithfulness to future commitments, and an increased sense that people should be punished for past unethical behavior (Ibid., p. 36). While these first two consequences may resonate well with many religious beliefs, the latter may produce higher levels of judgmentalism and lower people’s willingness to extend grace and forgiveness to themselves or others.

Researchers found that low future self connection, which seems to be a common state in contemporary Western individuals, is reinforced by several factors (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011). Two such factors are hearing statements or reading materials that suggest one will undergo major versus trivial changes in identity during life transitions (e.g. “once you have a baby, you’ll never be the same”). Religious traditions that use language of transformation to mark movement from being ‘lost’ to ‘saved’ or from status as a dependent child to that of an adult adherent in faith
may be unwittingly reinforcing low future self connection. Such speech may need to be tempered by other language that emphasizes what remains the same, e.g. being a ‘child of God’, a ‘bar/bat mitzvah’, or one of ‘G-d’s chosen people’. A third factor is being pressed to name many versus just a few stable aspects of one’s identity. Since the future self is best understood “as a continuation of the current self, to varying degrees” (Ibid., p. 184), focusing on just a few core elements of identity that persist makes it easier to see connections between who one is now and who one will become.

There are several ways to help people pay attention to their connectedness with their future self. These studies show that simply engendering or maintaining a basic sense of connectedness to the future self may help resolve self-control dilemmas, yielding more farsighted choices by people. Providing opportunities to vividly visualize the future self and then appealing to a “person’s responsibility to their own future self increased savings” and reduced unethical intentions and behaviors (Urminsky & Zauberman, 2016, p. 166). A similar appeal to religious imagination and the requirements of faithful living as a present and future disciple of a religious tradition could have the same effect. Prompting people to consider opportunity-cost trade-offs can reinforce decisions that would benefit a connected future self, which echoes religious talk about counting the cost of faithfulness in order to achieve a future goal. Rather than employing guilt or complex incentive schemes pitting the interests of the future and current selves against each other, religious educators might foster the sense that what matters most in defining us from a religious perspective persists over time and thus requires a commitment to care for the future self through present-self-control.

While future self connectedness is a significant factor in regulating people’s decision making, other factors also play important roles. People’s perceived and actual social power, their inclination to think emotionally versus abstractly about the future, their beliefs about the scarcity of time and money in the future, their anticipation of positive or negative changes in their lives or society, and even temporal markers (e.g. the start of a new month or year) can affect decision making too. Inviting individuals to embrace their future self may be part of educating people to be ethical decision-makers; it is not the whole of an effective curriculum.

Future Directions

Translating current trends in developmental research into religious education practices takes attention and commitment, yet it is not an impossible task for lay educators if scholars model the process and provide a simple framework for reflection. Working with a diverse group of Christian educators at a professional conference, I piloted an approach that involves sharing overviews of journal articles (as well as full texts) and reflecting on key concepts in those articles using three questions: 1) What findings challenge your usual beliefs and practices about people and teaching? 2) What faith stories or themes seem related to this area of research? 3) How could you emphasize pertinent stories/themes and alter practices to better conform to the research? The above analysis of contemporary research on selective social learning, narcissism versus self-esteem, and future selves and its implications for religious education includes insights gleaned from that workshop discussion. This paper (and the workshop) sampled topics from across the lifespan to demonstrate the validity of integrating developmental and religious education discourses. More work is needed to identify other research topics for investigation into how the ongoing work of those in developmental psychology (and other social sciences) might challenge and reshape religious education theory and practice.
Bibliography


