Spirituality and Ethnocultural Empathy among Italian Adolescents: The Mediating Role of

Religious Identity Formation Processes

Nicolò Maria Iannello

University of Palermo

Sam A. Hardy

Brigham Young University

Pasquale Musso

University of Palermo

Cristiano Inguglia

University of Palermo

Abstract

The current study examined the unique and combined roles of spirituality and religious identity formation processes on ethnocultural empathy among Italian youth. Spirituality was conceptualized as a desire for self-transcendence. Ethnocultural empathy entails concern for those of other cultural backgrounds. It was hypothesized that spirituality would predict ethnocultural empathy indirectly by way of religious identity commitment and in-depth exploration. Religious identity commitment is the extent to which people have invested in a particular religious worldview and community, while religious identity in-depth exploration is the degree to which they are actively seeking to learn more about their religious belief system. The sample included 301 Italian adolescents. Structural equation modeling revealed that spirituality positively and strongly predicted both mediators (i.e. religious identity commitment and in-depth exploration), and that it had a moderate, positive direct link to ethnocultural empathy. The mediators were in turn significantly related to ethnocultural empathy, with the link being negative for commitment, but positive for in-depth exploration. Finally, both of these indirect paths from spirituality to ethnocultural empathy were statistically significant. This suggests that spirituality may improve prosocial relations with those of other cultures by encouraging people to further explore their religious worldviews.

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A substantial and growing body of research demonstrates that religiosity and

spirituality can have a positive impact on adolescents, reducing engagement in antisocial and

health-risk behaviors while promoting prosociality and healthy psychosocial development

(King & Roeser, 2009). Nevertheless, little is known about how religiosity and spirituality

might affect youths' attitudes towards people from different cultural backgrounds. While a

few studies have examined relations of religiosity and spirituality with prejudice, (e.g.,

Hunsinger, Livingston, & Isbell, 2014; Streib & Klein, 2014), no research to date has linked

these constructs to ethnocultural empathy (i.e., empathy towards people from other cultures;

Wang et al., 2003). Additionally, the relative role of religiosity and spirituality in such

positive youth outcomes remains unclear (Piedmont, Ciarrocchi, Dy-Liacco, & Williams,

2009). One proposed model is that spirituality relates to positive youth outcomes via

religiosity as a mediator (Dowling, Gestsdottir, Anderson, von Eye, & Lerner, 2004). One

important facet of religiosity that may function as such a mediator is religious identity

formation (Roeser, Issac, Abo-Zena, Brittian, & Peck, 2008). Hence, the purpose of the

present study was to examine a mediation model whereby spirituality predicts adolescents'

ethnocultural empathy by way of religiosity identity formation processes.

Conceptualizing Religiosity and Spirituality

Before reviewing the research on youth outcomes of religiosity and spirituality, and

proposing our mediation model, we need to provide our conceptualization of the constructs.

Broadly speaking, religiosity is often seen as "the formal, institutional, and outward

expression" (Cotton, Zebracki, Rosenthal, Tsevat, & Drotar, 2006, p.472) of one's

relationship with the sacred (Reich, Oser, & Scarlett, 1999). Spirituality, in contrast, involves

the search for meaning in life, for a personal connection with transcendent realities

(God/High Power), and for interconnectedness with humanity (Zinnbauer et al., 1999; Worthington, 2011). In short, religiosity is typically operationalized as beliefs and practices associated with a particular religious worldview, whereas spirituality is operationalized as feelings of transcendence and interconnectedness. For the present study, we operationalized religiosity specifically as religious identity formation, given its relevance to ethnocultural empathy. Religious identity entails the extent to which people see their religious beliefs, practices, and community as central to how they want to be seen by themselves and others (Lopez et al., 2011; Roeser et al., 2008). Religious identity formation processes involve making commitments to particular worldviews, while in-depth exploration involves the extent to which people reflect on, learn about, and share their commitments (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008).

Youth Outcomes of Religiosity and Spirituality

Religiosity and spirituality seem to play a role both in individual and social outcomes for youth. In terms of outcomes for the individual, religiosity and spirituality help protect against mental illness (e.g., depression, Pearce, Little, & Perez, 2003) and health-risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol use; Jankowski, Hardy, Zamboanga, & Ham, 2013), but also promote resilience and coping (Kim & Esquivel, 2011), physical health (Rew & Wong, 2006), and psychological well-being (Petts, 2014). Regarding social outcomes, religiosity and spirituality prevent violence (Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Maynard, 2014), delinquency (Johnson, Jang, Larson, & Li, 2001), and aggression (Hardy, Walker, Rackham, & Olsen, 2012), as well as increase altruistic behavior (Hardy & Carlo, 2005), civic engagement (Gibson, 2008), and empathy (Hardy et al., 2012). There are a number of possible mechanisms for this adaptive influence of religiosity and spirituality. Religiosity can provide youth a sense of identity (King, 2003), a moral code (Smith, 2003), psychosocial skills (e.g., self-control; Hardy, Steelman, Coyne, & Ridge, 2013), and social capital (e.g., positive role models and peers;

King & Furrow, 2004). Spirituality by definition involves a motivation for teens to connect with something greater than themselves and to find a sense of purpose (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008).

One outcome of religiosity and spirituality of great importance that has received little attention is positive attitudes and behaviors towards cultural outgroup members, such ethnocultural empathy. Broadly speaking, empathy is the ability to perceive of and experience vicariously the inner experiences of others, while what is called *ethnocultural empathy* specifically takes into account racial, ethnic, or cultural differences affecting empathic processes (Rasoal, Eklund, & Hansen, 2011; Wang et al., 2003). The construct of ethnocultural empathy emerged from Ridley and Lingle's (1996) concept of "cultural empathy" consisting of cognitive, affective, and communicative aspects of empathy towards members of other cultural groups. Rasoal and colleagues (2011) suggest it is more difficult to assume the perspective of someone from a different cultural tradition than someone from the same background, making ethnocultural empathy a marker of heightened prosocial functioning. Few studies have examined this type of empathy, or positive intercultural attitudes and behaviors more generally, as an outcome of religiosity and spirituality.

Intercultural Attitudes as an Outcome of Religiosity and Spirituality

Examining intercultural attitudes (e.g., ethnocultural empathy) as an outcome of religiosity and spirituality is a compelling area of research as both are capable of preventing or promoting prejudice (Hunsberger, 1995). Studies of religion and prejudice date back to the pioneering work of Allport (1966), who argued that whether religion was a positive or negative influence on relations to outgroup members depends on one's orientation to religion. Specifically, he distinguished between *extrinsically* religious people who view religion as a means to other ends (e.g., social support) and *intrinsically* religious individuals who internalize their religion and consider it a salient end in and of itself (Allport & Ross, 1967).

Batson (1976) proposed an additional religious orientation called *quest* that entails an open and questioning approach to religion characterized by the re-examination of beliefs and the search for life meaning. Studies have generally found that quest religious orientation is negatively associated with prejudice, extrinsic religious orientation is positively predictive of prejudice, and relations for intrinsic religiosity are inconsistent and unclear (for review, Preston, Sitter, & Hernandez, 2010).

Relations between religiosity and prejudice have also been studied from other perspectives. Using a self-determination theory, one study found that people who were primarily religiously motivated to seek approval and avoid shame (i.e., introjected religiosity) were more prejudiced, while others who were religiously motivated because they had internalized religious beliefs were less prejudiced (Brambilla, Manzi, Regalia, & Verkuyten, 2013). Additionally, Village (2011) found that greater salience of religious faith was negatively associated with prejudice toward outgroup members. Streib and Klein (2014) similarly reported a negative link between the degree to which people identified as "religious" and their level of prejudice, but added that specific religious worldviews (i.e., particular beliefs) may be positively or negatively related to prejudice.

Less research has targeted the role of spirituality in prejudice. However, regarding prejudice toward sexual minorities, there is evidence that religiousness (a single item for self-identified religiousness) is predictive of more prejudice, while spirituality (a single item for self-identified spirituality) is associated with less prejudice (Cragun & Sumerau, 2015). Additionally, some spiritual practices, such as "compassion-based meditation" are linked to less racial prejudice (Hunsinger et al., 2014). It is likely that spirituality relates to lower levels of prejudice because it yields a more universal view toward humanity that sees all people as in-group members of the human race (Saroglou, 2013).

While some research has looked at prejudice as an outcome of religiosity and spirituality, few have looked at the opposite—that of empathy and altruism towards outgroup member. A fair amount of research has linked religiosity and spirituality to prosociality such as empathy and altruistic behavior more generally (for reviews, see King & Boyatzis, 2015; King & Roeser, 2009; Lerner, Alberts, Anderson, & Dowling, 2006). But, few studies have focused specifically on prosociality towards outgroup members. One study found that religiosity (a composite of religious motivation, religious involvement, and religious identity formation) was linked to positive attitudes towards outgroup members, but only after controlling for right-wing authoritarianism, a marker of prejudice (Shen, Haggard, Strassburger, & Rowatt, 2013). In other words, generally speaking more religious people have higher levels of right-wing authoritarianism, but, when that overlapping variability is removed, what is left is a religiosity that predicts more positive attitudes towards outgroup members. Another study reported how multiple indexes of religiosity and spirituality were positively correlated with compassion for close others as well as compassion for humanity (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005).

The Relative Role of Religiosity and Spirituality

When examining the importance of religiosity and spirituality to social outcomes, such attitudes and behaviors towards outgroup members, it is helpful to elucidate the relative role of religiosity and spirituality. Again, religiosity refers to the extent to which an individual is involved in beliefs and practices of a specific religious community, whereas spirituality is the human desire for transcendence, introspection, interconnectedness, and the quest for meaning in life (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Although the two constructs are interconnected but distinct (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999), there are few insights into the unique and joint contributions religiosity and spirituality play in the lives of youth. Most studies that have included both religiosity and spirituality simply compare the two as

predictors of youth outcomes, without specifying a theoretical model regarding their relative roles. Such studies have found, for example, that spirituality (a single item for self-identified spiritual) is more consistently and strongly linked to altruism than religiosity (a single item for self-identified religiousness; Saslow et al., 2013).

Regardless of how illuminating such studies are, they do not test a hypothesized conceptual model of the mechanisms by which religiosity and spirituality work together in predicting youth outcomes. For that, studies are needed specifying processes of moderation and mediation. For example, one study tested for an interaction between religiosity and spirituality, but found that spirituality (a single item for self-identified spiritual) was predictive of character regardless of whether or not youth identified as religious (measured dichotomously; James, Fine, & Turner, 2012). Most studies have looked into mediation rather than moderation. In some cases spirituality has been positioned as a mediator linking religiosity and outcomes. For instance, one study found that in Korean American adolescents, spirituality (a composite of daily spiritual experiences, beliefs about God, and private religious practices) mediated between higher religiosity (public religious involvement) and lower depression for girls and higher grades for boys (Kang & Romo, 2011). Alternatively, perhaps a more compelling model positions religiosity as the mediator between spirituality and outcomes (Dowling et al., 2004). From a positive youth development approach, teens have personal resources that encourage them to contribute to society (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Bizan-Lewin, 2011), and spirituality may be one such resource motivating religious engagement and prosociality (Lerner, Alberts, Anderson, & Dowling 2006). There is evidence that spirituality, religiosity, and thriving (a multifaceted construct suggesting successful positive youth development) are distinct constructs (Dowling, Gestsdottir, Anderson, von Eye, & Lerner, 2003), and that there may be both direct relations between spirituality (a composite of items capturing selfless concern for others and the greater good)

and thriving, and indirect relations via religiosity (a composite of religious involvement, importance, and beliefs; Dowling et al., 2004).

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to test a mediation model whereby spirituality predicts ethnocultural empathy via religiosity (operationalized as religious identity formation). This study is one of the first to test a clear conceptual model of the relative roles of religiosity and spirituality, and will be the first study to validate the model of religiosity as a mediator between spirituality and outcomes initially proposed and tested by Dowling and colleagues (2004). Additionally, this is the first study to examine the roles of religiosity and spirituality in predicting ethnocultural empathy. Lastly, this is one of the few studies linking religiosity and spirituality to intergroup attitudes among adolescents, as most such prior research has involved adults.

We attempted to capture religiosity and spirituality as distinct constructs. Spirituality was conceptualized as the universal human capacity for transcendence, interconnectedness with others and one's Higher Power, and the quest for a meaning in life (Howden, 1992; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008), which can be experienced in and/or outside of a specific religious context (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude 2003). Religiosity was conceptualized in terms of the extent to which adolescents form and evaluate their commitments in the religious domain, namely religious identity formation. We operationalized religious identity formation using the three-factors model of identity processes (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, & Meeus, 2010), involving *commitment*, *in-depth exploration*, and *reconsideration of commitment*. First individuals must make identity commitments, such as to particular religious ideologies, but then they can either deepen those commitments through in-depth exploration, or step back and reconsider those commitments, perhaps in preparation to disengage from them and redirect. In the present study we focus on religious

identity commitment and in-depth exploration, because they seem most conceptually related to ethnocultural empathy.

Hypotheses

We tested the following specific hypotheses:

First, spirituality will positively predict ethnocultural empathy, given how spirituality fosters greater connection to all of humanity.

Second, spirituality will positively predict religious identity commitment and religious identity in-depth exploration. In other words, spirituality will act as a force motivating religious identity formation processes.

Third, religious identity commitment will negatively predict ethnocultural empathy, while in-depth exploration will positively predict it. This is because in multivariate contexts, each predictor only gets credit for its unique contribution to the outcome. In this case, given that commitment and in-depth exploration are related, it is expected that the part of commitment that is independent of in-depth exploration may be akin to identity foreclosure in the identity status paradigm (Marcia, 1980), in that it may capture the more passive part of identity commitment often appropriated from parents. From a religious orientation framework, this would be similar to extrinsic religiosity, and thus likely predictive of less ethnocultural empathy (Allport & Ross, 1967). On the other hand, in-depth exploration infers pursuit of deeper religious identity formation, as with identity achievement (Marcia, 1980) and quest religious orientation (Batson, 1976), and thus would be predictive of greater ethnocultural empathy. The third process of Crocetti and colleagues' identity model, reconsideration of commitment, referring to the efforts one makes to change no longer satisfactory present commitments, was excluded from the present study, because it refers more to identity crisis than identity commitment, and thus is not capturing religiosity per se.

Fourth, religious identity formation (commitment and in-depth exploration) will mediate relations between spirituality and ethnocultural empathy, with the indirect path being negative through commitment and positive through in-depth exploration, given the above discussion.

Research Context

The sample used for the present study was composed of Italian adolescents growing up in a society strongly marked by Catholic tradition (Garelli, 2013). Given the high level of immigration to and through Italy, adolescents who live there grow up in a multicultural society where they have daily interactions with different ethnocultural groups (Musso, Moscardino, & Inguglia, 2017). Nonetheless, the country has a long and deeply-rooted religious tradition (i.e., *Catholicism*) which makes it suitable to investigate the impact of one's religious identity formation on intercultural competencies. Put differently, Italy is a context where religious differences are few but cultural differences are many. Thus effects of religious identity formation on attitudes towards outgroup members are less likely to confound religious and cultural differences.

Regarding religious identity formation in Italy, scholars argued that two main Catholic identities coexist in the country: the one being something culturally inherited rather than profoundly experienced, and the other of people who exhibit an internalized and committed adherence to the doctrine of such religious faith (Bader, Molle, & Baker, 2012). This seems to be evident among younger generations, a recent survey of 3,000 Italian young people between 15 and 34 years of age reported that although 70% defined themselves as Catholic, only 7% of them were fervent and practicing believers (Grassi, 2006). While the percentage of people identifying as Catholic in Italy (roughly 75%) is at least three times that of the U.S. (roughly 25%), a similar trend towards secularization and less internalized

Commento [P1]: This part was the conclusion of "The present study" section on the previous version of the paper. We thought it made sense to move it here, although the reviewer #2 said:

"Information about the sample in the last paragraph on p. 11 should be given in the Method section".

religiosity common across the two cultural contexts (Smith & Denton, 2005). Thus, it is possible that the processes linking spirituality, religiosity, and youth outcomes are similar.

Method

Sample

The sample included 301 adolescents, ages 13-19 ($M = 16.14$, $SD = 1.71$). In terms of gender, teens were 86% female and 24% male. Almost all participants (99%) identified their ethnicity as Italian. Regarding religious affiliation, most (75.3%) were Catholic, while 6.4% affiliated with other religious faiths, and 18.1% were not affiliated with a particular religious faith. In addition, 83% of students responded "Yes" to the question, "Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?" Teens were primarily from middle-class families (21% of mothers and 16% of fathers had education beyond high school).

Procedures

Participants were recruited through two public, non-confessional religious high schools in Southern Italy. A researcher left 450 packets with teachers that contained information about the study as well as parent consent forms. Interested students took home information and consent forms for their parents. Those who returned parental consent, and then provided self-consent, were allowed to participate. In total 327 students participated, but 26 were older than 19 so were eliminated from the present analyses. Researchers administered the questionnaires during school hours in classrooms. The surveys took about 40 minutes to complete. All measures were self-report. The local psychology department's ethics committee approved this study and all procedures were performed in accordance with the Italian Association of Psychology's ethical principles (2015) for psychological research. As such, we did not collect any identifying information in order to better ensure confidentiality, and participants were allowed to withdraw at any time.

Measures

Spirituality. Spirituality was assessed using the 28-item (α = .91) Spirituality Assessment Scale (Howden, 1992). The scale was translated from English into Italian following the recommendations of the International Test Commission (2010). Although the scale was developed among adults it has been used with adolescents (Briggs & Shoffner, 2006). Items were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Items related to the following four subscales were averaged to create four observed variables that were used as indicators of a latent spirituality variable: purpose (4 items; α = .77; sample item: "My life has meaning and purpose"), innerness (9 items; α = .82; sample item: "I have an inner strength"), interconnection (9 items; α = .76; sample item: "I have a general sense of belonging"), and transcendence (6 items; α = .65; sample item: "Even when I feel discouraged, I trust that life is good").

Religious identity formation. Two dimensions of religious identity formation (commitment and in-depth exploration) were measured using 10 items from the Italian version of the Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (U-MICS; Crocetti et al., 2010). The U-MICS assesses identity formation processes (commitment, in-depth exploration), and can be used to capture identity within different ideological and relational domains. As a reminder, in the present study we only examined commitment (5 items, α = .97, sample item: "My religion gives me security in life") and in-depth exploration (5 items, α = .97, sample item: "I try to find out a lot about my religion"). Items were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*completely untrue*) to 5 (*completely true*). Items for each subscale were used as observed indicators for latent religious identity commitment and religious identity in-depth exploration variables.

Ethnocultural empathy. Ethnocultural empathy was measured using the 31-item (α = .85) Italian version (Albiero & Matricardi, 2013) of the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (Wang et al., 2003). The scale was developed among adults but has also been used with

adolescents (Leyton-Armakan, Lawrence, Deutch, Williams, & Henneberger, 2012). The measure assesses empathic feeling and expression, empathic perspective taking, acceptance of cultural difference, and empathic awareness. Items were rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Items were averaged within the following subscales to create four observed variables that were used as indicators of a latent ethnocultural empathy variable: empathic feelings and expression (15 items; $\alpha = .81$; sample item: "I share the anger of those who face injustice because of their racial and ethnic background"), empathic perspective taking (7 items; $\alpha = .62$; sample item: "I know what it feels like to be the only person of a certain race or ethnicity in a group of people"), acceptance of cultural differences (5 items; $\alpha = .74$; sample item: "I feel annoyed when people do not speak standard Italian," reverse coded), and empathic awareness (4 items; $\alpha = .70$; sample item: "I am aware of how society differentially treats racial or ethnic groups other than my own").

Analysis Plan

Descriptive statistics for the observed variables were obtained using SPSS (version 23). Then, a series of structural equation models were estimated in Mplus (version 7.11). First, to evaluate the measurement model we conducted confirmatory factor analysis specifying latent variables for spirituality, religious identity commitment, religious identity in-depth exploration, and ethnocultural empathy, as well as all covariances between them. Second, to test the hypothesized model we estimated a full mediation model that specified spirituality as a predictor of religious identity commitment and exploration, and then those two mediators as predictors of ethnocultural empathy. Third, we estimated a partial mediation model that also included a direct path from spirituality to ethnocultural empathy as well as the indirect paths through commitment and in-depth exploration. This third model was to assess whether our proposed religious identity formation mediators fully accounted for relations between spirituality and ethnocultural empathy. As indicators of model fit, we used

the Chi square (χ^2) statistic, the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA; values below .05 indicate good fit, and below .10 moderate fit), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; values above .95 indicate good fit, and values above .90 indicate moderate fit).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. All items were approximately normally distributed (skewness < 2). Bivariate correlations among latent variables were obtained by estimating a confirmatory factor analysis model in Mplus (see table 2). The model fit the data moderately well, $\chi^2(129) = 382.86$, p = .0001, RMSEA = .08, CFI = .94, and all factor loadings were adequate (.46 to .98). All bivariate correlations were statistically significant and positive (see Table 2). Spirituality was moderately correlated with ethnocultural empathy, but strongly correlated with religious identity commitment and in-depth exploration. Religious identity commitment and in-depth exploration were strongly correlated with each other, but only moderately correlated with ethnocultural empathy.

The strong correlations between spirituality, religious identity commitment, and religious identity in-depth exploration raised concerns about potential multicollinearity when conducting the primary analyses. To evaluate the extent of multicolinearity we created mean composites for each study variable (averaging all items for a given construct) and then ran a regression model in SPSS with spirituality, religious identity commitment, and religious identity in-depth exploration as predictors of ethnocultural empathy, and requested collinearity diagnostics. The VIF values for the three predictors were in acceptable range (the highest was 3, whereas a conservative threshold is 10). Given these modest VIF values it is unlikely that multicolinearity is an issue (O'brien, 2007).

Mediation model

Next, we estimated the full and partial mediation models. In the initial estimate of the full mediation model we controlled for age and gender (added them as predictors of the mediators and outcome); however, age was not a significant predictor of any of these variables and gender was only predictive of ethnocultural empathy. Thus, age was dropped and the only path retained for gender was the one to ethnocultural empathy, and the model was re-estimated. This full mediation model fit the data moderately well, $\chi^2(146) = 414.26$, $p = .0001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .08. Next, we similarly estimated the partial mediation model, again adding gender as a control predicting the outcome, and this model likewise fit the data moderately well, $\chi^2(145) = 405. 96$, $p = .0001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .08. Lastly, we conducted a chi-square difference test to compare fit of the full and partial mediation models, which found the full mediation model to be a significantly poorer fit to the data, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 8.30$, $p < .05$. Thus, the partial mediation model was considered the final model.

In this partial mediation model (see Figure 1), spirituality positively and strongly predicted both mediators: religious identity commitment (b = 1.52, $p = .0001$; $\beta = .52$) and religious identity in-depth exploration (b = 1.34, $p = .0001$; $\beta = .49$). Additionally, spiritually had a moderate positive direct link to ethnocultural empathy (b = .37, $p = .004$; $\beta = .21$). The two religious identity formation mediators were significantly and strongly linked to the outcome of ethnocultural empathy, with the link being negative for commitment (b = -.24, $p = .01$; $\beta = -.39$), but positive for in-depth exploration (b = .31, $p = .001$; $\beta = .48$). Furthermore, the indirect effect of spirituality to ethnocultural empathy through religious identity commitment was moderate and negative (b = -.36, $p = .01$; $\beta = -.20$), while that through religious identity in-depth exploration was moderate and positive (b = .42, $p = .003$; $\beta = .23$).

Of note is that while the bivariate correlation between religious identity commitment and ethnocultural empathy was positive, the association became negative in the mediation

model. Such flipping of the sign is sometimes called a suppressor effect. In essence, when taken in whole, religious identity commitment is positively predictive of ethnocultural empathy, but, given the overlap between religious identity commitment and in-depth exploration, the unique contribution of religious identity commitment in the multivariate context becomes negative in sign. In other words, the part of religious identity commitment that is positively linked to ethnocultural empathy is redundant with religious identity in-depth exploration, and the remaining overlapping variance between religious identity commitment and ethnocultural empathy is negative.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the relative and combined roles of religiosity and spirituality in predicting youths' empathetic capacity towards people from different cultural and racial backgrounds. Specifically, the conceptual model proposed in this study is that one way spirituality is linked to ethnocultural empathy is through its role in religious identity formation processes of commitment and in-depth exploration. Religiosity as a mediator of relations of spirituality with outcomes was first proposed by Dowling and colleagues (2004), but this was the first study to further validate this model, and the first study to examine the relative role of religiosity and spirituality in ethnocultural empathy. Results supported the model in that indirect paths were found from spirituality through religious identity formation to ethnocultural empathy, as well as a direct path.

As expected, findings demonstrated that adolescents with an increased sense of spirituality have higher levels of identity commitment and in-depth exploration in the domain of religiosity. This is one of the first studies to show spirituality as a predictor of religious identity formation, but seems consistent with the notion of spirituality as a guiding force leading young people to find meaning in life and connect to something greater than themselves, such as a religious community and worldview (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen, &

Roehlkepartain, 2012; King & Boyatzis, 2015). Indeed, spirituality as a universal drive for something more than the mundaneness of daily life may be a source of motivation for youth to search for, commit to, and further explore religious communities, ideologies, and practices.

More spiritual teens also had greater empathy for those of other cultural backgrounds. This was the first study to link spirituality to ethnocultural empathy, and one of the first connecting it to empathy and altruism more generally. These results confirm prior work suggesting that spirituality may foster prosocial interactions with others (Huber & MacDonald, 2012; Markstrom, Huey, Stiles, & Krause, 2010;). Further, in terms of ethnocultural empathy specifically, it makes sense that a more expansive view of life and the world we live in, a mindset of searching and introspection, and a desire to connect with all of nature and humanity, and maybe a Higher Power, could predispose people to be more accepting of outgroup members, and perhaps not even perceiving them as being "outgroup" (Saroglou, 2013).

One important way spirituality might foster greater ethnocultural empathy is through motivating in-depth exploration of one's identity commitments, particularly or at least in the religious domain. In other words, one way teens are able to put their spiritual inclinations into action is by deeply exploring their religious community, beliefs, and practices, and what those mean to them personally. In the process of doing so, they could become more open to and accepting of alternative worldviews, and thus more connected to a broader circle of humanity (Saroglou, 2013).

The most novel and complex finding from the present study was that, when accounting for religious in-depth exploration, the relation between religious identity commitment and ethnocultural empathy was actually negative. As expected, religious identity commitment, distinct from in-depth exploration, may be akin to identity foreclosure. In other words, it is a commitment made rather passively without much awareness of alternatives -

i.e., it is a somewhat narrow-minded approach to identity formation (Marcia, 1980). It therefore makes sense that the teens higher on this form of commitment showed less empathy towards those that are culturally different from them. This idea has been demonstrated by prior studies linking foreclosed identity to greater prejudice (Fulton, 1997), as well as work by Duriez (2004) showing that rather than mere religious practices, it is the manner in which persons explore and process religious contents that is most predictive of empathy and racism. Perhaps religious communities and families that discourage religious exploration are also those that are more insular and thus discriminatory towards outgroup members.

Implications

The present study has implications for theory, research, and practice. In terms of theoretical implications, religious identity formation seems to have a double-faced function on youth thriving. An uncritically adopted religious commitment might increase a self-centered and conformist personality, whereas reflecting on one's own beliefs might motivate looking beyond the self, and lead to greater acceptance of other ethnic groups. For that matter, Saroglou (2012) pointed out that religion without openness to novelty consolidates social stability and personal coherence, but it comes at detriment to other aspects of positive youth development such as autonomy, growth, plasticity, flexibility, pluralism, and critical thinking. Regarding implications for research, this study demonstrated the utility of taking a model-based approach to examining the relative roles of religiosity and spirituality in youth development. By starting with clear conceptual model, and then testing it empirically, we were able to identify a sophisticated pattern of mediating processes. Lastly, our results point to implications for practice. Specifically, our conclusions may inform parents, educators, and religious leaders. The key message is that youths' spirituality may spark the healthy religious identity exploration necessary for them to become competent citizens (Lerner, 2004). As such, we encourage religious parents, religious schools, and religious communities to do

more than encourage participation in religious practices, internalization of religious beliefs, and adherence to religious proscriptions and prescriptions. Youth will be aided in their own personal development, and become better members of the global community, if we also encourage their spirituality and religious exploration. Both of these processes of searching involve youth reaching outside of themselves and thinking outside the box, which includes a level of uncertainty that might make religious parents, educators, and leaders somewhat uncomfortable (e.g., the youth could decide to leave the church). Nevertheless, it opens up the possibility for a deeper level of religiosity and spirituality, and greater connection to all of humanity (Brambia et al., 2013; Lerner et al., 2006).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although interesting, these findings should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the data were cross-sectional and correlational, thus hindering our ability to firmly establish the mediating processes. Future studies should use longitudinal design to better ascertain temporal ordering and causality. Second, the sample was mostly composed of Italian Catholic high school students. As a consequence, it is unclear to what extent these findings generalize to other populations. Future studies should include more diverse samples, particularly those that would allow for comparisons across religious affiliation. Finally, the measures were all self-report, thus they have the potential to lead to social desirability bias. Future studies might utilize less direct assessments such as implicit or behavioral measures.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to better elucidate the relative roles of religiosity and spirituality in positive youth development, particularly in relation to how youth interact with those of other cultural backgrounds. We found that more spiritual teens have greater feelings of ethnocultural empathy, and that one process by which spirituality may be linked to such relations to others is through religious identity formation. Thus, the present study

highlighted the potential of cultivating youth spirituality in order to foster within them a mature religious identity, and an ethnocultural empathetic ability. Spirituality motivates teens to search, reflect, and connect, and these processes might in turn help them be more open to and accepting of diverse worldviews and lifestyles. However, the caveat is that religious identity formation spurred by spiritual inclinations must involve processes of exploration or it could backfire, resulting in a closed-minded approach to the world and other people. Put differently, perhaps spirituality ideally ought to engender a movement "from an identification with a particular vision of meaning as instantiated in a particular cultural tradition towards a transcultural outlook in which an identification with the whole of humanity" (Roeser et al., 2008, p. 82). Future work should continue to clarify and investigate the relative roles of religiosity and spirituality in youth development, and seek to unpack the inherent complexities involved.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Observed Indicators

Variables	*M*	*SD*
Spirituality		
Purpose	3.54	.91
Innerness	3.14	.82
Interconnectedness	3.36	.65
Transcendence	3.00	.76
Commitment		
"My religion gives me security in life"	2.73	1.29
"My religion gives me self-confidence"	2.67	1.27
"My religion makes me feel sure of myself"	2.61	1.26
"My religion gives me security for the future"	2.50	1.24
"My religion allows me to face the future with optimism"	2.67	1.30
In-depth Exploration		
"I try to find out a lot about my religion"	2.79	1.31
"I often reflect on my religion"	3.03	1.34
"I make a lot of effort to keep finding out new things about my religion"	2.62	1.29
"I often try to find out what other people think about my religion"	2.59	1.35
"I often talk with other people about my religion"	2.62	1.32
Ethnocultural Empathy		
Empathic Feeling and Expression	4.42	.77
Empathic Perspective Taking	3.71	.85
Acceptance of Cultural Differences	5.05	.97
Empathic Awareness	4.29	1.14

Note. Samples sizes ranged from 295-301.

Table 2

Estimated Bivariate Correlations Between Latent Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Spirituality	-			
2. Commitment	.52***	-		
3. In-depth Exploration	.48***	.87***	-	
4. Ethnocultural Empathy	.24***	.15*	.25***	-

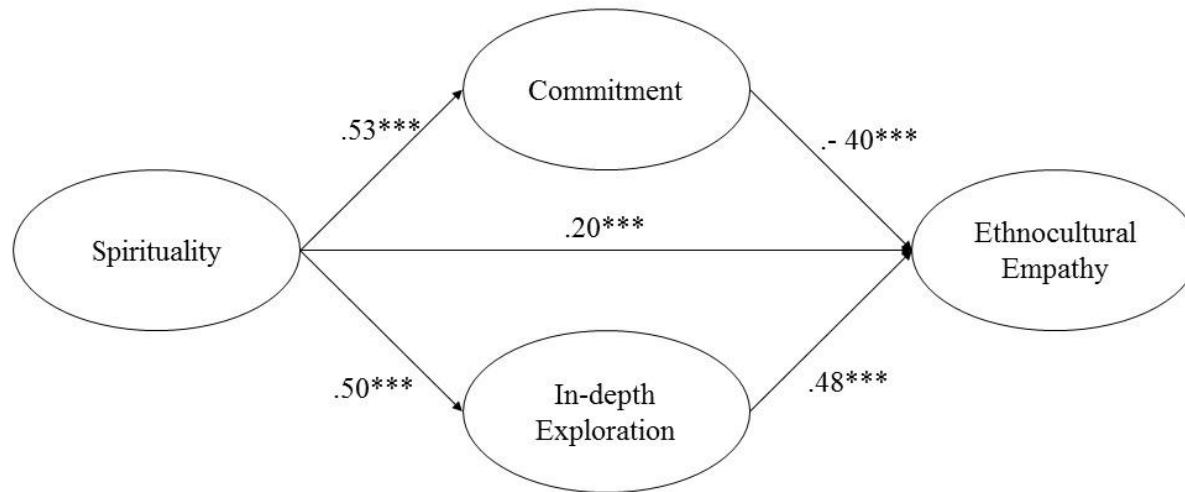*Note.* $N = 301$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Figure 1. Path diagram for best-fitting model.
$N = 327$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients (betas). Model included gender as a control variable predicting Ethnocultural Empathy, and included covariances between Spirituality and gender, and between Commitment and In-depth Exploration. The standardized indirect effects of Spirituality on Ethnocultural Empathy were $\beta = -.20$ (through Commitment) and $\beta = .23$ (through In-depth Exploration).