Åbo Akademi

OPEN ACCESS

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Theorizing religious socialization: a critical assessment

Klingenberg, Maria; Sjö, Sofia

Published in:
Religion

DOI:
10.1080/0048721X.2019.1584349

Publicerad: 01/01/2019

Document Version
(Referentgranskad version om publikationen är vetenskaplig)

Document License
Publisher rights policy

Link to publication

Please cite the original version:
Klingenberg, M., & Sjö, S. (2019). Theorizing religious socialization: a critical assessment. *Religion*, *49*(2), 163–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1584349

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

This document is downloaded from the Research Information Portal of ÅAU: 24. Oct. 2021

Introduction: Theorizing Religious Socialization: A Critical Assessment

Maria Klingenberg

Comparative religion, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland

E-mail: maria.klingenberg@crs.uu.se

Sofia Sjö

Comparative religion, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland

Introduction: Theorizing Religious Socialization: A Critical Assessment

Religious socialization remains a widely used concept amongst scholars who direct attention to the social patterns that underline the formation of religious attitudes. This article presents contemporary conceptualizations of religious socialization and provides an overview of how the concept is used in empirical studies. As the article sets the frame for the thematic issue at hand, it contains a presentation of the research project that the findings reported depart from. In line with the findings reported in the articles, we argue for an expanded understanding of religious socialization, formulated as four points. Finally, a definition of religious socialization that accounts for these four points is proposed.

Keywords: religious socialization; young adults; religious transmission; university students; emerging adults;

Introduction

Religious socialization remains a widely used concept in religious studies: in particular, it is found in studies that take an interest in how dimensions of religion are passed on through generations. Although socialization, religious socialization included, is understood as a lifelong process, it is predominantly studied in the context of children and youth. In studies on youth, religious socialization is often studied as young people's perceptions of the influence their parents have had on their attitudes, or as the way in which children's and care-takers' attitudes to religion and religious behaviors correlate (for a research overview see Petts and Desmond 2017).

The main purpose of this thematic issue is to present findings on religious socialization from the project Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective (YARG), thereby exploring the usefulness of religious socialization as a concept. Based on the material gathered in thirteen contexts worldwide, we argue that contemporary

research on religion would benefit from a broad understanding of religious socialization. In this introductory article, we present some current and frequently used definitions of religious socialization in relation to contemporary research, and discuss why a narrow focus on certain dimensions and agents of religious socialization risk making the concept insufficient for contemporary religious studies. Furthermore, we highlight some of the dimensions of contemporary religious and social change that present challenges to current understandings of religious socialization, an issue to consider since young adults simultaneously co-produce and are affected by some of these dimensions. Given that the articles in this issue are based on the same empirical study, we provide a short presentation of the main characteristics of the YARG project, and building on the findings discussed in this issue, we present four aspects that need to be considered in an expanded conceptual understanding of religious socialization.

In order to contextualize current conceptualizations of religious socialization, the article begins with an overview of the conceptual critique on socialization, as this critique both confirms and challenges established understandings of socialization. Even though our presentation departs from a conceptual critique of socialization, our aim is to illustrate the continual usefulness of socialization as a theory within religious studies. In light of our general aim, we therefore end this article by proposing a tentative definition of religious socialization.

Socialization: three main points of critique

While the notion of socialization is not new, the main ideas that underpin various socialization theories have changed and diversified over time. Here, we present three frequently mentioned points of critique that socialization theories have faced in the past. We argue that the dimensions of socialization theory pinpointed in this critique still

deserve attention, and they inform the subsequent conceptual discussion on religious socialization.

The first point of critique is directed towards conceptualizations that describe socialization as a straightforward process, according to which individuals are shaped in line with certain pre-defined and easily identifiable trajectories. The critique is by no means new: already in 1961, Wrong criticized early theorizing on socialization for presenting a simplistic understanding of humans and society and an over-socialized conception of man (Wrong 1961). A facile understanding of socialization as a process of stability and continuation along generations has limited capacity to account for the way in which social change occurs. Applied on religious socialization, conceptualizations that depict religious socialization as a process where religion is learned and thereby transmitted from one generation to the next have restricted capacity to account for religious change (cf. Furseth and Repstad 2006).

Partly in response to such critique, some socialization theories have also developed towards understanding socialization as a process that requires the active and reciprocal involvement of both the ones being socialized and the ones doing the socializing (Kuczynski and Markin 2007; Mol et al. 2013; Maccoby 2007). When the reciprocity of the socialization process is better accounted for, it also becomes more understandable how and why social and religious changes occur over time. Current debates on socialization therefore largely center on issues relating to the direction of determination (Arnett and Taber 1993; Arnett 2007), and discuss the degree of agency that the subject being socialized is able to exercise in relation to different types of social agents and in different institutional settings.

The second point of critique relates to the first and is more specifically concerned with how children and youth are understood in theories of socialization.

When children and youth are depicted as ‘objects’ of socialization, the way in which children actively interpret and negotiate the explicit and implicit messages they face have at times been largely overlooked. The underlining adult perspective behind such conceptualizations have been criticized for carrying problematic understandings of children and youth (Alanen 1988; Wyness 2012; James, Jenks and Prout 1998), and as a consequence, some novel and central developments in childhood studies no longer use socialization as a concept (cf. Corsaro 2011). Others still use the term socialization, but tend to highlight the agency of the subject being socialized (cf. Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2013; Kuusisto 2013; Storm and Voas 2012; Blunt Bugental and Grusec 2006). In many studies of media and socialization, issues of agency have taken center stage (see e.g. Arnett 1995; Anderson and McCabe 2012). Recent studies that have actively attempted to take the perspective of children and youth seriously have also resulted in discoveries of ‘new’ socialization agents, such as peers, that exert influence on what and how children and youth learn, beyond the dimensions recognized by the (adult) researcher (cf. Frønes 1995).

A third point of critique, stemming from youth studies and cultural studies, directs attention to the underpinnings that characterize many socialization studies in terms of desired learning outcomes, implying that behaviors and attitudes of young people can be both more and less desired. The critique pinpoints that studies of the ways in which young people come to hold personal viewpoints on religion, regardless of whether they include references to socialization or not, depart from understandings of what children and young people ‘ought’ to learn, meaning that young people’s behavior and attitudes are thereby measured against implicit (adult) norms (Klingenberg 2012).

While socialization constitutes the central concept in this thematic issue, we also acknowledge that much of the critique presented are valid points to take into account,

particularly in youth studies. Whereas some researchers have wanted to abandon the socialization perspective altogether, we propose that a re-conceptualization of religious socialization would be a better way to address some of the critique from previous commentators. However, before presenting the tentative definition that is used in this thematic issue, we provide an overview of the conceptualizations and usage of religious socialization in contemporary research.

Contemporary conceptualizations of religious socialization

For current perspectives on religious socialization, we turn to chapters on religious socialization in two contemporary and prominent handbooks in the sociology of religion and the conceptualizations presented there. Handbooks provide a good overview of how concepts and theories are currently understood within a research field, and for many junior researchers, they provide a gateway into understanding concepts (for a general study of religion handbooks see Stausberg 2006). It could therefore be suggested that the conceptualizations reflect common understandings of religious socialization currently at play in the research field.

The most recent post on religious socialization in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Dillon 2003) is written by Sherkat (2003), who provides two definitions of religious socialization. First, he states that the concept refers to ‘an interactive process through which social agents influence individuals’ religious beliefs and understandings’ (2003, 151). Later in the text, he describes religious socialization as ‘the process through which people come to hold religious preferences’. In this context, religious preference refers to ‘favored supernatural explanations about the meaning, purpose and origins of life – explanations that cannot be proven nor disproved’, and these preferences will in turn come to ‘help drive choices in the realm of religion’. The latter

definition focuses on individual choice rather than contextual influences, and the 'end-goal' of the religious socialization process is, thus, defined as 'religious preference', i.e. explanations containing references to the supernatural.

In *Handbook of Religion and Society* (Yamane 2016), Petts and Desmond (2016) present the definition of Spilka (2003), who refers to socialization as 'the process by which a culture (…) encourages individuals to accept beliefs and behaviors that are normative and expected within the culture' (Spilka 2003, 107). Later in the text, Petts and Desmond link religious socialization to Spilka's definition by referring to religious socialization as a process concerned with the adoption of religious beliefs and behaviors.

In the following, we will try to unfold the understandings of religious socialization conveyed in the definitions referred to above. First, we address how 'religion' is described in the definitions, i.e., the 'content matter' conveyed in the process of religious socialization. The definitions describe religion in different ways (Sherkat: 'supernatural explanations'; Spilka: 'beliefs and behaviors'), but both definitions are broad enough to capture phenomena in both institutional and non-institutional settings, which suggests that it is the subject matter being conveyed rather than the settings that determine whether processes of socialization can be understood as religious in character.

As for the nature of the socialization process, socialization is described through verbs such as 'influence' and 'encourage'. Not only do such verbs suggest that socialization assumes activity on behalf of social agents and/or the surrounding culture, but also, that religious socialization is a process initiated by the surrounding culture and/or social agents. These definitions therefore share the understanding of religious socialization as an overt process that is deliberate from the perspective of the

socialization agent. Furthermore, while both definitions acknowledge the individuals placed center-stage at this process, the role of the individual being socialized is described in different ways. Sherkat describes the socialization process as interactive; Spilka and colleagues in turn place the individual center-stage of the socialization process, albeit without explicitly acknowledging individual agency or the active learning of the individual being socialized. Both conceptualizations assume activity on behalf of the individual being socialized, but at the same time, the agency of the process is more explicitly described as a feature of the socialization agents and the surrounding culture.

How, then, do these definitions resonate with contemporary studies of religious socialization? Some recent texts acknowledge the role of social agents and the surrounding context in religious socialization in a broad manner. For example, Petts' and Desmond's (2017) research review includes studies on the role of family, peers, education, congregations, media and religious traditions in the socialization process, and Barry and Abo-Zena understands the meaning-making of emerging adults as 'the mutual informing of developmental domains' such as peers, the family, and religious communities (Barry and Abo-Zena 2014, 6-7). However, our first observation is nevertheless that the concept of religious socialization for the most part surfaces in studies on the relation between young people and their families (Kuusisto 2013; Storm and Voas 2012). To take an example, in their study of American emerging adults, Smith and Snell (2009) describe religious socialization as a teaching process, where young adults from religious homes are 'trained (…) to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers' (2009, 232), thereby equating religious socialization with strong parental religion. Smith and Snell describe how strong parental religion provides young people with religious know-how, entails training to embody certain identities and

behavioral patterns, and encourage youth to internalize a religious worldview. Substantial bodies of research have also pointed to the essential role that families and especially parents play as religious socialization agents[1] (Smith and Snell 2009; Nelson 2014; Arweck and Penny 2015; Vaidyanathan 2011), including the consequences that divorce and family discord can have on religious socialization (Ellison et al. 2011; Copen and Silverstein 2008; Zhai et al. 2008).

While the impact of the family generally is the central influence of individual religiosity, the focus on the role of families in religious socialization risks leading to religious socialization becoming understood as a much narrower concept than the definitions referred to earlier suggest. Moreover, a focus on the family coupled with an understanding of religious socialization as an overt and intentional process will not only have implications for what we come to know, but also for what systematically will fall off the radar in studies on religious socialization. The more Smith's and Snell's description of strong parental religion becomes a prototype for religious socialization, the less conceptualizations will attempt to account for the 'religious preferences' and 'beliefs and behaviors' of those who come from homes that are described as non-religious or lack distinct religious features. The way in which contemporary research often associates religious socialization with overt teaching on behalf of socialization agents, therefore risks overlooking many aspects of, in Sherkat's words, how young people come to hold religious preferences.

Our second observation relates to the first and points to how for the most part, religious socialization is studied in the contexts where young people are, in Spilka's

[1] Vaidyanathan has even suggested that the delayed entrance into adulthood argued for by Arnett (2004) and others (e.g. Smith and Snell 2009) means that 'parents may have a greater influence on offspring today than several decades ago' (Vaidyanathan 2011, 385).

terms, quite openly 'encouraged to accept beliefs and behaviors'. The strong parental religion described by Smith and Snell has institutional underpinnings and reflects a more general tendency of studies of religious socialization to take an interest in families *who are engaged* in religious communities, or/and the role of religious communities as socialization agents.

Drawing on Spilka's and colleagues' description of social learning theory, Petts and Desmond (2017) emphasize the central role of the 'sources' that young people learn from. Relating to previous research, they refer to observational spiritual learning as a recently implemented concept in studies of religious socialization, thereby suggesting that young people's spiritual development occurs through their observation and imitation of 'spiritual exemplars' in their surroundings. The role of families and religious communities as 'spiritual exemplars' are not unimportant, but at the same time, the decline of institutionalized religion in many Western settings suggest that a focus on these socialization agents alone will not cover how learning about religion occurs in a contemporary context (Lövheim 2012; Lövheim and Bromander 2012; Moberg and Sjö 2015). A focus on spiritual exemplars may therefore broaden the scope of which potential socialization agents that young people actually learn from, as long as spiritual exemplars are recognized as such in the analysis. Studies on religious socialization that are characterized by a narrow focus on parental religion and religious communities are bound to capture only a fraction of how young people learn about religion in many contexts (Klingenberg 2014).

Our third observation concerns agency. While it is true that there is growing awareness of the need to account for young people's agency in processes of religious socialization (Sabe 2007; Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2013), some issues regarding agency of young people, as reflected in studies on religious socialization, can

nevertheless be raised. First, it appears as if most studies conclude that religious socialization has occurred only in instances where young people have come to, in Spilka's words, accept certain beliefs and behaviors as their own, or when, in Sherkat's words, the influences of the environment are mirrored in the personal beliefs of the young person. Such understandings delimit the interest in young people's learning to the learning outcomes that mirror the religious preferences of the surrounding context. We suggest that a bottom-up perspective, that departs from the beliefs and behaviors or religious preferences that young people hold, and then attempt to understand the social sources for these preferences, would allow for a broader perspective on religious socialization. Furthermore, such a perspective would provide a better understanding of the 'spiritual exemplars' that young people acknowledge themselves, be it families, religious communities, or other actors in their surroundings.

Before proceeding with developing the argument for a broader perspective and presenting the working definition we propose, we turn to a presentation of the research project that has informed the undertakings presented in this issue.

Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective and the perspective of religious socialization

The aim of the transnational project Young Adult and Religion in a Global Perspective was to study the values and worldviews of university students in thirteen different contexts: Canada, China, Ghana, Finland, India, Israel, Japan, Peru, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Turkey and the USA.[2] The purpose of the project was formulated as questions about a) characteristics of young adults' religiosities and values; b) the main discourses

[2] YARG was an Åbo Akademi University Centre of Excellence 2015-2018 and funded by the Academy of Finland 2015-2019 (no. 288730).

that constitute these religiosities and values in terms of institutional, social and cultural influences, and c) the methodological and theoretical implications of the findings. The empirical studies were conducted in 2016 by a total of 45 researchers and research assistants.

With the exception of Japan, where only the survey was conducted, the project has used a mixed-method approach, departing from a survey including the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ) (n≈4900), developed by Schwartz and colleagues (Schwartz et al. 2001). Most participants were between 21 and 24 years of age when they took part in the study. The youngest participants are found in China and the USA, where the mean age of the case study participants are below 21, and the oldest in Sweden, where the mean age is 24. While a gender distribution was aimed for in the survey data, the data reflects a slight imbalance in terms of gender, as 39.8% identify as male, 59.7% as female and 0.5% as other, in the total survey sample.

At the end of the survey, participants were asked about their interest in taking part in individual interviews. In order for the material to include a rich array of perspectives, the selection of interviewees aimed at variation in terms of the interviewees' value profiles, demographic factors and religious background. The qualitative part of the study constituted interviews that began with the Faith-Q-Set (FQS), a new instrument developed by Professor David Wulff and revised by the YARG-team. FQS constitutes a set of cards containing statements on religious subjectivities. The participant is asked to sort the statements on a scale from agreement to disagreement, also leaving room for sorting out the statements being considered as irrelevant. The interviews with the participants that followed the FQS-sorting were semi-structured in character (n=562).

Both the YARG-survey and the interviews have delved into questions of socialization. The survey included questions on religious upbringing, religious belonging and sources of guidance, and the interviews following the FQS tapped into questions on how agreement and disagreement with certain statements related to the participant's background and social context. The interview material has thereby contributed to the mapping of the social sources that young adults consider important for their values and worldviews.

The data from the YARG project provides a useful test case for addressing a broadened understanding of religious socialization in several ways. As the project transcends the contexts in which the vast part of research on religious socialization has been conducted[3], the findings, which reflect the variety of cultural settings studied, have required researchers to revisit assumptions about, for example, the role of religious communities in religious socialization. Second, the shared research design of all case studies provide a common frame for the findings from the project, yet the flavors from the cultural contexts permeate the interviews and bring forth various perspectives on the themes discussed. As for religious socialization, the project's focus on the viewpoints of young adults provides a perspective on religious socialization where young people's reflections and negotiations become the focal point. Finally, the way in which the interviews departed from the FQS-statements rather than a more open question about 'religion' appears to have tilted the conversations on religious socialization into fruitful and sometimes unexpected directions. The way in which FQS introduces 'religion' as a multi-faceted phenomenon seems to have generated a richer material than a straightforward semi-structured interview on this topic.

[3] The rather narrow focus on Western cultures, particularly North American, in studies on religiosity and values has previously been pointed out by, for example, Trommsdorff and Chen (2013, xxv).

However, we also see that the frames of the study set certain limits to our knowledge about religious socialization. While the focus on university students made it feasible to conduct a study of this scope, university students are not representative for youth in general in the contexts studied, and the degree to which the participants are representative of university students in the national context they are part of also vary. It is therefore important to note that while case studies are referred to as nations, findings and accounts from the study are not representative of university students in the respective countries. We also acknowledge that the accounts of socialization found in the interviews are not exhaustive, and furthermore, being interview data, they are socially constructed in accordance with the dialogical situations they were generated in.

The YARG-study's focus on young adults, an age group often considered to be unique, also deserves a comment. The notion of young adulthood as a unique transitional life phase relates to the idea of 'emerging adulthood', described as a specific developmental stage in-between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett 2000). Emerging adulthood is described as a consequence of particular post-war social and cultural changes that have resulted in extended periods of education before entering work-life as well as postponement of marriage, family formation, and a professional career (Arnett 2004; Smith and Snell 2009; Barry and Abo-Zena 2014). It has been argued that these structural changes are much more evident in some societies and cultures than in others, and it has also been noted that people who belong to different segments of the same societies experience the social consequences of these changes in different ways (Arnett 2000; Nelson, Bagder and Wu 2004; Bynner 2005). Scholars have therefore come to highlight the context-dependent nature of notions of adulthood, in relation to factors such as class and ethnicity (see e.g. Arnett and Galambos 2003; Mayseless and Scharf 2003; Nelson, Badger and Wu 2004). At the same time, research in this area has

nevertheless clearly indicated that emerging adulthood is not a phenomenon peculiar to Western societies and cultures, as it can be identified as a life stage in a much broader array of different social and cultural contexts (see e.g. Facio et al. 2007).

The idea of ‘emerging adulthood’ resonates with the research population for the YARG study, since those who take part in higher education generally do not view themselves as yet fully holding either the abilities or responsibilities that are commonly associated with adulthood (Arnett 2016). However, the extent to which the university students who have taken part in the study in fact have resembling characteristics that make them ‘emerging adults’ is an empirical question rather than a theoretical assumption. A brief look at the survey data provides some insight. As highlighted above, the participants are between 18 and 25, thereby passing as young adults in terms of age. The vast majority (85.5%) reported being single at the time of the study: the second largest category reported cohabiting with a partner or living in a common-law-marriage (9.6%). Indicators that would suggest young people already having made a transition from emerging adulthood were less common: only 4.3% reported being married or in a registered partnership, and 4.4% reported having children. There are some contextual differences to these patterns, but we nevertheless contend that the overall picture makes it suitable to refer to our research population as emerging adults. References to Arnett’s (2004) and Smith’s and Snell’s (2009) work on emerging adults are therefore found in many of the articles in this thematic issue.

A final note concerns how the thematic issue reflects the YARG data in its entirety. While the survey data referred to include all thirteen case studies, the qualitative analyses do not cover all case studies to an equal extent. The theoretical aims of the respective articles, coupled with the research interests of the researchers who decided to engage in the work with the thematic issue, have admittedly put some of the

case studies into the limelight more than others. In order to bring out the richness of the data, an important guideline for all articles was, however, that each article should include data from at least two case studies. As a whole, the thematic issue therefore provides important insights into patterns of religious socialization that reflect both the similarities and the differences of the contexts studied.

A broader scope for religious socialization

On a number of issues, the findings from YARG have confirmed previous theorizing regarding religious socialization, but the YARG data also suggests further exploration of what kind of learning religious socialization entails. In light of the notions presented in this issue, we suggest four ways in which studies on religious socialization should be broadened in order to remain a relevant concept for contemporary studies.

As a response to tendencies of previous research, we argue that 1) *religious socialization is most gainfully studied as a process occurring simultaneously in several different settings, thereby acknowledging the many different ways in which young people encounter religion*.

The YARG project did not depart from a specific theoretical understanding of how and in which settings religious socialization occurs, and the conversations with the participating young adults include references to a number of sources of influence for their own worldviews. In this thematic issue, the socialization agents that young adults identify as influencing their worldviews are highlighted. Some of the findings clearly resonate with previous research. For example, Golo et al. (2019) explore primary religious socialization in Ghana, India and Poland, and their data supports the vital significance of primary religious socialization in these contexts. However, this compilation of articles also includes texts that challenge traditional understandings of

religious socialization. Moberg et al. (2019) build on the fast growing field of media, religion and socialization research and analyze the role of media in religious socialization in Ghana, Peru and Turkey. The article from Dahl et al. (2019), in turn, provide interesting insights into how young people understand the interplay between different socialization agents on their paths toward the non-religious worldviews they currently hold.

Our second point is that 2) *Studies of religious socialization need to explore fluctuating affiliations and positions of non-religion to a higher extent than they currently do, and in line with this argument, conceptualizations must also account for such positions*.

Individualization is claimed to be one of the main features of religious change in Western societies. Many young adults grow up in cultural contexts where the right to choose for oneself is both underscored and taken for granted. Patterns of individualization have been especially prevalent in studies on young adults and religion (Arnett and Arnett Jensen 2002), where being true to oneself and following one's own interests have been described as central features (Mikkola, Niemelä and Pettersson 2007; Niemelä 2015). The religiosity of young adults has been described as being less about doctrines, membership and tradition and more about finding one's place among a variety of influences (Dandelion 2010; Woodhead 2010). Although the theory of individualization has been problematized, this perspective has still been highlighted as essential when trying to comprehend contemporary processes of social and religious change in different contexts (Houter, Aupers and de Koster 2011; Furseth 2018).

It could be argued that individualization and religious socialization present two contradictory perspectives on social life, as one emphasizes agency and the other structure, but previous research has suggested that individualization should be

understood as a factor that informs processes of religious transmission and socialization. For example, it has been pointed out that also conservative parents in many contexts argue for the need to choose and learning to make once own choices (Hoover 2006). Furthermore, Voas and Crockett (2005) have indicated that the argument that children should be allowed to choose for themselves may result in religious beliefs not being transmitted in an active way. Such tendencies suggest yet another way in which individualization inform religious socialization.

Tendencies of individualization pose inherent challenges to pre-conceived categories such as ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, and in the case of the YARG project, the trans-national scope of the study further augments this challenge. One of the aims of the YARG project was therefore to assess the validity of such pre-conceived categories from an empirical perspective, and one of the reasons for implementing the Faith-Q-Set was its ability to capture variations of standpoints without departing from such categories. In this issue, one article clearly reflects this general aim of the project. By analyzing the religious socialization of those who identify as non-religious, Dahl et al. (2019) explore the boundaries for religious socialization as a concept by applying it on a social phenomenon that has seldom been studied within this frame. When non-religion is understood as socially anchored and analyzed from a socialization perspective, questions regarding how young people in different cultural contexts reach these positions and who the important agents are in this process are raised. Dahl et al.´s article provide insight into the different paths leading to non-religion and how these paths are shaped by the contexts in which they occur.

Our third point is that, 3) *Religious socialization needs to be conceptualized in a manner that gives room for agency-related perspectives*. The previous overview of the critique directed towards socialization theory has already brought forward the need for

agency-related perspectives on religious socialization. One of the prevalent points of critique directed towards socialization theory is that socialization theories tend to overestimate the extent to which young people adapt to their environment, and that dependency on one's environment does not necessarily imply lack of independent reasoning. The agency of young people, and the way in which it turns socialization into a reciprocal process, has been highlighted in studies on parenting and the different outcomes of different parenting styles (Gunnoe and Moore 2002; Nelson 2014; Madge, Hemming and Stenson 2013). Thus, while it is true that socialization is context-dependent in terms of how much weight is ascribed to ideas of independence and individualism (Arnett and Taber 1993), there are both theoretical and empirical grounds for suggesting that the agency of young people needs to be accounted for in studies on religious socialization.

One reason for the tendency to emphasize the role of the surrounding culture in processes of socialization relates to young people's general living conditions. Arguably, a young person's dependency on his or her surroundings for the fulfillment of basic needs do not provide the best conditions for demonstrating agency. However, it is also true that the direct impact of certain socialization agents considered especially important declines with age (Settersten 2002). Given that the YARG study is conducted amongst university students, it is beneficial to understand processes of religious socialization in a way which accounts for the agency of those interviewed.

In fact, the reasons for the interest in studying religion amongst young adults partly relate to issues of agency. Adolescence and young adulthood are considered to be central times for reflections on religious and spiritual issues and finding one's own perspectives on these issues (Arnett 2004; Abo-Zena and Barry 2014). Adolescence and young adulthood have also been noted as times of general religious decline, which can

be related to both individual and contextual factors (Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler 2007; Arnett 2004; Voas and Crockett 2005; Koenig 2015). The interest in young adults is also related to an interest in cultural, religious and social change that young adults are part of; as previous research has indicated, change usually occurs between rather than within cohorts (Ryder 1965). For example, young adults of today are the first generation that have grown up in a media-saturated world. Compared to older generations, young people therefore have experiences that deserve attention in their own right (Roberts et al. 2003: Possamai 2009; Barry et al. 2010; Collins-Mayo and Beaudoin 2010).

While the interview and FQS-data from YARG reflects the perspective of young adults at a more general level, perspectives of agency are especially prevalent in three articles in this issue. In their article on the use of media for religious purposes, Moberg et al. (2019) discuss the concept of self-socialization and the interrelated idea of agency (Arnett 1995; Heinz 2002; Arnett 2007). Their article ties into previous research on religion and media and tests how well notions of self-socialization can be argued to work in different contexts. The article highlights the in many ways independent use of media in the studied contexts, but also, challenges a simplified notion of self-socialization: young adults can be argued to in many ways be in charge of their socialization, but this does not entail that traditional socialization agents can or should be ignored. Furthermore, Golo et al.'s (2019) study concludes in a discussion on the role of primary socialization agents during young adulthood. While the findings point to the continuous role of primary socialization agents in the lives of young adults, notions of agency also permeate the accounts from those interviewed. Dahl et al. (2019) in turn highlight how identification as non-religious sometimes implies that the young adult has taken a stand and decided against the religious provision provided by his or her family.

Finally*, 4) Religious socialization needs to be understood as a social phenomenon that has different contours in different cultural contexts.*

Our final point has also been made elsewhere. For example, Trommsdorff (2013) has called for a more culture-informed approach to religious socialization that more aptly considers the culture-related differences between religious beliefs and practices, as well as how cultures impact on adolescent religiosity in different ways. It has already become evident that a project such as YARG requires researchers to revisit their assumptions and working hypotheses. We argue that context-sensitivity is needed, not only in order to identify differences, but also to notice similarities. In this thematic issue, the article of Vrublevskaya, Moberg and Sztajer (2019) builds on the discovery that the interviews in two different case studies, Russia and Poland, included similar tendencies of highlighting the role of grandmothers as religious socialization agents. However, a more careful analysis also pointed at contextual differences between how grandmothers were described in their roles as socialization agents. Their findings point to the ways in which religious socialization and the role of socialization agents are influenced by the broader societal context in which it takes place. Furthermore, studies on religious majorities and minorities highlight how majority and minority positions inform religious socialization in different ways (Kelley and De Graaf 1997). This becomes prevalent in the article of Broo et al. (2019), who explore the religious socialization of minority groups and how religious minority positions are formed in India and Israel.

Conclusion

In this introductory article, we have highlighted some of the issues with contemporary conceptualizations of socialization in general and religious socialization in particular.

We began by a presentation of three concerns commonly associated with socialization theories, and then moved on to a discussion on how contemporary definitions of religious socialization resonate with empirical research on the subject. Building on previous conceptualizations as well as the findings of the YARG-project, we have presented four aspects of religious socialization that should be accounted for in conceptualizations of religious socialization in order to retain the theory's value and relevance as a tool for research. We suggest a broader acknowledgment of which settings to study which would also take the religious socialization processes of those outside of institutional contexts into account, and a broadening of understandings of agency and contextual variations.

Based on these findings and building on previous theorizing we suggest that the articles in this issue is informed by the following definition of religious socialization: *'the process in which an individual comes to hold preferences in relation to dimensions understood as religious in the surrounding context'*. The processual character of religious socialization mirrors one of the understandings that Sherkat (2003) presents, and gives room for the notion that religious socialization is not delimited to certain life stages. While we acknowledge that religious socialization is more likely to occur during adolescence and young adulthood than during other life stages, we also understand religious socialization as a life-long process, which may very well be actualized and/or become more intense during other stages of the life course as well. Such an understanding implies that any study of religious socialization must also be understood as situational rather than the study of a fixed state of the art. Furthermore, much like Sherkat's definition, our definition places the subject rather than the agents exerting

influence centre-stage of the socialization process, which reflects an agency-based understanding of religious socialization.[4]

Whereas the understanding of religious socialization as a process concerning 'preferences' is also an inspiration from Sherkat, our understanding of the preferences that religious socialization actually result in are somewhat different. We do not assume that the end goal of religious socialization is religious preference, since religious preference in our reading narrows down religious socialization to concerning only those who prefer religion. Instead, we suggest that religious socialization results in 'preference in relation to dimensions understood as religious'. Such a definition gives room for studying both religious standpoints, non-religious standpoints, and everything in between from a socialization perspective. While it could be argued that 'preference' connotes a cognitive understanding of what 'religion' ultimately entails, we suggest that preference also may be reflected in how 'religion' is lived and practiced.

In line with the broadened understanding of religious socialization that we have called for in this article, we also suggest that religious socialization concerns 'dimensions understood as religious'. With this outlook, we specifically want to highlight the contextual understanding of religion and the need to be aware of contextual aspects. Our definition thus also encourages a continuous discussion of how to define and comprehend religion. It should also be noted that our definition does not name specific agents, contexts or actors that would be understood as especially significant in the socialization process, which is also a response to the broadened view of religious socialization we have proposed here.

---

[4] However, whereas Sherkat speaks of religious socialization as 'the process through which *people* come to hold religious preferences' (2003, 152), we have chosen to have *the individual* as the starting point in the definition suggested above.

It could be argued that the definition we present here becomes much too broad, meaning that anything and everything can become a matter of religious socialization. In fact, this is partly our point. With a more explorative approach in relation to religious socialization, researchers are challenged to go beyond a focus on certain set relationships and conditions and instead try to capture the complex processes at hand. Some possible ways of doing this are presented in the articles of this issue, but this is also a methodological challenge for future research. With this thematic issue and the definition of religious socialization presented here, we do not wish to end the discussion on contemporary religious socialization, but bring new life and perspectives to the discussion and inspire creative research that may both build on and challenge our views and findings.

Notes on contributors

Dr. Maria Klingenberg is a lecturer in social sciences of religion at Uppsala University, Sweden. Her main research area is youth and religion in the Nordic context. She has worked as a post doc scholar within the YARG project.

Dr. Sofia Sjö is Senior Researcher in the YARG project core team at the Department of Comparative Religion at Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland. Her research focuses on religion and media, religion and gender, and religious and social change. Recent publications include contributions to *Journal of Religion and Film*, *Religion and Gender*, and *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* and she is the co-editor of *Religion, Media, and Social Change* (Routledge 2015, with Kennet Granholm and Marcus Moberg).

References

Abo-Zena, Mona M., and Carolyn McNamara Barry. 2014. "Reflections on the Long and Winding Road of Meaning-Making." In *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality*, edited by Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena, 255-269. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alanen, Leena. 1988. "Rethinking Childhood." *Acta Sociologica* 31 (1): 53-67. doi: 10.1177%2F000169938803100105

Anderson, Laurel, and Deborah Brown McCabe. 2012. "A Coconstructed World: Adolescent Self-Socialization on the Internet." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 31 (2): 240. doi: 10.1509/jppm.08.043

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 1995. "Adolescents' Uses of Media for Self-Socialization." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 24 (5): 519.

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 2000. "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties." *American Psychologist* 55 (5): 469-480. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 2004. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 2007. "Socialization in Emerging Adulthood: From the Family to the Wider World, from Socialization to Self-Socialization." In *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, edited by Joan E. Crusec and Paul D. Hastings, 208-230. New York: The Guilford Press.

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 2016. "College Students as Emerging Adults: The Developmental Implications of the College Context." *Emerging Adulthood* 4 (3): 219-222. doi: 10.1177%2F2167696815587422

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen, and Nancy L. Galambos. 2003. “Culture and Conceptions of Adulthood.” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 100, summer 2003: 91-98. doi: 10.1002/cd.77

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen, and Lene Arnett Jensen. 2002. “A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults.” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 17 (5): 451-467. doi: 10.1177%2F0743558402175002

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen, and Susan Taber. 1993. “Adolescence Terminable and Interminable: When Does Adolescence End?” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 23(5): 517-537.

Arweck, Elisabeth, and Gemma Penny. 2015. “Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity: Socialising Agents and Factors Emerging from Qualitative and Quantitative Data of a Nation-Wide Project in the UK.” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36 (3): 255-273. doi: 10.1080/07256868.2015.1029890

Barry, Carolyn McNamara, and Mona M. Abo-Zena, eds. 2014. *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Barry, McNamara Carolyn, Larry Nelson, Sahar Davarya, and Shirene Urry. 2010. “Religiosity and Spirituality during the Transition to Adulthood.” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 34 (4): 311-324. doi: 10.1177%2F0165025409350964

Blunt Bugental, Daphne, and Joan E. Grusec. 2006. “Socialization Processes.” In *Handbook of Child Psychology; Vol. 3: Social, emotional and personality development.* 6th Ed, edited by Nancy Eisenberg, 366-428. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Broo, Måns, and Sawsan Kheir with Mallarika Sarkar. 2019. “Two cases of religious socialization among minorities.” *Religion* (this issue).

Bynner, John. 2005. Rethinking the Youth Phase of the Life-course: The Case for Emerging Adulthood. *Journal of Youth Studies* 8 (4): 367-384. doi: 10.1080/13676260500431628

Collins-Mayo, Sylvia, and Tom Beaudoin. 2010. “Religion, Pop Culture and 'Virtual Faith'.” *Religion and Youth*, edited by Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, 17-24. Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate.

Copen, Casey E., and Merril Silverstein. 2008. “The Transmission of Religious Beliefs across Generations: Do Grandparents Matter?.” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 39 (1): 51-71.

Corsaro, William A. 2011. *The Sociology of Childhood*. 3rd Ed. Sociology for a new century series. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.

Dahl, Karoliina, Nurit Novis-Deutsch, Janne Kontala, Slawomir Sztajer, and Maria Klingenberg with Avivit Mussel. 2019. ”Religious Socialization of Non-Religious University Students.” *Religion* (this issue).

Dandelion, Pink. 2010. “Conclusion.” In *Religion and Youth*, edited by Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, 233-238. Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate.

Dillon, Michele, ed. 2003. *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ellison, Christopher G., Anthony B. Walker, Norval D. Glenn, and Elizabeth Marquardt. 2011. “The Effects of Parental Marital Discord and Divorce on the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults.” *Social Science Research* 40: 538-551. doi: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2010.10.010

Facio, Alicia, Santiago Resett, Fabiana Micocci, and Clara Mistrorigo. 2007. "Emerging Adulthood in Argentina: An Age of Diversity and Possibilities." *Child Development Perspectives* 1 (2) : 115-118. doi: 10.1111/j.1750-8606.2007.00025.x

Frønes, Ivar. 1995. *Among Peers: On the Meaning of Peers in the Process of Socialization.* Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

Furseth, Inger. 2018. "Introduction." In *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere: Comparing Nordic Countries*, edited by Inger Furseth, 1-29. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Furseth, Inger, and Pål Repstad. 2007. *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion : Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Taylor and Francis.

Golo, Ben-Willie Kwaku, Måns Broo, and Slawomir Sztajer with Francis Benyah, Sohini Ray, and Mallarika Sarkar 2019. "Primary Religious Socialization Agents and Young Adults' Understanding of Religion: Connections and Disconnections." Religion (this issue).

Gunnoe, Marjorie Lindner, and Kristin A. Moore. 2002. "Predictors of Religiosity among Youth Aged 17-22: A Longitudinal Study of the National Survey of Children." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (4): 613-622. doi: 10.1111/1468-5906.00141

Heinz, Walter R. 2002. "Self-Socialization and Post-Traditional Society." *Advances in Life Course Research* 7: 41-64. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1040-2608(02)80029-6

Hoover, Stewart M. 2006. *Religion in the Media Age*. London: Routledge.

Houter, Dick, Stef Aupers, and Willem de Koster. 2011. *Paradoxes of Individualization: Social Control and Social Conflict in Contemporary Modernity*. Farnham: Ashgate.

James, Allison, Chris Jenks, and Prout Alan. 1998. *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kelley, Jonathan, and Nan Dirk De Graaf. 1997. “National Context, Parental Socialization, and Religious Belief: Results from 15 Nations.” *American Sociological Review* 62 (4): 639–59. doi: 10.2307/2657431.

Klingenberg, Maria. 2012. “Som Man Frågar Får Man Svar.” In *Religion Som Resurs : Existentiella Frågor Och Värderingar i Unga Svenskars Liv*, edited by Mia Lövheim and Jonas Bromander, 19–42. Skellefteå: Artos.

———. 2014. *Conformity and Contrast : Religious Affiliation in a Finland-Swede Youth Context*. University of Helsinki.

Koenig, Laura B. 2015. “Change and Stability in Religiousness and Spirituality in Emerging Adulthood.” *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 176 (6): 369-385. doi: 10.1080/00221325.2015.1082458

Kuczynski, Leon, and Melanie C. Parkin. 2007. “Agency and Bidirectionality in Socialization: Interactions, Transactions, and Relational Dialectics.” In *Handbook of socialization: Theory and research*, edited by J. E. Grusec and P. D. Hastings, 259-283. New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.

Kuusisto, Arniika. 2013. “‘Feet Sturdily on the Ground but Thoughts in Heaven’: Religious Socialisation Goals of Parents in Families Affiliated with a Religious Minority.” *Journal of Religious Education* 61 (3): 30–42.

Lövheim, Mia. 2012. “Religious Socialization in a Media Age.” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 25 (2): 151-168.

Lövheim, Mia, and Jonas Bromander, eds. 2012. *Religion som resurs? Existentiella frågor och värderingar i unga svenskar liv*. [Religion as resource? Existential questions and values in the lives of young Swedes.] Skellefteå: Argos.

Maccoby, Eleanor E. 2007. "Historical Overview of Socialization Research and Theory." In *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research* 2nd ed. edited by Joan E. Grusec and Paul H. Hastings, 13-41. New York: The Guilford Press.

Madge, Nicola, Peter J. Hemming, and Kevin Stenson. 2013. *Youth on Religion: The Development, Negotiation and Impact of Faith and Non-Faith Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Mayseless, Ofra, and Miri Scharf. 2003. "What Does It Mean to Be an Adult? The Israeli Experience." *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 100, summer 2003: 5-20. doi: 10.1002/cd.71

Mikkola, Teija, Kati Niemelä, and Juha Petterson. 2007. *The Questioning Mind: Faith and Values of the New Generation*. Tampere: Church Research Institute. Publication 58.

Moberg, Marcus, and Sofia Sjö. 2015. "Mass-Mediated Popular Culture and Religious Socialisation." In *Religion, Media, and Social Change*, edited by Kennet Granholm, Marcus Moberg and Sofia Sjö, 91-109. New York: Routledge.

Moberg, Marcus, Sofia Sjö, Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo, Habibe Erdis Gökce, Rafael Fernández Hart and Sidney Castillo Cardenas with Francis Benyah and Mauricio Javier Villacrez Jó. 2019. "From Socialization to Self-Socialization? Exploring the Role of Digital Media in the Religious Lives of Young Adults in Ghana, Turkey, and Peru." *Religion* (this issue).

Mol, Jan De, Gilbert Lemmens, Lesley Verhofstadt, and Leon Kuczynski. 2013. "Intergenerational Transmission in a Bidirectional Context." *Psychologica Belgica* 53 (3): 7-23. doi: 10.5334/pb-53-3-7

Nelson, Larry J. 2014. "The Role of Parents in the Religious and Spiritual Development of Emerging Adults." In *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality*, edited

by Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena, 59-75. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nelson, Larry J., Sarah Badger, and Bo Wu. 2004. “The influence of culture in emerging adulthood: Perspectives of Chinese college students.” *International Journal of Behavioral Development*. 28 (1): 26-36.

Niemelä, Kati. 2015. “No Longer Believing in Belonging': A Longitudinal Study of Finnish Generation Y from Confirmation to Church-leaving.” *Social Compass* 62 (2): 171-186. doi: 10.1177%2F0037768615571688

Petts, Richard J., and Scott A. Desmond. 2017. “Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood.” In *Handbook of Religion and Society*, edited by David Yamane, 241–62. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research. S.l.: Springer.

Possamai, Adam. 2009. *Sociology of Religion for Generations X and Y*. London: Equinox.

Roberts, Donald F., and Ulla G. Foehr with Victoria J. Rideout and Mollyanne Brodie. 2003. *Kids and Media in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ryder, Norman B. 1965. “The cohort as a concept in the study of social change.” *American Sociological Review* 30 (6): 843-861.

Sabe, Jordi Collet. 2007. “The Crisis in Religious Socialization: An Analytical Proposal.” *Social Compass* 54 (1): 97–111. doi: 10.1177/0037768607074155.

Schwartz, Shalom H, Gila Melech, Arielle Lehmann, Steven Burgess, Mari Harris and Vicki Owens. 2001. “Extending the Cross-Cultural Validity of the Theory of Basic Human Values with a Different Method of Measurement.” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32 (5): 519-542.

Settersten, Richard A. Jr. 2002. “Socialization and the Life Course: New Frontiers in Theory and Research.” *Advances in Life Course Research* 7: 13-40. doi: 10.1016/S1040-2608(02)80028-4

Sherkat, Darren E. 2003. “Religious Socialization: Sources of Influence and Influences of Agency.” In *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Michele Dillon, 151–63. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Smith, Christian, with Patricia Snell. 2009. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spilka, Bernhard. 2003. *The Psychology of Religion : An Empirical Approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Storm, Ingrid, and David Voas. 2012. “The Intergenerational Transmission of Religious Service Attendance.” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 25 (2): 131–50.

Stausberg, Michael. 2006. “Socialization/Upbringing.” In *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, edited by Kocku von Stuckrad, 1754-1761. Leiden: Brill.

Trommsdorff, Gisela, and Xinyin Chen, eds. 2013. *Values, Religion, and Culture in Adolescent Development*. The Jacobs Foundation Series on Adolescence. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tromssdorff, Gisela. 2013. “Cultural Perspectives on Values and Religion in Adolescent Development: A Conceptual Overview and Synthesis.” In *Values, Religion, and Culture in Adolescent Development*, edited by Gisela Trommsdorff and Xinyin Chen, 3–45. The Jacobs Foundation Series on Adolescence. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Uecker, Jeremy E., Mark D. Regnerus, and Margaret L. Vaaler. 2007. “Losing My Religion: The Social Sources of Religious Decline in Early Adulthood.” *Social Forces* 85 (4): 1667-1692. doi: 10.1353/sof.2007.0083

Vaidyanathan, Brandon. 2011. "Religious Resources of Differential Returns? Early Religious Socialization and Declining Attendance in Emerging Adulthood." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50 (2): 366-387. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5906.2011.01573.x

Voas, David, and Alasdair Crockett. 2005. "Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging." *Sociology* 39 (1): 11-28. doi: 10.1177%2F0038038505048998

Vrublevskaya, Polina, Marcus Moberg, and Slawomir Sztajer. 2019. "The Role of Grandmothers in the Religious Socialization of Young Adults in Post-Socialist Russia and Poland." *Religion* (this issue).

Woodhead, Linda. 2010. "Epilogue." In *Religion and Youth*, edited by Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, 239-241. Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate.

Wrong, Dennis H. 1961. "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology." *American Sociological Review* 26 (2): 183–93.

Wyness, Michael. 2012. *Childhood and Society*. 2nd Ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Yamane, David, ed. 2016. *Handbook of Religion and Society*. New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Zhai, Jiexia Elisa, Christopher G. Ellison, Charles E. Stokes and Norvald D. Glenn. 2008. "'Spiritual, but not religious:' The impact of parental divorce on the religious and spiritual identities of young adults in the United States." *Review of Religious Research* 49 (4): 379-394.