PART ONE

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION
OPENNESS AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study was conducted to explore spiritual development in adolescents, particularly as intertwined with Openness to Experience and social contexts characterized by openness. A religiously and ethnically heterogeneous sample of adolescents (N = 130) completed in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using a Grounded Theory approach. The contribution of openness to spiritual development in adolescents was interpreted at the level of the self, family, and peer group. Implications of the findings are understood against the extant literature on adolescent development.

Religiosity and spirituality (R/S) are increasingly topics of study with adolescent samples for their contribution to well-being (see Levenson, Aldwin, & D’Mello, 2005; Regnerus, Smith, & Fritsch, 2003; Rew & Wong, 2006, for reviews). From both religious and psychological perspectives, positive mental health is considered to extend beyond the absence of psychopathology, suffering, or self-destructive behaviors to include the presence of positive qualities, such as hope/optimism, forgiveness, prosocial values, and life satisfaction (McCullough & Snyder, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Despite the growing empirical support for the positive impact of R/S on adaptive functioning and its consideration as a protective factor against negative health outcomes, relatively little is known regarding how its development might be facilitated or thwarted in adolescence (e.g., King & Boyatzis, 2004; Miller & Kelley, 2005; Rew & Wong, 2006; Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, & Wagener, 2006). The field of spiritual development has been challenged to identify the central processes and dimensions of human R/S development through innovative conceptual approaches.

Increasingly, dynamic systems theories with a focus on ecological perspectives are what Lerner (2004) identifies as the “cutting edge” of developmental scholarship (see also Benson, 2004; Boyatzis, Dollahite,