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Sunni-Muslim American Religious Development During Emerging Adulthood

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Chana Etengoff[1] and Colette Daiute[1]

Abstract

Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in America, with approximately 6 to 7 million Muslims living in America within the past decade. However, there has been little psychological research conducted focusing on the development of the Muslim American self. This inquiry addresses that gap by focusing on how familial religious affiliation during childhood and the everyday environmental activity systems of emerging adulthood impact religious practice and the construction of the religious self among Sunni-Muslim American emerging adults (N = 63, 18-29 years) via the development of diverse mediational strategies. Utilizing an applied cultural historical activity theory–based analysis, the authors found that participants' religious development emerged as a diverse and dynamic process developing in relation to the interacting activity systems and sociorelational contexts of emerging adulthood.

Keywords

Sunni-Muslim, religious development, cultural historical activity theory

Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in America, with approximately 6 to 7 million Muslims living in America within the past decade (Chaudhury

[1]Graduate Center of the City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

Corresponding author:
Chana Miriam Etengoff, CUNY Graduate Center, 365 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4309, USA
Email: cetengoff@gc.cuny.edu

& Miller, 2008). However, there has been little psychological research conducted on the lived experiences and development of the Muslim American self (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008). Furthermore, much of the research regarding self-development among Western-born Muslims focuses on socialization and not on the interactive process of mutual individual and societal development (Eid, 2002). As an alternative to such preset stage theories of identity development or cultural reproduction, we explore Sunni-Muslim emerging adults' religious development within the context of *their* interactions with their everyday environments and multicultural activity systems.

Many scholars across disciplines have begun to research young people's interactions with people, objects, and everyday life events with increasing attention to the ideological transitions embedded within these activities in social and physical realities (e.g., Daiute & Lucić, 2010). Within this perspective, culture and self development are viewed as socially interactive activity processes (Vygotsky, 1978). After contrasting this theory of the interactive self with the traditional framework of "identity development," we present a definition of religion and religious development that incorporates the Vygotskian concept of cultural tools as a means of development and social change. In addition, we discuss the method by which this theory is applied to the research design and analysis of this study.

Traditionally, researchers have approached the study of the Muslim American self from preset stage theory perspectives such as identity formation and consolidation and identity integration and acculturation (e.g., Ahmed, 2009; Ahmed & Ezzeddine, 2009; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Erikson, 1959). However, researchers have recently found that changes in Christian and Jewish emerging adults' religious faith and practices are associated with frequent disruptions in the social, institutional, and geographical transitions of this phase of life (Smith & Snell, 2009). Furthermore, scholars have argued that Islam becomes a conscious element for Muslims in North America in part due to evolving social interactions related to their religious and cultural minority status (Ahmed, 2009; Daiute & Lucić, 2010; Duderija, 2007; Peek, 2005). Although there have been some notable efforts to begin contextualizing Muslim constructions of religious development within such sociocultural and sociohistorical frameworks, these efforts are often vague and when applied, analyses are frequently unrelated to the complex theoretical paradigms discussed (e.g., Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Duderija, 2008). In that case, we need to study religious development within an alternative applied framework that incorporates young people's dynamic and continuing interactions with their everyday environments. The focus of our research questions regarding religious development must expand to

include the study of both past and present social-relational dynamics and individual subjectivities and capacities.

Therefore, the present study illustrates the significance of applying cultural historical activity theory to the study of religious development, both in terms of religious practice and the construction of the self (Vygotsky, 1934/1978). Within this lens, the construction of the self is operationalized as an agentive activity–based process that is subject to change in association with the demands of sociorelational contexts, a more dynamic theory than that of "identity" (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). For example, researchers have found that ethnoreligious factors emerged in the discourse of Bosnian Muslim youth in the United States and not among their peers in Bosnia, suggesting that U.S. cultural heterogeneity involves discriminatory contexts that become salient icons to Bosnian Muslim youth (Daiute & Lucić, 2010). Furthermore, the self can be understood as a leading activity "by which individuals meaningfully contribute to the ongoing social collaborative practices in the world" (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004, p. 19; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001). Thus, in this study, religious development is not viewed as a static phenomenon or an internalized trait. Rather, religion is understood to be a proactive mediational process on the part of the individual to use "language and other symbol systems to perceive, manage, and develop self-society relations" (Daiute, 2010, p. 48).

This theoretical paradigm is particularly relevant to the Sunni-Muslim population due to their unique support of religious commitment being a personal and individualized process (Ali, 2006; Chaudhury & Miller, 2008). Unlike Shiite Muslims who view the *imam* as a political, religious, and spiritual leader descending from the Prophet Muhammad, Sunni Muslims perceive the *imam* as a leader of prayers alone. Furthermore, Sunni Muslims believe that the *imam* cannot intercede between Allah and mankind and it is therefore an individual's personal responsibility to develop a relationship with Allah and be saved through their own efforts (Muhammad, 1994). These ideological differences are reflected in a more elaborate religious hierarchy for Shiite Muslims as well as variations in the frequency and type of religious practice that is required by each group (Mahmood, 2006; Muhammad, 1994).

After an expanded discussion of cultural historical activity theory's relevance and application to the psychology of religion, we review Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood as related to religious development (Arnett, 1998; Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Belzen, 2010; Smith & Snell, 2009; Vygotsky, 1934/1978). We then present our research regarding how familial religious affiliation during childhood and the everyday activity systems of emerging adulthood influence the religious practices and beliefs of Sunni-Muslim

American emerging adults. In addition, we explore how participants discussed their use of religion as a cultural tool to mediate self–society relations. Results presented here are based on quantitative and qualitative measures completed by 16 Sunni-Muslim American men and 47 Sunni-Muslim American women between the ages of 18 and 29.

Research Context

Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Religion

Cultural historical activity theory provides a framework for studying the development of individuals in society by emphasizing social-relational dynamics as well as individual subjectivities and capacities as the context of human development and behavior (Daiute, 2006). Within this lens, human development is viewed as an activity that is influenced by and influences cultural and individual practices such as religious commitments and activities, activity systems, and cultural tools. Within this context, cultural tools are understood to be the socially constructed, historically situated, and individually adapted physical, symbolic, or abstract means by which we accomplish specific sociorelational goals. This theory additionally focuses on the idea that the processes of individual and social development are interdependent and fostered via the cultural tools and systems that construct society (Vygotsky, 1934/1978).

Based on this epistemological framework, religion is viewed as a practice-based cultural phenomenon that is mediated by individuals in response to the variations of everyday environments, social interactions, and sociopolitical contexts (Belzen, 1999). This is because "culturally different settings require different activities, leading to different (cognitive) abilities" (Belzen, 1999, p. 239). In other words, interactive individual-societal relations lead to the creation of meaning in everyday activities as humans adopt and transform cultural tools and symbols to achieve goals and overcome obstacles (Daiute & Lucić, 2010). In Belzen's perspective, it therefore becomes important to design studies that focus on situationally specific beliefs, values, rules, and social interactions as related to individual religious development (Belzen, 1999). This research orientation is of specific importance when studying populations in which religiosity is highly related to cultural traditions, such as the Sunni-Muslim American population (Belzen, 1999; Duderija, 2008). Yet Belzen's call for the application of cultural psychology to the psychological study of religion, has rarely graduated from the theoretical realm to that of deliberate application in terms of both research design and analysis (Lewis, 2010). In other words, there has yet to be a clear case study on the application

of Vygotsky's cultural historical activity theory to the study of religion. Although, it should be noted that there have been recent efforts to apply more ecological valid methods to the research design of studies focusing on the psychology of religion (Belzen, 2002). However, the present study is unique in that Vygotsky's sociocultural framework has been deliberately applied to both the research design and analysis, thereby creating a focused case study on theory as applied to religious development. Furthermore, this study is the first to apply the complex framework of cultural historical activity theory to the study of the Sunni-Muslim American religious development during the unique life phase of emerging adulthood.

Emerging Adulthood and Religious Development

Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood describes a distinct phase of development for young residents of industrialized countries (Arnett, 1998). Due to the many concrete life changes and disruptions that usually accompany this age, this stage often becomes the age of identity exploration, instability, being self-focused, feeling in-between, and yet, the age of attainable possibilities (Arnett, 2006; Smith & Snell, 2009). As a construct, emerging adulthood is contextualized and relational. Similar to Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural and historical development, the emerging adulthood experience is viewed as being inherently embedded within the relationship between the individual and their changing cultural and community experiences. Moreover, Arnett suggests that emerging adulthood is characterized by a heterogeneous experience both between and within cultures (Arnett, 2006). Thus, although many emerging adults may encounter similar developmental tasks during this life phase, addressing these tasks is likely to be a diverse process due to sociocultural specific traditions that may lead to conflicts within multicultural settings. This hypothesis is consistent with Daiute and Lucić's finding that religion emerged as salient for Bosnian Muslim youth's sense making about discriminatory interactions in the United States more so than for their Bosnian Muslim peers that remained in Sarajevo during a war (Daiute and Lucić, 2010).

Arnett and Jensen's research focusing on the religious development of 140 agnostic/atheist, deist, Liberal Christian, and Conservative Christian emerging adults emphasized the great diversity of participants' responses to questions regarding the importance of religion, their rates of religious attendance, and the content of their religious beliefs (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). It should be noted, however, that Arnett and Jensen also found that the majority of participants reported little relationship between their childhood religious socialization experiences and current religious attendance and beliefs (Arnett & Jensen,

2002). Thus, although numerous responses varied among participants, some attitudes and orientations were shared by the majority.

Alternatively, Smith and Snell's analysis of National Survey of Youth and Religion 2007-2008 data has suggested that the Muslim American population may experience a different religious development process during emerging adulthood (Smith & Snell, 2009). The Muslim American sample reported a significantly smaller aggregate percentage of participants who no longer identified as religious from age 13 to 17 (–0.1) as compared to Christian (Catholic –6, Protestant –7) and Jewish (–.4) emerging adults (Smith & Snell, 2009). However, as the survey sample included only a limited number of Muslim participants, the researchers did not explore the underlying relationship between the reported religious experience of Muslim American emerging adults and culturally specific variables such as cultural minority status.

The Cultural Context of Sunni-Muslim Americans

Research focusing on Sunni-Muslim Americans has reported a strong cultural and religious emphasis on family and communal values (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008). These values are situated in cultural artifacts such as the *Quran* as well as activities such as group prayer sessions. It is, therefore, not surprising that Sunni-Muslim adolescents frequently referenced their mother as a central figure in their spiritual quests (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008). However, the Sunni-Muslim American religious experience is unique among other Muslim groups in that there is an additional focus on developing an individual relationship with *Allah* as well as on engaging in an autonomous religious developmental experience as opposed to simply replicating early religious socialization experiences and family values (Ali, 2006; Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Duderija, 2007; Mahmood, 2006; Peek, 2005). In addition, prior research suggests that the process of religious exploration and religious commitment may be a diverse experience for Muslim American youth in general (Ahmed, 2009). For example, Ahmed found that although 75.5% of her Muslim American sample reported highly religious behaviors and attitudes, only one third (33.3%) had reported that they explored religious beliefs and then made a strong religious commitment (Ahmed, 2009). In other words, participants that reported similar religious behaviors and attitudes also reported differing pathways of religious development. It is therefore reasonable to hypothesize that even if an individual's religious group affiliation does not change during emerging adulthood, the individual's experience of religion will become personalized and modified based on educational and social pathways.

Moreover, this concept of a generally individualized developmental experience for Muslim American youth has been further supported by research

reports that Muslim American youth are greatly diverse in how they perceive themselves as Muslims living in the United States and their social relations within mainstream American society (Elashi, Mills & Grant, 2010; Kaplan, 2005). In other words, the development of the Muslim self is an individualized process that extends beyond the simplistic cultural label of "Muslim" to include personalized lived experiences within dynamic everyday social environments (French, Eisenberg, Vaughan, Purwono, & Suryanti, 2008). The aim of this study is to explore the nuanced journey of how Sunni-Muslim emerging adults in particular engage their religious development within multicultural contexts. Given this focus on individual–society interactions, the cultural historical activity theory–based method of analysis was selected as it illuminates the complexity of intrapersonal perspectives.

The Present Study

The present study was part of a larger research project aimed at contextualizing the emerging adulthood experience of multicultural populations. This specific segment of the study is focused on exploring the pathways of early childhood socialization and emerging adulthood activity systems on the religious development of Sunni-Muslim American emerging adults. Although Arnett and Jensen reported there to be a minimal relationship between childhood religious socialization and current religious practices, it is likely that this may differ for Sunni-Muslim Americans due to strong cultural and familial values emphasizing continued religious affiliation (Alli, 2006; Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Duderija, 2007; Mahmood, 2006; Peek, 2005). However, it is also likely that the religious development process may be similarly personal as researchers have reported that Sunni Muslims are more likely than their non-Muslim and Shiite counterparts to be engaged in a highly individualized religious process (e.g., Ahmed, 2009; Mahmood, 2006). However, a detailed analysis of the construction of Sunni-Muslim American emerging adults' religious development has yet to be conducted in terms of the new contexts and disruptions of emerging adulthood and the associated strategies that are developed to mediate these conflicts. In light of these aims, the following research questions guided this study: What is the relationship between familial Sunni-Muslim affiliation during early childhood and the participant's current religious group affiliation during emerging adulthood? How will participants' religious experiences, as defined by their activities and cultural tool use, be developed in relation to activity systems they encounter during emerging adulthood? How will participants' religious development processes differ, as operationalized by cultural tools and related mediational strategies?

Research Design and Method

The present study aimed to explore the religious development of Sunni-Muslim emerging adults in America in light of both their early childhood familial religious affiliations and their interactions within multicultural contexts during emerging adulthood. Sunni-Muslim American emerging adults answered open- and close-ended questions about their religious development via an online survey system. Descriptive data were primarily analyzed using frequency and means analyses. Narrative responses were analyzed using an applied theory based process of analyses, rooted in the epistemological foundation of cultural-historical activity theory.

Procedure

A Sunni-Muslim American research assistant aimed to ensure that the recruitment procedures and research design were culturally sensitive. As this study was part of a larger research project that included questions concerning religiously taboo risk behaviors, all participants completed an online survey in an effort to ensure anonymity.

The sample for this study was primarily recruited by asking the owners, managers, presidents, and/or administrators of online social networks targeting the Muslim American population to send an email or create a post that provided a link to the survey. About 20 recruiting messages were sent to social network administrators, with about 15 confirming receipt of this message. In addition, "snowball" sampling was applied; a message including the survey link was sent to about 10 of the research assistant's personal contacts. These contacts were then instructed to forward on the link to other interested contacts. Last, recruitment flyers were posted around New York City neighborhoods that have reportedly high concentrations of Muslim Americans.

Participants were recruited with a text specifying that the study was focusing on the post–high school experience of Muslims between the ages of 18 and 29. Participants included in the analyses identified as having been *raised* in Sunni-Muslim households, although they did not have to currently identify as Sunni-Muslims.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 63 Sunni-Muslim Americans, with the average age being 22 years (SD = 2.8) and 75% of the participants being female. An additional 20 surveys were not included in the final analyses as

the participants were not raised in Sunni-Muslim households, and one participant was not included as they identified as living outside of America. Participants were living in the United States at the time of the study and on average had been living in the United States for 15 to 20 years, with 48% of participants living in the United States for more than 20 years. Another 54% of participants identified as first-generation Americans, 44% had immigrated to the United States, and 2% identified as second-generation Americans. Fifty-six participants lived in the North Eastern region, 2 in the Mid-Western region, 4 in the Southern region, and 1 participant in the Western region of the United States.

The cultural affiliation of participants was highly diverse. Thirteen distinct cultural categories emerged from participants' answers to the open-ended question regarding cultural affiliation. Six percent of participants reported that they did not affiliate with any culture, with one participant explaining, "I don't have a cultural group, because my religion and culture does not go hand in hand." The greatest percentage, 48%, of participants affiliated with the South Asian culture in some form. In addition, 23% of participants affiliated with Middle Eastern culture in some form. However, it should be noted that a number of hyphenated affiliations emerged. For example, 5% of participants identified as Muslim-American, as one participant explained, "Muslim American because my religion guides most of my decisions in life and I love the country I was born and raised in." In addition, 6% of participants identified as being South-Asian Muslim American. This complexity of socioreligious affiliation was clearly illustrated by the following participant's response: "This question is trickier—I identify with both a US and Islamic culture. Islam itself is not necessarily a culture, but it's a way of life, and it defines much of who I am as a person. Additionally, I still feel a certain connection with Bengali culture."

With regard to relationship status, 67% of participants identified as single, 19% as married, 8% as engaged, 3% as casually dating, and 3% as being involved in a serious relationship; 73% of the sample participants reported that they lived with their parents, 13% with a spouse, 8% with roommates, and 6% reported that they lived alone. The sample was fairly highly educated with 49% identifying as college students, 33% completed college, 13% were either in the process of attaining or had attained a higher degree, and only 5% identified as having completed only high school or some college courses. In addition, the majority of participants attended formal religious educational settings at mosques, online seminars, private schools, campus clubs, and after-school programs for a number of years. Forty-four percent of participants attended formal religious educational settings for 1 to 5 years post–high school.

As most participants were still students, only 16% identified as working full-time and 27% part-time. It is therefore not surprising that 73% of participants reported that their personal income was below US$30,000. However, 54% of the participants reported their parents' annual income was above US$40,000 a year, 25% reported that their parents' income was between US$30,000 and US$40,000, and only 20% of participants reported their parents' income as below US$30,000.

Measures

As noted previously, this study was part of a larger research project and, as such, the complete survey that was administered was comprised of a total of 122 open- and close-ended questions. However, due to the specific aim and purpose of this study, only those items that are relevant to the analysis of familial religious affiliation and later activity systems' relation to religious development will be reported[1].

Religious Affiliation

Familial religious affiliation was assessed by asking participants to identify the category or categories that best defined their religious upbringing: Sunni-Muslim, Shiite Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Atheist, Agnostic, and Other. Participants were also asked to identify the category or categories that best defined their current religious orientation: *Sunni-Muslim, Shiite Muslim, Secular Muslim, and Other Muslim*. The options for current religious orientation were more limited as all recruiting efforts specified interest in participants who currently identified with the Muslim religion.

Activity Systems, Religious Tools, and Mediational Strategies

Participants were asked to answer four questions concerning changes in their religious practice: (a) Do you believe that your religious practice has changed? Answer options: *yes, no, unsure*; (b) if yes, when did your practice change? *Open ended*; (c) if so, please select all option(s) that best describe your experience: *more fundamentally religious, more spiritually religious, more liberally religious, more culturally religious, more socially religious, more secular and nonobservant*; and (d) please describe this change briefly. In addition, participants were asked to answer three questions regarding their choices concerning religious education post–high school: (a) What type of formal religious education did you attend post high school? *(please select all that*

apply): onsite seminars, online seminars, lessons at mosque, religious college, secular college, lectures, I did not attend any formal religious education; (b) for what length of time did you pursue a formal religious education post high school? *less than a year, more than a year, 2 to 5 years, more than 5 years, I did not attend any formal religious education post–high school*; (c) if yes, how frequently did you attend formal religious education post high school? *Daily, multiple times weekly, weekly, monthly, 1 to 3 times a year, 3 to 6 times a year, 6 to 12 times a year*.

Current Religious Beliefs, Attitudes, and Activities. Religiosity of Emerging Adults Questionnaire

Arnett and Jensen's six-item questionnaire focusing on religious practices, beliefs, and the importance of those beliefs was adapted to be culturally appropriate for the Sunni-Muslim American population (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Similar to Arnett and Jensen's study, participants were asked to identify the importance they placed on attending religious services, the importance of religious faith in their daily life, their certainty regarding their religious beliefs, and the extent of their belief regarding a higher power watching over them (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). In addition, Arnett and Jensen's question regarding frequency of service attendance was subdivided into two questions: the frequency of attending services at a *mosque* or with a *Jama'a* (prayer group) and the frequency of engaging in private prayer (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Furthermore, the frequency options were changed to be more culturally relevant (e.g., 5 times daily vs. 3 to 4 times a month).

Religious Culture

Barry and Nelson's four-item questionnaire focusing on the religious cultural experience of Mormon emerging adults was adapted for this study (Barry & Nelson, 2005). Reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) for this scale have been reported to be .90 (Barry & Nelson, 2005). Participants were asked to answer the following questions: "Suppose someone wanted to know all about you. How important would it be for them to know about your religious beliefs?" "How important is it to you to have friends who have the same religious background as you?" "How important is it to you to date people who have the same religious beliefs as you?" "How important is it to you to marry someone who shares your religious beliefs?" Due to issues of cultural sensitivity, participants were not provided with the same Likert-type scale as the one developed by Barry and Nelson. Instead, participants were provided with

options such as, "Very important, quite important, somewhat important, not at all important, I don't date before marriage."

Muslim Attitudes Towards Religion Scale (MARS)

This 14-item scale focusing on attitudes toward religion was originally developed by Francis and Stubbs and focused on the Christian population (Francis & Stubbs, 1987). Each item is rated by the respondent on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5) so that scores on the total scale had a possible range of 14 to 70, with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude (Wilde & Joseph, 1997). Reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) for this scale have been reported to be .93 (Wilde & Joseph, 1997). Wilde and Joseph adapted the scale for the Muslim population and developed the following practice based questions: I find it inspiring to read the *Quran*, Allah helps me, saying my prayers helps me a lot, Islam helps me lead a better life, I like to learn about Allah very much, I believe that Allah helps people, the five prayers help me a lot, the supplication (*dua*) helps me, I think the *Quran* is relevant and applicable to modern day, I believe that Allah listens to prayers, Mohammed (peace be upon him) provides a good mode of conduct for me, I pray five times a day, I fast the whole month of *Ramadan*, and I observe my daily prayers in the *mosque*. As the frequency of prayer and observing daily prayers in the *mosque* were included in the adaptation of the Religiosity of Emerging Adulthood Questionnaire, those items were omitted from this scale (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). However, participants were instead asked to rate the importance they ascribed to eating *Halal* food and the frequency in which they engaged in activities that were recommended although not required (e.g., voluntary fasts and prayers). In addition, four items were designed to be coded as reverse scored, although this precaution was not noted in the original application of the measure (Wilde & Joseph, 1997). Reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) for the adapted version of the MARS scale used in this study are acceptable at α = .74, as per Nunnally's definition of acceptability (Nunnally, 1978).

Results

The Relation Between Family and Individual Religious Group Affiliation

All 63 participants in this study were raised in families affiliated with the Sunni-Muslim community, and 98% of participants continued their

affiliation. Only one participant did not and instead affiliated with the Secular Muslim community. In addition, the mean score for the MARS was 61/70 with an *SD* of 4, indicating a commitment to religious practice as well. It should be noted that the Sunni-Muslim American sample's consistency in religious group affiliation is notably different than prior research efforts with emerging adults from other communities (e.g., Arnett & Jensen, 2002). It is possible that this is due to strong cultural values regarding family and community (e.g., Ahmed & Ezzeddine, 2009).

In addition, this relationship between early childhood familial affiliation and personal religious experience during emerging adulthood was not demonstrated by continued affiliation alone, which could be viewed as perfunctory. For example, 71% of participants responded that it would be very important for someone trying to get know them to know about their religious beliefs. Similarly, 87% of participants responded that it was very important to marry someone of the same beliefs. Furthermore, 98% of participants indicated that they strongly believe in a higher power, 83% were very certain of their religious beliefs, 81% rated their religious beliefs as being very important, 79% rated their religious faith as being very important in their daily life, and 60% rated religious service attendance as being very important. This was additionally apparent in participants' responses regarding their engagement in socioreligious activities. For example, 78% of participants prayed at a *mosque* or with a *Jama'a* (prayer group) at least weekly, with 48% of participants praying privately 5 times daily. In addition, 86% of participants reported that they fasted the whole month of *Ramadan*, and 49% of participants engaged in recommended although not required religious activities such as voluntary fasts and additional prayers (see Table 1: Religious Activities Frequency Table).

The personal importance placed on Islam during emerging adulthood was additionally discussed in participants' narrative responses to the open-ended questions, with a number of participants emphasizing the distinction between the religious *identification* of their youth and their form of religious *practice* during emerging adulthood. For example, a female Somali American who immigrated to Virginia at 7 years of age expanded on her report of becoming more fundamentally religious during college with the following statement; "I was born Muslim and raised Muslim. However, I never practiced until my junior [year] in college. Allah ta'ala (exalted) is truly the One that guides." This narrative is particularly rich because in addition to the participant contrasting the religious identification of her youth with her later commitment to religious practice, she closes the narrative with a religious quote enacting the personal meaning that she has found in the practice of her faith in daily life

Table 1. Religious Activities Frequency Table.

Religious questions related to cultural activities	%
On average, how often do you attend religious services at a mosque or with a *Jama'a* (prayer group)?	
5 times daily	3
Less than 5 times but more than once daily	19
Once daily	6
Weekly	49
Monthly	11
Yearly	10
Never	2
On average, how often do you pray privately?	
5 times daily	48
More than 5 times daily	5
Less than 5 times but more than once daily	41
Once daily	5
Monthly	2
Yearly	0
Never	0
On average, how often do you engage in religious activities that are recommended although not required (i.e., voluntary fasts and prayers)?	
Weekly	49
Monthly	29
Yearly	22
Never	0
I fast the whole month of *Ramadan*	
5 (*strongly agree*)	86
4	11
3	3
2	0
1 (*strongly disagree*)	0

("Allah ta'ala is truly the One that guides"). In addition, it is of interest to note that this participant implies that this change in religious practice has not been shared by her family. Similarly, a female Pakistani American reported that 7 years after immigrating to the United States she became more spiritual as she "learned more about Islam and started practicing it and wearing the headscarf." Furthermore, she specifically noted that these changes in practice are in stark contrast to her religious upbringing with the following

statement; "I grew up in learning Islam from a cultural point of view; now I am learning the true Islam as it was practiced by the Prophet Mohammad and his companions." The above analysis of these two narratives strongly illuminates the participants' knowledge of and pride in the distinctions between religious identification and religious faith and practice. Therefore, although the majority of participants did not change their religious identification from childhood, their lived religious experience often altered in relation to their individual experiences.

Moreover, even participants from religiously practicing families reported that their religious practice experience became more individualized and gained importance during emerging adulthood. This was clearly demonstrated by the narrative of a male Bangladeshi Muslim who immigrated to the United States, when he was 10 years old. In his words, "All my prayers and other acts of worship became geared toward pleasing my Creator instead of just doing them for the sake of doing them (as was the case before). I began to appreciate Quran and Sunnah[2] more. . . ." Within this statement it becomes clear that although the participant may not have changed the concrete performance structure of religious rituals since his youth, the practices and activities have become more meaningful as his appreciation for religious texts and Allah has grown. In addition, other participants indicated that the frequency of their religious practice additionally changed alongside their knowledge and appreciation of religious practice. In the words of a female participant of Palestinian heritage: "I pray more often now; I didn't know how to pray before."

Furthermore, it should be noted that these changes in religious activities are additionally co-occurring within changing developmental stages; as a female Muslim American from Georgia stated, "I went from a typical adolescent trying to fit in to gaining a greater appreciation for my religion." In other words, in addition to the majority of participants continuing to affiliate with the Sunni-Muslim community, many participants viewed their everyday religious life activities as being of personal importance in terms of their process of self-construction and their relationships with others. Thus, it appears as though Muslim American emerging adults are often constructing their religious experience via personal choices regarding practice-enacted beliefs.

The Interaction of Emerging Adulthood and Religious Activity Systems

Although the majority of participants reported a consistent religious affiliation from early childhood to emerging adulthood, 62% of participants additionally reported that their religious practice had changed since high school

similarly to other emerging adulthood populations (Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Smith & Snell, 2009). In addition, 73% of participants reported that they had become more spiritually religious, 64% more fundamentally religious, 25% more socially religious, 22% more liberally religious, 17% more culturally religious, and 5% more secular and nonobservant (with participants able to select more than one type of change).

Of the 69% who answered the open-ended question regarding the time of their religious practice change, 61% explicitly stated that their religious practice had changed in relation to experiencing new academic contexts. For example, a female participant of Tajik and Afghani descent explained her decision to become more fundamentally religious and more spiritually religious during her freshman year of college in New York with the following statement: "With knowledge and good company at my undergrad university, I learned the true fundamentals of Islam and learned to love it." This newly found love for Islam was additionally coupled with more than 5 years of religious schooling post–high school, representing the participant's use of religious studies to make sense of her everyday life.

In addition, other participants emphasized the introspective aspects of their religious changes occurring in relation to new social contexts, as a male participant of Pakistani descent did in the following statement: "College life made me look in to who I am and religion." Contrastingly, a South Asian Muslim American male participant indicated that his religious practice was adversely affected by the disruptions of his new academic context, as he said, "Don't have time to practice my religion sometimes as in residency." However, it is of interest to note that the participant additionally indicated that he had become more spiritual, perhaps suggesting an attempt to rebalance and redefine his religious experience within this new context.

In addition, 27% of participants indicated that their religious practice changed in relation to their age, with the average age of change being 18 with a standard deviation of 2 years. For example, a female participant of Pakistani descent described her post–high school religious changes as occurring within the following framework: "I became more aware of my religion at 18 years of age and I began practicing more." Although it is likely that this chronological identity marker was disrupted by social, institutional, and geographical transitions (Smith & Snell, 2009) as well, the chosen point of reference for this participant was her age, perhaps suggesting that this is an important marker of adulthood for her.

Furthermore, 12% of participants explicitly indicated that the time of their religious practice change was in relation to experiencing and seeking new religious activity systems. For example, a female participant of Bangladeshi

descent reported that she became more spiritual "When I started learning more about my religion, I have been enlightened by its grace and eloquence of the *Quran*." This sentiment was echoed by another female participant of Bangladeshi descent who studied *Quranic tafsir* (interpretation) for 2 years after high school and became more fundamentally and spiritually religious. The participant explained these changes in her religious experience by stating that she "finally studied what the Quran really said and meant, and I started to truly accept, believe, and practice it." This diversity of responses regarding the markers of religious change for Sunni-Muslim American emerging adults (e.g., coming of age, new academic contexts, new religious activity systems) supports prior research that the religious development of emerging adults is created in relation to dynamic and individualized life circumstances (Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Smith & Snell, 2009).

Using Diverse Cultural Tools as Mediational Strategies to Guide Emerging Adulthood

Utilizing the lens of cultural historical activity theory, these religious practice changes can be understood as different mediational strategies that are used to address dynamic interactions with everyday environments. Mediation has been defined as a "conductor of human influence on the object of activity," and the participants' narratives in this study indicate that they did so through the pathway of religious activities and tools (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55). For example, one female participant of Pakistani descent stated that "After high school [I] just wanted to study my religion before I studied in college so [I] decided to go and study the Quran." In this case, the participant chose to mediate the upcoming change in her life (going on to college) by pursuing religious studies via onsite seminars, formal lessons, and religious classes for a year prior to beginning college. The participant utilized the *Quran* and the activity system of religious classes to mediate her relationship with college, a seemingly self-initiated decision as the sentence is written as a first-person narrative. Similarly, a married female Bangladeshi participant living in New York reported that she mediated the activity system of college by utilizing the religious activities and tools of "wearing Hijab and more modest clothing and seeking knowledge," describing these cultural artifacts (*Hijab* and modest clothing) and activity systems (*"seeking knowledge"*) as part of her journey of becoming more fundamentally religious.

In addition, other participants mediated their relationship with new socio-cultural activity systems by pursuing the cultural tools of understanding and communicating cultural scripts with others. In the words of a female, Muslim

Egyptian participant living in New York, "Living in a more diverse country made me want to know more about my own religion. It was awful being a Muslim and when you are asked a simple question you cannot answer it out of ignorance to one's own religion." In fact, this participant was motivated to pursue formal religious lessons and onsite seminars for over 2 years post–high school as tools that would enable her to share knowledge with non-Muslim acquaintances. In addition, it is of interest to note that this participant's post–high school religious experience was multifaceted, as she reported that she became more liberally religious, more culturally religious, as well as more spiritual. Similarly, a female participant of South Asian descent discussed her management of self–society relations amid the changing sociopolitical context post 9/11 by stating: "It was after 9/11. . . . I started learning more about Islam so I could explain it to my peers. Then, that summer before high school, I went to a religious summer camp, and became very religious, and started wearing *Hijab*. However, I am now much more moderate." Within this narrative, the participant notes the new sociorelational context that initiated her religious practice change as being her sociorelational activity system (i.e., her peer group). After the events of 9/11, the participant's peer group began to ask questions about Islam, and the participant needed to relate to these new social demands. The participant then developed a mediational strategy of learning more about her religion and decided to engage in the activity system of religious summer camp as a tool to accomplish this goal. This activity system impacted the participant's mediational tool use of religious artifacts such as the *Hijab.* However, it is important to note that as time passed and, assumingly, new activity systems were encountered, the participant's religious development continued to change (i.e., "I am now much more moderate."), supporting the theory that religious development during emerging adulthood is fluid and constructed within dynamic contexts (e.g., Smith & Snell, 2009). In addition, the narratives suggest that the lived experience of Muslim emerging adults as a minority population may heighten their use of religion as a meaning-making strategy.

Furthermore, participants' responses indicate diverse ways of using religion as a cultural tool. For example, 34% of participants indicated that they engaged in religious education systems or studying the *Qur'an* on their own. As one female participant from Egypt said after more than 2 years of religious studies post–high school, "After reading and learning more about the religion. There are many things that I learned and corrected which I was taught wrong." Similarly, participants reported that they, often simultaneously, engaged in a variety of religious educational activity settings post high school: 68% attended formal religious lectures, 60% attended a series of onsite seminars,

51% attended a series of formal seminars at a *mosque*, 40% participated in a series of online seminars, 19% attended religious classes at a secular college, and 8% attended a religious college. Moreover, 24% of participants reported that they often changed their religious behavior in relation to the new time constraints imposed by challenging academic environments or the newly found socioreligious support networks on campus (e.g., "I grew in spirit and faith but lost the ritualistic aspects [prayer/reading]" and "more practicing after high school"). In addition, 20% indicated that they actively engaged in a process of self-construction; in the words of a 20-year-old Muslim American female of Pakistani descent, "I have become more conscious of my faith and have paid more attention to it, having valued it more." Similarly, a female participant that emigrated from Bangladesh to New York at the age of 6 echoed this sentiment by stating: "I have started learning all the 'why's' to what we as Muslims are required to do. For example, as a Muslim sister, I am bound to cover my hair and wear unfitting clothes. Nevertheless, learning by myself, I became intrinsically motivated."

Furthermore, 22% of participants indicated that they internalized a variety of cultural scripts. Fifteen percent discussed an increased level of religious consciousness and relationship with *Allah*, as one male participant who immigrated to New York from India said: "At some point in life, Allah put the love of Islam in my heart and I needed it. I needed to realize who is my creator? What is my purpose in life? What are my rights, responsibilities, obligations in this life? Etc." Interestingly, although the participant credits *Allah* for the initiation of his religious changes, the process of exploring existential questions is still presented as being highly intrinsic and individualized ("I needed to realize"). In addition, 7% wrote of their increased awareness of mortality and the blessings of life. For example, a female participant of South Asian descent explained her reasons for becoming more fundamentally and spiritually religious during high school and college with the statement that "Understanding where I came from and where I am going and all the blessings I have, made me realize there is more to life than what meets the eye."

Such narratives emphasize that the religious experience of this sample of Muslim American emerging adults is often more complex than continued religious identification or perfunctory religious practices alone; rather, it is presented as a contemplative and personally meaningful journey. In addition, participants' narratives suggest that religious practice changes were enacted to mediate both negative circumstances as well as more inclusive elicitations. The diverse and multifaceted nature of the participants' reported changes in their religious practice and faith in relation to their lived experience indicates that religious experience is an ongoing developmental process. Moreover,

emerging adulthood may be a unique time period for religious development due to the newly encountered activity systems of college and work.

Discussion

In this article, we hope to have shown how cultural historical activity theory–based research designs and analysis are useful tools in developing a comprehensive understanding of religious development as a dynamic process. We have argued that religious activity systems, artifacts such as the *Quran*, and scripts are cultural tools that enable Sunni-Muslim American emerging adults to mediate their processes of interacting in multicultural environments and their own process toward adulthood. In addition, we have discussed how religious development during emerging adulthood is a culturally specific phenomenon that occurs in relation to the interaction between cultural values and newly encountered activity systems.

In fact, preliminary comparisons between the Sunni-Muslim-American responses and the responses of a Jewish Modern-Orthodox sample collected as part of a larger study have indicated that the discussion of navigating ethnoreligious questions proposed by people outside of one's cultural group uniquely emerged in the responses of the Sunni-Muslim American participants (Etengoff, 2011). This may be a result of the fact that religious Muslims, particularly women who wear *Hijab*, are a visible minority that may be more likely to attract attention as the "Other" (Sirin & Katsiaficas, 2011). However, unlike prior research, participants in this study did not narrate these interactions with people outside of their cultural group as being discriminatory or offensive. Rather, the participants in this study reported that people's questions regarding their faith were prompted by curiosity, interest, and ignorance even within post-9/11 sociopolitical contexts. Furthermore, many participants were motivated by these interactions to explore their own faith in greater detail in an effort to be able to answer questions about their religion. As the study sample is largely female, this is not surprising as previous research has reported that Muslim American women often feel a "patriotic duty" to educate the public about their religion and culture (Zaal, Salah, & Fine, 2007, p. 169).

In addition, participants' diverse responses regarding the type and form of their religious practice changes indicate that religious development is occurring in relation to individuals' lived experiences and is more complex than is indicated by the homogeneity of affiliation. For example, some participants reported that they became more religious during college due to their exposure to a structured religious community on campus whereas others became less

involved in religious rituals due to the extensive demands of academic life. Therefore, although the Sunni-Muslim American sample's continued religious affiliation differs from Christian samples, the Sunni-Muslim American religious experience is similar to other populations in that the religious experience itself is a diverse process constructed within dynamic and permeable contexts (Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Smith & Snell, 2009). For these reasons, those who work with Sunni-Muslim emerging adults in educational or clinical settings should focus on the agentive role that individuals take when developing mediational strategies to address the changing contexts of emerging adulthood.

In addition, it is important to note that the emerging adults in this study acted within relationally complex environments. Relational complexity is understood to account for "the ability to interact meaningfully and flexibly with diverse others, in terms of their differing understandings, influence (power), expectations, and to adjust one's expression with them in terms of goals and needs" (Daiute, 2012, p. 6). Participants demonstrated their awareness of the social dimensions of power as they utilized the tool of relational complexity to mediate their religious experience in response to the questions of the majority culture as well as the limited allowances that are provided for religious observance in some academic settings. Such narratives suggest that future research would benefit from study designs which incorporate the dynamic and interactive relationship between the agentive and relational elements of religious development.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The results presented here have provided a multilayered description of how a sample of Sunni-Muslim American emerging adults experienced a variety of new contexts and how these contexts influenced their religious development. The purpose of this study was to highlight the diversity of this experience within the Sunni-Muslim American population, and as such, the specific results of the present study cannot be generalized beyond this population. In addition, the results of the present study must be interpreted in light of the associated sampling and data collection limitations. First, the sample was limited in that the vast majority of participants were from the North Eastern Region of America. In addition, 75% of participants were female, which prevents the analysis of gender differences. Future research should aim to include more participants from other areas of the United States as well a more equal number of male and female participants. Second, the sample was self-selected and therefore does not represent all Muslim emerging adults in

America. Third, the retrospective nature of participants' accounts of their religious development experiences is a potential limitation that can be addressed by conducting longitudinal investigations in the future. Fourth, the qualitative portion of this study was conducted via an online survey system, and as a result, there was no opportunity to ask participants to clarify their responses. Future research would therefore benefit from conducting in-person interviews.

Conclusion

Participants in this study shared experiences suggesting that they use religion, religious practices, and religious artifacts to address the challenges and opportunities of emerging adulthood in particular life contexts. Participants reported specific strategies of cultural tool use relating to artifacts, practices, and scripts. The new contexts encountered by the participants ranged from academic to new political contexts and their socioreligious experience seems to be similarly varied. Although there is an overall high retention rate in the Sunni-Muslim American community in terms of religious affiliation and cultural commitment, the participants included in this study responded to a number of different contexts using a broad range of religious mediational strategies. Indeed, some even suggested that their chosen mediational strategies continued to change alongside the dynamic contexts of their lives. The continued investigation of the diverse contexts that emerging adults encounter can assist researchers in developing an understanding of the variety of pathways that exist in emerging adults' constructions of religion as a system of practice-enacted beliefs. This study also suggests a theoretical and methodological approach to studying cultural development in a way which is sensitive to the diversities of this important phase of life in the current era of increasing intercultural contact.

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Notes

1. Arnett's (1998) Adulthood Achievement Criteria Questionnaire and Risk Behavior Questionnaire were administered as well, although results are not reported in the present publication.
2. Source of Islamic law largely based on exegesis.

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Author Biographies

Chana Etengoff received her master's of arts and master's of philosophy in developmental psychology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, at which she is also continuing her doctoral studies. Her research is currently focused on understanding minority groups' developmental and intergroup processes from an applied cultural historical activity theory perspective. She has worked with diverse populations, including both cultural/religious and sexual minorities in her study of prejudice and the interacting activity systems of gender, sexuality, religion, family, social media/technology, and human development across the lifespan.

Colette Daiute is a Professor of Psychology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Dr. Daiute does research on human development in extremely challenging and changing environments. In addition to focusing on children and youth, this research considers how organizations and informal collectives involve young people in activities to develop society and themselves. Colette Daiute's recent book publications include Human Development and Political Violence (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and journal articles "Human development in global systems," Global Studies Journal, 2012; " `Trouble' in, around, and between narratives," Narrative Inquiry, 2011. Daiute teaches courses on "Human Development and Globalization," "Narrative Inquiry," and professional development seminars on narrative inquiry and mutual youth-society development via participation in community organizations. http://www.colettedaiute.org