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Developmental trajectories of religiosity, sexual conservatism and sexual behavior among female adolescents



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A B S T R A C T

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Understanding the role of socio-sexual cognitions and religiosity on adolescent sexual behavior could guide adolescent sexual health efforts. The present study utilized longitudinal data from 328 young women to assess the role of religion and socio-sexual cognitions on sexual behavior accrual (measuring both coital and non-coital sexual behavior). In the final triple conditional trajectory structural equation model, religiosity declined over time and then increased to baseline levels. Additionally, religiosity predicted decreased sexual conservatism and decreased sexual conservatism predicted increased sexual behavior. The final models are indicative of young women's increasing accrual of sexual experience, decreasing sexual conservatism and initial decreasing religiosity. The results of this study suggest that decreased religiosity affects the accrual of sexual experience through decreased sexual conservatism. Effective strategies of sexual health promotion should include an understanding of the complex role of socio-sexual attitudes with religiosity.

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Introduction

The majority of adolescents in the United States participate in religious groups or traditions (Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002) and adolescent religiosity is associated with the expression of sexual behaviors (Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004). An interesting dynamic surrounds the relationship of adolescent religiosity and sexual behavior. Although evangelical Protestant youth hold less permissive sexual attitudes compared to other religious youth, they are among the youngest religious group to initiate intercourse (Regnerus, 2007). There appears to be a clash of cultures in which religious youth exist as “a unique dialectic of sexual-conservatism-with-sexual-activity, a combination that breeds instability and the persistent suffering of consequences like elevated teen pregnancy rates” (p. 206) (Regnerus, 2007). The present study will focus on how the “sexual-conservatism-with-sexual-activity” effect is shaped by measuring the developmental interactions of religiosity, sexual conservatism, and sexual behavior in a sample of mostly African-American young women.

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Adolescent religiosity and sexual behavior

Cross-sectional research has found greater adolescent religiosity is associated with lower sexual risk behavior including decreased number of sex partners, later age of first coitus and lowered proportion of sexual intercourse with an unknown partner (McCree, Wingood, DiClemente, Davies, & Harrington, 2003; Rostosky, Regnerus, & Wright, 2003; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004). Age of first coitus, for instance, was later for African-American female adolescents who reported high religiosity or more frequent church attendance (McCree, Wingood, DiClemente, Davies, & Harrington, 2003). Cross-sectional research has consistently shown a relationship between higher religiosity and decreased sexual risk behavior.

Longitudinal research indicates that higher religiosity is associated with greater delay of first sexual intercourse and decreased sex frequency. For instance, adolescent virgins who reported high religiosity were less likely to have had sexual intercourse two years later (Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003). Additionally, parental reports of adolescent church attendance and adolescent self-reports of higher levels of satisfaction in attending church predicted increased age at first sexual intercourse (Miller et al., 1997). Meier (2003) used data from the Add Health study (1995 and 1996) to examine the relationship between religiosity and first sexual intercourse in 15- to 18-year-olds. Higher reported religiosity at baseline was associated with decreased likelihood that the adolescents had their first coital event by follow-up, especially among female adolescents. Lastly, in a sample of African-American adolescents, frequency of religious attendance was negatively associated with sexual frequency. Specifically, decrease in religious attendance was associated with increase in sexual intercourse frequency (Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004). A recent study explored the developmental change of religiosity, which decreased from adolescence to adulthood (Koenig, 2001; Koenig, McGue, & Iacono, 2008). Thus, there is evidence from cross-sectional and longitudinal data that adolescent religiosity affects adolescent sexual behavior outcomes.

The possibility for reciprocal or bidirectional effects between religiosity and sexual behavior has been assessed with mixed results. Cross-sectional research has found that change in intercourse frequency is associated with lower religiosity (Benda & Corwyn, 1997; Thornton & Camburn, 1989). However, research utilizing more than one time point has not found a bidirectional effect between adolescent religiosity and sexual behavior (Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003; Meier, 2003; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004).

Religiosity, sexual conservatism, and adolescent sexual behavior

A working definition of sexual conservatism is the endorsement of traditional sexual morés regarding adolescent sexual relationships (i.e., sexual intercourse before marriage is morally wrong). In general, religiosity has been associated with conservative attitudes towards sex (Lefkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, & Boone, 2004; Thornton & Camburn, 1989). Research with emerging adults has also found increased sexual conservatism to be associated with decreased sexual behavior (Lefkowitz et al., 2004) and later age of intercourse (Simons, Burt, & Peterson, 2009). There have been similar findings with adolescents. Cross-sectional research with adolescent samples has found religiosity to be associated with conservative attitudes toward sex, such as the disapproval of premarital sex (Miller & Olson, 1988; Sheeran, Abrams, Abraham, & Spears, 1993; Thornton & Camburn, 1989). Similarly, in a study of African-American male adolescents, conservative sexual attitudes were related to decreased sexual risk-taking (Jemmott & Jemmott, 1990). Lastly, in a recent review of longitudinal research on adolescent sexual behavior, socio-sexual cognitions (i.e., less conservative sexual attitudes) were among the more robust predictors of first coitus (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008).

In a study that explored the longitudinal impact of religiosity and sexual conservatism on adolescent behavior, higher religiosity at baseline was associated with decreased likelihood of first coitus (Meier, 2003). Additionally, adolescents' permissive, or less conservative, attitudes toward sexual intercourse decreased the influence of reported religiosity on first sexual intercourse. The results from this study indicate "the dynamic process of religiosity and attitude change" in regards to sexual intercourse.

Religion and race effects on sexual behavior

Our understanding of adolescent sexual behavior has not been attentive to issues regarding race and sexuality (Thigpen, Pinkston, & Mayefsky, 2003). Although there are race differences for age of first sex and number of life-time partners (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008), too often research has focused on sexual risk behavior (HIV/STI and pregnancy) rather than the development of sexuality. The role of religiosity on the expression of sexual behavior has been strongest for minority women (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). Hence, it is important to understand the normal sexual development and role of religion among African-American young women.

Relevant covariates of religion on adolescent sexual behavior

Personal variables, other than religiosity and sexual conservatism, have been related to sexual behavior for adolescents. For instance, depression in youth has been linked to early age of first sex, lack of contraception and having a child (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). Moreover, sensation seeking has been positively related to sexual permissiveness (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1987) and a risk preference personality trait labeled "adventure seeking" affected religiosity for men and women (Miller & Hoffmann, 1995). Because they have been shown to influence sexual behavior and religiosity among female

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