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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank John Convey for his valuable advice on this project and Leonard DeFiore and Gilbert Saenz for their feedback on the manuscript.

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## Moral Formation in a Culture of Relativism: Correlates to Universalism and Relativism in the Moral Outlooks of Emerging Adults

*Steven Crawford Hayward*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This study explores some of the demographic, personal, and experiential factors of emerging adults that correlate to a spectrum of moral outlooks ranging from moral universalism to moral relativism. Data was gathered from 466 volunteer undergraduate students. Respondents' demographic, experiential, and personal factors served as independent variables. The relativism index score from Forsyth's (1980) Ethics Position Questionnaire served as the dependent variable. Results suggest several conclusions: First, adults in the life of youth are a significant factor in moral outlook, correlating to both universalistic and relativistic outlooks, depending on their example. Second, religious practice and involvement correlate to a universal moral outlook. Third, the personal characteristics of grit and spiritual transcendence correlate to a universal moral outlook. Fourth, engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage correlates to a relativistic moral outlook. Fifth, a Catholic school education at both the grade and high school levels correlates to a universal moral outlook.

**Keywords:** emerging adulthood, moral formation, relativism, objectivism, Catholic education

*On the threshold of the third millennium education faces new challenges which are the result of a new socio-political and cultural context. First and foremost, we have a crisis of values which, in highly developed societies in particular, assumes the form, often exalted by the media, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism. The extreme pluralism pervading contemporary*

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*society leads to behaviour patterns which are at times so opposed to one another as to undermine any idea of community identity* (Congregation for Catholic Education 1997, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, para. 1).

In a culture where individualism and postmodern notions of relativism have been increasing over time, one may ask what can be done to cultivate an objective moral outlook. More than ten years after The Congregation for Catholic Education published *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Pope Benedict wrote of a “great educational emergency” at the heart of which was the “failure to transmit certainties and values” (Benedict XVI, 2008, para. 2). The blame of this failure, Benedict wrote, could not simply be laid at the feet of the youth or their parents, rather he described a . . .

widespread atmosphere, and mindset and form of culture which induce one to have doubt about the value of the human person, about the very meaning of truth and good, and ultimately about the goodness of life. It then becomes difficult to pass on from one generation to the next something that is valid and certain, rules of conduct, credible objectives around which to build life itself (Benedict XVI, 2008, para. 3).

This atmosphere, this mindset, and culture of individual-centered subjective morality has been developing for well over a century, and its current forms have been documented by sociologists and historians (Hobsbawm, 1996; Lapsley, 2014; Murray, 2014; Smith et al., 2011). It can lead to a multitude of moralities where what is moral or immoral becomes a matter of personal taste. This is moral relativism.

Quintelier and Fessler (2012) have developed a concise explanation of the types of moral relativism. In their framework, a normative moral relativist judges the subject by the subject’s own moral standards independent of one’s own standards. In what they call extreme normative relativism, all moral actions are relatively right or wrong and, as such, every action ought to be tolerated or respected. In this study, the term moral relativism is used in a lay sense, referring to a general inability or unwillingness to pass judgement on an action due to a perceived lack of a common standard of morality.

Moral universalism, on the other hand, holds that acts can be judged as right or wrong for everyone (Quintelier and Fessler, 2012). It bases this on the existence of universal truths or standards that apply to everyone. The field of philosophy uses the term moral objectivism to refer to a moral truth that is independent of the human mind. In this sense, moral universalism differs from moral objectivism in that universalism connotes the scope of a

judgement (e.g., the judgement applies to all cultures, individuals, etc.), whereas objectivism refers to the moral truth being independent of the human mind (Goodwin & Darley, 2008); however, for the purposes of this study the term moral universalism is again used in a lay sense connoting both scope and source—a morality that applies to everyone because it is derived from universal truths.

Arnett (2014) developed the term “emerging adult” to refer to the 18–29 year-old age cohort. The term recognizes sociological changes that have occurred over the last several decades, resulting in a longer transition into practical if not legal adulthood. This study focuses on the early to mid-portion (18–24 years old) of the emerging adult population.

Among emerging adults, Smith et al. (2011) classified 60% of their sample of 18–23 year-olds as having a “highly individualistic approach to morality” in which morality is a personal choice and others are not to be judged since they are entitled to their personal opinions. Additionally, 72% of the sample described their moral decision-making process as “being based upon instinct” rather than cognitive deliberation. Schwab’s (2019) study of emerging adults’ conceptions of morality and living a “good life” found that subjects drew upon a variety of postmodern values, including individualism, idiosyncrasy, pluralism, and relativism to inform their moral decision making.

Living in a culture of relativism helps to reinforce and perpetuate a relativistic outlook (Rai & Holyoak, 2013). Rymarz (2014) has posited that individuals gravitate toward the default position of society in the absence of a compelling reason not to do so. Religious outlooks and teaching can provide a compelling counternarrative to a culture of relativism. In studies regarding changes in laws regarding the minimum drinking age and the availability of legal casinos, Hungerman (2014) found that religious individuals substitute robustly between religious and secular “consumption” as the opportunity cost of the consumption changed. He also found that religious proscriptions and teachings highlighting the opportunity cost of these behaviors played a strong role in determining the extent to which religious individuals participated in the newly liberalized activities of drinking and gambling.

Research on moral consensus (Beebe & Sackris, 2016; Goodwin & Darley, 2008) has found that where there appears to be moral agreement, people tend to view that opinion as derived from objective reasoning. Building upon this, Ayars and Nichols (2019) found evidence that when there appears to exist a high consensus on an issue of morality, this leads to a perceived universalist judgement and that this judgement can be independent of any authority beyond the consensus itself. Such crowdsourcing of morality manifests itself in many ways in contemporary secular culture, such as through the system of “procedural ethics.” Bruguès (2009) describes this as the democratization of ethics which calls for a dialogue when an ethical situation arises and a summary vote to be held to determine the outcome. Tolerance of the other’s opinion is

valued as part of the dialogue; however, no reference to truth or an absolute value can be made, because such an appeal ends the dialogue. The resulting vote in such a dialogue is not “good,” but rather a decision of the moment that is subject to change. And so, “good” does not exist in procedural ethics.

Where does one begin to resist a culture of relativism and become an objectivist influencer, an effective purveyor of universal values? One way to approach this is to identify factors that correlate to a more universalistic moral outlook and to nurture them. Forsyth (1980) developed a tool, the Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ), that enabled studies to measure moral relativism and, consequently, identify correlates to it. The EPQ’s relativism index measures subject responses on a nine-point scale (Table 1) to determine where an individual falls along a spectrum ranging from absolute universalism to absolute relativism in their moral outlook.

**Table 1**

*The Ethical Position Questionnaire’s Relativism Scale*

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
Universalism					Relativism			
Completely Disagree	Largely Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Largely Agree	Completely Agree

*Note.* The 10 items from Forsyth’s scale are written such that the stronger the agreement, the stronger the relativism. For example, item five reads, “Questions of what is ethical for everyone can never be resolved since what is moral or immoral is up to the individual” (Forsyth, 1980, p. 178). Agreement with this position indicates a relativistic outlook, whereas disagreement indicates a universalistic outlook.

One of the consistent correlates to lower levels of relativism has been religious belief. Baumsteiger et al. (2013) found that high religiosity scores on the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire correlated with low relativism scores on the EPQ’s relativism index. Yilmaz and Bahçekapılı’s (2015) priming experiments found that “religious and meta-ethical beliefs are not only correlated but can also causally influence each other reciprocally” (p. 98). Goodwin and Darley (2008) found that the most robust predictor of moral objectivism was an ethics grounded in the religious belief of a divine being. They further identified a subset of individuals who very tightly connected ethics with religion by not admitting the possibility of right or wrong acts without the existence of a God. They described these subjects as “almost maximally objective” (p. 1360). Sarkissian and Phelan (2019) found a positive correlation between belief in Hell and an objective moral outlook.

This study seeks to broaden the scope of factors identified with moral objectivism/universalism by examining some of the demographic, experiential, and behavioral factors of emerging adults

and comparing them across a spectrum of moral outlooks ranging from moral universalism and objectivism to moral relativism and individual subjectivism.

In addition to demographic, experiential, and behavioral factors, the study also examines the dispositional characteristics of grit and spiritual transcendence and their relationship to moral outlook. The concept of grit has been used to measure a quality which involves working through challenges and maintaining commitment and effort over time, usually in the areas of educational and vocational achievement. In this study the measure is used to quantify one's grit in the face of cultural challenges—in the form of relativism in the culture—by subscribing to universal moral values. [Perry \(1970\)](#) found that individuals who maintained religiously based objective beliefs within his framework of relativism possessed potent tools for transcendence. This corresponds to the importance Pope John Paul II ascribed to a transcendent metaphysical orientation. In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Pope [John Paul II \(1998\)](#) expressed the importance of a transcendent metaphysical orientation when he wrote, “Wherever men and women discover a call to the absolute and transcendent, the metaphysical dimension of reality opens up before them: in truth, in beauty, in moral values, in other persons, in being itself, in God” (para. 83). More recently, [Rymarz \(2010\)](#) has suggested that in order to overcome the challenges of contemporary culture, one needs to cultivate “self-transcendence” in the subjects of evangelization.

### Methodology

The data for the study was solicited from undergraduate students from three universities in Texas. The sample of convenience included 560 students between the ages of 18 and 24. At two of the colleges, an email invitation to complete the survey was sent to the undergraduate student body. At the third, volunteers were solicited by sending invitations to student organizations on campus. Additionally, professors from the government department promoted the survey to their classes. As an incentive, all the survey participants at all of the institutions had the opportunity to enter a drawing for two \$100 gift cards. Student participation in the survey was completely voluntary and anonymous. Survey respondents were 36.5% male and 63.5% female. The majority of respondents (61.6%) indicated Catholicism as the religious tradition they grew up in followed by Nondenominational Christians (15.0%), Baptists (12.2%), and those indicating another religious tradition (6.9%). Just over 4% of the respondents indicated that they grew up without a religious tradition. Majorities of respondents reported attending government public or charter elementary/middle schools (53.9%) and high schools (57.7%). The next most frequent schools of attendance were Catholic: 21.2% for elementary/middle school and 23.8% for high school. A majority (83%) of respondents continued to affiliate with the religion of their youth. While 30.3% indicated they were sexually active, just 2.6% of the respondents were married.



## Instruments

Data for the study were collected using a 55-item online survey. The instrument was authored using a combination of four existing scales and a series of items informed by the literature.

### *Relativism Index*

The dependent variable of the study is the position of the subject on a universalism-relativism spectrum of moral outlooks using the ten-item index of relativism developed by Forsyth (1980). An individual averaging above 5.0 on Forsyth's scale (Figure 1) tends toward moral relativism in their responses whereas an individual averaging below 5.0 tends toward moral universalism. In other words, the lower the mean on the relativism index, the lower the relativism. All means in this study refer to the respondent's mean score on Forsyth's relativism index unless stated otherwise. The internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ) of the scale as used in this study was good.

### *Spiritual Transcendence and Grit*

Two other psychometrically validated measures were used in the survey instrument: Siedlitz et al.'s (2002) eight-item Spiritual Transcendence Index (STI) and Duckworth and Quinn's (2009) eight-item short Grit Scale. The STI was developed to measure the "subjective experience of the sacred that affects one's self-perception, feelings, goals, and ability to transcend difficulties" (Siedlitz et al., 2002, p. 441). The internal consistency of the STI ( $\alpha = .96$ ) and Grit Scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ) as used in this study were good.

Traditionally, the Grit Scale has been used to measure a quality that contributes toward achievement in widely valued goals recognized by others, usually in the areas of education and vocational achievement.

### *Demographics & Upbringing*

Seventeen items designed to identify demographic variables were included in the survey instrument. These sought to identify respondents' family situations growing up, religious traditions—or absence thereof—as well as religious service attendance currently and growing up. Respondents were able to select from representative categories/frequencies for each of these items. Other items asked the respondents if they described their parents as religious or not and spiritual or not.

### *Experiential Items*

Eleven experiential items were included to evaluate if educational and/or religious programming and other life experiences could be identified as factors correlated to moral outlook.



The survey included items regarding elementary and high school education, service learning, volunteering, mission trips, religious retreats, having participated in organizations in college, having a mentor in high school and college, and asking if the mentor provided an “ethical, religious, or spiritual model.”

Previous research has suggested that having a good relationship with at least one caring adult can have an important impact in the lives of adolescents and emerging adults (Hardie et al., 2016; Lapsley, 2014; Rymarz, 2015). The survey instrument allowed subjects to select from a variety of community-oriented activities in which they may have participated.

The final item of the survey instruments asked if subjects were currently sexually active. Although no corollary has been established between moral relativism and the sexual activity of unmarried emerging adults, multiple studies (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006; Smith & Snell, 2009; Hardie et al., 2016) have identified a corollary between sexual activity in teenagers and diminished religious practice.

### Procedures for Analysis

The survey was completed by 560 individuals. Forty-four individuals from the sample did not fall within the identified age range and an additional 50 of the survey respondents did not complete the 10 questions from the relativism index of the EPQ. These respondents were removed from the sample, resulting in a sample of  $n = 466$  individuals for analysis. Correlations were conducted on scaled independent variables and the respondents’ positional score on Forsyth’s relativism index. Analyses of variance (ANOVA) and  $t$ -tests were used to study the difference between means of the positional score on the relativism scale and nominal level variables. Finally, a series of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted of those factors that the previous analyses had found significant.

## Results

### Correlational Analyses

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for the scale variables in the study. *Religious Service Attendance During Youth* ( $r = -.292, p = .01$ ) and *Current Religious Service Attendance* ( $r = -.476, p = .01$ ) had significant negative correlations with moral relativism: more frequent religious service attendance correlated to lower levels of relativism. The dispositional variables of *Transcendence* ( $r = -.398, p = .01$ ) and *Grit* ( $r = -.109, p = .05$ ) also had significant negative correlations with moral relativism: higher scores on these scales correlated to lower levels of relativism.

**Table 2***Bivariate Correlation Matrix for Scale Variables*

	Relativism	Grit	Transcendence	Service Attendance Youth	Service Attendance Current
Relativism	1.00	-.109*	-.398**	-.292**	-.476**
Grit		1.00	.222**	-.043	.049
Transcendence			1.00	.284**	.620**
Service Attendance Youth				1.00	.452**
Service Attendance Current					1.00
<i>M</i>	4.19	3.49	4.65	4.80	4.99
<i>SD</i>	1.62	0.67	1.26	1.36	2.07

Note. \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Means reported are for the particular scale variable: *Grit* is scored on a 1 to 5 scale, weak to strong; *Transcendence* is scored on a scale of 1 to 6, weak to strong; *Religious Service Attendance* is scored on a scale of 1 (never) to 7 (more than once a week).

## Tests of Means

### *Parental Example*

One-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the marital status and living arrangements of the respondents' parents on the respondents' moral outlook. There was a significant difference of means between the parents' marital and living situation and their children's moral outlook ( $F_{4,458} = 11.98, p < .001$ ). Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction indicated that moral outlooks of the respondents whose parents were *Married and Living Together* ( $M = 3.96, SD = 1.60$ ) differed significantly from those respondents whose parents were *Married and Separated* ( $M = 5.64, SD = 1.02$ ), *Never Married and Separated* ( $M = 5.48, SD = 1.17$ ), *Unmarried and Living Together* ( $M = 5.27, SD = 1.95$ ), and *Divorced* ( $M = 4.71, SD = 1.39$ ). These results suggest that growing up with parents who are married and living together aligns with a more morally universalistic outlook and having parents who are separated or unmarried and living together aligns with a more relativistic moral outlook. Respondents whose parents are divorced exhibit weaker universalism than those whose parents are married and living together.

The use of *t*-tests identified a significant difference between a respondent classifying their parent as religious or not. Respondents who described their mothers as religious ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) had stronger universalism than those who did not describe them ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) as religious,  $t_{464} = -4.94$ ,  $p < .001$ . Respondents who described their fathers as religious ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ) had stronger universalism than those who did not describe them ( $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) as religious,  $t_{463} = -5.82$ ,  $p < .001$ . No significant differences were found when the respondents' classification of parental spirituality was examined. These results suggest that respondents' perception of their parents' religiosity is an important factor in a more universalistic moral outlook.

### *Experience During Youth*

Between subjects ANOVA revealed that respondents' school environments had a significant difference between means with regard to moral outlook. The difference was significant both at the elementary and middle school levels ( $F_{3,460} = 31.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the high school level ( $F_{3,462} = 43.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Post hoc testing using the Bonferroni correction revealed significant differences at the elementary/middle school level between respondents who attended Catholic schools ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) and public and charter schools ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), and other private schools ( $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). The difference between Catholic school attendees and those who were homeschooled was not significant. At the high school level, those students who attended Catholic schools ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ) also exhibited higher levels of moral universalism than students who attended government public or charter schools ( $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) and other private schools ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ). The difference between Catholic-schooled and homeschooled respondents was not significant.

Examination of the mentor factor revealed a significant difference in the relativism scores of students who reported having a mentor ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ) and those who reported not having a mentor ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ),  $t_{441} = -2.23$ ,  $p < .026$ ). Among those who indicated they had mentors, those who stated that their mentor provided an ethical, religious, or spiritual example ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) had significantly lower levels of relativism than those who stated that their mentor did not provide an ethical example ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ),  $t_{302} = -6.94$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results suggest that the ethical example (or lack thereof) of a mentor during the high school years is an important factor in emerging adults' moral outlooks.

Respondents who had *Participated in a Mission Trip* ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ) had stronger levels of universalism when compared to those who had not ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ),  $t_{439} = -1.99$ ,  $p = .047$ . The difference was more pronounced between those who had *Participated in a Religious Retreat* ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) and those who had not ( $M = 4.96$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $t_{441} = -6.00$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### *Identification & Behavior*

Between subjects ANOVA revealed respondents who indicated they maintained continuity with the religious tradition of their youth ( $M = 4.01, SD = 1.60$ ) had a stronger universalistic outlook than those who did not ( $M = 5.06, SD = 1.47$ ),  $t_{463} = -5.31, p < .001$ . The analysis was also conducted after removing those respondents who indicated they had grown up without a religious tradition ( $n = 20$ ). The differences between those who continued to identify with their religious tradition of youth ( $M = 3.89, SD = 1.58$ ) and those who did not ( $M = 5.10, SD = 1.43$ ) was greater,  $t_{444} = -5.38, p < .001$ . These results suggest that having a religious tradition in one's youth and maintaining continuity with it in emerging adulthood is an important factor in a universalistic moral outlook.

Respondents who described themselves as "spiritual" or "religious" had lower relativism means than those who did not. The difference between those identifying themselves as spiritual ( $M = 4.10, SD = 1.57$ ) and those as not spiritual ( $M = 4.61, SD = 1.79$ ) was significant,  $t_{463} = -2.59, p = .010$ . For those identifying themselves as religious ( $M = 3.78, SD = 1.54$ ), the mean score on the relativism index was lower than those who did not ( $M = 5.40, SD = 1.20$ ) and the difference greater:  $t_{462} = -10.39, p < .001$ . These results suggest that respondents who feel themselves to be religious or spiritual will have more universalistic moral outlooks than those who do not feel this way.

Unmarried respondents who indicated they were sexually active had higher relativism scores ( $M = 5.15, SD = 1.43$ ) than those who were not sexually active ( $M = 3.78, SD = 1.53$ ), and the difference was significant,  $t_{425} = 8.68, p < .001$ , suggesting that unmarried sexual activity is a factor of a more relativistic moral outlook. The significant difference persisted when examining males and females separately. When comparing males to females, there was no statistical significance to the difference. An increased morally relativistic outlook was present in unmarried sexual activity for both males and females.

### *Current Experience*

Similar to the results for those respondents who indicated they had mentors in high school, those who indicated they currently had mentors ( $M = 4.08, SD = 1.58$ ) scored lower on the relativism index than those who did not ( $M = 4.48, SD = 1.71$ ),  $t_{441} = -2.46, p < .014$ . The difference was greater ( $t_{305} = -4.56, p < .001$ ) when asked if the mentor had provided an ethical example ( $M = 3.95, SD = 1.52$ ) or not ( $M = 5.06, SD = 1.59$ ), with those who had a mentor that provided an ethical, religious, or spiritual example exhibiting lower levels of relativism.

Respondents had the opportunity to indicate participation in a variety of activities during both their high school and college years. Respondents who indicated they *Participated in Campus*

*Ministry* during college ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) were more universalistic than those who did not ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ),  $t_{464} = -5.05$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Given the results of the analysis, [Table 3](#) lists the seventeen factors identified in this study to have statistical significance with regard to moral outlook.

**Table 3**

*Factors with Statistical Significance to Moral Outlook*

Group and Subgroup	Factor
Upbringing	
Parental Example	Parents Married and Living Together* Describes Both Parents as Religious Religious Service Attendance During Youth
Experience During Youth	Catholic Elementary and Middle School Education* Catholic High School Education* Mentor Provided a Religious/Ethical/Spiritual Example during High School* Mission Trip Participation Religious Retreat Participation
Current Circumstance	
Disposition	Grit Transcendence
Identification & Behavior	Identification with the Religious Tradition of Youth Describes Oneself as Religious Describes Oneself as Spiritual Current Religious Service Attendance Unmarried and Sexually Active
Current Experience	Mentor Provides a Religious/Ethical/Spiritual Example Currently* Participation in Campus Ministry During College

*Note.* \*Factor was recoded into a dichotomous variable for subsequent hierarchical regression analysis.

### Hierarchical Regression

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to evaluate the predictive influence of the factors shown to have significance with regard to respondents' moral outlooks. This was

undertaken in order to determine which of the factors remained strong in a model containing multiple significant factors.

First, the factors within the categories of *Parental Example*, *Experience During Youth*, *Identification & Behavior*, *Current Experiences*, and *Disposition* were analyzed using hierarchical linear regression with relativism as the dependent variable to examine the factors' relative significance within each of these categories. The following factors were eliminated due to lack of significance within their respective categories: *Catholic Elementary and Middle School Education*, *Mission Trip Participation*, *Grit*, *Identification with the Religious Tradition of Youth*, and *Describes Oneself as Spiritual*.

Next (see Table 4), a five-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with relativism as the dependent variable to determine the combined contributions of the twelve remaining significant factors. Factors were entered in blocks: The first block consisted of the demographic variables of sex and age; the second block consisted of factors related to *Adult Modeling* and *Role Models*; the third block consisted of factors related to the respondents' *Disposition*, *Self-identification*, and *Behavior*; the fourth block consisted of two factors related to the participation in *Religious Programming* outside of religious services; and finally, the fifth block consisted of *Catholic High School Education* to determine its contribution to the variance after the other significant factors were taken into account.

The first model did not contribute significantly to the regression model:  $F_{2,421} = 0.56, p = .572$ . Adding *Adult Modeling* and *Role Model* factors to the second model contributed significantly to the regression model,  $F_{7,416} = 12.87.32, p < .001$ , and accounted for 17.5% of the variation. Introducing the self-oriented factors in the third model explained an additional 13.9% of the variation, and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F_{11,412} = 17.38, p < .001$ . Adding the *Religious Programming* factors in model four explained a minimal additional variation of 0.3%, and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F_{13,410} = 14.86, p < .001$ . Finally, adding *Catholic High School Education* at stage five explained an additional 3.7% of the variation, and this change in  $R^2$  was significant  $F_{14,409} = 16.25, p < .001$ .

Together, the factors in Model 5 accounted for 35.7% of the variation in relativism. It is composed of five significant factors: *Catholic High School Education* ( $\beta = -.207$ ), *Unmarried and Sexually Active* ( $\beta = .159$ ), *Transcendence* ( $\beta = -.130$ ), *Parents Married and Living Together* ( $\beta = -.118$ ), and *Mentor Provided an Ethical Example During High School* ( $\beta = -.093$ ). The scale variable of *Transcendence* has a negative correlation to relativism. The dichotomous variables of *Catholic High School Education*, *Parents Married and Living Together*, and *Mentor Provided an Ethical Example During High School* all had a negative association with relativism, whereas the association of *Unmarried and Sexually Active* with relativism was positive.



**Table 4***Hierarchical Regression on Selected Factors*

Factor	Model 1 Demographic Factors	Model 2 Adult Models	Model 3 Disposition Identification Behavior	Model 4 Religious Programing	Model 5 Catholic High School
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Sex	.125	.032	.007	.010	.012
Age	-.037	-.081	-.079	-.076	-.079
Parents Married & Living Together		-.157***	-.138**	-.144**	-.118**
Both Parents Religious		.098	.017	.011	.006
Service Attendance Youth		-.171***	-.047	-.031	-.018
Mentor Ethical Example H.S.		-.173***	-.108*	-.103*	-.093*
Mentor Ethical Example Now		.055	.057	.055	.039
Transcendence			-.128*	-.125*	-.130*
Describes Self as Religious			.115	.115	.105
Service Attendance Currently			-.166	-.138	-.124
Unmarried and Sexually Active			.159***	.158***	.159**
Participation in Religious Retreat				.059	.017
Participation in Campus Ministry				.026	.019
Catholic High School Education					-.207***
R <sup>2</sup>	.003	.178	.317	.320	.357
$\Delta$ R <sup>2</sup>	-	.175	.139	.003	.037
F	.56	12.87***	17.38***	14.86***	16.25***

Note. The dependent variable is the Relativism Index score; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

### Relativism Viewed Through Demographic Factors and Experience During Upbringing

The study found that there was no significant difference in moral outlook based on sex or age within the emerging adult population surveyed; however, it did identify seventeen other factors that were significant factors with regard to moral outlook. Many of these factors suggest parents play an important role in the moral outlooks of their children. Respondents who grew up with parents who were married and living together presented a stronger universalistic outlook than any



other parental circumstance. Parents provide their children with a religious tradition or none and are generally the ones responsible for their religious service attendance, or lack thereof, growing up (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). In keeping with the findings of Baumsteiger et al. (2013), Goodwin and Darley (2008), and Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015), growing up within a religious tradition was a significant contributor to a more universalistic moral outlook. More frequent attendance at religious services correlated negatively with a relativistic moral outlook. Respondents who described their mother and father as religious also exhibited higher levels of universalism than those who did not describe their parents in this way.

Parents not only model behaviors that contribute to a universal moral outlook, but as overseers of their children's education, they determine the educational environment in which their children spend a significant amount of time during their childhood and adolescence. The choice of a Catholic school or homeschooling is an important factor in a universal moral outlook.

Other adults during the respondents' formative years of high school also played a significant role as a factor in their moral outlooks as emerging adults. Those whose mentors provided an ethical example during high school had significantly higher universalism scores than those who did not. In fact, those who indicated their mentors did not provide an ethical or spiritual example had a mean score on the relativist side of the EPQ, suggesting that a mentor's example can either support or provide a counterexample to a culture of relativism.

### **Relativism Viewed Through Personal Disposition and Current Practice and Experience**

This study has empirically demonstrated a correlation between the personal characteristic of spiritual transcendence and maintaining a stronger universal moral outlook. On the level of the individual, transcendence allows one to see beyond oneself and one's individual desires and can thus be seen as a valuable tool in combating the individualism that contributes to a relativistic moral outlook.

This study also identified a correlation between higher scores on the Grit Scale and higher levels of universalism. Persistence in the face of difficulty or adversity represented by a higher grit score would seem to support Pope Benedict XVI's (2008) contention that persistence in the face of suffering helps to develop a truth-oriented outlook.

In the areas of current personal practice, those respondents who attended religious services more frequently as emerging adults correlated to higher levels of universalism. On the other hand, those respondents engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage exhibited a more relativistic moral outlook. This finding extends the research linking sexual activity outside of marriage with decreased religious service attendance (Hardie et al., 2016; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006; Smith & Snell, 2009) to also include decreased levels of moral universalism.

### Relativism and Experiential Factors

Being part of a community that provides support in the religious area is an important factor in universal moral outlook in emerging adults. Thus, those experiences related to religion presented a stronger universal moral outlook in respondents who participated in them. This was evident in the differences between those individuals who participated in religious retreats, mission trips, and campus ministry and those who did not.

A mentor in the life of college students also proved to be a significant factor in emerging adults' moral outlooks. As with mentors during the high school years, mentors who provided an ethical, religious, or spiritual example during college years had mentees whose mean on the EPQ relativism scale corresponded with a more universal moral outlook. As with mentees in high school, the mean of those who had a mentor that did not provide such an example fell on the relativistic side of the EPQ relativism scale.

### Relativism and a Catholic School Education

A Catholic school education was an important factor in the respondents' moral outlooks. This was true at both the elementary/middle and high school levels. Hierarchical regression analysis found a Catholic high school education to be the top factor among those with significance to moral outlook. This is in keeping with the mission of Catholic schools since their modern inception to provide an education in faith and morals in addition to academics (See, for example, [Leo XIII \[1885\]](#) and the [Congregation for Catholic Education \[1988\]](#)). A Catholic school that imparts student formation in line with Church teaching incorporates many of the factors deemed to be significant factors in emerging adults' moral outlooks. It provides opportunities for religious service attendance in the form of campus liturgies. It cultivates transcendence through practices such as Eucharistic adoration and the sacrament of reconciliation. It provides opportunities for participation in religious retreats and mission trips. Its faculty and staff provide modeling of and mentorship in a religious way of being and approaching life. Catholic schools provide cultural indicators that remind their students that they are Catholic ([Smith et al., 2014](#)). Catholic schools can tap into a 2000-year history of reflection on morality and to the Church's ways of looking at moral issues. It is this history that [Rymarz \(2015\)](#) suggests making use of in the "claims for plausibility" (p. 21) for its way of looking at the world. [Smith et al. \(2011\)](#) identified a lack of a moral framework for examining moral issues as being a principal cause of emerging adults' relativism. A Catholic education, faithfully implemented, provides its students with a tradition and moral philosophy grounded in a universal moral outlook.

### Implications for Practice

The findings of this study suggest some important implications for those individuals and organizations concerned with the moral development of youth. Here, focus will be placed on

the implications for the role of adults in the life of youth, for Catholic schools, and for outreach organizations. These are important avenues that provide examples, support, and accompaniment as youth develop into adults.

### The Role of Adults

Smith et al. (2011), John Paul II (1998), and Benedict XVI (2008) have maintained that if the youth of today are morally adrift, it is not of their own doing; they are merely a reflection of the wider adult culture into which they have been initiated. The findings of this study suggest that both parents and other adults can be significant factors in moral outlook of emerging adults. It is, therefore, incumbent upon adults to model and work for the climate of morality into which they would like the future generation to be enculturated. It is a challenging task for youth to progress ethically in a relativistic climate (Perry, 1970). As Murray (2014) has documented, during this past half century, the generations of adults who formerly encouraged a moral and cultural ethic to follow, have been replaced by those that have declined to continue in this role.

Today the role of mentor and encourager is difficult, requiring the courage to open oneself up to criticism and cancellation. In his emergency call, Pope Benedict XVI (2008) commended adults to reclaim their authoritativeness in order to exercise their authority in the area of moral truth and goodness, calling it an “act of true love.” Adults must have the courage to model moral universalism and encourage youth to resist the temptation of relativism and, instead, embrace the development of the rational skills necessary for exercising a reasoned universal moral outlook.

### Implications for Catholic Schools

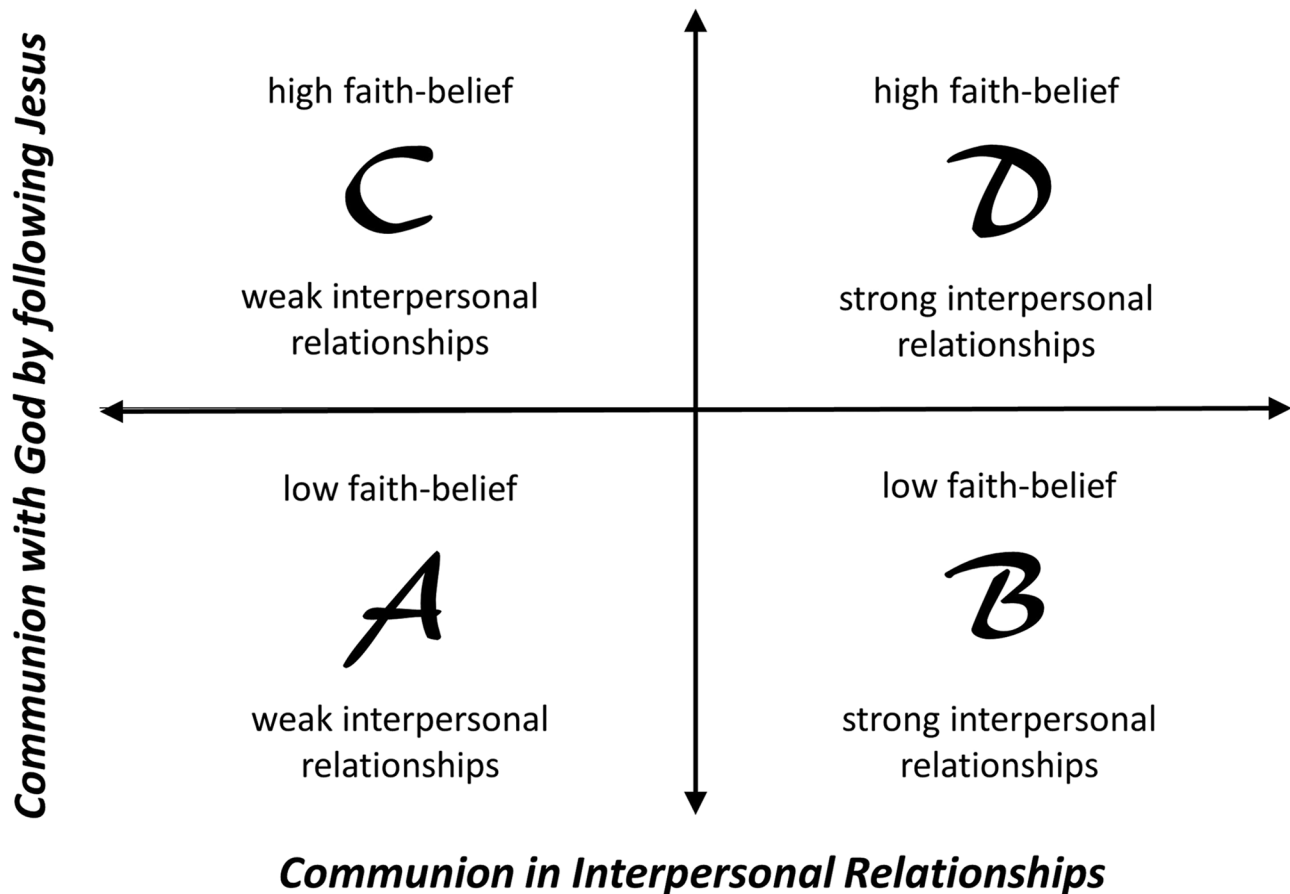
By their very iconography, Catholic grade and high schools present distinctive markers to their students and anyone who enters their halls that differentiate them from contemporary secular culture. Yet it is what goes on in these schools that helps to cultivate a student’s moral outlook. In other words, it is their Catholic identity that is key to the transmission of a culture of moral universalism.

The Congregation of Catholic Education’s (2013) statement, *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*, stresses an identity that as relational beings, humans are called to be in communion with those around them and with God. These avenues of communion provide the basis for two axes along which relations take place: A faith-belief vertical axis of *Communion with God Realized by Following the Way of Jesus* and a humanist horizontal axis of *Communion in Interpersonal Relationships*. (Figure 1) Ideally, a school should develop both of these axes in its students, locating it in quadrant D where both the Interpersonal Relationships and Faith-Belief dimensions are strong; however, weak formation in the faith-belief dimension would likely lead to locations in quadrant A or B, those quadrants conducive to the development of a relativistic moral outlook. In the current cultural climate, the

findings of [Hungerman \(2014\)](#) and the work of [Rymarz \(2009, 2014, 2015\)](#) suggest that it is more comfortable, more natural for people and institutions immersed in a culture of relativism to emphasize the *Communion in Interpersonal Relationships* dimension over the *Communion with God by Following the Way of Jesus* dimension, thus resulting in a more relativistic orientation.

**Figure 1**

*Situational Matrix of Faith-Belief and Interpersonal Relationships*



Note. Based upon [Congregation for Catholic Education \(2013\)](#).

It is the cultivation of the Congregation's axis of *Communion with God by Following the Way of Jesus* that is important for the development of a universal moral framework in emerging adults. Because of the cultural milieu of relativism, this dimension of Catholic identity should be addressed with greater intentionality.

Since adults provide an important example of moral living and action to youth and emerging adults, every employee in a Catholic school should be considered a potential model for its students.

It is important that employees in a Catholic school see themselves as models for students. In an address to students of Jesuit schools from Italy and Albania, Pope Francis (2013) stressed the importance of consistent witness of parents and all who work in schools. During the address, he took a moment to address the adults in the audience:

Teach them [students] to see the beauty and goodness of creation and of man who always retains the Creator's hallmark. But above all with your life be witnesses of what you communicate. Educators—Jesuits, teachers, operators, parents—pass on knowledge and values with their words; but their words will have an incisive effect on children and young people if they are accompanied by their witness, their consistent way of life. Without consistency it is impossible to educate! You are all educators, there are no delegates in this field (Francis, 2013, para 8).

All members of a school community should be considered as providing important witness to students and each other.

In addition to the cultivation of witness among their faculties and staffs, Catholic school leaders should consider their extracurricular programs and support structures. They should include, as Perry (1970) has recommended, programs and supports that recognize students in their courage and confirm the membership they achieve as they assume the risks of each forward movement on their ethical journey—which in the case of a Catholic school would be forward movement in recognizing and embracing a reasoned and Catholic moral framework. While recognition of student achievement in the area of academics and extracurricular activities is typically widespread, recognition of moral progress is less cut-and-dry and less prevalent, thus necessitating the creativity of Catholic school administrators to develop such recognitions.

Only through intentional reflective practice can leaders in Catholic education begin to evaluate their school culture and programs to determine if they are imbued with a Catholic identity that cultivates a universal moral outlook and fosters in their students those dispositions and skills outlined by The Congregation for Catholic Education (1988): the confidence in their ability to attain truth, the ability to make judgements about what is true and false, and the ability to make choices based on such judgements. Reflection on the presence of these dispositions and skills in their students should be part of every Catholic school leader's practice.

### **Implications for Campus Ministry and Outreach Programs**

In as much as these programs are administered by adults, they provide the opportunity for youth and emerging adults to come in contact with models and potential mentors. Care must be taken in the selection of adults who work in such programs. While religious belief and practice is paramount in such positions, attention should also be paid to candidates' universalism-relativism

orientation with regard to the broader culture. They are in the perfect position to be “encouragers” (Perry, 1970) of moral development. If such individuals are reflective of a relativistic culture, then an important opportunity is missed to provide a boundary that distinguishes its members from those outside the group. Such a marker helps religious affiliation to develop and become stronger (Rymarz, 2016). In the absence of these markers, youth-targeted programs risk becoming more influenced by the culture of relativism than providing a credible counterexample to it.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study support the idea that adults are a significant factor in the moral outlook of emerging adults. This is found in parents whose marital and living arrangements, perceived religiousness, and model of religious practice during youth were all significant factors in emerging adults’ moral outlooks. The factors of having parents who are married and living together, who are described as religious, and who attend religious services more frequently were all significant factors in a more universal moral outlook in emerging adults. Additionally, adults who play a mentoring role in the lives of youth and emerging adults are a significant factor in the moral outlook of emerging adults; a factor associated with a universal or relativistic outlook depending on the example provided. Religious practice was a significant factor of moral outlook, with stronger practice correlating to a stronger universal outlook. Describing oneself as religious or spiritual was a factor in a universal moral outlook. Experiences such as participation in campus ministry organizations, religious retreats, and mission trips were all significant factors in an individual’s moral outlook. The dispositional characteristics of transcendence and grit were significantly correlated to moral outlook and positively correlated with universalism. Sexual activity outside of marriage was a factor in a more relativistic moral outlook. Finally, a Catholic school education at both the elementary/middle and high school levels was identified as a significant factor in a universal moral outlook. Hierarchical regression analysis identified a Catholic high school education as the strongest factor among those measured in a universal moral outlook of the emerging adult. This underscores the importance of cultivating a Catholic identity in Catholic schools that embraces, articulates, and defends Catholic moral teaching. In doing so, a Catholic school can provide a credible counterexample to a culture of relativism.



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