Identity, Belonging, and Purpose as Lenses for Empathizing with Adolescents

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Abstract

Adolescent exploration is rooted in questions such as: *Who am I? Where do I belong?* and *What difference do I make?* Research investigating adolescents' quest for identity, belonging, and purpose (IBP) can inform empathic youth ministry approaches. Here, we (1) review social science literature regarding adolescents' search for IBP, (2) describe findings from the Fuller Youth Institute's *Youth Ministry Innovations* project, and (3) discuss lessons learned from this process and the future of innovation in the church.

Introduction

For all generations, the journey of navigating and negotiating life's challenges and opportunities punctuates our lives with instability. We especially experience instability when our aspirations stretch us or when challenges are thrust upon us. Whether these are intentional pursuits, life-altering instances (e.g., death of someone close, marriage, moving, illness, leaving home, parents' divorce, losing a job, or medical emergency), or less dramatic moments (e.g., family disagreements, adjusting for a tighter budget, work stress, friendship fallout, fitting in, trying out for the team, or applying to college), they can upset a person's equilibrium.[i]

The instability young people experience is more prevalent than adults realize. This instability is especially challenging for young people as, developmentally, they are still acquiring the skills needed to find their way. In other words, young people are learning to navigate instability through new situations that require them to draw from new resources and acquire new skills.[ii]

When Christian adults' solutions to young peoples' states of instability focus on providing ways to avoid disequilibrium or artificially replace their instability with some sort of pseudo-stability, young people feel spiritual dissonance. Symptoms of their dissonance take multiple forms such as young people feeling that they have "grown out" of their childhood faith, that religious teachings seem unwilling to address current topics most important to them, or that faith communities appear ill-equipped to dialogue over adolescents' experiences with doubt and faith. In the family context, some parents may have well-intentioned efforts to shelter their teenagers, but this sheltering leaves young people feeling emotionally, socially, and logistically ill-equipped to successfully navigate the twists and turns that lie ahead in college, the military, work, and relationships. We speculate that one of the reasons churches' investment in youth

ministry is increasing while youth church participation is decreasing rests in adults' misguided ministry and parenting that focuses on trying to preserve young people's states of stability rather than helping them acknowledge and negotiate their instability.

While adolescents' experiences of instability are diverse, it is helpful for adults to consider these diverging journeys in light of their shared quest for identity, belonging, and purpose (IBP). All people, especially young people, are motivated to walk into and press through instability in order to discover who they are, where they belong, and what they aspire to do in life.

What follows is a description of our 4-year research project funded by the Lilly Endowment called Youth Ministry Innovations (YMI). In this brief piece, we will first define our terms, Identity, Belonging, and Purpose, and explain how these constructs raise crucial questions for adolescents. Second, we will illustrate our preliminary findings from the Fuller Youth Institute's (FYI) YMI project. Third, we will discuss how our definitions, findings and illustrations can serve as lenses for better empathizing with adolescents. Fourth, we will provide examples for how youth ministries are trying innovative approaches that faithfully respond to teenager's core questions surrounding IBP.

Research Investigating IBP

Core to young people's lives are questions surrounding their identity ("Who am I?"), sense of belonging ("Where do I belong?"), and purpose ("What different do I make?"). As we seek to develop ministry approaches that aid young people as they answer these questions, we rely heavily on the work of researchers who have investigated young people and their development. Below we briefly summarize some of the research that has guided our work.

Identity

We define identity as a set of beliefs concerning who one is in relation to one's personal attributes, relationships, and group affiliations. Following this definition, it is important to recognize that identity is multidimensional and includes beliefs about individual characteristics, intimate relationships, family, friendships, religion, occupations, ethnicity, social groups, politics, and other factors (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). According to Marcia (1964), an individual's identity can also be in a state of achievement (having arrived at a commitment), foreclosure (commitment without exploration), moratorium (exploration without commitment), or diffusion (neither commitment nor exploration).

Furthermore, identity exploration can differ in breadth and depth (Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Beyers, & Missotten, 2011). A young person may be exploring a variety of different options briefly or a single option more intensely, and a young person may have "achieved" an identity in one domain, but still be exploring in another domain. Some research indicates that different age groups explore and commit to an identity differently. In early adolescence, exploration may be broader and increase in depth with age (Luyckx et al., 2011). Emerging adults, by contrast, may engage more in commitment making and identifying with an identity (Luyckx et al., 2011).

Belonging

We define belonging as the sense that one is connected to and can trust a community in which one can exert influence, have one's needs met, and mutually share emotional connection with others. This definition emphasizes the importance of feelings of membership in a community, influence upon a community, fulfillment of personal needs, and shared emotional connection (Evans, 2007). Similarly, Lee and Robbins (1995) considered social connectedness

and social assurance to be two key components of belonging. Social connectedness may be defined as a sense of membership in a community and social assuredness as the level of trust that a community would present when an individual needed its assistance. Early adolescence is a period in which young people are beginning to distance themselves from their parents and increase their affiliation with peers (Newman & Newman, 1976). Emerging adults may focus less on affiliation with peer groups and more on developing a sense of connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1995).

Purpose

We define purpose as a commitment to a meaningful goal that leads to behavior that works toward this goal. Bronk (2013) notes that there are four key elements of purpose: commitment ("some aim to which they are willing to commit their time, resources, and mental energy"), goal-directedness ("a pursuit of some type of aim or goal, but one that it is particularly stable and far-reaching"), personal meaningfulness (an aim that is central and significant to the individual), and impact on the world beyond the self ("not solely self-serving, but that also leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the broader world"). Additionally, an individual may have multiple purposes. Purposeful activities, reflection, discussion, fostering an entrepreneurial attitude, and social support are all factors that may positively influence a young person's pursuit of a purpose.

Some research finds that major changes, triggering events, and major transitions can all contribute to positive purpose development. For instance, the transition from high school to college may provide an opportunity for young people to think more frequently or intentionally about their life purposes. The developmental pattern for purpose may mirror that of identity. Adolescence and emerging adulthood can be a time of an increasingly intentional and

meaningful pursuit of purpose. Some research finds that during the beginning and middle of emerging adulthood, young people are pursuing purpose (i.e. they have not yet attained it) and that attainment of purpose tends to peak toward the end of emerging adulthood.

IBP and the Church

Research on identity, belonging, and purpose bears important implications for the church as well. Youth leaders who seek to effectively minister to young people must consider the various facets of teenagers' identity development. The leader must be aware that a young person may be actively exploring and seeking out various identity features. At the same time, other aspects of identity are developed passively within the young person by other people who interact with the young person and the environments in which the young person resides. Identity exploration is ripe for discussion given the number of facets young people are becoming aware of—spirituality, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status—and youth ministry leaders may help shape these conversations. Our theology may articulate that the identity of each Christian holds Christ in its center, but we may wonder to what degree this is practiced and applied in youth ministry contexts in such a way that it positively promotes exploration and discussion.

Research concerning a young person's sense of belonging is also of the utmost importance for the church. Though many churches may describe themselves as welcoming communities, they may ask themselves to what degree they encourage young people to exert some influence in the church and whether or not all age groups are capable of sharing an emotional connection with others. If such factors are missing, a sense of belonging may also be deficient. Often, young peoples' sense of belonging is left as a problem for the youth leader to solve and youth ministries are increasingly recognizing this limitation. Theoretically, the church aspires to be a place where young people find belonging, but these findings from the social

sciences may raise question about how the whole church can better foster a warm and welcoming environment.

Investigations of young people's pursuit of purpose also bear important implications for the church and its ministry with young people. The church is well situated to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion on purpose in life. Additionally, the church may uniquely help young people determine what a good and bad purpose may be by framing it in light of a Christian narrative. Reframing mission and vocation as central to the ways young people express their faith offers new opportunities for youth leaders and churches to reimagine the role youth groups and congregations play in helping shape and support young peoples' future trajectories. We hope that ministry discussions surrounding purpose may be informed by the work of scholars from both the social sciences and theology.

The above sections addressing IBP are a brief overview of some of the research that has investigated these topics. Adolescence remains an important time for development in these areas and youth ministry leaders may learn much from such research.

Youth Ministry Innovations

Project Overview

Our literature review on young people's quest for IBP, coupled with FYI's previous research on young people and congregations, has contributed to the conceptual framework driving *Youth Ministry Innovations* (YMI). Through this project, FYI is collaborating with church leaders to reimagine how youth ministry approaches that reference historic Christian practices support young people's growth in their IBP. Theologians, like James K.A. Smith, point to the necessity of youth engaging in Christian practices rather than merely attending Christian programming. By reimagining historic Christian practices (such as prayer, testimony, and

lament) for present-day contexts, churches provide liturgies for youth to participate in and be shaped by (Smith, 2009). As youth ministries grapple with the decentralization of spiritual communities due to teenage busyness and the distance often created by high school graduation, FYI speculates that the future of youth ministry lies in recovering and reimagining habit-forming practices. By regularizing and forming spiritual practices that transcend programmatic spaces, youth's identities, belonging, and purposes can continue to be formed within the Christian narrative beyond youth ministry attendance.

By the end of 2019, 60 churches from across the United States will have each participated in a 1-year cohort process focused on recovering and reimagining Christian practices to support young people's quests for IBP.[iii] This 1-year cohort is comprised of three primary phases: 1) learning, 2) innovation, and 3) implementation. Each of these phases is essential to the cohort process. Before leaders can innovate, they need to learn the requisite tools for Christian innovation and the goals of Christian innovation.[iv] During the learning phase of the cohort, church leaders participate in a 2-month, online learning arc that focuses on a) listening to young people in order to empathize with their instabilities, b) understanding the IBP, and c) exploring how design thinking can be utilized to reimagine and re-contextualize historic Christian practices to form adolescents' IBP.

Following the learning phase, leaders engage in innovation (i.e., the second phase of the cohort). The innovation phase is largely comprised of interacting and empathizing with the youth in their churches and neighborhoods, ideating new ways of meeting their youth's formative needs, and prototyping a potential response. The climax of the innovation training phase is a 3-day intensive innovation summit at Fuller Theological Seminary. By the end of the summit, each church leaves with a unique ministry innovation prototype.

Over the course of the ten months following the summit, church leaders engage in the implementation phase of the cohort. Leaders test their assumptions, beta-test their prototypes, and invite youth to engage in their reimagined Christian practices. Whether the new ministry practice ultimately succeeds or fails, this final phase is absolutely essential. Without the implementation phase, the prior two phases become merely theoretical in nature and fail to chart a future course for youth ministry.

Illustrations of the Project Process and the IBP Constructs

While the YMI project is still underway, the first yearlong cohort yielded insights regarding youth IBP formation. The following case study illustrates how ministries can be shaped with the intent of forming IBP in young people and succeed in doing so.

Case study: A student-led prayer group. By empathizing with the youth in their congregation and in the surrounding schools, youth leaders from a Midwest church (which we will call "Midwest Fellowship") discovered and identified that students struggled to feel a sense of belonging within their Christian communities. In response, leaders worked with students to develop a student-led prayer group where they would practice praying with each other consistently over ten weeks as a way of fostering belonging. The goal was not to "just pray," but to pray personally, communally, and expectantly. While this project may not sound innovative at first blush, the process by which it was developed demonstrated a responsiveness to their young people's needs (in this case, belonging) and yielded formative results among the youth participants.

Description of the cohort process. Prior to implementing Midwest Fellowship's ministry project, the leaders participated in the learning and innovation phases of the cohort. FYI initiated the cohort experience by training ministry leaders to engage in an observation exercise,

reinforcing the priority of starting with the felt needs of young people, rather than trying to design relevant programs. The intent of this exercise was to help leaders see young people with fresh eyes. Because youth ministers interact with youth frequently, many leaders assume they have a firm grasp on the current lives of young people. This exercise succeeded in helping youth ministers realize that there are aspects to youth's lives today that shift and change, requiring youth leaders to perpetually seek to understand them rather than to rest on their assumptions from past experiences.

In this observation exercise, youth ministers visited places where youth congregate to observe how they interact outside of church. After visiting malls, sporting events, and local eateries, several church leaders reflected on how the line between the digital world and the in-person world was blurred in youth's social interactions. Youth leaders critically self-reflected on their own assumptions about the digital-'real' world divide, recognizing that it does not hold true for many young people. Observations like these began to challenge youth leaders' starting points, highlighting some crucial differences previously unnoticed by the youth leaders.

While participants' observations emphasized distance between youth leaders' assumptions and youth's actual lives, FYI also attempted to train leaders to consider empathy as a way to bridge this distance. Following the observation exercise, FYI guided leaders to look deeper than their initial observations in order to discover what might be driving the social interactions they observed. Many leaders speculated that young peoples' actions were rooted in their deep need to belong. One leader, reflecting on her observations, postulated that when teenagers felt momentarily excluded in a conversation, turning to their phone was a way of still feeling connected. Consider the shift this leader is making. Instead of stating the common mantra among adults that "kids these days are addicted to their phones," this leader saw something else.

Her empathy didn't see "addiction" but a longing for connection. Recognizing the desire to belong helped this leader empathize with these teenagers' use of technology. The combination of observation and empathy challenged faulty assumptions and created connection between youth leaders and the youth they observed.[v]

After engaging in these observation and empathy exercises, Midwest Fellowship leaders attended the FYI innovation summit and prototyped an initial, practice-based response to their particular teenagers' need for belonging. The summit gave participants a chance to recover and reimagine Christian practices in order to address the needs they discovered through their observations and empathy work. Through the innovation process, they were encouraged to think beyond their traditional ministry assumptions and parameters, seeking solutions they deemed most helpful to support the needs of their students. Midwest Fellowship prototyped a student-led prayer group that would both respond to youth's need for belonging and foster the practice of prayer.

Upon returning to their church, the Midwest Fellowship leaders met with a group of youth to test their prototype. Together, adults and students studied Acts 2:42 and imagined what a community that resembled the early church could look like today. This starting point helped frame belonging within the Christian narrative and provided meaning for the formation of this potential group. The adult leaders provided vision and a potential path forward (guided by their prototype), but they also empowered the students to shape the vision of the group and lead it themselves. The adult leaders exhibited a balance of empowerment and support that provided the necessary environment for youth to lead and grow in IBP.

During and following the implementation of the student-led prayer group, youth journaled about their experiences in the prayer group and took surveys that helped evaluate the

impact of the group on their IBP. Students exhibited confidence in their religious identities as they met and invited others to join them in spiritual activities in a public space. While adult leaders assumed the students would request a classroom at their school to host the group, the students chose to meet at a nearby park instead.[vi] The students wanted to be visible to people arriving at school, hoping this would draw others to the group. The group grew quickly from 8 to 17 students as they continually invited others to join them. The 17 students demonstrated a high degree of group affiliation, which deepened their identity formation and impacted their sense of belonging, as well.

The prayer group engendered a sense of belonging as it became a trusted community in which students felt connected, exerted a high degree of influence, had relational needs met, and mutually shared emotional connection. Through this group, the students built significant friendships with those from other churches, which increased their sense of belonging beyond the prayer group meetings themselves. By the end of the semester, the 'prayer' group was attending school games and dances together. One student reflected, "I finally feel like I have a group to be part of." Others voiced that they felt "free" and felt "real ownership" of the group.

The students also developed purpose through their participation. Bronk's (2013) four marks of purpose were each exhibited by the group. First, the students demonstrated commitment to the group. When they faced challenges like inclement weather, the students viewed these challenges as bonding experiences rather than reasons not to attend. Second, the group developed a far-reaching goal. Toward the end of the semester, out of their own volition, the students began planning how they could help younger grades continue the prayer group after they (as the founders) graduate. Third and fourth, this goal was personally meaningful and bigger than themselves. By providing mentorship and ongoing opportunities to reflect and journal, the

adult leaders helped facilitate this positive purpose development and helped the students make meaning of their experiences through the Christian narrative.

Midwest Fellowship succeeded in collaborating with youth to create a community that fostered the communal habit of prayer and a deep sense of belonging to one another. The historic Christian practice was reimagined in a way that uniquely matched their students' contexts. By starting with young people, rather than programs, Midwest Fellowship avoided defaulting to preexisting models (e.g. a school-approved Christian club) and enabled the students to build a community that truly fostered belonging with their peers and cultivated the communal practice of prayer.

Project Insights and Future Directions of IBP-Focused Ministry

While Midwest Fellowship provided an encouraging example of ministry leaders reorienting their perspective to introduce a Christian practice designed to support their young people's development in IBP, we complied a diverse range of results. Our initial assessment from our first wave of churches determined that two thirds had significant shifts that proved helpful for serving young people. However, the other third struggled to implement their experiment and were not able to offer specific data due to the incomplete nature of their projects.

As the FYI team reflected on the first wave of churches engaged in the innovation process, we drew the following conclusions that have helped us improve our process. First, we sought to make our training clearer and more interactive. We moved our modules to the Canvas LMS where participants are now able to interact with our coaches and each other. This change provides peer learning, accountability, and a central hub of resources that all can access. Second, we recognized that there were times when we were not clear on our expectations regarding the size of the project or the change we hoped churches would attempt. In current and future cohorts,

we have sought to be clearer. Third, we have recognized that the cultural contexts of our churches affect the ways ministries introduce, try, and process new initiatives. Leader feedback has helped ensure we are respectful of the ways faith communities respond to leadership, new programming, serving students, and respecting the whole congregation. Fourth, our training has revealed that leaders need continual support to launch something new or different from their traditional youth ministry frames. Our work to prepare, instruct, coach, and support leaders through the cohort reminds us of the challenge we have to uphold expectations and give support toward new initiatives.

Conclusion

In this project, we have sought to identify, clarify, and illustrate the IBP constructs so that they might serve as lenses for youth leaders to better understand and respond to the needs of their young people. Instead of judging teenagers based on their behaviors (such as church attendance, obeying leaders, or giving the right answers), the IBP lenses provide ways for leaders to look beyond the surface in order to understand the deeper questions and motives teenagers hold. It is here that we might discover what matters most to our young people and can start to attend to their real concerns, questions, hopes, and dreams. Further, through the lenses of IBP, youth leaders can begin to demonstrate how the Gospel is truly good news for teenagers in their everyday lives. Through better understanding and responsive ministry, youth leaders can walk with young people in the midst of their most pressing questions: *"Who am I?", "Where do I belong?",* and *"What difference do I make?"* Additionally, the process of empathizing with young people first provides a desperately needed paradigm shift for youth ministry. Instead of starting with programs and trying to figure out ways to get young people to engage in them, we must instead ask, "How might youth ministry begin with empathizing with young people's

formative needs so that we might use our resources to help shape their IBP?" When we begin

with young people, we have the opportunity to reframe youth ministry assumptions, approaches,

and metrics.

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[i] One of our framing assumptions has been that we must start with the young person [vs. the church, programs, or adults] in mind. By empathizing with their experiences of instability, we have a better view of their needs and are compelled to join them where they are at rather than stay at a safe distance.

[ii] People's experiences of instability are noted across theological, educational, and psychological disciplines. Regarding spiritual development, we refer to the works of Sharon Daloz Parks and James Fowler; educationally, Alexandar Helen Astin, Astin and Jennifer Lindhom; John Dirkx; and Jack Mezirow; theologically, Walter Brueggemann, John of the Cross, and others.

[iii] FYI is currently half-way through the YMI project. One yearlong cohort has already been completed, the second cohort is halfway through the process, and the third and final cohort began in October, 2018 and will conclude in December, 2019.

[iv] FYI's work builds upon Scott Cormode's conception of Christian innovation. According to Cormode, "The goal of Christian innovation is to create shared stories of future hope that make spiritual sense of the longings and losses of the people entrusted to our care."

[v] Nevertheless, the FYI team also recognizes that this empathetic exercise fell short of true empathy. In order for empathy to be truly realized, it must be shared and felt between both parties. In the cohort that began at the beginning of October 2018, FYI began the cohort with leader-led focus groups and interviews in order to engage in more focused listening and interaction with the youth in their churches. The FYI team anticipates that this exercise will yield deeper levels of empathy as leaders reflect on how youth's responses relate to IBP.

[vi] Other than dropping off of the snacks and saying hello, the YMI adult leader stayed in his car at a distance to provide safety and space for the students to lead.

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