Relational Spirituality and Virtue Formation:

Exploring Mediation through Human and Divine Differentiation[1]

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Abstract: This paper summarizes a relational spirituality model (RSM; Sandage et al., 2020) framework of virtue formation based on the relational development of differentiation as a mediating mechanism of change. The RSM will be introduced in relation to virtue and broader processes of spiritual formation. Relevant findings from a series of empirical studies on relational spirituality, differentiation, virtue, and mature alterity in the contexts of seminary training, faith leadership, and mental health practice will be considered. Interdisciplinary theory and empirical findings will be used to frame an account of crucibles of moral transformation with associated implications for faith communities.

Introduction

Leaders within various spiritual and religious traditions often make the claim that authentically practicing those traditions will lead to moral transformation fostering virtue and other positive outcomes. The "authentic practicing" part of such a claim can be challenging to operationalize and measure from a psychological perspective, but that is part of the methodological work of psychology. And while there is now a vast scientific literature on the field of positive psychology on many different virtues, it is challenging to find psychological theories of developmental growth in virtue that attempt to engage spiritual and theological perspectives on what we could call *virtue formation*. This paper will propose an argument for developmental differentiation (or differentiation of self; DoS) as a mediating mechanism of constructive change in virtue formation based on a relational spirituality model (RSM; Sandage et al., 2020; Shults & Sandage, 2006). There are numerous definitions and approaches to the construct of *relational spirituality* in social science literature (e.g., Davis et al., 2021; Hall & Lewis Hall, 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2016), so below I clarify the contours of the RSM as developed within my research with colleagues. I will mostly "stay in my own lane" as a psychologist by primarily drawing on psychological theory and empirical research to respond to the question - "What is it about human persons that they are morally transformed by God in these ways?" But I also reach toward conversation with Christian theology about the role of God as the ground of differentiated relationality (Balswick et al., 2016; Volf, 1996) and ways this impacts virtue formation.

As I advocate for an interdisciplinary relational integration (Sandage & Brown, 2018) approach to the study of moral transformation and virtue, I will suggest psychological and theological models of virtue often neglect the valuable insights from the other discipline and can benefit from bi-directional influence. Psychological approaches can sometimes reduce virtue formation to intrapsychic or social dimensions and neglect the important role of spiritual

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dynamics, ethical commitments, and ultimate concerns. Theological approaches to virtue can sometimes shortchange detailed attention to embodied processes through which spiritual influences are mediated in human experience. I hope this interdisciplinary workshop and conversation can foster more integrative understanding and practice.

Definitions and Locating the Questions

I will start by defining key terms and locating the questions I am asking within certain disciplinary matrices. Ultimately, I am seeking to make applications of these ideas in both (a) professional mental health treatment settings and (b) contexts that serve the spiritual formation of faith leaders. I also hope for broader relevance in faith communities and wider public settings, but these two contexts above form my primary sources of empirical data and represent the key settings for my own applied work.

Consistent with the RSM, my focus will be on *relational spirituality* defined as ways of relating with God and the sacred (Sandage et al., 2020). The discipline of psychology specializes in individual differences, and the RSM approach to relational spirituality seeks to phenomenologically describe a variety of ways different individuals relate to their experience of God and other sacred realities (e.g., fearful avoidance, dutiful obedience, angry complaint, loving intimacy and surrender, grandiose identification, etc.). These diverse ways of relating can be associated with outcomes that range from the salutary to pathological or mixed depending on contextual factors and the defined goal or *telos* of spiritual formation for a particular community. I elaborate on the conceptual framework of the RSM below. The literatures in the psychology of religion and spirituality and the positive psychology of virtues have been brought together in some integrative research, but there has been very limited attention to mediating mechanisms of change from an interdisciplinary perspective. Some of the working theological and psychological assumptions about spiritual, characterological, and moral formation I endorse are summarized in Porter et al. (2019) in dialogue with empirical findings with seminary students from an RSM perspective.

By *virtue,* I mean "qualities of human character and excellence which enhance the capacity to live well, to live 'the good life'" (Sandage & Hill, 2001, p. 243). Virtue is semantically related to the Greek *arete* which means excellence. From a psychological perspective, virtues can be considered excellent qualities or strengths of human character and behavior that tend to help persons and communities flourish when systemic forces cooperate with such flourishing. Character virtues can also be formed through suffering (Brady, 2018), and virtuous behaviors also often emerge within (or even provoke) oppressive systemic forces which complicates the connections between virtue and flourishing (Tessman, 2005). For example, it can be difficult for sexual minorities to flourish in non-affirming religious communities even if they are practicing moral virtues proscribed by those communities.

The term *virtue formation* refers to the multi-dimensional processes of individual and communal growth in virtues within particular sociocultural and religious contexts. Virtues integrate characterological dispositions and moral behavior, thus virtue formation involves the integration of the domains of character formation and moral formation as defined by Porter et al. (2019). Virtues engage values, ideals, goals, and ultimate concerns, thus making virtue formation a part of broader spiritual formation. There are many specific virtues that can be considered but my research has been primarily on forgiveness, humility, gratitude, hope, compassion, and justice. My focus in this paper will be on individual virtue formation, however I will try to

highlight the interactive influence of communal, organizational and systemic dynamics. Clearly, it is challenging to practice virtues such as humility if one is embedded in communities and organizational contexts lacking humility, and this is compounded if a person holds marginalized identities (Moon & Sandage, 2019).

Differentiation is a developmental system that can facilitate a suite of capacities for (a) self-regulation of emotions, (b) relational flexibility of balancing connectedness and autonomy, and (c) abilities to relate effectively and cooperatively across sociocultural differences (Sandage et al., 2020). Aspects of differentiation require cultural contextualization and manifest in differing forms of balance based on cultural norms, however core aspects of differentiation have been found to be salutary for relational and emotional functioning in many global regions. Colleagues and I have previously argued differentiation of self (DoS) is an important characteristic of spiritual maturity (Majerus & Sandage, 2010; Shults & Sandage, 2006), and the empirical research I summarize below offers support for that thesis. Volf (1996) described differentiation as part of both the internalization of relationships and also the relational dynamics of alterity that can impact capacities for forgiveness. I will suggest this applies to other virtues, also.

The fields related to moral and virtue education include many philosophies or theories of virtue development, including some suggestions that the capacity for emotion regulation is important (Kristjansson, 2018). However, despite influential virtue ethics theories about the importance of (a) emotions as part of virtues and (b) communities in helping form virtues (e.g., MacIntyre, 2007) there appears to be limited application of relational development theories in psychological research on virtue and even less attention to the differentiation-based integration of relationality and emotion regulation in the formation of virtue.

By *emotion regulation* (or affect regulation), I mean the ability of an individual to modulate their emotional states to respond adaptively to their environment (Hill, 2015). Numerous models of psychotherapy emphasize interventions for the regulation of negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression). However, I suggest that emotion regulation can also involve the up-regulation of particular forms of positive emotion, motivation, and behavior that link relational virtues to the healthy psychosocial functioning necessary for eudaimonic flourishing (Sandage & Owen, in preparation). Virtues involve more than emotion regulation, but capacities for particular forms of emotion regulation are crucial for the virtuous functioning that leads to eudaimonic flourishing. From an RSM perspective, my particular interest for this paper is in relational dynamics of spirituality and differentiation as they interact with capacities for emotion regulation that facilitate virtue.

By *mediation*, I mean a factor that helps account for the association between other factors. In this case, I will propose differentiation as a mediator of individual differences in relational spirituality and virtue in leading to mature formation outcomes such as (a) multi-dimensional flourishing and (b) mature alterity (intercultural competence/humility and social justice commitment). At this point, I will not be able to demonstrate clear evidence of empirical causality for differentiation but will offer some preliminary support across a broader continuum of mediation. And obviously social science methods cannot account for the supernatural influences that can be embedded in empirical effects.

Transformation within the RSM refers to second-order change as indicated by significant changes in the ways of relating to a particular person, goal, or other object (Sandage et al., 2020;

Shults & Sandage, 2006). Thus, moral transformation implies a change of motivation and relational dynamics driving certain behaviors. While there can be negative moral transformations, my interest in virtue pulls for a focus on constructive moral transformations and associated forms of relational development and relational spirituality. An example applied to constructive virtue formation could involve a person who has tried to practice forgiveness of others out of dutiful obedience to spiritual teachings and moral commandments or simply for personal relief from negative feelings. If this person then moves to forgiving out of a more internalized sense of God's love and associated moral integrity it could represent a moral transformation.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that this paper will largely draw on empirical studies from my own research program with colleagues (see Table 1). I am using this occasion as an opportunity to try to organize and synthesize findings from a large group of studies we have conducted to frame an argument for DoS as a key mechanism in virtue formation based on the RSM. It is also the case that DoS has been widely studied in numerous social science areas (e.g., couple and family functioning, intercultural relations, self-development, leadership) but not as thoroughly in relation to virtue and spirituality in other research labs.

RSM and Virtue Formation

In this section, I offer a brief overview of the RSM in relation to virtue formation and supporting research in this area.

RSM Overview. The RSM foregrounds three key multi-dimensional spirituality constructs: (a) spiritual dwelling, (b) spiritual seeking, and (c) spiritual struggles (Sandage, Rupert, et al., 2020; Sandage & Stavros, 2023). *Spiritual dwelling* refers to the numerous forms of relational spirituality that can promote communal connections, spiritual grounding and spiritual intimacy, orienting values and meaning, and practices aimed at emotional and spiritual regulation. At its best, spiritual dwelling is stabilizing and can promote social support, holistic well-being, and a sense of identity. Healthy forms of spiritual dwelling tend to be positively associated with prosocial values and virtues in social science research (Captari et al., 2023; Jankowski, Sandage, Wang, & Crabtree, 2022). However, highly anxious, rigid, or enmeshed forms of spiritual dwelling will not tend to promote virtuous behavior and can instead reflect closed system dynamics privileging homogeneity over diversity, narcissism or shame over humility, and resentment over compassion and forgiveness. Spiritual practices can be conductive to virtue if constructive and authentic dynamics of relationality and emotion regulation are involved, but spiritual practices can be ineffectual or even work against virtue when insecure and dysregulating dynamics of relational spirituality are operative. For example, a study with Christian seminary students found more petitionary prayer was associated with lower hope when students held insecure and shame-based relational spirituality templates for God (Paine & Sandage, 2015). This might fit Christian persons who cognitively believe in God's love but struggle to internalize an authentic sense of secure love due to attachment difficulties. More broadly, the various dimensions of spiritual dwelling can be strengths for individuals and communities unless these dynamics produce inflexible resistance to changes and growth necessary for moral transformation.

Spiritual seeking is oriented toward processes of spiritual exploration, valuing reflection on existential questions, openness to diversity, and growth in spiritual complexity in the face of tragedy and suffering. Seeking can require tolerating ambiguity, anxiety, and deconstruction, but

can lead to new spiritual understanding, more diverse relationships, and a widening circle of compassion and social concern. On the other hand, some anxious forms of seeking can lead to perpetual searching without forming the connections or commitments that tend to facilitate well-being and virtue, and spiritual seekers do not always embrace moral transformation or a widening circle of concern. The stress and angst of chronic seeking as an ongoing process of change can in some cases work against prosocial growth and virtue. For example, a person might repeatedly switch between various churches and faith traditions in consumeristic fashion whenever disappointments set in, which could reflect avoidance of commitments, a search for utopia, or some other barrier to moral and spiritual maturity. My colleagues and I have described how this type of pattern of *wandering* is contrary to differentiation and diverges from healthy spiritual seeking (Sandage et al, 2020; Shults & Sandage, 2006; Worthington & Sandage, 2016). Beyond chronic patterns of seeking, the reality that cycles of seeking are often prompted by losses, disappointments, or episodes of dissonance means that spiritual seeking might at least temporarily work against certain virtues (e.g., gratitude, forgiveness, loyalty) while potentially being motivated by other virtues (e.g., integrity, courage, justice).

While spiritual dwelling and seeking reflect differing postures within formation that can be in opposition, the RSM suggests they actually form a complementary dialectic that can be constructive when balanced and integrated over time. Long-term dwelling without fresh seeking usually becomes stale or entrenched against growth. Perpetual seeking without dwelling can be grandiose or lacking in rootedness. Theologically, I believe God draws us to dwelling in God's secure love and prompts seeking in formative rhythms that are unique to particular individuals and communities, thus requiring Spirit-led discernment during any season. Over time, spiritual maturity involves capacities to integrate dwelling and seeking.

Spiritual struggles are also multi-dimensional (e.g., conflict or distress related to the Divine, meaning, morality, doubt, relationships in spiritual communities, social oppression, etc.) and are a common aspect of spiritual development or formation in many traditions (Pargament & Exline, 2022). At the same time, spiritual struggles are frequently associated with problems in mental health and well-being and can interfere with virtue formation for various reasons. In a study with outpatient clients, we found that spiritual struggles can be related to problems in psychosocial functioning over and above the impact of mental health symptoms, which suggests this is an important and under-rated area for mental health practice (Sandage, Jankowski, et al., 2022). For some persons, spiritual struggles can prompt spiritual seeking as a way to pursue new or deeper pathways toward healing and growth, for example a person seeking a richer understanding of God's love on the heels of a failure event to counter shame-driven perfectionism and bitter reactivity. Yet others can find themselves languishing in painful and dysregulating spiritual struggles, such as disappointment with God or faith communities, without a sense of agency to explore new spiritual understanding or feeling bereft of ways of authentically practicing virtues. Again, the RSM draws attention to the relational spirituality dynamics within and around individuals and communities experiencing spiritual struggles, as well as the ways wider systemic factors (e.g., prohibitions against spiritual struggles) can impact the resolution or perpetuation of such struggles.

The RSM theory of transformation focuses on the importance of constructive relationships as holding environments to support the dialectical balancing of dwelling and seeking and the integration of struggles into more coherent life narratives. For some individuals, new and corrective experience of relating to someone (e.g., pastor, therapist, spiritual director,

mentor) sincerely and benevolently interested in their experiences and well-being can be pivotal to transformation. The RSM draws on the *crucible* as a metaphor to describe the intense processes of change that can involve destabilization prior to the construction of new developmental patterns, moral commitments, and meaning (Sandage et al., 2020). A crucible represents a "resilient vessel in which metamorphic processes occur" (Schnarch, 1991, p. xv). Authentic relationships that effectively balance challenge and support can help shape a crucible container for liminal processes that allow persons to wrestle with their integrity dilemmas and move toward internalized commitments and transformed patterns of relating with God and others. Theologically, I believe God is immanently engaged in helping shape the corrective relational dynamics that can be internalized by individuals as they grow in virtue formation, although the specific nature of this Divine engagement obviously merits many theological questions and debates.

A key implication of the RSM is that leaders (e.g., spiritual leaders, therapists, spiritual directors, etc.) who are called to cultivate and steward transformative spaces need mature relational capacities such as those that characterize DoS (Shults & Sandage, 2006). I will return to related points below, but here I want to mention the RSM emphasis on the ongoing formation of leaders to facilitate DoS, well-being, personal and professional growth, metabolization of stress and trauma exposure, prevention of burnout, and overall practical wisdom. My colleagues and I have suggested this requires the cultivation of healthy relational ecologies to support the ongoing formation of spiritual leaders and therapists. In my view, this is an under-rated issue when it comes to the challenges of trying to be stewards of transformation and can get reduced to simplistic platitudes about leaders' need for self-care. From an RSM perspective, leaders who help construct and hold space for spiritual and moral transformation will need to work within healthy relational ecologies that balance dwelling and seeking in addition to engaging wise practices of self-care. At present, there appears to be an under-supply of such relational ecologies for these vocations which contributes to concerning rates of burnout and secondary traumatic stress (Captari, Choe et al., 2024; Hydinger et al., 2024).

Relevant Empirical Findings on Dwelling, Seeking, and Virtue. Two early RSM-based cross-sectional studies of Bethel seminary students used a self-report measure of a recent spiritual transformation to investigate shifts in the dynamics of spiritual dwelling and seeking (Sandage, Jankowski, & Link, 2010; Sandage, Hill, & Vaubel, 2011). While the focus was not on moral transformation, there was evidence that students reporting a recent spiritual transformation showed a greater integration of spiritual dwelling and seeking in these studies than students not reporting a recent spiritual transformation. This was suggestive that experiences of constructive spiritual transformation might involve a synthesis or bringing together of the dynamics of dwelling and seeking. In the second study there was also evidence this integration was positively associated with commitments to the social virtue of generativity or caring for future generations.

More recently, two studies with large samples of students from eighteen Christian seminaries in North America found associations between DoS and the integration of spiritual dwelling and seeking. Using latent profile analysis, DoS was associated with a group of students with a profile integrating dwelling and seeking while also showing higher levels of virtue without impression management elevation in comparison to other student profiles (Jankowski, Sandage, Wang, & Hill, 2022). A subsequent longitudinal study from the same project with a larger sample found a group of students ("regulated seekers") with a profile that integrated spiritual dwelling, seeking, and DoS also showed higher levels of flourishing and mature alterity

outcomes over time than other student profiles. This regulated seekers group was also not characterized by the elevated impression management (or "illusory spiritual health"; Edwards & Hall, 2003) effects of the "complacent dwellers" group whose lower seeking seemed to interfere with markers of maturity (Jankowski et al., under review).

We have also started to study DoS within the context of our spiritually-diverse client population at our outpatient mental health clinic. In a recent study utilizing the RSM as a framework, DoS mediated the positive effects of spiritual dwelling on reduced symptoms and improved social well-being among clients over time and also showed concurrent effects with spiritual seeking on those outcomes (Gerstenblith, Jankowski et al., in prep). While not directly related to moral transformation in therapy, these results suggest DoS is a key mechanism in the positive effect of healthy forms of relational spirituality on prosocial outcomes.

Differentiation, Relational Development, and Virtue

This section summarizes the theorized role of relational development systems, particularly differentiation, within the RSM understanding of virtue formation. I also briefly engage the RSM view of differentiated relational ontology and then offer an overview of relevant empirical findings.

RSM and Relational Development Systems. The RSM also focuses on three relational development systems that have evolved for overlapping-yet-distinct functions that impact virtue formation: (a) attachment, (b) differentiation, and (c) intersubjectivity (Sandage et al., 2020). The attachment system develops in response to human needs for security, trust, relational co-regulation of emotions, and safe havens of community. The differentiation system has evolved in response to needs for cooperation across human differences that necessitate a balance of self-identity and interpersonal and sociocultural flexibility. The intersubjectivity system emerges from the particular challenges of human subjectivity and alterity that can range from subjugating and estranging power relations to more highly developed capacities for intimacy, mutual recognition, and the repair of relational ruptures toward shared understanding. These relational development systems are interconnected, yet theory and research related to each system contributes distinct features to RSM strategies for both spiritual formation and clinical practice. Thus, a particular individual or relational system seeking to work on virtue formation might benefit from an initial focus on one or more of these development systems based on the unique strengths and contextual challenges they are experiencing.

Each of these relational development systems offers valuable functions within virtue formation. Attachment has been empirically studied in relation to virtue formation in our research program (e.g., Hainlen et al., 2016; Jankowski et al., 2019; Jankowski et al., 2022) and the wider field (e.g., Allsop et al., 2021; Dwiwardani et al., 2014) and is particularly salient for understanding individual differences in relational spirituality dynamics involving God images (Tung et al., 2018). Intersubjectivity has been more difficult to study empirically to date, due in part to the complexity of the construct and associated measurement challenges, but it has been engaged theoretically around social ethics (e.g., Orange, 2020). In this paper, I am focusing on DoS as a key mechanism of change in virtue formation because that is the relational development system for which we have the largest body of empirical research supporting associations with virtue. However, I think DoS might also have some priority in relevance to virtue formation due to (a) the combination of relational flexibility and emotion regulation

capacities and (b) the evolutionary function of helping individuals and relational systems negotiate cooperation across differences.

Differentiated Relational Ontology. The developmental concept of differentiation also fits with a differentiated relational ontology. By "relational ontology" I mean the view that "relations between entities are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves" (Wildman, 2010, p. 55; see also Shults, 2003). In contrast to some views of relational ontology within the literature on relational spirituality, I prefer a differentiated relational ontology perspective that views both relations and entities as real, meaning differentiated entities in relation (Sandage et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2016). From a Trinitarian theological perspective, differences or differentiated entities can exist within a relational matrix, and yet relations are basic to being. God as Trinity exemplifies differentiated relationality as separate persons existing in intimate and cooperative relationship (Sandage et al., 2019). Volf (1996) has offered a theological account of differentiation to describe the activity of God in creation through "separating-and binding" that can results in patterns of interdependence and forgiveness. Balswick et al. (2016) have employed a Trinitarian theology of differentiated relationality, inspired by the developmental theory of Loder (1998), as a nexus of the human spirit and the Divine spirit to form capacities for a *reciprocating self* conducive to relational and social maturity. These are some of the interdisciplinary theoretical inspirations for the RSM account of DoS in virtue formation.

Relevant Empirical Findings on Relationality and Virtue in Psychotherapy. Two recent longitudinal clinical studies from our outpatient clinic and research lab do not explicitly focus on DoS but do offer relevance to this RSM account of virtue formation. In the first study, we investigated different trajectories of change on virtues (gratitude, forgiveness), eudaimonic well-being, and depression among adult clients receiving psychotherapy using a contemporary relational psychodynamic approach (Jankowski, Sandage, Captari et al., 2024). We identified a subgroup of clients who started at lower levels of virtue, well-being, and depression and also showed growth in these virtues during treatment which was associated with reduced depression and increased well-being over time. This does not tell us the mechanism of change but does show some clients reported growth in these virtues in the context of relational psychotherapy which was associated with salutary outcomes. We also independently measured both client and therapist ratings of their working alliance or relationship during treatment, and convergence on these ratings was associated with the client group showing the overall highest levels of virtue and eudaimonic well-being. Such convergence in ratings of the relationship dynamics does not necessarily reflect DoS and is probably a better index of intersubjectivity, but the findings to support theorized connections between relational development, virtues, and the role of relational co-regulation in fostering capacities for cooperative work.

The second study (also from our clinic) again identified a subgroup of adult clients showing a trajectory of growth in relational virtues (gratitude, forgiveness, humility) during relational psychotherapy using longitudinal growth mixture modeling. Two clinician-researchers then conducted qualitative interviews with a group (N=15) of these clients exploring their understandings of relational virtues and experiences with these virtues during treatment. Results are too nuanced to adequately summarize here, but suffice to say these clients articulated a variety of ways the therapist-client relational dynamics influenced their re-working or reconstruction of their own understanding and practice of these virtues. Therapeutic timing and therapist attunement to both relational dynamics and unique aspects of clients' identities,

experiences, and worldviews were credited as highly important. In many cases, clients reported prior negative or unhelpful experiences with certain virtues (e.g., forgiveness, humility) but felt they had discovered a new meaning of these virtues in the relational context of psychotherapy. Importantly, these relational virtues were rarely an explicit focus or goal in treatment but rather either (a) emerged more inductively as topics of dialogue or (b) remained implicit dynamics that were not named but clients drew upon in reflecting on these virtues in the context of the interviews.

In reference to findings from this second study, I use the concept of differentiation to describe this kind of clinical approach to relational virtues emphasizing (a) therapists' own embodiment of these virtues and (b) a non-directive and exploratory approach to engaging these virtues implicitly and/or explicitly without trying to control clients' embrace of these virtues. From this perspective, the actual experience of these relational virtues is prioritized over direct instruction about the virtues, and often it is vital to start by processing and metabolizing intense emotions that are serving contrary functions to the practice of that virtue (e.g., anger, fear, or shame in the case of forgiveness). In our view, these therapists seem to be doing more than simply modeling virtuous behavior, as might be suggested by cognitive or social learning theories. Rather, the qualitative data seems to resonate with RSM perspectives that clients are "taking in" or internalizing relational experiences with therapists at a limbic level of neurobiology in ways that shift their moral and relational frameworks toward greater self-regulation and virtue embodiment. And I think of the relational processes these client participants described as reflecting therapists' and clients' capacities to work together to implicitly balance dynamics of dwelling and seeking, connecting and exploring, in relation to virtues.

Relevant Empirical Findings on DoS and Virtue. We have also found numerous significant effects for DoS in relation to relational spirituality and virtue. In our studies with seminary students in evangelical contexts, DoS has mediated protective effects for (a) forgiveness (Jankowski et al., 2013; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010) and (b) spiritual dwelling (Jankowski & Sandage, 2012) on mental health outcomes. DoS has also been positively associated with eudaimonic well-being over and above impression management (Ruffing et al., 2021) and with constructive growth in humility following a formation program (Jankowski et al., 2022) in evangelical seminary contexts. DoS has also accounted for relational development challenges impacting virtues including the negative effects of (a) vulnerable narcissism on humility and forgiveness (Sandage et al., 2017), (b) attachment insecurity on forgiveness (Hainlen et al., 2016), and (c) overall narcissism on well-being (Jankowski et al., 2021).

These connections between DoS and virtue have also extended to some broader religious contexts. DoS was positively associated with humility among students at a progressive Christian seminary (Captari et al., 2021), and DoS mediated the protective effect of intellectual humility on lower spiritual struggles among Jewish seminary students amidst the Gaza-Israel War (Gerstenblith, Stein et al., in prep). We also found DoS mediated the effect of humility on positive mental health and reduced narcissism in a sample of religious leaders from Abrahamic traditions (Jankowski et al., 2019).

Differentiation and Virtues of Mature Alterity

In this section, I summarize the RSM perspective on mature alterity and findings related to relational spirituality, virtue, and mature alterity.

Alterity means ways of relating to otherness or a person's perceived sense of social and existential difference, and my colleagues and I have previously summarized our RSM interdisciplinary understanding of alterity in conversation with a range of scholars such as Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Jessica Benjamin, and Miroslav Volf (Sandage, Paine, & Morgan, 2019). The RSM describes alterity as a ubiquitous existential dynamic in life as there are always differences between people and communities even if there are also substantive similarities. As stated above, difference is a part of social and ontological reality and can provoke anxiety leading to exclusion, violence, and other reactive behaviors (Volf, 1996). Alterity can also involve idealization of others which is another problem for mutual recognition and intercultural competence. As a Divine reality, difference is necessary and potentially constructive depending on relational spirituality and social responses to those differences. These complex multi-dimensional and primal dynamics of alterity provide one potential pathway toward spiritual and moral transformation (Sandage, Jensen, & Jass, 2008; Sandage et al., 2019).

In *The Luminous Darkness*, pastoral mystic and social activist Howard Thurman (1965) reflects on the potential connections between relational spirituality and alterity amidst the racial segregation of his time in this way:

> "Could it be that we are face to face with an inherent weakness in religious experience, as such, that is private, personal, and binding on the individual only to the extent that he [sic] identifies himself with another and thereby becoming one with him at all levels and all the ways that are significant? … It is a probing process trying to find the opening into another. And it requires exposure, sustained exposure … The religious experience as I have known it seems to swing wide the door, not merely into Life but into lives." (pp. 110-111)

Thurman's phrase "swing wide the door" poetically captures our RSM interest in benevolent alterity as a positive form of relational spirituality emerging within transformation. In addition to Thurman, we have drawn on the other theorists above to describe benevolent alterity as "comprised of both (a) differentiated perceptions of self and others, and (b) an ethical orientation to the good and socially just moral action" as these dynamics pertain to alterity (Sandage et al., 2019, p. 193). Volf (1996) has offered a theological model of differentiated alterity in relation to the virtue of forgiveness, and I view mature and differentiated alterity as a relational spirituality dynamic that might facilitate numerous other virtues. At the risk of over-statement, I suggest religious communities have tended to be more effective at fostering virtuous behaviors toward other in-group members than facilitating virtue toward out-group members in contexts of alterity. Theologically and psychologically, I consider this a problem with respect to cultivating spiritual maturity in Christian contexts.

Relevant Empirical Findings on DoS, Virtue, and Mature Alterity. From a social science methodological approach, we have also operationalized mature alterity using the constructs of (a) social justice commitment and (b) intercultural competence but also with some recent studies on cultural humility. To date, we have published nineteen empirical studies on the facets of mature alterity (i.e., social justice commitment, intercultural competence, cultural humility) and aspects of spiritual formation and virtue in predominantly Christian samples of emerging or practicing faith leaders. Seven of these studies have included DoS and I summarize those findings below. Two of the studies have been in religiously-diverse clinical contexts, including one with clinicians (Crabtree et al., 2021) and one with clients (Choe et al., 2023). Our

measures of social justice commitment have typically included items addressing active concerns and commitments to work against racism, sexism, and poverty. Obviously, Christians differ in their views about the necessity or importance of working against these systemic dynamics, which is reflected in findings with these measures showing nonsignificant or very modest correlations with impression management in our studies. The measure of intercultural competence we have used – the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, 2011) – is not correlated with impression management. Our cultural humility measure is new and has not been tested in relation to impression management. Overall, our measures of social justice commitment and intercultural competence have been positively associated with a wide range of indices of healthy spiritual formation and virtue among Christians (Sandage, Hydinger, & Wang, 2023).

In our empirical research, DoS has been positively associated with (a) social justice commitment and (b) intercultural competence among seminary students in evangelical Christian contexts. DoS mediated the positive association between forgiveness of others and social justice commitment in one of these studies (Jankowski et al., 2013), and the negative association between attachment insecurity and social justice commitment in another study (Hainlen et al., 2016). DoS also mediated predicted associations between (a) relational spirituality dynamics (spiritual well-being, spiritual instability), (b) meditative prayer, and (c) humility in relation to intercultural competence among seminary students (Jankowski et al., 2014; Paine et al., 2016; Sandage & Jankowski, 2013). Several of these studies were also part of a wider review of research on DoS and cultural competence (Hook et al., 2022). Overall, these studies suggest DoS helps account for the positive connections between healthy Christian spiritual formation and mature alterity, while also helping to explain the negative impact of spiritual and relational struggles on commitments to justice and intercultural effectiveness.

In clinical contexts, DoS also mediated the positive association between humility and spiritual and religious competence in a sample of practicing clinicians (Crabtree et al., 2021). This suggests DoS can facilitate the humility necessary for clinicians to sensitively engage clients across spiritual and religious differences. A study with psychotherapy clients also found DoS was positively associated with growth in both cultural humility and eudaimonic well-being during treatment (Choe et al., 2023). This latter study appears to be the first showing cultural humility might be conducive to the mental health of psychotherapy clients and could further reflect the connections between DoS, flexible openness to the perspectives of others, and psychosocial well-being.

Crucibles of Moral Transformation

This section offers some initial thoughts on applying the RSM to crucibles of moral transformation. Previously, the RSM has been utilized to conceptualize crucible-like processes of change in spiritual transformation (Shults & Sandage, 2006), interpersonal forgiveness (Worthington & Sandage, 2016), and broader psychotherapeutic changes (Sandage et al., 2020) but not moral transformation, per se. My specific interest in this paper is in the moral transformation of virtue, which from an RSM perspective would involve an individual or relational system undergoing a second order change in the motivational dynamics and sustained practice of a particular virtue (e.g., compassion, humility, forgiveness). The RSM suggests crucible processes involve the intensification of dissonant intersections between (a) core values and goals and (b) current developmental capacities thereby clarifying the need for significant developmental (or formative) growth. Schnarch (1997) has described these as integrity dilemmas

which I consider an apt description, however other virtues besides integrity may better describe particular versions of these dilemmas. By "dissonant intersections" I do not mean these concerns are irreconcilable, as transformation represents a move toward such reconciliation. Rather, I mean that crucible processes bring a focusing of attention which some contemplatives have described as the *purgative way* (Shults & Sandage, 2006) and in New Testament language has been described as *conviction*. Shame and guilt are frequently part of the intensification of crucible processes, although I do not consider them particularly helpful to the resolution of these dilemmas. Rather, I view DoS as central to the suite of formative capacities necessary to tolerate the distress and ambiguity of moral crucibles, regulate associated emotions (such as shame and guilt), access core values and ultimate concerns, and perceive new possibilities for moral commitment and action. *Moral transformation therefore represents a differentiating process*.

I should also note the obvious point that moral crucibles do not always lead to differentiation and moral transformation. It is quite possible (or even probable) that individuals or relational systems wrestling with crucible dynamics will choose homeostatic anxiety-reduction strategies that offer more stabilized or familiar alternatives to transformative change. Transformation always involves risk and loss which challenges relational and systemic dynamics. To add to the complexity of these situations, there can be moral considerations involved in resisting moral transformation. For example, a pastor of a financially vulnerable church might wrestle with the fearful way they have capitulated to a board member who is also the largest donor to the church thereby enabling his patterns of bullying and emotionally abusive behavior toward various members. But the pastor will also have to count the cost of engaging the differentiation necessary to confront this person and risk the potential consequences for the entire congregation. Many moral dilemmas have these competing considerations which can involve choices on the prioritization of differing virtues and moral concerns.

The RSM posits differentiated relational dynamics are central to constructive crucible processes. This means leaders and other members of communities supporting those in moral crucibles need high levels of differentiation to offer respectful and non-anxious presence, curiosity, care, and wisdom. Poorly differentiated leaders, family members, or friends will tend to overfunction, rescue, or seek to control outcomes of crucible dilemmas in ways that impede virtue formation. Or they distance when the crucible heats up. This often happens when our own anxiety reaches a level we cannot regulate causing us to over-reach or run away. To be clear, there are crisis situations where leaders or those involved need to take decisive action or use authoritative power to determine certain moral outcomes. But these are not situations that typically lead to virtue formation or moral transformation, and some chronically anxious individuals and relational systems have trouble differentiating true crises from crucibles.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

I have summarized a relatively large group of empirical studies suggesting positive associations and several mediation effects for DoS related to relational spirituality and virtue formation. This includes some intervention and longitudinal studies, but the majority of the research is cross-sectional necessitating more rigorous research designs to test causal effects. Overall and with some exceptions, this research is weighted toward predominantly white, evangelical Christian samples in the United States so more research is needed in other religious, ethnic, and global contexts and other research labs. Clearly, DoS operates somewhat differently depending on cultural contexts and norms. There is also a need for qualitative and mixed method

designs to gain a thicker description of the specific processes and relational dynamics of differentiation that can facilitate virtue formation over time.

Implications for Faith Communities

In this final section I will briefly name a few implications for faith communities based on this model of virtue formation:

First, the RSM highlights the importance of cultivating healthy and differentiated relational dynamics or "relational ecologies" to foster authentic virtue formation. Such relational ecologies are needed for leaders (e.g., pastors and other spiritual leaders, chaplains, therapists, etc.), leaders-in-training (e.g., seminary students), and congregants or other community members. Differentiated relational ecologies are often feasible to develop but not as simple as putting a group of people in a room. There is a need to steward the relational space toward constructive developmental dynamics that offer a balance of support and challenge. Our current highly polarized social context in the US provides added layers for this challenge. At present, we are testing online versions of both group and individual formation programs for clergy, chaplains, and therapists drawing on a multi-dimensional model of virtues to help prevent burnout and promote flourishing (Captari, Choe et al., 2024) and we need other interventions in this area.

Second, an RSM-based approach to virtue formation in Christian contexts also invites integrative attention to embodiment and wisdom about developmental dynamics in ways that challenge radically dualistic and implicitly Gnostic approaches to virtue. Spiritual influences do not bypass human embodiment in virtue formation. Put differently, we should be hopeful and intentional about virtue formation but not idealistic nor grasping for "microwaveable" techniques. Relational development does not happen without wise effort, but it also does not usually happen overnight. There is a need for more substantive and evidence-based relational development resources for faith communities in this area.

Third, and paradoxically, virtue formation also often starts in painful vulnerability and moves in non-linear ways toward growth. Any process of moral transformation of virtue will involve metabolizing loss, disappointment, and other difficult emotions as part of developing new ways of practicing that virtue. This typically requires leaders and faith community members with strong tolerance for anxiety, ambiguity, and pain as part of their differentiation and their ability to sit with others in moral crucibles. Leaders and faith communities obviously differ widely in these capacities, and relational development difficulties such as pathological narcissism, chronic shame, or ethnocentrism (among others) will interfere with virtue formation until those difficulties are constructively addressed.

Finally, we need integrative (theological and psychological) approaches to the inter-related areas of diversity competence, cultural humility, and mature alterity as part of spiritual and virtue formation. This speaks to a faith community's overall systemic capacities for differentiation and effectively managing the anxieties of difference as part of virtue formation and spiritual growth. This is the area that concerns me the most at this time.

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Table 1: *Relevant studies on differentiation of self from our labs*

Study #	Citation	Sample	Role of DoS	Key Findings
1	Sandage & Jankowski (2010)	213 Bethel Seminary students	Mediation	DoS mediated effect of dispositional forgiveness on spiritual instability, mental health symptoms, and well-being
2	Sandage & Harden (2011)	172 Bethel Seminary students	Associated Factor	DoS was positively associated with intercultural competence, forgiveness, and gratitude

3	Jankowski & Sandage (2012)	140 psychologically distressed Bethel Seminary students	Mediation	DoS mediated spiritual dwelling and negative mood
4	Jankowski ea (2013)	213 Bethel Seminary students	Mediation	DoS mediated the effects of forgiveness on (a) depression and (b) social justice commitment. Also positively associated with humility.
5	Sandage ea (2013)	202 Bethel Seminary students	Associated Factor	DoS positively predicted both social justice commitment and hope
6	Sandage & Jankowski (2013)	139 Bethel Seminary students	Mediation	DoS mediated the effects of (a) spiritual well-being on intercultural competence and social justice commitment and (b) spiritual instability on intercultural competence
7	Jankowski & Sandage (2014)	138 Bethel Seminary students	Mediation	DoS mediated the effect of meditative prayer on intercultural competence
8	Hainlen ea (2016)	209 Bethel Seminary students	Mediation	DoS mediated the effects of attachment on (a) forgiveness, (b) positive emotion, and (c) social justice commitment
9	Paine ea (2016)	75 Bethel graduate students	Mediation	DoS mediated effect of humility on intercultural competence
10	Sandage ea (2017)	162 Bethel Seminary students	Mediation	DoS mediated the effects of vulnerable narcissism on depression, forgiveness, and humility
11	Jankowski ea (2019)	258 Religious Leaders	Mediation	DoS mediated effects of humility on (a) mental health symptoms, (b)

				eudaimonic well-being, and (c) narcissism
12	Ruffing ea (2021)	111 Gordon Conwell Boston seminary students	Associated Factor	DoS was positively related to humility and eudaimonic well-being o/a impression management
13	Captari ea (2021)	65 Boston U seminary students	Associated Factor	DoS positively predicated humility mediated by mindfulness
14	Jankowski ea (2021)	75 clergy candidates	Mediation	DoS mediated the negative impact of narcissism on well-being conditioned by humility
15	Crabtree ea (2021)	48 practicing therapists	Mediation	DoS mediated effect of humility on spiritual and religious competence
16	Jankowski, Sandage, Ruffing ea (2022)	136 GC Boston seminary students	Concurrent Change Factor	Positive changes in DoS were concurrent with positive changes in humility over time
17	Jankowski, Sandage, Wang ea 2022	580 students at Christian seminaries in North America	Associated Factor	DoS associated with group of students integrated dwelling and seeking and higher levels of virtue without impression management elevation
18	Choe ea (2023)	180 psychotherapy clients in Boston	Associated Factor	DoS positively associated with client group that showed increased cultural humility and eudaimonic well-being during treatment
19	Gerstenblith, Jankowski ea (in prep)	75 psychotherapy clients in Boston	Mediation	DoS mediated the effects of spiritual dwelling on (a) reduced symptoms and (b) improved social well-being over time. Showed concurrent effects with spiritual

				seeking on those outcomes.
20	Gerstenblith, Stein ea (in prep)	35 seminary students at pluralistic Jewish seminary	Mediation	DoS mediated the effect of intellectual humility on lower spiritual struggles
21	Jankowski, Sandage, & Wang (under review)	867 students at Christian seminaries in North America	Associated Factor	Group of students with integrated spiritual dwelling, seeking, and DoS showed profile of authentic flourishing and mature alterity