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Predicting sexual abstinence among Seventh-day Adventist emerging adults



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ABSTRACT

This study proposes to strengthen the nascent scholarship investigating sexual behavior among Seventh-day Adventist emerging adults. A sample of 592 unmarried, 18 to 25 year old university students, who are baptized or SDA religious adherents, responded to a questionnaire which investigated their socio-psychological motivations for abstinence. The analysis is guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior. Regression analysis reveals that it is not religiousness, but attitude toward abstinence, the support of friends for the concept of abstinence, and high self-efficacy, that motivates their decision to remain abstinent. These factors remain significant net of other significant co-variables such as authoritarian parenting, coming from a two-parent family, age, and race/ethnicity. Discussion centered on the value of promoting these key constructs rather than religiousness alone, to achieve abstinence among SDA emerging adults.

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1. Introduction

There is a vast scholarship on the sexual behaviors of religious youth. Past research consistently shows that religious adolescents and emerging adults display less permissive attitudes about sex and report less sexual activity than their non-religious counterparts (Rostosky, Wilcox, Wright, & Randall, 2004; Sinha, Cnaan, & Gelles, 2007; Kirby, 1997). Some researchers use samples of respondents from varied religions, but this study proposes to investigate the socio-psychological motivations for abstinence among members of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) religion, using a sample of SDA emerging adults. The SDA religion, like many others, upholds abstinence as the only

permissible form of sexual expression for unmarried individuals (SDA Church, 2005; Benagiano & Mori, 2009; Guite, 2008; Bassett et al., 2002). SDAs also advocate that this rule of conduct be taught in the home, church, and school, the most important venues for moral and spiritual education (Akers, 2010). In keeping with this focus on spiritual/moral education, these doctrinal ideas are taught at the tertiary level of all educational institutions owned and operated by this religion. Although abstinence is a value among SDAs, there are few published studies on sexual behavior among SDA emerging adults. Two investigate this topic at the high school level (Hopkins, Hopp, Marshak, Neish, & Rhoads, 1998; Weinbender & Rossignol, 1996), and one among black students at the university level (Ashley, Ramirez, & Cort, 2013). The most recent work on this topic (Baltazar, Conopio, Moreno, Ulery, & Hopkins, 2013), identifies a list of factors protective against early initiation and other sexual risk behaviors which includes personality characteristics, religion or religiousness, parental relationships, adult mentoring, school involvement, and service learning. This

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study nevertheless gives religiousness a prominent place on this list, stating, “anything we can do to strengthen faith will be highly protective” (Baltazar et al., 2013, p. 12).

Research involving youth of various denominations paint a different picture. One such study encourages caution against a dependence on religiousness as the most prominent protective factor (Agha, Hutchinson, & Kusanthan, 2006). They conclude that denominations that are not only strongly opposed to premarital sex and condom use, but are able to exercise control over adolescents through socialization or the threat of social exclusion, are likely to create conflicting behaviors among adolescents that cancel each other. Religiousness, or affiliation with conservative religious groups, especially when affiliation is accepted as a proxy for religiousness, is considered at best dubious in its ability to delay sexual initiation or preserve abstinence.

We attempt to strengthen this nascent scholarship by examining the socio-psychological motivations for abstinence among a sample of emerging adults attending two SDA institutions. The subjects in this study are baptized SDAs or adherents to the religion.

Among college students, the freedom of campus life provides an array of opportunities for both the sexually active and those who choose abstinence. While acquiring the rights and privileges of adulthood, these emerging adults are simultaneously freed from the constraints of individuals and institutions that controlled their lives (Roche, Ahmed, & Blum, 2008; Abar, Abar, & Turrisi, 2009b). There are however, factors that act as enduring socio-psychological reference points, and influence sexual behavior either singly or in combination with other factors. These include perceived parental acceptance or rejection of certain behaviors (Schwartz et al., 2009), spirituality and religiosity of their families of orientation (Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012), family structure (Brewster & Tillman, 2008), and their own religiousness (Landor, Simons, Simons, Brody, & Gibbons, 2011). We feel that these factors are important and should not be ignored when examining abstinence among SDA youth.

This response to the paucity of research on sexual behavior among SDAs begins with the premise drawn from the work of Regnerus (2007), that religiosity or religiousness – not religious affiliation – almost always makes a difference in adolescents’ sexual behavior, but does not necessarily motivate their sexual decision making. He argues that the “difference” to which he makes reference is evident in the conservative sexual practices of, for example, evangelical Protestant youth, as compared to the more permissive practices of non-religious youth. But, just because it makes a difference does not mean that religion or religiousness is the chief motivator of their sexual decision making. Regnerus further submits that something more is required for religiousness to make a more apparent difference in the sexual lives of adolescents. “That something is a plausibility structure—a network of like-minded friends, family, and authorities” (p. 203), whose teaching and example offer an alternative to sexually permissive scripts offered by society. We conceptualize this plausibility structure as an expression of what is referred to in the foundational theory of this study as “subjective norms.”

Regnerus’s work has relied heavily on longitudinal research using nationally representative samples, which make a strong claim of causality. We therefore expect to see some association of religiousness with abstinence, but a persistent effect when other important predictors are considered, is doubtful. We focus therefore on variables other than religion or religiousness as the variables of main interest in investigating decision making processes, or more specifically, motivating factors among SDA emerging adults who choose abstinence over sexual involvement.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical approach

This study utilizes the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1988, 1991) for its thematic structure. It is used to guide in identifying variables for the model, and organizing the analysis. The TPB proposes that behavior is best determined by intentions to perform a behavior or to refrain from performing it. Intentions in turn, are determined by a combination of three motivating constructs: (A) attitude toward the behavior, (B) the subjective/societal norms which support engaging in or refraining from that behavior, and (C) perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991; Pelling & White, 2009). Attitude toward the behavior includes positive or negative feelings toward the behavior, which may spring from internal socialization about the behavior. Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressure from important others or institutions in which individuals may be embedded. Perceived behavioral control refers to the level of control persons may feel they possess with reference to performing or not performing the behavior. This construct may be conceived as self-efficacy for the behavior (Hamilton & White, 2008; Ajzen, 1991). Variables that address these three constructs constitute the independent variables of main interest. These variables are: attitude toward abstinence, support of friends who believe in abstinence, and self-efficacy for abstinence.

A large scholarship substantiates connections between the motivating constructs and intentions, and between intentions and behavior. For example, adolescents who have positive attitudes and intentions about abstinence, have a reduced likelihood of engaging in sex (intentions—behavior) (Masters, Beadnell, Morrison, Hoppe, & Gillmore, 2008; Lemer, Blodgett Salafia, & Benson, 2013), and among black SDA university students, high levels of peer support for abstinence, and self-efficacy for abstinence, promote intentions to be abstinent (motivating constructs—intentions) (Ashley et al., 2013). High self-efficacy for abstinence is a positive predictor of abstinence (motivating construct—behavior) (Hamilton & White, 2008; Sherr and Dyer, 2010), and having an increased level of social support from friends in a faith context is related to decreased likelihood of sexual initiation (motivating construct—behavior) (Holder et al., 2000). These studies support the TPB by validating the connection of the motivating constructs and behavior, through intentions as an intervening variable. They also suggest direct associations between the motivating concepts and behavior, or through interactions with other variables. We

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