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Influencing Contextual Factors in the Religious Identity Development of Strict Reformed-Raised Emerging Adults in The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Religious identity development is highly influenced by contexts. This influence is even more powerful for young people who grew up in strict religious contexts because of the prominence of orthodox beliefs and practices in everyday life. This article presents which contextual factors were influential on the religious identity development of 18 emerging adults who grew up in strict Reformed contexts in the Netherlands. Moreover, it presents characteristics that led the participants to consider the influence as positive or negative. In the study, the perspective of the emerging adults was central, and through in-depth life story interviews, contextual influence was explored.

KEYWORDS

emerging adults; religious identity development; influence; contextual factors; strict reformed upbringing

Introduction

Strict religious contexts are in the spotlight and attract the attention of many people who are not familiar with such contexts. This is exemplified in the popularity of Netflix series like *Unorthodox* and *Shtisel*, which provide revealing insights into strict religious communities and how it is for youth to grow up in such communities, which are often closed to outsiders. Interestingly, these series, which depict orthodox forms of Judaism, provoked worldwide reflections and debates not only within Jewish communities but also on social media and in webinars, YouTube videos, and discussion groups. Topics for discussion include, for example, young people's agency and freedom from oppressive and prescriptive religions to develop their own identity. The online portrayals of strict religious contexts and the developmental paths of young people growing up in such contexts thus give food for thought about what supports and hinders youth in taking their own paths. Moreover, they point at the influence of an all-pervading religious milieu on (religious) identity development.

Religious identity development and contextual influences

In this study, we conceptualize religious identity development as conforming to the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory, which we apply to religion as a domain of identity, as “a process in which individuals explore and commit to a set of religious beliefs and practices” (Visser-Vogel et al. 2015, 91). With Loveland (2016), we would state that religious identity development “is essentially social” (294). This is in line with other studies (e.g., Cohen-Malayev, Schachter, and Rich 2014; de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2019; Fisherman 2011; Hemming and Madge 2012; Sherkat 2003; Visser-Vogel et al. 2015) which showed that religious identity development is shaped and influenced by the context. We use the term “context” in this study of religious identity development to refer to the micro-context of an individual’s family, school, church, and peers (Schachter and Ventura 2008). Also, the term “context” refers to the macro-context, representing the larger socio-historical and cultural context in which religious identity development occurs and which is, considering this study’s Dutch population, postmodern and secular in nature (Erikson 1968; Schachter 2005; Visser-Vogel et al. 2015).

We observed that, in the literature, various terms are used for contextual influences in (religious) identity development. Influential people are referred to as “authority figures” (Zittoun 2013), “(identity) agents” (Özdikmenli-Demir and Şahin-Kütük 2012; Schachter and Ventura 2008), “influential adults” (Vaclavik, Velazquez, and Carballo 2020), “important others” and “significant role models” (Marcia and Archer 1993), and “socialization agents” (Fisherman 2011). For other things, such as life events, organizations, books, and events, the term “sources” was used (Sherkat 2003; Visser-Vogel et al. 2015). To grasp contextual influences in all their manifestations, in this study we use the term “contextual factors.” This is because “sources” may indicate people or things used by an individual in religious identity development, whereas the term “contextual factors” also includes influences outside of individuals’ control.

As the term “identity agent” already indicates, contextual influence is often related to agency, which our systematic literature review study confirmed (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2019). In the scholarship, we observed that there is an ideal image of healthy religious identity development, whereby youth “exercise agency” (Hemming and Madge 2012) and the context honors and stimulates agency. This implies that youth are enabled to explore, and to make an authentic, self-chosen religious identity commitment; faith is not forced and the views of youth are respected (Armet 2009; Barrow, Dollahite, and Marks 2020). The focus on agency in religious identity development involves a perception of young people as agents actively participating in their religious identity development, thereby building up and shaped by the contexts (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2019; Hemming and Madge 2012; Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2014; Schachter and Ventura 2008). Thus, they are not perceived as “passive recipients” (Dollahite and Thatcher 2008, 615).

Strict Reformed contexts

Growing up in strict Reformed contexts generally implies that children and youth are part of a subculture that is characterized by close social ties focused on the group’s own churches, schools, organizations, and sometimes even a specific geographic area (e.g.,

the so-called Dutch Bible Belt) where many of the strict Reformeds live (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., forthcoming). The strict Reformeds adhere to the Belgic Confession and affiliate with the tradition of the *Nadere Reformatie* (Hoekstra and Ipenburg 2008; van Lieburg 2007; Zwemer 2001).¹ They are strict in their adherence to orthodox or conservative beliefs rooted in the Bible and this confession. They hold strict beliefs about salvation: humans are sinful from birth, and only through the sovereign grace of God can people be saved (Stoffels 2008; Zwemer 2001). Likewise, they are strict in how they practice their faith, which is, apparent, for example, in their concern for appearances, including clothing (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2019). We propose that contextual influence is more powerful on children and youth who grow up in strict religious and mono-religious milieus, such as strict Reformed milieus. In those milieus, people generally are strongly oriented to their own community in which orthodox beliefs, practices, and values are commonly shared and transmitted, with an endeavor to remain separate from the broader society (Visser-Vogel et al. 2012). Moreover, considering the specific characteristics of strict Reformed contexts, obtaining agency might not be self-evident for youth. The strict beliefs and practices, and the accompanying expectations concerning the directions of young people's religious identity development, might leave little room for agentic commitment-making and exploration (Armet 2009; Hemming 2016).

Main question and perspective

To our knowledge, the number of studies that have focused on contextual influences in the religious identity development of a strict Reformed-raised population is very limited. According to Roehlkepartain, Benson, and Scales (2011), there is still little academic understanding of “how beliefs and practices within a particular religious context (such as extreme authoritarianism) may undermine or misdirect” (556–57) healthy religious identity development. Considering the emphasis in the existing literature on agency and the role of context in facilitating agency in religious identity development, this study seeks an answer to the following question: which contextual factors were, according to strict Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands, influential on their religious identity development, and how do they value and characterize this influence? In answering this question, the perception and voice of participants are central, since we “want to know the unique experience and perspective of the individual” (Atkinson 2012, 124).

Method

In this study, we adopted a qualitative research method, conducting in-depth narrative interviews in which participants reflected on their current religious identity commitment and their process of religious identity development thus far. This narrative approach enabled us to grasp the process of religious identity development, and especially how this process, from the perspective of emerging adults, is influenced by contextual factors (Atkinson 2012; Elliot 2005). As Schweitzer (2000) argues, “biographical

¹This “movement within Dutch Calvinism took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the influence of Scottish, English and, to a lesser degree, German Puritans and strove to keep personal behaviour and experiences within the norms of religious doctrine” (van Belzen 2008, 125).

studies attest to the collision of influences and events that affect faith and identity which becomes apparent from qualitative investigation of young people's life courses and lived experiences of faith" (94).

Instruments

Building on our theoretical framework, former studies into religious identity development, pilot interviews, and input from other researchers, we developed two semi-structured interview guidelines with open questions and key questions. Those key questions addressed the central themes of our research project that we sought to explore in the interviews. The second interviews with participants, which focused on the process of religious identity development over time, were the basis for this specific study into the influence of contextual factors. In these interviews, we used a timeline as a visual tool to structure the life stories of participants and to grasp the central moments in their religious identity development (Adriansen 2012).

Participants and recruitment

We intended to select emerging adults with a strict Reformed education, and therefore we asked strict Reformed secondary schools to approach former students and to invite them, on behalf of the researchers, to participate in the study. These schools were situated both in more mono-religious rural areas and more pluralist urban areas, and they were characterized by an admission policy. This policy is aimed at only admitting students with a strict Reformed upbringing, and thus it was assured that our participants met our selection criteria. The former students received an email from their school, and if they were interested in participating, they filled out an online survey with personal information and their religious self-identification. Out of all viable responses, we selected 18 emerging adults aged 22 to 25, as we supposed that they would have the capacity to organize their life stories and to reflect on the processes of contextual influence on their religious formation (McAdams and Zapata-Gietl 2015). In our selection, we considered variables such as gender, educational level, and religious identification (see Table 1 for biographic information of the research participants).

Procedure

All the interviews for the research project were conducted by the first author between April 2018 and April 2019, and each participant was interviewed twice about his or her current religious identity commitment and process of religious identity development. The participants were paid €50 for their participation. Almost all the interviews, which lasted approximately three hours each, took place at the participants' homes or another place where they felt comfortable and would not be disturbed. During and after the interviews, the researcher took notes, and the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

With the data analysis software ATLAS.ti, all interviews were coded and thematically analyzed by the first author. In this process, she kept memos and discussed the analyses and

Table 1. Biographic information of the research participants.

Name	Gender	Age
Simon	M	23
Oliver	M	23
Evelyne	F	23
Robert	M	23
Adrian	M	23
Felix	M	24
Emily	F	24
Lois	F	24
Rachel	F	24
Tobias	M	24
Mathilda	F	25
Jonathan	M	25
Norah	F	25
Susanna	F	25
Christoph	M	25
Lauren	F	25
Richard	M	25
Julia	F	25

interpretations with the other authors and fellow researchers. In line with the Braun and Clarke (2006) procedure for thematic analysis, after reading the transcripts, we open-coded the text segments of the second interviews that concerned contextual influence in participants' religious identity development, which generated an extensive list of detailed codes. Second, we reviewed this list of codes several times and developed codes that discerned the various aspects of contextual influence—for example, codes for contextual factors (who or what) and codes for the reason why each factor was considered influential (how and in which way). Third, we merged all those codes into larger, thematic main codes, such as *life events*, with underlying subcodes such as *life events: parents' divorce*.

In our analysis, we built on (a) what participants mentioned when we directly asked for the contextual factors they perceived as positive or negative influences for religious identity development, and (b) how participants talked about contextual factors. This meant that we considered word choice, tone, and the emphasis of certain words. For example, terms like “nice” and “super fun” were indicative of positive valuations, and terms like “superficial” and “annoying” were indicative of negative valuations.

Results

In this section, we will first discuss which contextual factors appeared most prominent in the stories of our participants, as our analysis revealed various contextual factors that, according to the participants, had positively, negatively, both positively and negatively, or neutrally influenced their religious identity development. Second, we will discuss the specific characteristics of these factors. This is because we observed that the specific characteristics of contextual factors determined the participants' positive, negative, both positive and negative, or neutral valuations.

Influential contextual factors

We discerned two types of contextual factors that were influential in the religious identity development of our participants: *people*, of whom 29 specific individuals were

Table 2. The most prominent influencing contextual factors.

People	Other factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in the inner circle: parents and partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life events: parents' divorce or parents' struggles with the church, the birth of participants' children, a trip abroad, or family or participant illness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peers: friends, classmates, and roommates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christian youth groups and activities: church Bible study groups, student unions, and special evenings and weekends for youth (not organized by the church)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People from church: pastors, youth leaders, and elders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School: strictly Reformed primary and secondary school, and further education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers: of strictly Reformed primary and secondary schools and of university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The arts: literature and music
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colleagues (often peers) 	

mentioned in our data, and *other*, comprising 43 specific *factors* that were identified in our data. The most prominent influential contextual factors are presented in Table 2. We found that people in the inner circle, peers, life events, Christian youth groups, and activities were mentioned most.

In general, people were considered a positive influence for religious identity development, yet in some cases were considered a negative or neutral influence. However, for parents, we observed another balance between positive and negative valuations, since more than half of all participants considered their parents a positive influence, yet almost half considered their influence negative. Focusing specifically on the Christian and non-Christian people among all influencing factors, a similar pattern presents itself: almost all participants perceived Christian people as a positive influence, yet 10 out of 18 participants also cited instances of negative influence from Christian people.

Regarding the youth activities, these were mainly valued positively in religious identity development. To life events, it applied that they were mainly valued as both positive and negative, as an event itself was experienced as negative but the outcome was perceived as positive. This is exemplified by Norah when narrating about a very difficult period in her life:

Maybe it's been my high and low in my life, I guess. Well, if I just think about how it felt emotionally to me, like I was in a really deep well and kept sinking, sinking, sinking, you know, and you should have God to help you, like, and to hold you. ... So that was a very difficult period, but I think it made me so aware of, um, the dependence on God.

Characteristics of influencing contextual factors

As discussed, we observed that the valuation of contextual factors mainly depends on the specific characteristics of these factors. In the following paragraphs, we will describe the characteristics based upon who people *were* and what they *did* positively and negatively. We thus focus on the characteristics of influential people, although we also found other contextual factors that were influential. This is because it was generally the *people* involved in those factors who influenced participants in their religious identity development. For example, a participant mentioned that the youth group from his church influenced him positively; however, this influence was moderated by the group's youth

Table 3. Positive and negative characteristics of influential people.

Who people were—positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepting • Inspiring and exemplary • Somehow similar 	Who people were—negative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hypocritical
What people did—positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in dialogue • Providing other perspectives 	What people did—negative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limiting • Focusing on right and wrong

leader. Notably, many participants mentioned more than one characteristic when reflecting on influential contextual factors, which indicates that not just one independent characteristic determines contextual influence in religious identity development and its valuation.

We focus on the characteristics related to participants' positive and negative valuations, and especially those most prominent in our data (see Table 3), since we propose that these will provide the most profound insights into participants' perceptions of influential contextual factors in religious identity development. Considering the valuation of contextual factors in religious identity development, we observed that participants mentioned many more positive than negative characteristics. Interestingly, our analysis showed that the negative characteristics reflect experiences with the context that appeared while discussing other topics than contextual influences in the interview.

Who people were—positive

Accepting. We first found that participants considered it positive when people made them feel accepted in their religious identity development. This implied that there were no judgments and people were open to what the participants thought or did, and consequently they felt comfortable expressing feelings, doubts, and personal issues. Susanna talked about her conversations with a minister from another church:

With him I felt comfortable because I could tell my story and that man understood me and, um, yes, or he just quietly read a passage of the Bible with you and he just talked about it and was not so critical, not with the finger pointing, or um, just like, also like: “well, that’s you, okay.” And nothing, nothing is weird, then, when I asked or said, like, “But why does it happen then this way [in the strict Reformed church the participant was raised in]?”

Likewise, Christoph commented on the non-strict Reformed student union he attended: “That has been a place where I was able to express my doubts at first and that also was taken quite seriously.” We observed that this accepting attitude related to both Christian and non-Christian people but primarily to non-Christian colleagues, Christian peers, and educators in the church. Interestingly, acceptance was more emphasized when participants spoke about non-Christian people and did not occur with Christian people in the inner circle of participants, like parents and partners, although these people appeared most influential. Susanna, for example, explained about her non-Christian colleagues:

With them, I felt very free, yes, I really had, I never had the feeling that they were laughing at me or, or, nothing at all, they didn’t think it [being Christian] was strange, no, they just saw me as Susanna and, eh, that [the faith] was part of it.

Inspiring and exemplary. Second, we found that participants valued it as positive when they felt that people were inspiring and exemplary because of their religious identity commitment and the way they lived and shared their faith. We inferred that people who embodied the “inspiring and exemplary” characteristic functioned as role models for participants in religious identity development. We observed that participants talked about them as real and genuine believers with a conforming Christian lifestyle. Lois exemplified this characteristic when talking about her friends and classmates: “the people there, I think, were real, real believers, so to speak. I was not like, um, they are, um, they fake or something.” And as Jonathan described the youth leader from the church he attended in his younger years: “he really just showed with his life just that he, that he really lived for it. And that he loved God.”

We also observed that inspiring and exemplary people shared their personal faith. Norah, for example, stated about a classmate: “he was always, eh, yes, very much engaged with faith or something, I always really appreciated that. We, I really was supported by him ... That he was so much involved, and that he spoke so frankly about it.” And Mathilda explained about a teacher and that his “purity” and the “genuine way” he talked about the Bible made her think, “that’s how I want to be, so, um, that was the kind of image of how a Christian should be.”

As these illustrative quotations reveal, the characteristic applied to a variety of Christian people, but especially to parents and peers, including both strict Reformed and non-strict Reformed peers. Two participants referred to non-Christian people who were perceived as inspiring and exemplary. Adrian, for example, mentioned that his influential non-Christian colleagues showed him “how life can be or how you can live your life.”

Somehow similar. Third, we found that people were a positive influence on participants’ religious identity development when participants felt they were somehow similar and that there was a common ground. This implied that the participants could identify with their views, developmental process, upbringing, or age. Identification with views appeared to be the most prominent. Christoph and Richard illustrated this identification with views, although one identified with his Christian partner and the other with non-Christian students and teachers in his university studies. As Christoph stated:

If you both think about it [the faith] the same way, it is really, really nice. Yes, and at the same time perhaps not very stimulating, but yes, no, I think it is really relaxed. So, sort of, the feeling, it also gives you the feeling that it is fine the way it is now [his current commitment].

And Richard commented that in his university studies he felt he was not the only one who did not believe:

... that that was indeed a kind of confirmation, because almost the whole group of highly educated Dutch people think about it [the faith] this way, have this opinion of it. You’re not special if you think so or something. While in, in the beginning, it was still a bit of an exception if you weren’t religious.

We observed being somehow similar to people applied to various people, Christian and non-Christian, adults and youth, but mainly to peers: friends, classmates, colleagues, and the people who participants met at Christian youth activities. We surmise that this is because participants and peers were in the same stage of life and thus had

similar interests and struggled with the same things. Norah reported about the Christian youth evenings she engaged in with peers: “all people are also about your own age and many, uh, have the same questions.”

Who people were—negative

Hypocritical. Several participants referred to hypocrisy as a characteristic of people that influenced them negatively in their religious identity development. Rachel narrated about the pastor of her church who put much focus on clothing and who did not greet her when he saw her clothing: “what I found difficult with him is that he, eh, of course, said everything on the pulpit, but then in practice, if you don’t greet someone, I think you just don’t make it true in practice.”

We observed that hypocrisy only occurred in the stories about (strict Reformed) Christians in family, churches, and schools. We posit this is because participants had implicit or explicit expectations that those Christian educators would be role models in living the faith. Lois, for example, revealed her expectations of church people when she described the church she grew up in:

People don’t talk to each other there, there is a lot of gossiping there, there is really, there is not a pleasant culture there at all. Not a communion at all, like. Um, um, that also caused me to think that, that I also in this whole period, huh, thought like: “well, if this is the faith, and if this is the church?” In the Bible I read that a communion should be very different and that they should love each other, should help each other, and that was not at all what I saw in that church. So that has also influenced my whole, whole faith, that I thought: “well, you all say that you are a believer, but in the meantime, you gossip frequently, or, or there are arguments.”

What people did—positive

Engaging in dialogue. Concerning what people did, we found that people were valued as a positive influence on religious identity development when they engaged in dialogue, mainly about faith or faith-related issues. This implied that conversations were initiated and facilitated but also that people asked questions of participants. Mathilda, for example, narrated that the Bible study weekends she attended were a positive influence on her religious identity development: “what in that sense just really influenced me, eh, that there I could easily talk to other young people ... that there, your questions, and um, and um, yes, just issues around faith, eh, you could really discuss.” And Rachel reported about an elder from her church:

He has, eh, um, um, also asked me a lot of questions, like, eh, eh, but, and “what does God mean to you?” And eh, eh, “what can you then say about Him?” And, and that is why you also start to think about: “but what, what do I believe and what, what, yes, indeed, what does God mean to me?”

Likewise, Julia explained how questions from classmates at her public secondary vocational education school were thought-provoking:

I could never really be who I was. And then you do get questions from them [her non-Christian classmates] and I actually just answered them as my parents would want me to answer them. ... Or that I sometimes had to say, like, “I have no idea, I don’t know.” They were questions, eh, like “how do you know that there is a God” and “what do you actually believe?”

We propose that it is interesting that dialogues appeared prominently in our data, since most participants reported that within strict Reformed contexts, it was not common to talk about the faith, especially at home. Richard said, “Yes, it was much more about doing than talking, and that has always been the case that there was little talk about it. Like, apart from Bible reading, but, really, like a one-on-one conversation about your feelings.” Likewise, Lois said, “there was never really fai-, conversation about faith, what it [the faith] meant for them [her parents].”

We observed that dialogues, in our data, in most cases were mentioned concerning other factors as Christian youth groups and activities, peers (Christian or not), partners, and influential people from church, and only once concerning parents. The reported lack of dialogues at home might explain why people other than parents were a positive influence, because they talked with the participants. Another explanation might be that it is too “personal” to talk with parents about the faith, especially because adolescence is a period in which participants “distanced” from parents, as Mathilda explicated.

Providing other perspectives. We also found that people were considered a positive influence on participants’ religious identity development by providing or embodying other (than the strict Reformed) perspectives on the Christian faith or new, non-Christian perspectives on the world outside the faith. Lauren narrated about her time at the non-strict Reformed but Christian student union:

Then I also learned to see more and more: yes, there are many different ways you can believe because there were really many different people at that association. ... There we not so many strict Reformed people like where I came from, but yes, from all corners, eh, of Christian Netherlands, so to speak. There, that is where you learn a lot from, eh... Regularly that, eh, I was also kind of in shock or so, and that I thought: “hey, how can Christians do that?” For example, that a group of girls went to the cinema and then to Harry Potter, and I thought, “yes, if you are a Christian, then that is not allowed, right?” “You could not do that, right?” And then they went, they said, “yes, but I think differently, I see it this way.” And then I thought: “yes, okay, I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

Likewise, Robert mentioned that his university studies, “in which faith, of course, is approached very historically, Christianity is approached very historically,” influenced him “very much.” He realized that Christian faith is “human” and “that it is subject to change and in that sense, it is less fixed than you would, than you have always thought.” And Emily narrated about her volunteering trip abroad and meeting Christians who live in completely different circumstances: “what those people, what they radiate, like, that they are just happy with such small things, and, um, also just real faith, only in a completely different way, so in that sense, that just has broadened my view.”

The illustrative quotations indicate that these perspectives were represented by various influential people. Interestingly, it appeared that the other perspectives were provided more by Christian than non-Christian people. This might be somewhat counterintuitive because it might be expected that non-Christian people would have embodied or provided these perspectives. A possible explanation might be—considering that the participants generally grew up with only one perspective on faith and life—that any other perspective, even if it is a slightly different Christian perspective, expanded their horizons.

What people did—negative

Limiting. We found that people were considered a negative influence on participants' religious identity development when they felt that they were limited and prohibited from doing what they wanted. This became apparent in the stories about experiences with imposed rules, the prohibition of certain practices, the pressure to go in certain directions, and the lack of space for one's own choices and independent thinking. Julia said about the elders of the church she grew up in: "the things that I, um, that are quite important to me, they completely lambaste them." And as Tobias narrated about the response of a pastor to his intention to go to the Lord's Supper after he made the profession of faith² in his church, "he really strongly advised against doing that" and explained that this was because "he didn't really believe that we were real believers."

We observed that this characteristic only occurred in participants' stories about parents and educators in churches and schools, with a single exception of one participant who felt limited at the non-strict Reformed student union he attended. Christoph noted: "they have not really created the m-, um, conditions or, really, stimulated honest conversations, which made me think, um, v- rather superficially or unilaterally at that age. About faith." It is not unexpected that this limiting characteristic was related to educators in family, churches, and schools, since these were responsible for the transmission of the strict Reformed beliefs and practices.

Focusing on right and wrong. We also found that people were perceived negatively in religious identity development because of the focus on what is right and wrong and what is good and not good to do. Richard illustrated this when he talked about his strict Reformed secondary school: "that really such, eh, rules were explained and, eh, what you were allowed and not allowed to do and, eh, eh. Well, those rules were much stricter than I [with emphasis] thought they should be." Along the same lines, Lauren reflected on the strict Reformed secondary school: "thinking in terms of condemnations or something. Like, 'if I do this, yes, then it will never be okay.' Or like, a bit difficult to see the nuance, and eh, yes, 'it has to be this way, otherwise not.'"

As the illustrative quotations reveal, we observed that this focus on right and wrong only appeared in the stories about strict Reformed schools, including teachers, and the stories about churches, including pastors and elders. In light of our observations regarding participants who experience being limited, it is not unexpected that participants negatively experienced this focus on right and wrong by teachers, pastors, and elders, since these persons were, among others, particularly responsible for the transmission of the faith and especially the strict Reformed interpretation of it.

Conclusion and discussion

In this study, we explored which contextual factors influenced the religious identity development of strict Reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands. We also explored how these emerging adults valued and characterized this influence. First, the current study found that several contextual factors were, according to the participants,

²In strict Reformed churches, the profession of faith is conditional to partaking in the Lord's Supper.

influential in religious identity development. Interestingly, it appeared that almost all the most prominent contextual factors—except the arts as a contextual factor—are mainly on the strict Reformed micro-level of contextual influence. This finding accords with those of other studies that have identified the positive influence of people in the inner circle, friends, church people, church activities, people with the same opinions as emerging adults, and life events on religious identity development (Tervo-Niemelä 2020; Vaclavik, Velazquez, and Carballo 2020; Visser-Vogel et al. 2015). A possible explanation for our finding that the most prominent influencing factors are in the participants' micro-context might be that the strict Reformeds are generally strongly oriented to their own community, including family, church, and school (Zwemer 2001).

Interestingly, it appeared that Christian people in general, compared to non-Christian people, were considered a positive influence and also a profoundly negative influence. It may be that when Christian people do something that youth experience as negative, this negative valuation is strengthened by the assumption of youth that Christians uphold a certain lifestyle in which words and actions ought to correspond. Also, it appeared that the macro-context did not have a clear role in the religious identity development of our population. This is remarkable because within strict Reformed contexts, there is the perception that youth are strongly influenced by, for example, secular media, although the strict Reformeds often distance themselves from these influences (Klaasse 2020; Zwemer 2001). This discrepancy between perceived influences by the strict Reformeds and experienced influences by our participants may be explained by strict Reformed-raised emerging adults possibly not recognizing a dichotomy between the micro-context of their upbringing and the larger macro-context.

Second, the study found that people were at the heart of contextual influences. The characteristics of influential people—who people were and what they did—appeared to determine participants' positive or negative valuation. These findings support the findings of previous studies which demonstrated that the open-mindedness of influential people and sharing similarities mattered in religious identity development and that restrictions and limitations, authoritarian attitudes, narrow-mindedness, and conflicting religious views caused youth to consider contextual influences as negative (Kuusisto 2009; Özdikmenli-Demir and Şahin-Kütük 2012; Visser-Vogel et al. 2015).

As mentioned in the Introduction section, prior studies have noted the importance of agency in religious identity development, wherein the context plays an essential role in facilitating agency. The present results are significant because they reflect a plea by strict Reformed-raised emerging adults for agency and the conditions for an agency-stimulating environment in religious identity development. Considering the positive and negative characteristics of influential people, young people would preferably feel themselves accepted, regarded as fully-fledged conversation partners, and provided with other perspectives. Also, this means that young people are allowed to find their own way in religious identity development. Nevertheless, participants reported being limited by influential people and that people focused on what is right and wrong. We propose that such socialization practices are in tension with the discussed ideal image of healthy religious identity development, whereby youth are supported rather than hindered in exploration and making their own authentic commitments (cf. Armet 2009; Barrow, Dollahite, and Marks 2020; Roehlkepartain, Benson, and Scales 2011).

It is noteworthy that the research population had not intended to walk their religious identity development path alone. On the contrary, the findings indicate that they need role models who are inspiring and exemplary and with whom they can identify. As the findings show, we believe that conversations are crucial, as we encourage engaging in dialogue as an important means by which potential influential people connect with youth. Capitano and Naudé (2020), who studied the spiritual identity development of South African adolescents, maintain that exploration and commitment-making occur “through a process of discussion and modelling” (25). In this regard, these authors refer to “a reciprocal and bidirectional process between the unique individual and context” (20). Because of this study’s focus on the participants’ perspective, we were not able to identify whether there were real bi-directional relationships between our participants and influential people, implying that the participants also influenced these people in their own process. We, therefore, recommend future researchers take the perspective of influential people into account when researching contextual influences in religious identity development.

Based on our findings, we argue that contextual influence in religious identity development is about balancing between agency and dependency. Young people need to balance between displaying ownership of their religious identity development and relying on other people’s guidance and frameworks. Influential people, such as educators in families, churches, and schools, need to balance between giving space for individual choices and opportunities for exploration on the one hand and guiding youth while staying true to their own religious beliefs and practices on the other hand. In line with this, Dollahite et al. (2019) note the challenges of balancing and integrating religious firmness and religious flexibility. Religious firmness implies loyalty to God by “having clearly-defined and deeply-valued religious beliefs and practices” that are “non-negotiable” and “inviolable” (14). Likewise, religious flexibility implies loyalty to loved ones by “maintaining sensitivity to their needs, challenges, and circumstances” (14). Interestingly, the authors propose that when parents—and we would argue all potential influential people—strive for balancing and integrating religious firmness and flexibility, they contribute to “authoritative, balanced, functional, and healthy” (14) religious socialization practices. We suggest that it is important for further studies to explore this balancing and integrating act and how both young people and influential people, including professional and nonprofessional educators, could address it. This exploration is especially important in strict religious contexts where young people might not necessarily feel agentic because of expectations about young people’s beliefs, practices, and lifestyles. Schachter and Ventura (2008) state in this account that “the essence of identity formation has been described as the individual’s inner need to find a unique self separate from the expectations of his peers, parents, and teachers” (452).

We are aware that this study is limited by the sample size of 18 emerging adults; however, we do not aim to generalize our small sample findings to the whole population of strict Reformed or strict religiously raised emerging adults. Notwithstanding our sample size, our qualitative research methodology allowed us to gain a detailed and in-depth understanding of contextual factors’ influence on the religious identity development of an understudied population. Thus, we believe that this study provides valuable insights into what, according to strict Reformed-raised emerging adults, matters in

religious identity development and points to what young people need from contextual factors in this process. In this way, the study aims to contribute to further research on contextual influences in identity development and to offer potentially influential people tools with which they could support youth in authentic and agentic religious identity development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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