

**Symposium Title:** Integrating religion into the study of the mental health and wellbeing of children experiencing substantial adversity

**Symposium Chair:** Kristin Hadfield

**Integrative statement:**

Religious faith and faith-based organizations play an active role in promoting children's positive development in circumstances of substantial adversity. Yet, these are often 'overlooked' by researchers aiming to promote child mental health and wellbeing. In this symposium, we will discuss the role of religion in positive youth development and provide evidence for how partnering with faith-based organizations may provide new avenues for research and intervention.

*The first presentation* will describe the role of faith-based organizations in promoting wellbeing among displaced children. Drawing on interviews conducted at the US-Mexico border, it will illuminate the landscape of faith-based humanitarianism and provide evidence of how to work with faith organizations to study child and adolescent mental health and wellbeing. Drawing from mixed-methods data South African and Canadian youth, *the second presentation* will explore the role of religion in social ecological theories of resilience. This presentation will discuss how faith-related resilience processes intersect with well-established protective processes, with implications for interventions. Building on this, *the third presentation* will report on a randomized controlled trial evaluation of an intervention which integrates Bible stories and positive psychology principles to try to promote positive youth development among early adolescents in Zambia. Finally, *the fourth presentation* will use data from focus groups with parents and teachers in Sierra Leone to examine their perceptions of how children learn empathetic and moral behaviour. The perceived role of religiosity and other factors in the development of children's empathy and morality will be discussed.

Through this interdisciplinary symposium, we will cover how integrating religion into the study of mental health and wellbeing of children experiencing substantial adversity can be useful from a methodological perspective (Presentations 1 and 3), for developing theory (Presentation 2), for understanding children's positive development (Presentations 2 and 4), and for intervening to improve this development (Presentation 3).

\* Below, the underlined name is the proposed presenter.

## **Presentation 1**

### **Faith, solidarity, and resilience humanitarianism in migrant shelters on the US-Mexico border.**

Catherine Panter-Brick<sup>1</sup> and Mark Eggerman<sup>2</sup>

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The United States has been mired in an immigration crisis at its border with Mexico. It is also plunged in a humanitarian crisis, one aggravated by recent Trump Administration policies. To-date, very little research has been conducted on the health impacts of migrant detention on the US-Mexico border, though inhumane conditions for families and unaccompanied “alien” and “refugee” youth have long been reported. And while the challenges of US immigration crises are not new, little attention has been paid to the roles of churches coming to the assistance of migrants for more than two decades. In this paper, we draw upon interviews conducted in 2018-19, in both Mexico and the US, with religious and secular organizations focused on helping migrants at the border, though providing basic assistance in migrant shelters. We describe the landscape of faith-based humanitarianism and show how multiple actors come together to re-establish a sense of human dignity, advocate for basic human welfare, safety and wellbeing, and address the specific challenges of children and youth migration in crisis. Faith-based humanitarianism is an important site for the expression of resilience, solidarity, and social justice, as churches step in where states are unwilling or unable to provide care. The wide scope of programs sponsored by faith-based communities raise important questions for research, policy and practice regarding humanitarian responses to the needs of refugee youth.

## Presentation 2

### **Youth resilience in communities dependent on oil and gas industries: The role of faith-based resources.**

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<sup>4</sup> Resilience Research Centre, School of Social Work, Dalhousie University

Using mixed methods data from youth participants in communities under economic and social stress in South Africa ( $n = 577$ ) and Canada ( $n = 493$ ), this paper will explore the social-ecological dynamics that foster resilience. Informed by a multisystemic understanding of resilience, and building on previous research on resilience-enabling processes among vulnerable youth in sub-Saharan Africa and North America, we will discuss how faith-based factors intersect with well-established protective processes (such as membership in a supportive collective, constructive meaning making, and self-regulation) to facilitate positive mental health outcomes for adolescents and emerging adults. The data that the paper draws on form part of a 5-year longitudinal mixed methods investigation of biological, psychological, familial, educational, community, and environmental factors that affect young people ages 15-24 coping with economic boom/bust cycles in communities dependent on oil and gas industries. Our analyses show a dynamic model of faith-related resilience-enablers that are culturally heterogeneous in their expression but share common themes across contexts and genders. Implications for possible interventions to enhance young people's wellbeing in communities that rely on resource extraction industries under pressure from boom/bust economic cycles will be discussed based on work with youth and adult advisory committees in both communities that collaborated in the analysis of findings between sites.

### Presentation 3

#### **Building psychological resilience in early adolescents in Zambia: A randomized controlled trial evaluation of a faith-based, positive psychology intervention.**

Kristin Hadfield<sup>5</sup>, Dana Seale<sup>6</sup>, Robert Emmons<sup>7</sup>, Robert McGrath<sup>8</sup>, Yvonne Pande<sup>9</sup>, J. Paul Seale<sup>6</sup>, Troy Lewis<sup>9</sup>, and Sion K. Harris<sup>10,11</sup>

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Character-based resilience training has potential to yield dividends for youth in low- and middle-income countries. Strategies that promote child/adolescent flourishing and lower their risk behaviours are especially critical in countries like Zambia, where 53.4% of the population are under the age of 18, 57.5% of people live in extreme poverty, and where children face continuing substantial challenges. Global Resilience Oral Workshops (GROW) is a 24-week curriculum rooted in positive psychology and spirituality. GROW is a weekly after-school intervention which uses archetypal stories from the Bible to teach positive psychology concepts, with the aim of promoting positive youth development. To test the efficacy of GROW improving child outcomes, we conducted a wait-listed randomized controlled trial in Lusaka with 643 10-14-year-old participants (55.4% female). We collected data before the intervention (T1), immediately following the intervention (T2), and 7 months after the end of the intervention (T3). We also conducted focus groups with GROW leaders and participating children to evaluate the acceptability of GROW as an intervention. The intervention significantly increased participants' psychological resilience and hope, as well as reducing alcohol use. There were no other character or substance use-related impacts. In this presentation, we will 1) use the focus group data to discuss how participants responded to a faith-based intervention, 2) use the focus group data to discuss how a religious focus impacted the acceptability and feasibility of implementation, and 3) use the self-report survey data to examine the effects of GROW on participant outcomes.

## Presentation 4

### **“Charity begins at the home”: A qualitative understanding of empathy and morality in children of Sierra Leone.**

Gita Bhattacharya<sup>1</sup> and Theresa Betancourt<sup>2</sup>

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Civil War in Sierra Leone dramatically altered the social and mental health landscape of the country, particularly for children. This research sought to understand the perspectives of caregivers in post-conflict Sierra Leone on what shapes the development of empathy and morality in their children. Three main questions framed the analysis of qualitative interviews: 1) According to parents and teachers, how do children learn empathetic and moral behaviour in post-conflict Sierra Leone?; 2) How do caregivers in post-conflict Sierra Leone view the expression of empathy and morality in young children?; 3) What cultural factors do caregivers see as promoting or challenging the development of empathy and morality in young children, if at all? To answer these questions, we analysed 16 focus group interviews of parents and teachers who lived or taught in Bo, Kenema, Waterloo and Makeni. Caregivers in post-conflict Sierra Leone believed that children develop empathy and morality both from observation and direction from parents and teachers. Observing others suffering, particularly peers, emerged as the main context in which children learned to express empathy. Paradoxically, caregivers and teachers also described peers as exerting a negative influence on their children’s moral attitudes and behaviours. Across participants, caregivers emphasized a connection between good education and moral behaviour. Additionally, parents associated religiosity, such as the act of praying or attending church, with moral behaviour in their children. Overall, concepts such as “The Sierra Leone Native Way” and parents’ discontent with “Child Rights” emerged across focus group discussions, suggesting Sierra Leone culture, as mediated by the parents, enabled children to become resilient and adopt moral behaviour. This data collection was completed before the historic Ebola outbreak of 2014-2015. Future research could build on this study by exploring the role of Ebola in communities and how it has shaped views of empathy and morality.