Culture of Ambiguity
Implications for Self and Social Understanding in Adolescence
Sandra Leanne Bosacki

Research shows that the ability to “read others” or to make sense of the signs and symbols evident in human communication has an influence on children’s self-conceptions and their social interactions in childhood and adolescence. Given that psychological explanations play a key role in teaching and learning, further research is required, particularly on adolescents within the school context. This book investigates which aspects of these discourse experiences foster the growth of understanding of spirit, emotion, and mind in adolescence. Accordingly, from a co-relational approach to the development of understanding mind and education, this book builds on past and current research by investigating the social and emotional antecedents and consequences of psychological understanding in early adolescence. Specifically, this book explores the question: How do adolescents use their ability to understand other minds to navigate their relationships with themselves and their peers within the culture of ambiguity? To address this question, this book critically examines research on adolescents’ ability to understand mind, emotion, and spirit, and how they use this ability to help them navigate their relationships within the school setting. This book might appeal to a range of educators and researchers from early childhood educators/researchers to developmentalists specializing in the socioemotional and spiritual/moral worlds of adolescents.

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Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation. Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity—youth identity in particular—the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant. But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some "touchy-feely" educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfulfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
Culture of Ambiguity

Implications for Self and Social Understanding in Adolescence

Sandra Leanne Bosacki
DEDICATION

To my mother, father, and sister. Thank you for being my lighthouse in this world of emotional fog.
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I have a strong affection for puzzles and exploration. One of my earliest memories of exploring puzzles involves my childhood summer holidays with my parents and sister on the Atlantic shore, exploring on the beach in Cape May, New Jersey searching for seashells. I always felt a sense of awe as I wondered how you could see different shapes in each seashell – and that this would change next time you looked at it. It also fascinated me that others would also see something different in each seashell.

One of my earliest fascinations with ambiguity during school stemmed from my interest as a young child in the ambiguous figures such as Garrow’s duck/woman. Upon childhood visits to the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto on elementary school trips and with my family, as a young child I used to stare at the ambiguous diagrams – mesmerized and mystified by how these figures played tricks with my eyes. I could not believe my own eyes as I would see one image one time, then a completely different image the next. I was also interested and surprised that others viewed the image so differently – or the same. How did we learn how to interpret these images?

As a young child growing up in a family with extended family who spoke Polish and Ukrainian – although I could not speak the language, I was enthralled as well as puzzled, as I often stood on the periphery of the social circle and observed my family members interacting during family gatherings. Although the Polish and Ukrainian words did not make sense to me, I could glean a sense of the meaning behind the eyes and laughs of family members and feel some kind of emotional sense of the story. These exposures to puzzles and complex multilingual social interactions have laid the emotional and cognitive groundwork for me to explore the area of adolescent’s understanding of social and self ambiguity as many questions remain unanswered.

As an older child and young adolescent, I was also interested in how people’s facial expressions would not necessarily match the tone of their voice emotionally, or what they were literally saying, or what I felt from them regarding their emotional tone. During my school years, I felt challenged as a learner to try to ‘predict’ the inner worlds others were experiencing using the clues available such as words, facial expression, non-verbal communication such as actions, gestures, stance, tone of voice, etc. I was usually in fear of being judged as an incompetent social detective – that it, I aimed as a child, and then later as an adult to aim to be a competent social detective and understand other’s messages with/or without verbal language.

Over the years, as I continued my educational journey as student, through graduate work and into academia, this combination of such puzzling and enchanted learning experiences have led me to continue to explore ambiguity in adolescents’ social and emotional lives in others and one’s self in my teaching and research. Given the diverse cultural and moral landscape of the Canadian population, as well
as the rapid advances made in technology today and social media, I find that I am perplexed by an increasing number of ambiguities in everyday situations and I wonder what this means for our psychological understanding of others and ourselves.

As I continue my pursuit to discover that 'perfect' shell on the Atlantic shore, I also continue my pursuit of issues of silence, emotions, and ambiguity in the emotional lives of Canadian youth as I continue to learn from the expertise and knowledge of adolescent minds. I invite the reader to join me on my journey of exploring the ambiguous and unexplored landscape of the personal and social world of the adolescent.

S.L. Bosacki
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I thank all those involved with the schools in which I have conducted my research studies on adolescents’ and children’s thoughts and emotions over the years including the children, teachers, principals, school staff, and parents. Throughout the years, at Dalhousie University, Brock University, and the University of Chicago at Illinois I have had the pleasure to work with numerous graduate student research assistants on various research projects and I thank them all for their assistance and support.

I have had the opportunity to discuss my ideas for this book in various classes that I have taught at Brock University and I thank all of my past and present students for furthering my thoughts around the many ideas discussed in this book. I also take this opportunity to thank my colleague and friends who have provided many inspiring conversations regarding ambiguity and silence in adolescence and have supported and furthered my thinking in the area of exploring adolescents’ social and emotional lives.

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Above all, I thank my parents and sister for their patience, tolerance, and humour while I devoted my time and energy to this project. Their emotional support has made this book possible.
INTRODUCTION

SCHOOLING THE AMBIGUITIES OF ADOLESCENCE

A Psychocultural Exploration

“All knowledge is ambiguous.” J.S. Habgood

“If I don’t know I don’t know I think I know
If I don’t know I know I think I don’t know.”
(Laing, D.H., 1969, p. 55)

How do we help young people make sense and meaning out of ambiguity and uncertainty during the transition between childhood and adolescence? How do we encourage youth to develop effective skills to help navigate through the culture of ambiguity during early adolescence? Given the increased recent surge in research on social cognition, the focus remains on the cognitive regarding aspects of learning and development (Olson & Dweck, 2009). Thus, this book focuses on theoretical and practical issues regarding emotional and social aspects of adolescents’ educational experiences that may contribute to their emotional and spiritual health. Drawing on past and current research on theory of mind and also on shy/socially withdrawn and emotionally sensitive children and adolescents (Bosacki, 2005; 2008), this book expands on the increasing complexity of the social and personal worlds of the Canadian adolescent. In particular, this book focuses on the ambiguities regarding identity and relationships that occur during the transitional developmental period between childhood and adolescence.

As educators become increasingly cognizant of the new realities of adolescents, this book aims to encourage educators to redefine and restructure their definitions of ambiguity within adolescence. In particular, this book will build on, and then move beyond the traditional cognitive-developmental representations of how adolescents learn, and provide recommendations that may inspire educators to adapt holistic and inclusive educational strategies that aim to help youth to develop healthy relationships with one another and themselves in the increasingly ambiguous contexts of the classroom, community and beyond. Overall, this book aims to encourage the expansion of new ideas that challenge the dominant discourse in educational psychology that tends to focus on the cognitive. This book encourages readers to focus on the importance of emotionality and spirituality regarding teaching and learning within the realms of the personal, social, and supernatural. Specifically, I will explore why is emotional and spiritual health important for adolescents in the classroom, what are these important educational health issues, and how can educators and researchers integrate the emotional and spiritual into the classroom and develop practical educational strategies that will enable adolescents to navigate the ambiguous landscape of the classroom.
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This book attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the fields of human development and education. I view the psychocultural notion of that development and learning includes aspects of cognitive, social, cultural, emotional, moral, and the spiritual through the lens of both an educational researcher and a practitioner or a developmental interventionist. Through the book, I will draw on empirical evidence from past and present research on adolescents’ social and emotional worlds including psychological understanding, self-conceptions, and peer relations, and also practical educational implications. This book will combine the scholarly areas of theory, research, and practice. As a developmental interventionist, it is my goal to provide a book that will encourage educators and researchers to engage the two disciplines in an ongoing critical discourse.

This book investigates adolescents’ ability to interpret, understand or make meaning of human thoughts and feelings, and its relation to their sense of self, peer relations, and socio-communicative competence within the school setting. Often referred to as Theory of Mind understanding (ToM), the ability to “read” others’ minds or mental states in the context of social action can also be referred to as psychological understanding (Bruner, 1996). This ability to translate the social language exchanged between others helps us to make sense of the minds of others in that it helps us to understand multiple perspectives and to communicate with others (Nelson, 2007; Tomasello, 1999).

Within the larger context of folk psychology, or our culturally shaped notion in terms of which people organize their views of themselves, or others, and of the world in which they live. This folk psychology, according to Bruner (1990) is an essential base not only of personal meaning, but of cultural cohesion as well. This book builds on Bruner’s (1996) description of the connection between folk psychology and folk pedagogy as folk psychology guides our social interactions, whereas folk pedagogy in part shapes our goals to help children and adolescents to learn about the world. As educators and researchers, how can folk psychology and pedagogy help us to explore our questions regarding what are adolescents’ minds like and how can we help them learn within the culture of ambiguity in the current school context?

Past research makes clear that communication, understanding of mind and relationships are closely linked in normative development, especially when individual differences are considered. A wealth of research with young children has now shown that engaging in discourse about inner states is linked to later success in understanding of mind and emotion. Beyond the age of five, however, little is known about the links between the understanding other minds and relationships (Dunn, 2008; Hughes, 2011; Moore, 2006). The ability to solve such ambiguous puzzles may mark children’s first realization that beliefs can have their origin within persons rather than exclusively in an external world. Given that children who possess high levels of psychological understanding are more likely to “think about their own and others’ thinking” during the school day, such an ability has important educational implications for beyond the gradeschool into highschool (Wellman & Laguttata, 2004).

Research has shown that the ability to “read others” or to make sense of the signs and symbols evident in human communication has an influence on children’s
self-conceptions and their social interactions in childhood and adolescence (Nelson, 2007). Thus, given that psychological explanations play a key role in teaching and learning, further research is required, particularly on adolescents within the school context. This book will investigate what aspects of these discourse experiences foster the growth of understanding of spirit, emotion, and mind in the adolescent.

Accordingly, from a co-relational approach to the development of understanding mind and education (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, Dunn, 2008), this book will build on past and current research by investigating the social and emotional antecedents and consequences of psychological understanding in early adolescence (Bosacki, 2003; 2008; Bosacki & Moore, 2004). Specifically, this book will explore the question: How do adolescents use their ability to understand other minds to navigate their relationships with themselves and their peers? To address this question, this book will critically examine research on adolescents’ ability to understand mind, emotion, and spirit, and how they use this ability to help them navigate their relationships within the school setting.

This book aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the fields of human development and education regarding the notion of ambiguity within the context of adolescence. Expanding on the Oxford Dictionary’s definition of ambiguity as “open to more than one interpretation, having a double meaning; unclear or inexact because a choice between alternatives has not been made,” (Oxford Pocket Dictionary – 2006, p. 18), Derived from the Latin word “ambiguo meaning uncertain, from ambi gere which means to go about or around, this book views the notion of “the ambiguities of the adolescent’s world” through the lens of both an educational researcher and a practitioner. I will explore the meanings and functions of ambiguity experienced by adolescents in the classroom.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, I have become interested in exploring the questions around ambiguity and uncertainty within the secondary school context. For example, when language is capable of being understood in more than one way by a reasonable person, ambiguity exists such that words are ambiguous when their significance is unclear to persons with competent knowledge and skill to understand them. What does this mean for adolescents? Given that there are two categories of ambiguity: latent and patent, where latent ambiguity exists when the language used is clear and intelligible so that it suggests one meaning but some extrinsic fact or evidence creates a need for interpretation or a choice among two or more possible meanings. In contrast, a patent ambiguity is one that appears on the face of a writing or document because uncertain or obscure language has been used. Applying these terms to the adolescent classroom, and drawing on the legal definitions of ambiguity such as in the law of contracts where ambiguity means more than that the language has more than one meaning upon which reasonable persons could differ (West’s Encyclopedia of American Law, 2008). For example, if there is an ambiguity, and the original writer or creator of the ambiguity cannot effectively explain it, then the ambiguity will be decided in the light most favorable to the other party. Applying this thinking to the adolescent
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classroom, what does this mean for social contracts made between peers, family members, educators and learners?

What does ambiguity mean for the adolescent and her experiences within her private and public worlds? What are the emotional and social functions, or what do we do with the verbal and nonverbal ambiguities? How do the functions differ if we create our ambiguities, or if they are imposed on us by others including those individuals for whom we care about, compared to those with whom with we are unfamiliar? What are the implications of the ambiguities of our Canadian society for the adolescent? Finally, looking toward the future, I end the book by exploring the question of where do we go from here and where is our path leading us to?

I aim to provide some future directions for adolescent students, and those who work with youth regarding what to do with classroom ambiguities and uncertainties. To answer some of these questions, this book provides empirical evidence and also suggestions for practice, both educational and clinical. Thus, this book aims to marry the theoretical and practical two scholarly areas regarding ambiguity in adolescence. As the author, it is my goal to provide a book that will inspire educators and researchers to engage in an ongoing discourse involving classroom ambiguities and continue to question the silences and contradictions found within the adolescent school context.

What does it mean when there is ambiguity in the secondary school classroom? What are the experiences of adolescents when they are being claimed to act, and/or communicate in ambiguous terms, or when they are exposed to ambiguities in the classroom? What is happening in the hearts and minds of adolescents facing complex contexts for which there are multiple meanings? What role do social messages play in the classroom through the use of Internet, Smart phones, etc. play in the classroom and what implications do these technological communication tools and social media contexts have for adolescents’ sense of self and social relationships?

To answer these questions, this book will borrow from both psychoeducational research and holistic educational philosophies that explore the roots of classroom complexities and uncertainties. This book will examine how individual differences and classroom culture, including gender, ethnicity, and language may affect our experiences of ambiguities in school settings and suggest ways in which educators can redesign and rethink educational programs that acknowledge the notion of doubt, uncertainty, and multiple meanings. To explore the landscape of classroom ambiguities from the perspective of a researcher and educator, I will outline, multiple meanings of ambiguity that adolescents may experience within the classroom. To bridge the gap between theory and practice in the fields of human development and education, theoretical and practical implications are discussed. It is hoped that this book’s attempt to unravel the meanings of classroom ambiguities will encourage educators and researchers to instill and foster the unspoken love of learning among the youth they work with.

ORGANIZATION AND FRAMEWORK OF THE BOOK

This book developed from own writing, research, conference presentations, teaching, and personal experiences during childhood and adolescence. Currently, I teach
various graduate courses in education including developmental issues in children and adolescence, educational research methods, and cognition and learning. Throughout the past fifteen years, the questions and comments from my previous research participants, students, and colleagues have influenced my thinking around the topic of adolescents’ emotional lives and social worlds. Accordingly, these multiple voices have been integrated throughout this book, as they have inspired me to think further on the concept of ambiguity and the implications it has for the classroom.

By providing a combination of research findings and practical applications, this book aims to inspire in a theoretical and conceptual sense and also practical (for both research and teaching purposes). This book may assist educators of all ages by presenting them with ideas to integrate the concept of ambiguity into their classroom, and to address issues of self-growth, especially the spiritual and emotional aspects. Although this book focuses on adolescence, the main ideas discussed in this book regarding ambiguity in self and social development are applicable to any age, thus, the audience could range from an early childhood educator to a university professor.

In particular, I hope that this book will interest educators or ‘developmental interventionists’ who are curious about exploring the needs of the ‘whole adolescent’ in education. I wrote this book intending to appeal to a variety of educators and researchers, ranging from early adolescent educators/researchers to university professors specializing in socioemotional and spiritual/moral development. This book may also have an international appeal given that the topic of ambiguity, emotionality, and education has become of interest to many educators across the globe.

This book is divided into three main chapters or sections, with each chapter highlighting an important aspect of classroom ambiguity in adolescents. Chapter 1 critiques theoretical issues that surround concepts and definitions of the culture of ambiguity in adolescence. I also connect the literature on developmental social cognition and spirituality to issues of ambiguities. Chapter 2 explores some of the possible contexts of classroom ambiguities, their characteristics and how they influence the lives of adolescents. In other words, why do some adolescents feel more confused and upset by ambiguities than others, or feel the need to understand ambiguous situations, and are ambiguities helpful or hurtful to the adolescents’ personal and social lives? This section describes some examples of when and where adolescents may experience specific ambiguities in the classroom. To explore this question, the chapter outlines the extant literature on particular examples of current experiences of classroom ambiguities regarding the self, and within the social context as well as the cultural context such as experiences of personal silence and social silence including ostracism. In particular, the chapter focuses on ambiguities created by situations of exclusion and ostracism including status variables such as ethnicity/race, gender, and social class. Specific examples of research used to explore youth’s understanding of interpretive ambiguity regarding humour, teasing and psychological bullying, deception, silence and ostracism. Chapter 3 explores the practical implications of classroom ambiguities, and examines the strategies and directions that educators and researchers could take in work aimed to support the development of a healthy voice and heart in adolescents.
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Overall, this book aims to address the paucity of research on adolescents’ concepts of ambiguity within the classroom and how this may be linked to self-growth and social relationships. Socioemotional and spiritual development are emphasized and provide current and relevant psychoeducational research that may hopefully lead to new questions and lines of inquiry. Following A.A. Milne’s (1926, introduction) advice, “Perhaps the best thing to do is to stop writing Introductions and get on with the book.”
WHY? (WHO, WHAT, AND WHERE) CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

“A little illusion is the only bond between mortals that never breaks.”
(Capek, 1927, p. 63)

“everything that deceives may be said to enchant.” Plato, The Republic
- (cited in Turkle, 2011, p. vi)

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Given the complexity surrounding the concept of ambiguity, this chapter aims to provide a roadmap to some of the meanings and definitions of personal and social ambiguities within the context of adolescent and education. That is, to explore the question of what ambiguity mean to adolescents, this chapter explores the multiple meanings and definitions of ambiguity within the psychocultural context. More specifically, I will review and connect the literature on ambiguity to related areas of inquiry including social cognitive development and emotionality in adolescence. I end this chapter with recommendations for educators to address the personal and social ambiguities in adolescence within the secondary school context.

WHY SILENCE, AMBIGUITY, AND EMOTIONALITY WITHIN THE HIGHSCHOOL CLASSROOM?

Why discuss the concept of ambiguity within the adolescent culture? What is specific about Canadian adolescents that provide the opportunity to explore the ambiguities and uncertainties of the personal, social, and cultural worlds. Building on the work of Bruner and others (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Bruner, 1996; Dunn, 2008; Olson, 1994), I take a psychocultural approach to development and schooling that views the importance of relationships as well as personal identity within the larger discourse of a learning community. As Yon (1994) notes, conceptualizing schooling as a discursive space enables us to recognize how individuals come from contradictory locations and occupy contradictory positions. Thus, binary categories will not work within a discursive space, as the connections between identity and community remain fluid as both learning and growing processes.

How do adolescents respond socially and emotionally to contexts of ambiguity? What emotional responses do socially ambiguous events evoke in youth within the school context. As I will discuss further on in Chapter 2, ambiguity and uncertainty may lead to feeling of positive and negative emotions as adolescents strive to make sense of contradictions and incoherency. Feelings of ambivalence may also arise as adolescents search for ways in which to express their emotions. Fitting within the
culture of ambiguity, Yon (2004) discusses the school context as a place of incoherence and elusiveness accompanied by feelings of ambivalence and supports what Bauman (1991) describes as living with the tensions of opposing views and positions – however implicitly made.

Who: Why Canadian Adolescents in 2012?

As the entomologist chasing butterflies of bring colors, my attention was seeking in the garden of gray matter, those cells of delicate and elegant forms, the mysterious butterflies of the soul, whose fluttering wings would someday – who knows? – enlighten the secret of mental life.


As Laing (1960) states in his description of the divided self during development, adolescence is the age where universally, the heightening or intensifying of the awareness of one’s own being, both as an object of one’s own awareness and the awareness of others (an awareness of oneself by oneself). Many researchers and educators agree that adolescence (approximately 9–18 years) is one of the most pivotal times in an individual’s overall development (e.g., Berk, 2011; McDevitt & Ormod, 2004; Selman, 1980; Santrock, 1993). Regarding interpersonal relations and identity formation, according to the classical developmentalist G. Stanley Hall (1904), adolescence is the age when youths’ shift their energy from themselves to their social relationships and experience the “storm” and “stress” of life. According to both Hall (1904) and Erickson (1968), the central task for the adolescent includes the development of one’s own identity within the larger social and cultural context. Thus, the adolescent’s task is to develop self-understanding within the nexus of social relationships.

As Fivush (2008) states, adolescence is a critical developmental period when autobiographical memories begin to coalesce into an overarching life narrative that defines self, others, and values. According to Fivush (2008), autobiographical memory is memories related to the self, and more specifically, these memories provide interpretative and evaluative information that transforms a memory from a simple recounting of what occurred to a reminiscing about what kind of personal meaning that event holds for the individual. As children develop through middle childhood and into early adolescence, they become increasingly able to think about multiple facets of an event simultaneously, to maintain cognitive and emotional ambiguity, and to infer and deduct both physical and psychological connections between events (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Diel, 2010; Habermas & de Silveira, 2008).

With these social cognitive skills, adolescents become capable of creating overarching life narratives infused with increasingly sophisticated perspective and evaluation. Thus, according to Fivush (2008), in adolescence, we see the beginning of a coherent life narrative that links events across time and places the self in relation to others, embedded in an unfolding human drama of interconnected stories. How these stories are constructed in family and friendship reminiscing remains critical for adolescents’ developing sense of self and social understanding.
What: Definitions of Ambiguities in the Personal, Social, and Cultural Worlds

In this section, I will first discuss definitions of ambiguity as there is an ongoing conceptual discussion regarding ambiguity as a concept across various disciplines. Given the application of ambiguity to all academic disciplines, this book will focus on the areas of inquiry related to adolescent development including psychology, psycholinguistics, and education among many others. Following definitions and areas of research on ambiguity, I will then discuss a selection of research on the development of children’s reactions to ambiguity and will finish this section with how this study of ambiguity can help us understand how adolescents experience ambiguity in self and social contexts.

Derived from the Latin word ambiguus, uncertain, from ambigere, to go about: amb-, ambi-, around; see ambi- + agere, to drive; see ag- in Indo-European roots], the Oxford Dictionary, The Pocket Book Dictionary of Current English (2006) defines ambiguity as open to more than one interpretation; having a double meaning, unclear or inexact because a choice between alternatives has not been made. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines ambiguous as “doubtful or uncertain from obscurity of indistinctness; capable of being understood in two or more possible senses or ways.”

Ambiguity is often referred to as uncertainty or doubtfulness of the meaning of language. The word is associated with various synonyms and phrases such as: abstruseness, bewilderment, confounded meaning, confused meaning, confusion, disconcertion, doubtful meaning, doubtfulness, dubiety, dubiousness, duplicity in meaning, equivocalness, equivocation, incertitude, indefinite meaning, indefiniteness, indeterminacy, obscure meaning, puzzlement, reconditeness, uncertainty of meaning, unintelligibility, vagueness. Focusing on the meaning of language, where there is no ambiguity, one must abide by the words. Thus, when language (verbal and nonverbal communication) is capable of being understood in more than one way by a reasonable person, ambiguity exists. It is not the use of peculiar words or of common words used in a peculiar sense. Words are ambiguous when their significance is unclear to persons with competent knowledge and skill to understand them.

As I mentioned in the introduction, there are two categories of ambiguity, according to some legal texts (West’s Encyclopedia of American Law, 2008): latent and patent. Both types of ambiguity have implications for the school context as such definitions help to guide educators strategies to deal with ambiguities in the classroom. Latent ambiguity exists when the language used is clear and intelligible so that it suggests one meaning but some extrinsic fact or evidence creates a need for interpretation or a choice among two or more possible meanings. For example, unknown to the parties to a social contract such as agreeing to go for a coffee, two individuals of the same name were to arrive from the same city during different months of the same year. This extraneous fact necessitated the interpretation of an otherwise clear and definite term of the contract. In such cases, extrinsic evidence may be admitted to explain what was meant or to identify the social contract.

A patent ambiguity is one that appears on the face of a document or writing because uncertain or obscure language has been used. In the law of contracts, ambiguity means more than that the language has more than one meaning upon which
reasonable persons could differ. It means that after a court has applied rules of
interpretation, such as the plain meaning, course of dealing, the court still cannot say
with certainty what meaning was intended by the parties to the contract. When this
occurs, the court will admit as evidence extraneous proof of prior or contemporaneous
agreements to determine the meaning of the ambiguous language. Parole evidence
may be used to explain the meaning of a writing as long as its use does not vary the
terms of the writing. If there is no such evidence, the court may hear evidence of the
subjective intention or understanding of the parties to clarify the ambiguity.

Sometimes, courts decide the meaning of ambiguous language on the basis of
whom was responsible, or the creator of the ambiguity. When only one individual
knew or should have known of the ambiguity, the unsuspecting party’s subjective
knowledge of the meaning will control. If both parties knew or should have known of
the uncertainty, the court will look to the subjective understanding of both. Thus, the
ambiguity no longer exists if the parties agree upon its meaning. If the parties disagree
and the ambiguous provisions are material, no contract is formed because of lack of
mutual assent. This knowing but not knowing is referred to as willful blindness, and
although this language occurs within the context of the legal system, the concepts
referring to ambiguity and interpretation can be applied to educational contexts and
has implications for adolescents’ social interactions within the classroom.

Ambiguity or the quality of being unclear due to optional interpretation is
commonly used as the word to describe a situation that is hard to understand;
although perhaps because the situation can be understood from more than one
point of view. As Langdon claims, “all reality is ambiguous. Ambiguity is synthe-
sis. The problem and the solution are one” (p. 35). As Harris (2010) notes, there are
different types of uncertainty – expected uncertainty (where one knows that one’s
observations are unreliable), and unexpected uncertainty (where something indi-
cates in the environment that things are not as they seem or appear to be). Ambi-
guous situations are related to unexpected uncertainty such as whether or not the
look between two children are directed to one individual, and what does this look
mean – acceptance? Rejection? Some researchers who explore behaviours within
the context of economics found that expected uncertainty such as a situation where
probably can be assessed is related to risk, whereas unexpected uncertainty is the
uncertainty borne of missing information and relates to ambiguity.

Regarding communication and ambiguity, Empson (1947) notes “An ambiguity,
in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or
deceitful” (p. 1). Empson used the word in an extended sense and applied it to “any
subject with any verbal nuance, which gives room for alternative reactions to the
same piece of language.” (Empson, 1947; p. 1). He based his definition on the
analytical mode of approach, and claimed that any prose statement could be called
ambiguous in the sense that it needs to be analysed and interpreted. Interestingly -
when Empson provides an example he refers to the statement, “the cat on a mat.” –
and when he refers to the emotional reaction a person may have to ambiguity in
her/his life, he claims that it “has contradictory associations, which might cause
some conflict in the child who heard it, in that it might come out of a fairy story.”
(p. 2). Given the ambiguities with the adolescent’s world, to what extent does the
adolescent experience emotional reactions to social and personal ambiguities and how can we look to developmental and educational research for clues?

Drawing on the connections to ambiguity and communication, Burke’s (1970) approach to language claimed that language is used to persuade people to action and defined persuasion as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature responds to symbols” (Burke, 1970, p. 43). According to Burke, persuasion could be referred to as the artful use of the “resources of ambiguity” that are usually revealed in an artistic, and frequently emotional format. Such an approach could help children to learn the techniques of persuasion and thus to co-create through the use of narrative a “common ground” as Aristotle stated, between the learner and the peer (audience). That is, how can adolescents create a shared understanding with their peers in that they influence their peers to feel they are being spoken to in their “own language” and hear references to their own beliefs and values. Thus, the audience (persuadee) will develop a sense of identification or mental and emotional connection with the persuader, believing that the persuader is like them – or share common ground. Thus, according to Burke’s theory, when persuaders try to act, believe, and talk like the audience (her/his peers), they create an emotional bond with listeners, who will learn to trust and identify with them, and thus as their relationship or emotional bond strengthens, may follow their advice on issues. In terms of relationship building, Burke (1970) noted that such identification or bonding occurs most readily when wrapped in drama, a story, or other kind of narration.

This ability to persuade others involves the ability to understand the inner world of self and others as explained earlier when discussing the role of Theory of Mind. Thus, applying Burke’s (1970) theory to the adolescent classroom, educators and researchers could explore the question of to what extent do youth use ToM and ambiguity as a means of communication with their family members, peers, and themselves? How does their ToM ability influence their decision to use ambiguity as a social strategy or device to influence adolescents’ emotional, social, and moral selves? To help address these questions, in Chapter 3 I will describe how Burke’s approach to the process of persuasion involving communication and ambiguity could help co-create a Theory of Mind (ToM) or social cognitive toolkit for adolescents that could be used to further their understanding of social and personal ambiguity within the classroom.

Regarding the connections between emotions and belief, Harris (2010) discusses neurocognitive research on disbelief and disgust that explores how the brain responds to uncertainty, or the mental state in which the truth value of a proposition cannot be judged or not knowing what one believes to be true. For example, various studies such as Wicker et al.’s (2003) research suggests disbelief was associated with bilateral activation of the anterior insula, a primary region for the sensation of taste and this area is widely thought to be involved with negatively valenced feelings like disgust, harm avoidance, and the expectation of loss in decision making. For example, Wicker et al., (2003)’s research suggests that uncertainty prevents the link between thought and subsequent behaviour and emotion from developing. To help illustrate, when one believes what one sees and thus, she settles upon a specific, actionable representation of the world. However, applying belief to the social
context, how can others be ‘certain’ of any social situation as we do not have access to all of the information necessary to lead to an informed social judgement.

However, on a note of caution, as Harris (2010) warns, we must be avoid drawing too strong a connection between disbelief and discussion (or any other mental state) on the basis of these data. Equating disbelief with disgust represents a “reverse inference” of a sort know to be problematic in the neuroimaging field. As we cannot reliability infer the presence of a mental sate on the basis of brain data alone, if and only if the anterior insula were active only if participants experienced disgust. But given the complexity of the brain and its responses, the research findings remain ambiguous in that the anterior insula appears to be involved in a wide range of neural, positive states such as music appreciation, self-recognition, smiling, and time perception (Craig, 2009; Poldrack, 2006). Thus, research findings on ambiguity remain ambiguous and contradictory, and in need of further research and study, especially regarding the development of cognitive and affective processes involved with the interpretation of ambiguous situations within adolescents. For example, how do adolescents respond emotionally to social and personal ambiguity? How do they cope with such uncertainties regarding social connections and identity?

Given the emphasis of linguistic representation in meaning and the need for clear, concise text and speech to minimize ambiguity, a growing amount of researchers are exploring the role technology plays in the ambiguities related to our social communication and personal development. As I will discuss the role technology plays in ambiguity and emotion throughout the book, I agree with educators and researchers who state the need to be cautious in how we interact with the contradictory and ambiguous nature of the moral landscape of the Internet (Harris, 2010; Hancock, 2009; Turkle, 2011). As Harris states, the Internet has simultaneously enabled two contradictory influences on belief in that it reduces intellectual isolation by providing more opportunity for people to learn the diversity of opinion on any topic, but at the same time allows others to share their beliefs – however valid or trustworthy their claims may be. How do we as adults cope with the paradoxical challenges the rapidly evolving technological landscape provides us with regarding the contradictions between freedom of speech, the right to privacy and safety? How do we as researcher and educators reconcile these contradictions and ambiguities, and how does this affect our youth today? As Harris notes, given that knowledge is increasingly becoming open-source, how does this accessibility shape our emotions and values? What are the implications for youth’ social learning and developing a strong moral sense of self and identity?

Regarding the importance of clarity and reciprocity in meaningful social communication, research shows that one of the principal features of social feedback is that it systematically removes uncertainty. To explore this within a social and moral context, Delgado, Frank, and Phelps (2005) explored how adults’ responses to feedback are influenced by their prior expectations. Delgado et al., explored our ability to accept or reject linguistic representation of the world within a game context where the participant played a trust game with three adults assigned a hypothetical moral character – (good, bad, and neutral). Overall, participants responded the most strongly to violations of trust in the neutral character, followed by the bad character,
and were most willing to trust the ‘good’ adults irrespective of their feedback within the game. The findings of this study have significant implications for adolescents within the classroom and how they interact with their peers, educators, and also family members outside of the school. That is, ambiguity affects not only how we communicate with others via written text and speech, but also in how we represent ourselves to others by either verbal or nonverbal communication. Given the importance of clearly valenced feedback for the development of trust to occur, future research needs to explore how perhaps remaining emotionally or morally neutral may have implications for how adolescents develop trust within social relationships with educators and their peers within the school context. I will return to the implications of Delgado’s research in Chapter 2 when I discuss the links to education in more detail.

Developmental Foundations: In the Beginning…

Developmentally, in both the development of self-understanding and understanding social relations, both early toddlerhood (14–18 mos) and early adolescence are significant times of social cognitive learning. Research with young infants regarding ambiguity and social referencing are relevant to understanding self-knowledge and social relations, and may help to illuminate our understanding of how adolescents make sense of ambiguous situations regarding their sense of self and others. Studies with infants and their caregivers that explore infants’ developing sense of self and their responses to ambiguous situations can help us to understand the origins of social cognition and identity development (Tamis-LeMonda and Aldoph, 2005), and thus could help us to make sense of the issue of ambiguity during adolescence.

As Tamis-LeMonda and Aldoph (2005) note, despite the centrality of ambiguity in the social referencing literature, the construct has been ill defined. Three interrelated problems influence extant studies of social referencing (1) definitions of ambiguity are problematic; (2) the role of infant’s experience and age are not adequately examined; and (3) the meaning of infants’ responses on social referencing tasks is unclear. We can glean information from research on infants and apply this to help us with research regarding ambiguity in adolescence. For example, Tamis-LeMonda and Adolph (2005) claim that studies with infants that explore the issue of ambiguity rarely consider individual differences in infants’ experience and development. Researchers typically take a “one size fits all” approach to ambiguity. For example, the use of ambiguous stimulus may be used for all infants such as a visual cliff, select toys, animals, people, or the higher of the drop-off on the visual cliff (Sorce, Emde, Campos, & Klinnert, 1985). As Baldwin and Moses (1996) point out, the definition of ambiguity in traditional studies ends up being circular. As researchers claim, we can only know that a stimulus is ambiguous if infants seek social support from their mother and defer to mothers’ social messages.

How does this research with infants’ social referencing help us to understand social and self-ambiguity in adolescents? For example, what becomes meaningful ambiguous stimuli during adolescence, and how do adolescents differ in their interpretations of such ambiguous situations? Consider for instance the experimental paradigm of the visual cliff, or the strange toy experiment where the infant
approaches an ambiguous situation with the main caregiver looking on and showing either positive or negative facial affect – the infant’s task is to make a decision regarding how to act next, and how to cope with the situation – such as to take a risk, and to cross the visual cliff with the help of their mother’s cues, or to take the risk of crossing, and/or approaching the strange to – irrespective of the mother’s social cues.

Given that these social and personal experiences serve as parallels to markers of ambiguity during infancy when both the personal and social remain integrated and the infant is learning to differentiate between self and other, how can these experiences inform us of the developmental state of adolescence? What can findings from social referencing studies with infants tell us about the process of self-other differentiation and self-individuation during early adolescence? Who does the adolescent look to for social referencing cues when approaching an ambiguous situation and needs to make a decision regarding action?

As mentioned earlier, given that we can only know that a stimulus is ambiguous if infants seek social support from their mothers and defer to mothers’ social messages, how does this finding translate to adolescence? Can we only know that a social situation is ambiguous if adolescents seek support from their peers and defer to peers’ social messages? What implications does Tamis-LeMonda and Adolph’s (2005) research on babies and social referencing have for the conceptualization and quantification of ambiguity in adolescence? As the infant studies may provide an ideal context for studying the emergence of infants’ social referencing, what kind of studies would provide an ideal situation to study social referencing and the ontogeny of social information gathering in adolescence? What do these infant studies of ambiguity say about the adolescent’s sense of self, confidence, and self-knowledge?

Whether and when infants seek and use social information will depend on their knowledge of self, as indexed in their evaluation of the situation as safe, ambiguous, or dangerous. To know that a situation is ambiguous, infants must be able to gauge the limits of their own abilities. As Tamis-LeMonda and Adolph (2005) claim, in the absence of self-knowledge, there can be no ambiguity. At least for motor abilities, self-knowledge depends on the duration of infants’ motor experience.

Connecting this research to the adolescent experience in ambiguous situations, how do adolescents learn knowledge about themselves? How do they learn to gauge the limits of their own abilities – first motor, then emotional, social, cognitive, etc.? If there is no ambiguity in the absence of self-knowledge – how does this lay the foundation for the development of self-certainty, sense of competence, work, trust and confidence? In contrast to the lack of, or absence of self-knowledge such as inexperience, what happens when an adolescent has a sophisticated understanding of self-knowledge – does this increase their experiences of social ambiguity – are adolescents who acquire a sense of developed self-knowledge more likely to evaluate social situations as ambiguous and/or dangerous as compared to safe?

Overall, given that infants’ intentional seeking and use of social information in ambiguous situations lies at the heart of social referencing, developmentalists and educators need to draw on social referencing research in infancy to help them make sense of self and social understanding later on in adolescence. However, to date, the one-size-fits all approach to social referencing exists, with little research examining
individual differences, and thus the developmental emergence and continued longitudinal research of social referencing remains untested. Thus, such research will help to bridge the divide between infant social referencing and adolescent self and social understanding. Further on in this book, I will describe the theoretical and practical implications of exploring this connection between research in infants’ social referencing and self-concept, emotional competence, and higher order ToM research (i.e., understanding recursive mental states, “She thinks that he thinks she likes him”) in adolescents including work on understanding sarcasm and teasing (Banerjee, 2002; Barnett, Barlett, Livengood, 2010; Miller, 2009; Murphy, & Brewton, 2010; Happe, 1994; Hayward, 2011; Hughes; 2011; Keltner, 2009; Yuill, 2009).

Self-Ambiguity Continued: Sense of Coherence in Adolescence

To help adolescents with the task of self understanding and furthering one’s own self knowledge, according to Antonovsky (1979)’s model of stress and health defined by ‘salutogenesis’ or origin of health. This notion of health is characterized as a continuum, where each individual at a particular point of time exist somewhere on this continuum of health. To define where one stands on this continuum, people have ‘general resilience resources’ which can help them to conceptualize the world as organized and understandable. Sense of coherence (SOC) represents the motivation, and the internal and external resources one can use to cope with stressors, and plays an important role in the way one perceives challenges through life. SOC is a global orientation, an enduring tendency to see the world as more or less comprehensible (the internal and the external word are perceived as rational, understandable, consistent and predicable), manageable. Thus, the individual must believe and thus have faith, confidence and trust in oneself that s/he has available resources to deal with situations, and that the world is also meaningful in which one has the motivation to cope and the commitment to emotionally invest in the coping process.

SOC can also be perceived as a spiritual world view in dealing with the sources of stress, especially with regarding to the meaningfulness component (Braun-Lewensohn & Sagy, 2010). How adolescents create meaning in which some situations may be perceived as stressful, or by defining the ability to conceptualize stress a challenge or as ‘fighting spirit’ (Moore & Greer, 1989), one can also define SOC as a spiritual sources of coping with stress. However, what one individual perceives as a stressful event may not be considered by others as stressful. For example, some adolescents may find socially ambiguous situations stressful in that social roles and expectations remain implicit, unpredictable, inconsistent, and hidden.

According to Antovoksy’s (1979) model, their ability to cope with this situation with regards to their resilience resources kit may influence their sense of self and well being. Further to this, how one perceives and copes with stress are also variable, as one individual may perceive a stressful event as a ‘challenge’ and ‘puzzle’ to solve, whereas another individual may react in a way that they perceive the stressful event as a threat to one’s self and sense of safety. Educators and researchers need to develop educational programs that help youth to deal with these ambiguous and perhaps stressful events. In Chapters 2 and 3, I will describe
examples of specific education models developed to help foster resilience and healthy decision-making aimed to promote well being and emotional health in adolescence (e.g., McGrath & Nobel, 2009).

As Dabrowski (1967) notes, an individual may have variable sensitivities to ambiguous and uncertain events that are unpredictable. According to Dabrowski’s model of positive disintegration, some individuals may be considered to be very excitable or psychoemotionally overexcited within the context of personal, social and cultural ambiguity, and thus may experience feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Areas of future research need to focus on these findings from within the field of applied sociocultural- neuropsychology, and need to explore ways in which educator-researchers can help adolescents to learn ways in which to effectively cope with such emotions.

As with the majority of psychological constructs, a sense of coherence is a multifaceted and dynamic concept in that may be affected by various individual and environmental factors, and thus remains flexible and vulnerable to change, especially at transition times during development. As adolescence is a crucial developmental stage in which youth further develop cognitive and emotional competencies, enabling them to take perspective, plan ahead, and see future consequences of an action, and manage emotions more effectively, all of which facilitate their abilities to deal with sources of conflict and stressful events in a variety of contexts. Additionally, early adolescence is characterized by confusion, unpredictability, and experimentation. In their longitudinal study of adolescents and mental health, Braun-Lewensohn and Sage (2010) from a developmental point of view expected stronger SOC (sense of coherence) in late adolescence. Several criteria during adolescence contribute to development of a strong construct of SOC. One of the most crucial is the stability of the community, since it helps adolescents to perceive the world around them as predictable and manageable (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1986). Furthermore, since the development of SOC in adulthood is based on adolescent experiences, adolescence seems to be a critical period. Facing ongoing stressful situations of political violence might influence adolescents’ ability to develop a strong SOC.

This sense of coherence may also develop as adolescents develop their life narrative through autobiographical memories as noted earlier (Fivush, 2008). Recent research on narrative, memory, and family relations suggest that a shared collaborative perspective is related to higher adolescent self-esteem, whereas an independent perspective is related to higher adolescent self-efficacy (Bohanek et al., 2006). A closer examination of the emotional content of these narratives reveals that families that express and explain more emotion, providing a more embellished understanding and resolution of emotional experiences, have adolescents who display higher social and academic competence (Marin et al., in press). These patterns indicate that different aspects of family reminiscing are related differentially to adolescent’s emerging sense of self and others.
Moral Ambiguities: Ambiguity within Canadian Culture and Values

As Grinder and Eglunde (1966) state in their review of research on adolescent development across various countries, intercultural research on adolescence offers great promise. Given that this research occurred almost 50 years ago, to what extent does transcultural research with Canadian youth in 2011 offer researchers further insight regarding their development and emotional health. Outlined below are some examples of some ways in which we can think about research with Canadian adolescents and continue to ask the questions regarding adolescents’ perceptions and conceptualizations of Canadian values. For example, within the ambiguous moral and cultural Canadian landscape, what are adolescents’ beliefs and feelings regarding Canadian values, and whom do they think has the power to decides which values provide the moral compass for Canadian youth today?

As Bruner (1990) mentions, if knowledge is relative to perspective, and if one considers all knowledge to be ambiguous, regarding the issue of values, how do we make sense of one’s choice of perspective? To complicate matters further, give that everyone has a bias or cognitive frame which guides our meaning making, as Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky (1981) ask, how are we to judge the authenticity of others values and morals within the context of uncertainty or ambiguity? Are values and morals a matter of personal preference or choice? When does the personal moral domain intersect with the social conventional domain as many domain theories have discussed (see for example Nucci, 2001; Turiel). According to Bruner, values inhere in commitment to “ways of life” and ways of life in their complex interaction constitute a culture. Values are communal and consequential in terms of our relations to a cultural community and fulfill functions for us in that community. The values underlying a way of life, become incorporated in ones’ self-identity and at the same time, they locate in one’s culture. To the degree that a culture in Sapir’s sense is no “spurious” the value commitments of its members provide either the basis for the satisfactory conduct of a way of life, or at least, a basis for negotiation. As a complete theoretical exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of moral and cultural development are beyond the scope of this book (see Harris, 2010 for further discussion regarding the complexity of moral landscapes), in this book, I will focus on some of the key questions raised by developmentalists and educational researchers and apply such questions to the context of adolescent development and educational context.

However, as Bruner (1990) cautions, the pluralism of modern life and the rapid changes it imposes may create conflicts in commitment, values, and therefore conflicts about the “rightness” of various claims to knowledge about values. Given that our world today contains ambiguities and uncertainties, I agree with Bruner in that we need to hope for a viable pluralism together with a willingness to negotiate differences in world-view. We need to be comfortable about these differences among others and ourselves, in an authentic, comparing, and compassionate way. As Bruner (1990) suggests, a psychocultural approach to educational and development emphasizes the need for us to develop and cultivate open-mindedness and demands that we be conscious of how we come to our knowledge and as conscious as we can
be about the values that lead us to our perspectives. This ability to become aware of and care about other’s perspectives, as well as the need to develop empathetic sensitivity or an awareness or sensitivity to one’s emotional experiences as well as the experiences of others will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 when the educational implications of cultural, spiritual, social, and personal ambiguity are outlined and illustrate that the ability to develop open-mindedness and empathic sensitivity will remain a crucial component of any psychological program for youth.

A value system is the result of social environment and might provide aspiration for social goals through which actions can be judged, justified and motivated. Adolescence is a unique period in which values are being formed, re-evaluated and renegotiated. The formation of a value system also allows for identity development. Within the Israeli context, Sagy et al., (1999) identified three dimensions of values among adolescents: individual (e.g., personal friends, personal interests, money for self), in group collectivist (e.g., country, nationality, faith, solidarity with the poor in one’s country) and universal (e.g., international cooperation, democracy, solidarity with the poor in the world, environmental protection).

Regarding the specific Canadian context, as noted by Yon (2000) and his research, underlying the incompleteness and complexity of social interactions, as well as the tensions, contradictions and incoherencies, we need to be aware of Canada’s focus on multiculturalism, as well as promoting behaviours that promote kindness, caring, and tolerance has consequences for adolescents’ emotional and social development. Yon has noted that Canada’s perspectives on multiculturalism can also be viewed as elusive and fluid, which also has implications for adolescents’ identities and social relations with others concerning issues of diversity including gender and ethnicity. The addition of the increased use of technology and social media has also added to the culture of ambiguity within the Canadian context, as various communication levels remain unclear, especially the nonverbal communications. As Turkle (2011) notes, given that adolescents are increasingly using technological media such as social media and communication tools such as Smartphones, Twitter, Skype, texting, etc., the culture of ambiguity continues to expand. Thus, I agree with Dubrowksi (1967) in that some children and adolescents may be more sensitive to ambiguity and thus, sensitivity to cultural ambiguity may also influence one’s sense of coherence and emotional well being.

Consistent with the cautious attitude toward the relation between technology and education, various media thinkers such as Postman (1995) and more recently Sherry Turkle (2011) encourages educators and parents to question the social and psychological impact technology may have on youth’s learning and development. As Turkle states in the book’s subtitle, “We expect more from technology and less from each other,” she claims that the Internet and digital age have changed since her 1995 book on created identity within the web. According to Turkle, she is now concerned with how electronic interaction may create constraints for our emotional expressions in that our range of emotional communication is controlled in a sense by our electronic interactions. Turkle mentions the work of Nass (2010) and his research with affective computing in which he claims his findings suggest that we interact with machines in the same way we interact with humans. That is, according to Nass
WHY? (WHO, WHAT, AND WHERE) CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

(2010), our brains cannot distinguish between interacting with people and interacting with electronic devices. I will elaborate on these issues of technology and moral and emotional ambiguity regarding social communication later in Chapters 2 and 3 when I explore questions such as, how do we know when we experience an authentic thought and feeling, and can electronic interaction create the same emotion and thought as a physical, face to face interaction? The implications of such possibilities for how we can help adolescents to communicate with themselves and others within this technological landscape will be explored further on in Chapter 3 when I outline the educational implications of emotional ambiguity and technology.

As the Canadian cultural context becomes increasingly diverse and complex, as Telzer (2011) notes, revisions to the theories on the acculturation gap-distress models are necessary to address the complex cultural landscape. This issue becomes an increasingly significant one regarding issues of ambiguity concerning a youth’s cultural identity, particularly as the adolescent as compared to their parents, may experience different connections to their native or home country as opposed to their host country and vice versa. The acculturation gap-distress model purports that immigrant children acculturate to their new culture at a quicker pace than their parents, leading to family conflict and youth maladjustment. Telzer critiques the acculturation gap-distress model, showing that acculturation gaps function in unique ways depending on many social and contextual variables. According to Telzer, in contrast to the original model, which only discusses one type of acculturation gap, there are at least 4 types of acculturation gaps: (1) the youth is more acculturated than the parent in the host culture, (2) the youth is less acculturated than the parent in the host culture, (3) the youth is more acculturated than the parent in the native culture, and (4) the youth is less acculturated than the parent in the native culture. Thus, each of these types of gaps function in unique ways and have significant implications for youth in Canada with their social relationships and personal identity, as well as educational implications for the culturally diverse adolescent classroom.

Given the ambiguity surrounding the complex possibilities of these acculturation differences, how do adolescents learn how to make sense of such cultural ambiguities, and how are they to create trusting relationships and a coherent sense of self within such an ambiguous cultural context? For example, how does an adolescent Canadian-Ukrainian female who was born in Canada and has little knowledge of Ukrainian culture deal with parents who have limited knowledge of English, but are set against any use of Ukrainian language from their daughter, and discourage any reference to, or knowledge of the Ukrainian culture in favour of Canadian culture? Or picture the case of the same family, but reverse the scenario where the parents although fluent in the English language and Canadian culture, may encourage the use and learning of Ukrainian culture, whereas their daughter may prefer to learn English and only focus on Canadian culture? How is the adolescent female to develop a culturally coherent identity – does she consider herself to be Canadian? Ukrainian? Both? As one can imagine the numerous possibilities of this acculturation model and it will increase with complexity given the number of cultures within a family. As this particular example focuses on two of the models, there are
many more complicated examples of multicultural families involving multiple cultural backgrounds, as well as considering how factors such as gender, age, level of education, financial status of the family among others may play a role in such models. Given the complexity of this issue, as Costigan (2011) and Phinney (2011) note, researchers and educators need to continue to explore these complex and ambiguous cultural models as they have critical implications for how a youth develops a coherent sense of self and social and emotional competence.

Surprisingly, despite the significance of this crucial transitory time, the majority of past research has focused on adolescents’ cognitive abilities (Harter, 1999), and thus needs to further explore adolescents’ emotional lives including their values and beliefs within a psychocultural framework (Harter, 1999). Why have researchers continued to neglect the spiritual and socioaffective aspects of adolescent development? Is there anything distinctive about their affective development and the place of spirituality in their lives? To answer such questions, this book will consider how young adolescents make sense of themselves, and the world around them. As educators and researchers suggest (Damon, 2008; Twenge, 2006), as we enter a new millennium, researchers and educators who work with youth need to be open to new questions and new conceptions of adolescence as historically, scientific and lay conceptions of adolescents have diverged.

In addition to the reasons previously mentioned, early adolescence is often considered to be of developmental interest due to the emergence during this period of reflective/abstract thought (e.g., Piaget, 1962; Chandler, 1987), an increase in gender-role expectations and behaviours and the increase of self-contradiction and conflict (Blos, 1979; Harter, 1999). Furthermore, the lack of research on developmental, gendered social and self-understanding suggests that such an investigation would be fruitful. Early adolescence can also be viewed as a transitional phase, a discontinuous shift in the self-system. The characterization of the transition to adolescence as discontinuous is consistent with psychoanalytic, sociobiological, and sociocognitive-developmental models. Particularly during this time, conflict episodes may represent a rich microcosm through which novel self, peer, and parent relationships emerge and stabilize. Empirical and theoretical work supports the notion that early adolescence beings a period of shifting power dynamics, which may lead to competing goals and results in a higher density of conflict opportunities. As Baumrind (1991) suggests, adolescent maturity is thought to grow from “the balance between agency and communion, between separation and connectedness, and between conflict and harmony” (p. 120).

As adolescents struggle for balance, they may experience contradiction, conflict, which in turn may lead to experiences of ambiguities within themselves and others. That is, interpersonal conflict may lead to ambiguous social situations whereas intrapersonal the conflict may manifest as a lack of, or unclear and ambiguous private speech or inner dialogue. Thus, adolescents may begin to feel at conflict with themselves, and their own competing worlds of the public and private. Given that the adolescent needs to accomplish two main tasks, that of social connection and individuation, many researchers have noted the complexity and paradoxical qualities of this time which have implications for silence and voice.
Where: Adolescent Culture and Role of Technology in Self and Social Ambiguity

As Yon states (2000) Canada’s culture of tolerance and diversity creates the context for a culture of ambiguity and ambivalence that adolescents must deal within the context of their learning journey to develop self and social understanding. Does tolerance and acceptance promote ambiguity and moral disengagement? For example, how do adolescents cope effectively with conflicting messages and increasing pressure to excel and cater to one’s individual needs, although simultaneously, there is an increasing pressure to be tolerant, kind and compassionate towards diversity, and strive to meet the needs of others toward social justices and human rights.

According to Bandura (2001), times of uncertainty and contradictions within an ambiguous and complex larger cultural landscape may lead some adolescents to disengage morally. Bandura explains this process of moral disengagement in terms of social cognitive theory, in which one’s moral behavior is a function of moral reasoning and the self-regulatory mechanism of self-monitoring, judgment, and self-reactions (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastoretti, 1996). This theory describes the cognitive processes by which moral disengagement (deactivation of internal controls) is used to justify behavior to self that is in violation of one’s internal moral standards. Bandura also states that while moral disengagement occurs in a social and cultural context, such social circumstances can possibly weaken internal self-regulatory mechanisms and may hinder the development of moral and emotional sense of well being.

Regarding the role of emotions, to what extent does ambiguity lead to ‘emotional disengagement’ – and to what extent can an adolescent student appear to be cognitively and morally on the surface engaged – is there anyway to evaluate how the adolescent feels? What emotions are she/her experiencing toward oneself, others? As Laron (2011) note, how can researchers explore the connections between the feeling of boredom and disengagement? Can one be cognitively and morally engaged in an activity but remain emotionally disengaged – feeling no emotions, or perhaps experience negative emotions? As Larson (2011) notes, how can researchers explore the connections between boredom and disengagement? How do researchers and educators investigate this personal beliefs system and emotional framework?

The digital world in which youth socialize may also have the potential to serve as a social context that may promote moral disengagement (Hancock, 2009; Turkle, 2011). For example, the inability to observe the immediate reaction of the victim may allow the perpetrator to believe, “It was just a joke,” or “He/she didn’t really mind.” The cyberbully might minimize the behavior by thinking, “I didn’t hit her or anything. That would be bad, but this is not.” The online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) noted above could be conceptualized as a variation of moral disengagement, as it allows the individual to behave in ways that are contrary to his or her usual moral code.

Regarding the process of disengagement, and I would further add to this by extending it to disenchantment - what role does belief and emotional experience in this ‘en/disenchanted?’ As Humphrey (2011) also notes - how can we protect our youth and ourselves from becoming disenchanted, or as Humphrey states “psychological
zombies” who do not experience or understand emotions. To what extent would we become emotional zombies? Further in the book during Chapter 3, I will return to the notion of disenchantment and the role technology may play in the classroom and creating emotional and social ambiguities within the adolescent context.

Related to feelings of enchantment, awe, and wonder as Humphrey (2011) and Keltner (2009) discuss, how does emotion play a role in our sense of awe? And I would build on this and ask, how are awe and emotional experiences related to en/disengagement? Regarding education - can we replace “engaged” with “enchanted” - how do children learn to become “enchanted with learning”? For example, within a religious and spiritual context, if one thinks believers are enchanted by religious icons - how do they learn to become to believe and what how does this belief develop into, or relate to enchantment? Applying this line of thinking to an educational context, how do learners become enchanted with the teacher/teaching/learning process?

As Damon (2008) discusses in his work regarding how adolescents find meaning in their path to purpose, how do young students become disengaged with their lives and how is this connected with their ability to find a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives? How did they become engaged or enchanted with learning in the first place, and what happened to allow them to become disengaged? Given the complex and ambiguous nature of engagement and learning, researchers need to explore how adolescents develop a sense of engagement and then for some, the process of disengagement and boredom in learning. What are the implications for the adolescent’s social and personal lives?

According to Damon and his colleagues (2008), a sense of purpose refers to “a stable, and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self” (p. 33). This paradoxical and complex nature of purpose remains a puzzle for those who work with youth as it entails both a personal and social aspect and is simultaneously independent of one another, as well as dependent upon one another. For example – a sense of purpose according to Damon claims to be the foundation for one’s goals in life and the reason for “why” we have goals and motivations to behave the in ways that we choose to move forward. Thus, this sense of purpose is connected to moving forward and to learning and growing, not only individually, but also for a genuine concern for others to grow and move forward as well.

Damon (2008) reflects on his research with American youth and their responses from interviews based on a questionnaire regarding the Youth Purpose study. In sum, Damon’s research showed that the youth’s responses could be divided in terms of the sense of purpose they expressed in their lives. And their responses allowed the researchers to divide the youth into four main groups [disengaged (25%), dabblers (31%), dreamers (25%), and purposeful (20%)]. Regarding the role of ambiguity in these youth’s plans, interestingly, perhaps the purposeful group that experienced the least amount of ambiguity in their responses, stated that they have found meaningful goals in their life to inspire them to create a coherent future agenda, they know what they want to accomplish and why, and have made steps to achieve their goals. Ambiguity may have played a larger role in the plans of the dreamers and dabblers, as
both groups appear to have purposeful aspirations but have taken few if any steps to act as in the case of the dreamers. Although the dabblers acted on various purposeful pursuits, they still may have experienced ambiguity they did not express a clear sense of why they are acting and whether or not they will stay with their interests.

Damon (2008) states his concern over the problem of youths who appear to be disengaged and do not appear to believe that they have a purposeful life, and appeared to express emotional ambiguity through their manner of ambivalence and nonchalance during the interviews. According to Damon (2008), this disengagement illustrated by these particular youth is a problem for society in that there appears to be an emotional disconnect between these youth and their caring for others and themselves. What would create the foundation for this sense of purposelessness or direction in life? How do such youth deal with the increasingly moral and cultural diversity North American society?

Damon (2008) states that the dabblers and the dreamers are the groups that perhaps remain in the greatest state of developmental flux they may be moving toward developing a purposeful life. However, to what extent can those who work with youth help to guide and support them so that they see the connection between intention and action? Damon (2008) builds on this concern and claims that the group of disengaged youth, and I would further build on this by claiming that they are disenchanted with learning, remains the most significant challenge for parents, researchers, educators and developmental and clinical psychologists. Working with youth to help them to feel a sense of meaning, direction, and purpose in their lives which will lead to well being remains a top priority for educators and schools that I will return to and elaborate on in Chapter 3 when I discuss how researchers and educators can collaborate to co-create a holistic, developmentally appropriate educational programs that promote both a personal sense of meaning as well as a sense of purpose for helping others and larger society.

In addition to the disengaged youth, I am also in agreement with Damon (2008), that perhaps the youth categorized as dabblers and dreamers may are also be at risk for failing to develop a coherent sense of self and meaningful life purpose. In contrast to disengaged youth who claim to have no sense of connection, those who are dreamers and dabblers both share ambiguities regarding their paths from intention to action as the dreamers may think about purpose but fail to act on their intentions, whereas the dabblers in a sense somewhat share a similarity to multitaskers regarding the use of technology. Dabblers who participate in various activities with little purpose and an overall plan could be viewed as remaining disconnected to others and their sense of purpose and meaning. As Turkle (2011) discusses in her reflections on her interviews with youth and adults regarding their experiences with technology, youth who participate in various tasks while interacting with others often experience a sense of emotional disconnect with others and a lack of meaning and direction regarding their personal lives.

In the case of youth who may be both dabblers or multitaskers, and dreamers, to what extent does technology help them to create purpose and meaning in our lives? If developing a sense of connection with self and others is necessary for leading a purposeful lives, to what extent does technology shape our emotional lives and interactions with others. What are the moral and emotional implications of
remaining as Turkle (2011) states, “alone and together” (p. 14), or “there but not there.” (p. 14). When interacting with others, and also ourselves, does the constant use of technology, or engaging in various activities with no overall purpose or goal prevent us from being alone with ourselves? To what extent are youth at risk for developing an ambiguous and incoherent sense of self and social connections within the current technological landscape? For example, why would an adolescent choose or prefer to take action that violates their personal moral and value codes – and is this process of moral decision making the same for virtual and real-life worlds? How do they develop and learn values and moral codes within a culture of multiple values and ambiguities and learn to decided which value is the preferred value and one that guides their personal and social worlds (both on-line and in real-time)? I will return to these questions in Chapters 2 and 3 when I discuss the research on adolescents’ experiences with technology in relation to ambiguity, and the implications technology has for the youth’s emotional, and moral, social lives.

Adolescents within Secondary School Culture in Canada

The secondary school context is a prime source for a host of multiple ambiguities and mixed messages regarding one’s sense of self, social relations, and cultural issues. According to Suarez-Orozoco, Sattin-Banjaj and Suarez-Orozco (2010), in their description of the foundation for the Ross School, model, similar to Yon’s (2004) notion of school a discursive place, schools are organized around a master narrative and animated by social practices and cultural models that align to the values, ethics, and worldviews encompassed in that narrative (Selman, 2003). Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1952) synthetic work on the idea of culture is useful in suggesting how to think about the ways in which a school’s culture can construct meanings, pattern interpersonal relationships, and shape institutional life. School cultures are organized around foundational narratives that are developed out of common experiences in the here and now but that also account for origins and a sense of mission in facing the future. School narratives are built on collective histories, stories, and the microrituals of belonging that communicate to every member of the school community. According to Rosaldo (1989), school cultures, like all cultures, are never monolithic, univocal, or static.

All cultures, especially the school culture, contain diversity, and contradiction – where cultural narrative suggest a plasticity where continuity and change contain and necessitate each other. As such, a cultural system that is able to adapt to new cultural realities and fuse the external forces with needs and values through internal symbolic logic will manage to navigate change in more productive ways and ideally lead to a culture of engagement and well-being. Given our emotional responses to change and contradiction within a larger context of ambiguity may lead to feelings of ambivalence that may influence how youth develop personally as well as socially. As noted by Yon (2004), living with such contradictory positions and opposing multiple subjectivities may lead to ambivalence or feelings that are mixed and uncertain. In Chapter 2, I will describe related research that explores the personal and social ambiguities experienced by adolescents in the classroom, during
play and leisure time regarding virtual games, social networking, and involvement in extracurricular activities such as various sports, after school clubs, etc. The role of humour in ambiguity will also be discussed as it also plays a role in adolescents’ experience. Finally, in Chapter 3, I will discuss educational programs that promote this pathway to the culture of engagement.

SUMMARY

In summary, how can we build on Grinder and Englund’s (1966) claim that remains relevant almost fifty years later, “Major and rapid social and technological changes, as aspects of cultural contact, are disrupting traditional generalizations about socializing experiences, personality traits, and cultural patterns.” (p. 459)? As I discuss in the next two chapters, as educators and researchers, we need to continue to investigate these complexities in the hopes that this research with adolescents may provide some practical educational strategies to help adolescents to develop a sense of personal well being and social and emotional competence within a complicated and ambiguous cultural context.