Moral Development in a Global World
Research from a Cultural-Developmental Perspective

Edited by
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How liberals and conservatives are alike and apart: a research autobiography

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I grew up in Denmark for most of my childhood. Unlike the United States, Denmark is not particularly diverse. This was even more true when I was a child, as there were fewer immigrants than now. The vast majority of Danes, then and now, value a society where all individuals have relatively equal access to education, health services, and work and civic opportunities. In turn, everyone is expected to contribute substantial time and taxes to make this vision a sustainable reality. It is a vision and a reality based on beliefs in individual autonomy coupled with collective responsibility (see also Vainio, Chapter 3, this volume). It is not, however, based on religious or spiritual beliefs (Arnett & Jensen, 2011; Zuckerman, 2008). Religion is largely absent from individual and collective consideration. For example, unlike in the United States, meetings in city hall do not start with a prayer. There is no pledge of allegiance invoking divinity. Nor does the monetary unit avow a “trust in God.” The vast majority of Danes very rarely attend religious services. When they do it is typically to affirm family and communal ties and traditions, such as at weddings, rather than belief in God. On worldwide surveys assessing extent of religious and spiritual belief and behavior, Denmark repeatedly comes out rock bottom (Crafter, 2010).

At 18, I immigrated with my family to the United States. Like many immigrants, we came with educational and occupational aspirations (Suárez-Orozco, 2015). We were hopeful and fascinated. We also felt apart and puzzled. Certainly, the religious side of the United States was mysterious. Living in Atlanta, we wondered on Sundays where all those cars with very well-dressed people were going during the morning hours. After a busy week, all we wanted to do was read the newspaper and drink strong Gevalia coffee. Where were those Americans going? It took us several Sundays to figure it out.

By the early 1990s, I had decided to delve more deeply and systematically into this American religious side. While a graduate student at the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago, I began to attend Baptist churches as part of a dissertation project on culture, religion, and morality that I was developing. Baptists engage in full-body immersion—from head to toe—to mark the moment in their lives when they “take Jesus into their hearts” and become “saved.” For a couple of years, I attended five different Baptist churches, one large mainline church and four smaller ones that self-identify as fundamentalist. Certainly for me, attending church services a couple of times on Sundays and on Wednesday evenings (a common Baptist service time) and joining a wide variety of church community events on other days across the five churches was a kind of immersion, too. In a matter of a few weeks, I had spent more time in church than in all of my previous life put together.

This chapter describes key insights about the moral psychology of religiously liberal and conservative cultures that emerged from this ethnographic research and from interview and questionnaire research with adult church members. In turn, these insights, along with findings on moral development from other research traditions, led to my proposal of the cultural-developmental approach to moral psychology (Jensen, 2008, 2011b). The chapter also includes a review of recent research that tests and extends the cultural-developmental predictions through interviews with children, adolescents, and adults. These participants from religiously liberal and conservative communities discussed not only “public” moral issues, where judgments are applied to people in general, as in past research, but also “private” moral issues, where they made decisions for themselves. As we will see, it turns out that the two cultural groups share developmental features and moral reasoning, but with age they part company on what they think should be the “moral lingua franca” of society. This represents a new and nuanced way to understand what has commonly been termed the American “culture wars” (Hunter, 1991). As such, it also tells us something about moral reasoning and its fundamental and distinctive role in human societies and cultural socialization. This chapter, then, is a kind of research autobiography that brings together past and present insights with the hope of inspiring complex and creative new research.

Attending church: one program, different messages

The Baptist churches that I attended were all located in central Missouri, an area where smaller cities and towns, suburbs, and rural patches are puzzled together. After initially visiting some twenty churches of various denominations, I decided on the five Baptist churches that seemed good candidates for a comparison of religiously liberal and conservative congregations.1

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1 I included one larger mainline church and four smaller fundamentalist ones in order to have enough of a pool of congregants for interviews and a questionnaire survey.
have noted that religious liberals and conservatives have come to form different kinds of cultures in the United States (e.g., Bellah, 1987; Wuthnow, 1989). Old lines among Catholics, Jews, and Protestants have in many ways been supplantled by splits within religious denominations and in American culture in general. As liberal and conservative political and nonprofit organizations work together across the old religious lines, the new split finds vociferous expression in public debates—to the point where Hunter (1991), in a careful analysis of this public realignment, termed it the "culture wars." The term, borrowed from the German Kulturkampf of the Bismarckian era, is striking. It is also rather muscular. There is, after all, not an armed conflict, and heated public debates have a way of obscuring more subtle and complex individual convictions and psychologies. Still, the new public ideological split is evident. In fact, some have proposed that the American division is one example of similar post-World War II divisions that are occurring worldwide between modernism and fundamentalism (Marty & Appleby, 1995).

Once I had decided on the five Baptist churches, I met with pastors to obtain their permissions to attend their churches as a researcher and to ask if they would author a letter to their congregants endorsing the interview and questionnaire components of my study. I had expected pastors to ask a series of questions about my research approach and even to show reluctance toward an outsider of indeterminate faith. Fundamentalist churches in particular have been characterized as closed off to researchers who are not kindred spirits (Ammerman, 1987). What I promised was to aim to capture the beliefs and behaviors of congregants in a way that they would clearly recognize, even if they might not share my terminology and research vantage point. I also promised to make my findings and writings readily available. To my surprise and delight, I was met with wide open doors. As time went on, I would come to realize that pastors and congregants were welcoming for a variety of reasons, all of which were positive, but not necessarily focused on the merits of scientific research.

When I entered through church doors to attend service, I sought to follow congregation norms. Typically, I arrived early and stayed late to converse with congregation members. I participated fully in worship greetings, singing, recital of prayers, and so on. I did not take part in communion, though, since it is a practice that at least in fundamentalist churches presupposes having proclaimed one’s faith in Jesus. In most of the fundamentalist churches where women wear skirts, not trousers, I would follow suit—so to speak. In fundamentalist churches where members bring their own bibles, I, too, would bring one.

The service programs across the five churches included many of the same elements and even followed much the same order: pastor’s welcome and greetings, invocation, prayer, scriptural readings, hymns, pastor's sermon, offertory, invitation to declare one’s faith, and benediction. This traditional structural commonality did not, however, entail similar messages. Subtle behaviors conveyed profound ideological differences between liberal and conservative churches. Going back to the Bible, for example, it was not only that fundamentalist congregation members would bring their own. Their bibles were stuffed with strips of paper, scribbled notes, and sticky notes—reflecting frequent and careful study. Many women, and some men, kept their bibles in cloth carriers that were elaborately embroidered or quilted—reflecting considerable care. Also, unlike the mainline church, the fundamentalist ones would never type page numbers in the programs for where to find biblical passages, a situation that caused me considerable initial chagrin and fear of embarrassment. The absence of page numbers may partly be because fundamentalist congregation members do not all bring the same version of the Bible, but, more importantly, it undoubtedly signals the deep knowledge of the Bible expected in churches where scriptures are taken to denote divine will.

How behavioral responsibilities are distributed also differentiates the two kinds of religious communities in telling ways. Service activities and rituals at the mainline Baptist church are performed by women and men, as well as children and adults. An attempt to encourage the participation of all individuals is evident from the first to the last moment of service. For example, both women and men serve as church greeters, lead invocations, and recite scripture verses from the pulpit. Also, both women and men speak to the congregation about fund-raising drives, serve as ushers, and provide guidance to persons who make known their intent to join the church during the end-of-service invitation. Children, too, are involved side by side with adults. For example, youth groups perform musical arrangements. Also, services often include children’s sermons, where children—and the occasional small group of jesting adolescents—come to the front of the church to chat with the pastor about diverse topics. Both children and adolescents also serve as ushers—another practice that on occasion renders events less than formal with children merrily chewing gum or forgetting the protocol. The involvement of members across age and gender in the worship service signals that hierarchy between children and adults and women and men is deemphasized. There is, instead, encouragement of individual expression, equality, and inclusiveness.

In the fundamentalist churches, congregation members participate in service rituals and activities with exuberance and enthusiasm, but all members do not partake equally in responsibilities. Both women and men sing in the choir, give witness, and come to the front of the church to kneel and pray. Women, however, do not serve as church greeters or ushers, lead in prayer, or speak from the pulpit on matters of faith. This division of gender roles within the churches is one manifestation of a conservative worldview that prescribes gender role divisions in many areas of life—church, family, and society. Also, children and adolescents have virtually no responsibility for service activities and rituals.
They do not typically perform musical arrangements. They do not serve as ushers. There are no children’s sermons. In fact, children are sometimes dismissed to various classes during service. It is primarily at special times, such as Christmas, that children are actively involved through musical and theatrical performances. In one church, a children’s Christmas play featured the conversion of Kermit the Frog from hedonism to fundamentalism — in a rendition that seemed pretty far from Jim Henson’s otherwise vivid imagination. The fundamentalist division of church labor conveys a hierarchical worldview in terms of the relations between children and adults, women and men, parishioners and pastor, and — of course — humans and God.

Finally, an analysis of pastors’ sermons, too, helps us to see the different values and worldviews that guide these religiously liberal and conservative communities. Naturally, the subjects of pastors’ sermons varied and pertained to a wide variety of issues. When I analyzed themes across about a hundred sermons, three consistent messages emerged in the fundamentalist Baptist ministers’ sermons. These pertained to sin, salvation, and evangelizing. The sinfulness of human nature and the sinfulness of the present world were consistent concerns. In the words of two pastors, “lust” and proneness to “temptation” are ineradicably part of human nature. Moreover, this day and age is a time when lust is promoted rather than curtailed. For example, one pastor in a sermon spoke of how present day media and laws encourage sinful behaviors. Focusing upon “sexual lusts,” he argued that our current society promotes promiscuity, which in turn has led to the evils of abortion and sexually transmitted diseases. In his and the other pastors’ view, we must refrain from giving in to temptations — sexual or otherwise. We must “do battle” against temptation in our individual lives and in society.

The goal of salvation was another consistent theme of the pastors’ sermons. They often spoke of the goal of becoming saved. They explained that only through faith and a personal commitment to Christ can humans enter heaven. When we “receive” Christ, we experience a new birth. The pastors emphasize that being saved means that we strive to become righteous and “Christ-like” in this world, for example, by battling temptation. It also means that after this world we are ensured of entry into heaven.

The third consistent theme of the pastors’ sermons was the necessity of evangelizing. The fundamentalist pastors conceive of evangelizing as a first step toward a person’s salvation. It is a dead serious task — literally — aimed at saving family members, friends, acquaintances, and strangers from the fires of hell and granting them entry into a glorious heaven. In sermons, the pastors repeatedly invoked the necessity of evangelizing in the course of one’s daily life. They also provided favorable depictions of missionary life. In one sermon, for example, the pastor described missionary work as an arduous but noble endeavor. He explained that missionaries must sever their ties to their homes and families — they must be willing to “go anywhere, bear any burden, and sever any tie.” Yet, the lives of missionaries are ennobled by the fact that their tie to God is fortified. In the words of the pastor, God becomes “my all, my life.” The pastors’ sermons on sin, salvation, and evangelizing indicate the centrality of divine authority and the divine realm in the religiously conservative worldview. In this psychologically powerful view, the self has a divine purpose.

The mainline pastor’s top three themes were different from those of the fundamentalist ministers, as was the underlying notion of self revealed by the themes. The first prominent theme in the mainline church was the importance of respecting diverse people and their rights. The pastor’s sermons sometimes included general statements to the effect that his church welcomes all persons and does not require uniformity. At times he contrasted this to the “pushy closed-mindedness” of more conservative congregations. At the more specific level, the pastor spoke, for example, of the necessity of supporting the rights of gays and lesbians.

A second prominent sermon theme pertained to curing for both self and others. This theme was given an imaginative elaboration in one sermon when the pastor spoke of the danger of falling into the “messiah trap.” As he explained it, this is the trap where one begins to fancy oneself a messiah. He described two ways in which one may get caught. One way is to think that one can create one’s own religion and be entirely self-sufficient. The second messiah trap involves an exclusive devotion to the lives of others. It is the trap of sacrificing the self for others. The pastor, in essence, was calling for a delicate balance between individual and community considerations.

On the surface, the third theme preached by the mainline Baptist minister — evangelizing — overlapped with those of the fundamentalist ministers. Evangelizing is at the heart of Christian faith, and it is an imperative task of mainline Protestant congregations that are shrinking and aging (PewResearch, 2014). The mainline Baptist pastor often encouraged his parishioners to evangelize, but he was at pains to distance himself and his congregation from the kind of evangelizing carried out by evangelicals and fundamentalists. A telling sermon was entitled: “Reframing the troublesome task.” The task, of course, is evangelizing. According to the pastor, it is troublesome because his church must clearly distinguish itself from “Bible-thumping fundamentalists” who push a “quasi-religio-politicalo agenda” that “eventually will defame our faith.” In the pastor’s view, the evangelizing approach of fundamentalists and others akin to them is “confrontational,” “manipulative,” and “simple.” It seeks to convert persons into a faith that is “oppressive.” In order to set themselves apart from this form of evangelizing and outlook, the pastor suggested that his church bury the word evangelizing and instead begin to employ the term “disciple making.” He also suggested that two key concerns to be spoken of during “disciple making” should be those of justice and love.
We see, then, from the ethnographic research, that religious liberals and conservatives frame the self differently. To religious conservatives, the self has divine purpose in this world and the hereafter. The self may become godly, but humans are not on par with God. This hierarchical relationship between God and humans is one that also extends to and is mirrored in other relations between humans, including between men and women. To religious liberals, in comparison, the self is what might be termed a “social individual,” whose primary purposes involve balancing care for self and for others and treating all individuals in an equitable manner.

We see, too, that the cultural clash between liberals and conservatives is potent. The mainline Baptist pastor’s sermons unmistakably delineated the division and portrayed the other side in antagonistic terms. Fundamentalist pastors, meanwhile, made their view plain that hell is for real and that the modern world seems eager to get there as fast as possible. It is evident that the two sides are competing with the other each to claim its own worldview as the better one and to promote it as widely as possible.

**Interviewing adults: two hierarchies of ethics**

But how do ordinary individuals on the two competing sides see things? That was my next question. The sociological research had addressed group dynamics (Bellah, 1987; Hunter, 1991; Wuthnow, 1989). My own ethnographic work provides insight into behaviors and beliefs as expressed in church. Aiming to delve deeper into individuals’ own perspectives and explanations, I decided to interview adult members of the congregations about moral issues, especially those that seemed at the heart of the cultural clash such as family, gender relations, and views on the purpose of life (Jensen, 1997, 1998a, 1998b).

Over the course of several months, I visited the homes of forty adults who were in midlife, half from the mainline congregation and half from the fundamentalist ones.\(^2\) They volunteered to take part in interviews that addressed a variety of moral issues, including divorce, abortion, and suicide in the case of terminal illness. I would ask them to tell me whether they thought these behaviors were right or wrong and to explain their reasoning. For example, “Do you think it is morally wrong to divorce, or do you not think so?” “Why is that? What are your reasons for thinking so?” “Would you try to stop a person from divorcing?” As I have found across many interview studies on morality by now, almost everyone was open and had quite a lot to say. People are often engrossed by moral questions. Here, the official part of the interviews, the part I recorded for analysis, lasted about an hour and half on average. Often, though, people wanted to chat both before and after the interview, something I was happy to do.

The only truly knotty moment I experienced during all of the interviews occurred fairly early in the course of one visit with a fundamentalist woman. I could tell from the moment that I pulled into her driveway that she held strong convictions. Her parked car was plastered with bumper stickers, including “Life is short. Pray hard. Read the Bible!” Once inside the front door, there were religious items all over—crosses on the wall, a bible on the coffee table, plenty of sofa pillows with scripture in needlepoint. After some lemonade and friendly small talk, I started my recording device, but I had barely gotten halfway through the questions for the first issue when she suddenly gripped my arm and implored me to kneel down on the floor with her and ask Jesus to come into my heart. She was warm, passionate, beseeching. Desperately casting about in my mind for a graceful reply to a plea that I had never encountered. I finally gave her hand a gentle squeeze and said that now was not the right time. The experience was entirely outside my research protocol or anything I had learned from graduate school courses and textbooks on research methods. But it was perhaps the single most revealing moment in my research because I understood that while I had come to her house in search of knowledge about human psychology, she had opened her door to try to save my soul.

My other thirty-nine interviews were also thought-provoking but seldom as interpersonal intense. After I had transcribed all interviews, I coded the interviewees’ moral reasoning in terms of the three Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity proposed by Shweder and his colleagues (Jensen, 1995; Shweder, 1990; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, et al., 1997; see also Appendix A of this volume). These ethics entail different conceptions of the moral self. The ethic of Autonomy defines the self as an autonomous individual who is free to make choices, being restricted primarily by concerns with inflicting harm on other individuals and encroaching on their rights. Moral reasoning within this ethic centers on an individual’s rights, interests, and well-being and on equality between individuals. The Ethics of Community defines the moral self through membership in social groups such as family and nation and through responsibilities that ensue from this membership. Moral reasoning within this ethic includes a focus on a person’s duties to others and promoting the interests and welfare of groups to which the person belongs. The Ethics of Divinity defines the self as a spiritual entity. Here, moral reasoning centers on divine and natural law, injunctions and lessons found in sacred texts, and the striving on the part of a person to avoid spiritual degradation and come closer to moral purity.\(^3\) I decided to analyze my data in terms of the three ethics

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\(^2\) The age range was 35 to 55 years old. The mean age was 42.9 years (SD = 6.8) for fundamentalist Baptists and 48.6 years (SD = 6.8) for mainline Baptists.

\(^3\) A stratified random sample consisting of 20 percent of the interviews was coded by an independent rater. Reliability using Cohen’s kappa was 0.90.
because, unlike other major approaches in moral psychology at this time, they incorporated a wide variety of moral concepts and explicitly included a divinity dimension.

What I found was that although the two groups of religious liberals and conservatives showed overlap in their moral concepts and reasoning, they were also strikingly different. The groups were similar in making frequent mention of the Ethic of Community. Liberals, however, reasoned significantly more in terms of the Ethic of Autonomy for almost all of the moral issues than did religious conservatives. Meanwhile, the conservatives reasoned more in terms of the Ethic of Divinity for every issue than did liberals. Listening to the interviewees, the differences in where the cial was set on their moral compass was clear. In response to the issue of suicide in the case of terminal illness, for example, a religiously conservative man said: "I leave that in God’s hands... He gave us life, He can take the life when He wants to, and He can give us grace to go through difficulties in life while we’re here." In contrast, a liberal interviewee approached the issue from the vantage point of the individual and the loss of autonomy. Rhetorically, she asked: "Who wants to lay in bed for even one extra day of their life just to be alive, if they can’t communicate, they can’t eat by themselves?"

Ordinary individuals who belong to religiously liberal and conservative Baptist congregations care deeply about moral issues. But what comes clear is that they have different hierarchies of ethics. For conservatives, Ethics of Divinity and Community are well above the Ethic of Autonomy. For religious liberals, Ethics of Autonomy and Community are above the Ethic of Divinity. While both sides share communal concerns and values, even this commonality is not uncomplicated because, as we already saw from the ethnographic research, some of the specific differences are that each side values and wishes to pass on to the next generation differ markedly. Their views of what constitutes a good family and a good society diverge on crucial questions such as how much individual expression to allow for, how to divide the roles and responsibilities of women and men, and the extent of authority invested in parents, pastors, and other familial and social leaders (see also Jensen, 2006).

More research: replicating the two hierarchies

Interviews, especially when conducted in people’s homes, are very high on my list of ways to conduct psychological research. People say the most interesting things. They are thoughtful and often eloquent. Unfortunately, interviews are also incredibly time consuming, both to conduct and analyze. So, while what we learn has depth and complexity, we are left to wonder how broadly the findings apply. Asking myself this question, I next decided to survey a larger sample. I constructed a questionnaire pertaining to the same moral issues used in my interviews. For each issue, respondents indicated whether they judged it as right or wrong. Then, they selected from a list of six moral reasons the ones they thought were most important in supporting their judgment. I had formulated these reasons on the basis of the most common word choices and key concepts that I had heard in the course of conducting the interviews. For each list, two of the six reasons represented each of the three Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity (see Appendix D for the questionnaire. Three Ethics Reasoning Assessment, TERA). 1

I recruited 120 respondents, 60 mainline and 60 fundamentalist Baptists. Also, each Baptist group included even numbers of young, midlife, and older adults. 2 The findings replicated those from the interviews. Again, religious liberals hierarchized the Ethics of Autonomy and Community as more important than the Ethic of Divinity, whereas conservatives placed Divinity and Community above Autonomy. This was true across all three age groups.

Interestingly, these two different hierarchies of ethics have also been found in research with religious liberal and conservative Hindus in India (Jensen, 2008) and religiously liberal and conservative Lutherans in Finland (Vainio, Chapter 3, this volume). These findings are suggestive of the moral psychology that might underlie the post–World War II worldwide differentiation that social observers have noted between modernism and fundamentalism. However, I would hasten to add that we should not simply conclude that, for example, liberal American Baptists, liberal Finnish Lutherans, and liberal Hindu Indians are one and the same. That would gloss over important diversity between religions and nations, even as they appear to share a similar hierarchy of ethics.

Subsequent research by social psychologists, using a coding system derived from the three ethics, has also extended the research to political liberals and conservatives as well as continued research with ministers of liberal and conservative congregations. They have either found the same two hierarchies of ethics as in my interview and questionnaire research with religious groups (McCahams, Albaugh, Farber, et al., 2008) or something fairly similar (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2013).

Thinking about psychology: what about development?

We know, then, that religious liberals and conservatives, from young through older adulthood, have two different hierarchies of ethics. What soon puzzled me about this finding was how to reconcile it with almost a century’s worth

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1 Respondents were also provided with the option of writing their own reasons in addition to selecting from the list. This was in case some respondents did not think the list included what they considered important reasons. Only 2 percent of all reasons in the study, however, were self-generated.

2 The young adults were 19 to 27 years old (mean = 23.2, SD = 0.58), the midlife adults were 35 to 56 years old (mean = 46.5, SD = 1.49), and the older adults were 65 to 84 years old (mean = 72.7, SD = 1.30).
of developmental research on morality (Freud, 1930/1961; Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1932/1965; Turiel, 1983). All of this work postulates one universal pathway of moral development. The argument, with some variations among theories, is that young children are self-focused, then broaden their horizons to consider others as they grow older, and then come to think in terms of concepts of rights and equity in the course of adolescence or adulthood.

When I first came over to the United States from Denmark, perhaps I, too, thought that adult moral development looked one kind of way. But my research with mainline and fundamentalist Baptist adults shook me out of this cocooned conviction. Clearly, the two groups of adults are not the same. Over the course of their development they have not ended up in the same place, and it stands to reason that there must be more than one developmental pathway of moral psychology. I was not the first researcher to realize that adults from different cultures and religions varied vastly in their moral reasoning. In the early 1990s, as I collected my dissertation data, scholars working in many parts of the world were increasingly writing about a plethora of moral concepts (e.g., Edwards, 1997; Huebner & Garrod, 1991; Miller, 1994; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1990; Zimbardo, 1994). The Three Ethics formulation (Shweder, 1990) and coding manual (see Appendix A), in fact, sprang from a survey of all of these kinds of concepts.

The question remained, however, of how to describe the development of morality as a multiplicitous phenomenon. I was convinced of the validity of cultural research findings showing multiplicity. At the same time, I also thought that almost a century’s worth of moral development research had generated valuable knowledge. The question was how to bridge the findings from the cultural and universalistic research traditions (Jensen, 2011a, 2012). To me, the answer lay with a new kind of theoretical approach—one that was not unitary and static, but flexible and dynamic.

With the goal of formulating such a theory, I reviewed a large set of findings pertaining to moral reasoning, emotions, values, and judgments. As described in the introductory chapter to this book (Jensen, Chapter 1, this volume), the findings come from diverse disciplines. Based on a synthesis and some reinterpretation of the findings, I proposed the cultural-developmental approach (Jensen, 2008, 2011b). The central new idea is that there is a template for the development of each of the Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity. In other words, there is a certain ontogenetic trajectory across the life course for each. These trajectories place boundaries on the impact of culture, but they are not determinative because the trajectories are also shaped by culture.

Let’s first look at the ontogenetic templates. Figure 8.1 illustrates the trajectories across the life course for each ethic. In previous writing, I have described extensively the research basis for each trajectory (Jensen, 2008, 2011b). Here, then, I give the elevator talk version. The proposal is that Ethic of Autonomy reasoning emerges early in childhood and stays relatively, if not entirely, stable across adolescence and into adulthood. Some types of Autonomy reasoning go down after childhood but are then supplanted by other Autonomy considerations. Thus large amounts of research have shown that children in different cultures focus on harm to individuals and individual needs in regard to both self and others (Blum, 2013; Carlo, 2006; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990; Snarey, 1985; Turiel, 2002; Walker, 1989; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). In adolescence and adulthood, some consideration of the welfare of the self and other individuals remains, but now consideration of individual rights and equity also emerges—even if these concepts do not prevail across cultures (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy et al., 1995; Gilligan, 1982; Killen, 2002; Miller & Luthar, 1999; Piaget, 1932/1965; Snarey, 1985; Vasquez, Keltner, Ebenbach, et al., 2001; Walker, 1989; Walker, Pitts, Hennig, et al., 1995; Zimbardo, 1994). While the proposal is that Ethic of Autonomy reasoning remains fairly stable across the life span, it is also plausible that in cultures where there is a very strong push for collectivity or submission to divinity, there may be somewhat of a decline with age. In such cultures, considerations of the needs, desires, and interests of individuals—especially the self—would be seen as either irrelevant or even morally objectionable, and hence by adulthood such considerations might diminish.

Turning to the Ethic of Community, my review of the research indicates a rise throughout childhood and into adolescence and adulthood. Findings have consistently indicated that younger children in diverse cultures invoke Community reasons such as family interests and customs (Kohlberg, 1984; Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990; Olson & Spelke, 2008; Shweder,
Mahapatra, & Miller, 1990; Thompson, 2012). Moral reasoning related to the family is likely to find continued expression past childhood and probably even more so in the course of adolescence and adulthood as a person’s experiences with duty to family and family interests go up (Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990). By late childhood and adolescence, Community reasons that pertain to social groups other than the family are added, including concern for friends, peers, and authority figures in places such as school and work (Carlo, 2006; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006; Schlegel, 2011; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Research has also shown that by late adolescence or adulthood even more Community reasons are added, such as a focus on societal organization (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy, et al., 1995; Nisan, 1987; Walker, 1989; Zimbardo, 1994).

My proposal for the Ethic of Divinity is somewhat more tentative because research on divinity considerations in people’s moral psychology is scarce (Trommsdorff, 2012). Psychology has long eschewed the religious and spiritual sides of people’s lives, going back at least to Freud’s (1927/2010) declaration that religion is an “illusion.” Bearing in mind the caveat regarding scarcity of research findings, my proposal is that this ethic will often be low among children but will rise in adolescence and become similar to adult use. To me, it is telling that diverse religions have ceremonies in early or midadolescence that confer moral responsibility on adolescents and link that responsibility to knowledge of religious teachings (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al., 2003; Schlegel & Barry, 2015). Just to give a few well-known examples, there is the Hindu sacred thread ceremony, the Jewish bar mitzvah, or the Protestant confirmation. Furthermore, research has also indicated that adults often explain their moral behaviors in terms of divinity concepts, including adults from relatively secular communities (Colby & Damon, 1992; McAdams, Albaugh, Farber, et al., 2008; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1990; Walker, Pitts, Hennig, et al., 1995). I think the potential infusion of Divinity reasoning in adolescence may especially characterize religious groups that emphasize scriptural authority or regard supernatural entities as largely distinct from humans. In these communities, beliefs in omniscience and omnipotence, for example, are of such an abstract nature that they may be readily translated into moral reasoning only by adolescents whose cognitive skills allow for more abstraction than those of younger children (Adelson, 1971; Keating, 1990; Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1972). In short, children in these communities may well believe in God, but converting this belief into moral reasoning takes additional development. However, in religious traditions and cultures where the divine and human realms are regarded as intermeshed, it is possible that Divinity concepts are more accessible to and hence used more by children in their moral reasoning (Saraswathi, 2005). Then in the course of adolescence and adulthood, additional Divinity concepts may get added on.

As I mentioned, the templates for the ethics are flexible rather than one-size-fits-all. How early each ethic emerges and their slopes across development depend on the hierarchy of ethics within a culture. So, let us return now to what we know about the hierarchies of religiously liberal and conservative adults and see how culture shapes the trajectories. I have illustrated this in Figures 8.2A and 8.2B. Within religiously liberal groups, the expectation is that children, adolescents, and adults frequently will use the Ethic of Autonomy. The Ethic of Community will be rarer among children but will then become quite common.
among adolescents and adults. The Ethic of Divinity will be used infrequently at all ages, and if it emerges, this will occur only in the course of adolescence. For religiously conservative groups, my expectation is that children, adolescents, and adults will use Autonomy infrequently. There may be some decrease over the life span because of the strong emphasis on renouncing self-interest among religious conservatives. With respect to Community, the expectation is that its prevalence will rise steadily from childhood to reach a high level in adulthood. The Ethic of Divinity will be low among children but will then rise markedly in adolescence and remain high throughout adulthood.

Back to interviewing: how liberals and conservatives are alike and grow apart

To test the hypotheses represented by Figures 8.2A and 8.2B, I decided to return to my favorite pastime of interviewing. For this study, graduate students and I embarked on visiting the households of sixty mainline and sixty evangelical Presbyterians in a metropolitan area on the East Coast of the United States. Within each of these two religiously liberal and conservative groups, we interviewed even numbers of children, adolescents, and adults. Even though it requires a lot of driving, I prefer to interview people in their homes because it gives a sense of their everyday lives. This time around when we interviewed children, it was also a good idea because they were very comfortable at home. They could go to get a drink in the middle of an interview (Pepsi was popular), show you around their room (some did this with great pride), and jump up and down on the couch (one boy with tremendous zest).

For this study, we asked everyone about two kinds of moral issues. As in my earlier work with liberal and conservative congregants, we asked about issues such as divorce and giving money to a panhandler, where interviewees made moral judgments for people in general. For example, "Do you think that it is morally right or morally wrong for people to give money to a panhandler?" I term these "public" issues, since they involve judgments and reasoning in regard to the general public. We also asked everyone about an experience from their own life that they considered to have involved a moral decision. I term these "private" issues. We quickly found that our interviewees recounted a huge range of private moral issues, from fairly mundane matters of deciding whether to give back excess change at the grocery store to shocking accounts of being convicted for child molestation. As a research group, we met weekly to review and process what we had heard.

The children were 7 to 12 years old (mean = 10.03, SD = 1.38), the adolescents were ages 13 to 18 years old (mean = 15.03, SD = 1.60), and the adults were 36 to 57 years old (mean = 45.88, SD = 4.61). The reason why I wanted to include private moral issues in addition to public ones is that I was concerned that research on liberals and conservatives was missing a significant part of the picture in regard to their moral lives and the nature of the so-called culture wars division. For example, some scholars have claimed that liberals, unlike conservatives, do not speak in terms of Ethic of Divinity considerations at all. The assertion is that they lack this "language" (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009).

Yet, from my ethnographic research, I knew that religious liberals value religion and spirituality. Many attend church with some regularity. Many are involved in volunteer work that seems in part motivated by their faith. Also, in some other research where I had asked liberals to describe God, they provided extensive and detailed descriptions that touched on questions about the purpose of life and the extent of free will — in short, matters of morality (Jensen, 2009).

So, what were we missing? Thinking back to my earlier review of the research literature on moral psychology, I remembered that some of my colleagues had found that adults, even relatively secular ones, would invoke religion and spirituality when talking about private moral issues (Colby & Damon, 1992; McAdams Althaugh, Förber, et al., 2008; Walker, Pitts, Hemnig, et al., 1995). In fact, I, too, had found this in my first study in graduate school with alumni of the University of Chicago, few of whom were particularly conservative (Jensen, 1995). In contrast, the researchers who claim that liberals lack the moral language of divinity use surveys that address only highly hypothetical moral situations where all judgments are made for the general public. This highlights a fundamental research method truism: what researchers learn from their participants depends on what they ask about in the first place. So, in hopes of learning something complex, real, and nuanced, I decided to ask people about their everyday lives.

What did we find? Three key points stood out. First, religious liberals and conservatives share important developmental features. Children — whether they lived in a liberal or conservative household — reasoned more in terms of the Ethic of Autonomy and less in terms of the Ethic of Community as compared with adolescents and adults. The children especially focused on the physical and mental well-being and interests of self and other individuals. In response to the question of whether to give money to a panhandler, a conservative girl, for example, thought it best not to give money to a panhandler, "because they could go out to the store and buy, like, cigarettes or something that's not good for them. So it would be better to just give them some kind of food." A liberal girl sounded similarly concerned for the physical well-being of panhandlers, "If you give them food and water...and stuff they'll be able to live for a longer amount of time."

Second, there is much more to moral development than age or common maturation alone. Culture indeed shapes moral trajectories. Cultural differences
were already evident by about age 10, which was the mean age of the children. Conservative children thought in terms of the Ethic of Divinity, whereas liberal children did not. A 9-year-old boy from the conservative community supported giving money to a panhandler, “because God tells us to give things.” In contrast, a 10-year-old girl from the liberal community emphasized fairness, an Ethic of Autonomy concept that was super popular among liberal children. She explained that a panhandler is just as deserving as anyone else: “just like if you took all [of] Queen Elizabeth’s stuff away, she’d be just as poor as the panhandler. It’s just they don’t have enough stuff to get as far as Queen Elizabeth.”

Third, the role of culture in moral development becomes even more evident when comparing public and private spheres of reasoning. As compared to conservative children, not only did conservative adolescents and adults reason more in terms of Divinity but they showed a bifurcation where they invoked Divinity more for public than private issues. In other words, they not only thought of their own moral lives in terms of considerations pertaining to God and scriptures but especially emphasized these considerations in terms of how they believed everyone ought to think and behave. When I first saw this result in my statistical output, I had an instant flashback to my days of attending fundamentalist Baptist churches. Of course — evangelism! To conservative adolescents and adults, the Ethic of Divinity belongs not only in the private sphere but also distinctly in the public one. Bearing witness to God, the pastor had instilled his congregants, should be “my all, my life.”

Among liberals, in contrast, age intersected in a different way with spheres of morality for Divinity. Whereas liberal children and adolescents sincerely reasoned in terms of Divinity, liberal adults did. In contrast with the claims that they simply lack this language (Haidt, 2013), liberal adults primarily spoke of Divinity when contemplating their private moral issues. Here is an example of many where a liberal woman recounted her decision to find her adoptive mother against the advice of friends: “I thought it was something that in the eyes of God it was right for me to do.” Another liberal woman described how she had returned $10 to Borders bookstore that the cashier mistakenly had refunded her. She said: “God knows and, so it hurts Him when you cheat. He didn’t cheat on me, and I shouldn’t cheat on other people. By doing the right thing, the world becomes a better place. It’s not enough just to do it in bigger things, you’ve gotta do it in little things.” Some liberal adults clearly think about moral matters in terms of religion and spirituality. It is just that liberal adults have privatized the Ethic of Divinity.

Conclusions: on “culture wars” and moral psychology

So, what does this tell us about the psychology of the culture wars? From two decades of research with religious liberals and conservatives, I have come to the conclusion that the culture wars are much more public than private. That’s good. It may well be why it is not truly a “war” in the United States. We can all think of the daily clashes in Congress and in the media between liberals and conservatives. But for ordinary Americans, there is an everyday moral life, too, that is more complex, more nuanced, less conflictual. While bumper stickers proclaim that “Friends don’t let friends vote ______” — fill in either democrat or republican — the fact is that most people have friends across the culture wars divide. While we may get heated about public policy, things are less divided and more peaceful on the private front.

The research also tells us something basic about the psychology of morality. Moral psychology has witnessed a virtual “full of reason” in the current trend in psychology and neuroscience... in favor of gut feelings,” according to Yale psychologist Paul Bloom (2013). In a nutshell, the argument in this case is that humans make moral decisions solely based on emotions, and our thoughts are rationalizations of what we already feel like doing. But I really think that humans have evolved to be something more than, say, chipmunks (although they probably think and plan, too). Undoubtedly, we all rationalize from time to time, but it is not all that we do. Our tremendous and distinctive capacity for reasoning is not just an epiphenomenon. In my view, the research findings indicate that the development of moral reasoning in humans involves intra- and interpersonal dialogical processes. Morality in part is a process in which we have internal dialogues with some distinct private moral reasons for weighing our behaviors — such as Ethic of Divinity reasons for liberal adults. Morality is also a social process in which we dialogue, debate, and argue with others. We do this person-to-person. We also do this at the level of groups and through public representatives — as in the culture wars.

As an immigrant who has now lived longer in the United States than in my native Denmark, I still sometimes feel apart. Over time, though, I have come to think that being a kind of anthropologist-in-residence may have virtues. I am at a close distance. It makes for a research approach with which people are at once familiar and remarkable. Certainly, I hope that my research, while not telling people how they should live their lives, nonetheless might make us more thoughtful about how we all — alike and apart — develop and live our individual and collective lives.

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How liberals and conservatives are alike and apart


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