Religious Orientation and Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors

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Published online: 28 Jul 2011.


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2011.590755

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Religion is one of the major forces of control over sexuality, and many studies have observed an inverse relationship between religiosity and sexual permissiveness. The Religious Orientation Scale has been used to study the relationship between religious orientation and sexuality. It has been found that those with intrinsic views are more conservative in their sexual values while those who are extrinsic have more liberal views. The purpose of this study was to use the Religious Life Inventory, an instrument that also has a quest orientation, to evaluate the relationship between religious orientation and various premarital sexual activities and attitudes within a sample of conservative religious students. Inverse correlations were found for those with internal and external scores, while weak but positive correlations were found for those with quest scores. These findings suggest that those with a more open-minded position on religion may have the same open-minded position on sexuality.

What is the relationship between religious orientations and sexual behavior and attitudes among young adults in a university setting? Historically, religious institutions have taken a prominent role in prescribing standards of appropriate sexual conduct and instituting a system of sanctions to enforce their religious doctrine; according to Studer and Thornton (1987), all sexual relations outside the marital union are condemned. The traditional Judeo-Christian view that the purpose of sex is for reproduction has greatly influenced American attitudes and beliefs regarding sexual behavior (DeLameter, 1981). For highly proscriptive religious affiliations,
nonmarital sexual relations are inherently wrong, and those who engage in such behaviors are seen as sinners who can now only attain salvation through repentance and abstinence (Cochran & Beeghley 1991). As a result, these religious beliefs have been found to have a great influence on people’s sexual attitudes and behavior. The purpose of this study is to see how the Religious Life Inventory created by Batson et al. (1993), measures the relationship between religious orientations and sexual attitudes and behavior.

**Literature Review**

A long history of research focuses on the relationship between religiosity and sexuality. Previous work has so typically observed an inverse relationship between religiosity and sexual permissiveness that it has been seen as an empirical generalization (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991; Haerich, 1992). According to Studer and Thornton (1987), the religious group with which people identify appears to be substantially correlated with how they evaluate the appropriateness of premarital sexual behavior and with the sexual mores they choose to follow in their own lives, including older age at first sexual intercourse and less permissive attitudes about premarital sex. Woodruff (1985) alone cites approximately a dozen studies showing the inverse relationship between religious belief and/or church attendance and sexual activity, and also supports these findings through conducting subsequent research.

For example, Thornton and Camburn (1989) state that young people who attend church frequently and who value religion in their lives have the least permissive attitudes and are less experienced sexually. Teens with higher levels of religiosity also tend to delay sexual involvement more than those with lower levels of religiosity (Hardy & Rafaelli, 2003). An inverse correlation is also found between religious commitment and adolescents’ sexual values and behavior (Inazu & Fox, 1980). McCree et al. (2003) support the existing research in their findings that the importance of religion and attending religious services correlates with fewer sexual activities beginning at an older age. The evidence not only supports this for adolescents, but also continues into emerging adulthood, specifically the ages between 18 and 25 years, in which individuals engage in their most extensive sexual exploration (Lefkowitz et al., 2004). It has also been found that people age 17 to 25 years who attend
church every week believe that premarital sex, despite affection for their partner, is immoral, and they had lower frequency of premarital sexual intercourse (Jensen et al., 1990). Ultimately, research has found a relationship between church attendance and religious commitment and a person’s beliefs and attitudes about sexual behavior, as well as sexual behavior itself.

In a study that explores the importance of sociocultural factors in determining how sexuality is expressed and treated, DeLamater (1981) identifies religion as one of the major sources of social control over sexuality. This relationship can be explained using reference group theory: people’s behaviors and attitudes are decisively shaped by the groups in which they participate (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991). Individuals refer to those groups to evaluate past behavior and to direct current and future behavior. The influence of religiosity on premarital sexual permissiveness is weakest among members of those faiths that have the most tolerant official stance on this issue and becomes stronger as the denomination becomes more intolerant.

One of the more commonly used means of finding the relationship between religious orientation and sexuality has been the use of Allport and Ross’ (1967) Religious Orientation Scale, which classifies people’s religious orientations as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Research has shown that intrinsic religiosity is associated with more conservative sexual attitudes, whereas extrinsic religiosity has been associated with more liberal sexual attitudes (Reed & Meyers, 1991). Woodruff (1985) also agrees that adolescents who are intrinsically oriented and high in religious behavior have the lowest levels of premarital sexual activity. Thus, religious orientation may protect young people from sexual risk-taking.

Another study that utilized the Religious Orientation Scale found significant inverse correlations between premarital sexual permissiveness and church attendance, self-reported religiousness, and intrinsic religion, while a positive correlation was found between premarital permissiveness and extrinsic religious orientation (Haerich, 1992). This study by Haerich supports the idea that intrinsically oriented people’s increased dependence on religion will in turn increase religion’s influence on those people’s patterns of sexual behavior. Increasing scores on the extrinsic scale appear to represent an orientation toward religion in which the individual’s focus is on personal comfort and security. It was speculated...
that such a person would use sexual intimacy to the same ends, leading to the positive association between extrinsic orientation and sexual permissiveness (Haerich, 1992).

Working from the Religious Orientation Scale (Allport & Ross, 1967), Batson et al. (1993) created three new scales to measure religious orientation. The first scale is the internal scale, designed to measure a component of the intrinsic dimension—the degree to which an individual’s religion is a result of internal needs for certainty, strength, and direction, rather than devotion to orthodox beliefs and practices, as Batson et al. (1993) believed Allport and Ross (1967) intrinsic scale actually measures. A correlation of .73 exists between the intrinsic and internal scales (Batson et al., 1993).

The second scale is called the external scale, designed to measure a component of the extrinsic dimension—the degree to which an individual’s external social environment has influenced personal religion. However, these assumptions were proved wrong. Higher scores on this scale are associated with higher scores on the intrinsic rather than the extrinsic scale. The correlation between external and intrinsic is .59, while it is only .03 with extrinsic (Batson et al., 1993). This finding suggests that, although an intrinsically oriented individual’s religion is still internally motivated (a correlation of .73), it can, in fact, be related to external, social factors (a correlation of .59).

The most significant change is the quest scale, designed to measure the degree to which an individual’s religion involves an open-ended search for answers to the existential questions raised by the complexities of life. Batson et al. (1993) indicates that a quest orientation to religion is less constraining to one’s religious beliefs than an intrinsic orientation. A quest-oriented individual resists clear-cut answers and acknowledges that he or she may never know the final truth. Although the quest scale has been used in various studies, very few have been found that also look at sexual attitudes and behaviors. One study found that among men, the quest scale correlated positively with “erotophilic disposition and with men’s increased willingness to consider having sex with a desirable person known for a shorter time” (Rowatt & Schmitt, 2003, p. 462).

To see whether outcomes for the external scale would, in fact, more closely resemble those expected of intrinsic orientations
rather than extrinsic orientations, and to explore further how the quest scale relates to sexuality, this study used the Religious Life Inventory to study the relationship between the three measures of religious orientation on sexual attitudes and behaviors. In light of previous literature, it is hypothesized that as scores on the internal scale increase, sexual activity and comfort engaging in sexual activity will decrease. Although the external scale was intended to correlate to Allport and Ross’ (1967) extrinsic scale, which would lead to an inverse correlation between religious orientation and sexuality, as stated previously, because the external scale tends to correspond better to the intrinsic scale, it is anticipated that as scores on the external scale increase, sexual activity and comfort engaging in sexual activity will decrease. In addition, because a quest-oriented person is more likely to be more open-minded and less bound to religious beliefs, it is hypothesized that as scores on the quest scale increase, sexual activity and comfort engaging in sexual activity will increase. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that comparing the highest and lowest quartile of the scores on each of the religious orientation scales will show significant differences in sexual activity and attitudes, with those higher in internal and external scores being less likely to have engaged in and be comfortable with engaging in various sexual activities and those higher in quest scores being more likely to have engaged in and be comfortable with engaging in various sexual activities.

Method

Sample

The study was conducted at a Midwestern denominational University. A questionnaire was developed which looked at a number of risk behaviors and protective factors such as sexual activity, substance abuse, pornography, gambling, depression, relationships, and religious beliefs and practices. The questionnaire was administered using a paper-and-pencil closed-answer format. It was decided to collect the data during certain class periods on a given day. The class periods were chosen on the basis of the large number of classes and students that would be available during those time periods. An evening class was also used in order to include more of the graduate students. It was hoped that this
method would increase the likelihood that those classes surveyed
would help in the representativeness of the sample. Professors of
these classes were contacted on their willingness to survey their
class and a group of trained survey proctors gave the survey. Per-
mission for this study was granted to Andrews University’s insti-
tutional review board. Because of the focus of this article, only
data from the Sexual Activity and the Religious Life Inventory sec-
tions of the survey that will be used.

Because this study focuses on premarital sexual activity, only
the 634 single (97.0%) or engaged (3.0%) subjects were used. The
sample was 57.9% female and 42.1% male. Participants ranged in
age from 18-49 (M = 20.89, SD = 3.15). The sample was predomi-
nantly White, non-Hispanic (49.1%). The remaining individuals
identified as African American-West Indian (21.4%), Asian-
Pacific Islander (13.0%), Latino (9.3%), American Indian-Alaskan
Native (0.3%), and other (6.9%). Most subjects reported being of
the denomination associated with the university (94.0%). The rest
of the sample identified as other Protestant (1.6%), Catholic
(0.6%), other (1.3%), or as having no religious affiliation (2.5%).

After splitting each of the religious scales into quartiles, 116,
125, and 133 subjects had scores in the highest quartile on the
internal, external, and quest scale, respectively. Quartiles were
used because in the Batson et al. (1993) original approach, they
avoided typing. Rather than classifying individuals as solely inter-
nal, external, or quest, the degree to which each individual’s religi-
on can be characterized in each of these ways is measured.
Therefore, rather than comparing an intrinsic individual against
a quest individual, highest and lowest quartiles within each scale
were compared against each other.

Measures

The Batson et al. (1993) Religious Life Inventory was used in order
to measure religious orientation. The inventory consists of 35
items, six on the external scale, nine on the internal scale, 12 on
the quest scale, and seven unscored buffer items. The respondents
answered each question on a 9-point Likert scale, with one being
strongly disagree and nine being strongly agree. In a study of under-
graduates, the internal, external, and quest scales demonstrated
adequate reliability (α = .84, α = .79, α = .78, respectively; Batson
et al., 1993). This study produced similar results for the internal, external, and quest scales ($x = .84$, $x = .70$, $x = .72$, respectively). Means and standard deviations were also run on the data. For the internal scale the mean was 7.31 and the standard deviation was 1.85, for the external scale the mean was 6.33 and the standard deviation was 2.06, and for the quest scale the mean was 4.88 and the standard deviation was 2.16.

Sexual activity was measured by asking the respondents to answer yes or no to whether or not they had ever engaged in kissing, breast stimulation, or fondling (their fondling or their partner’s fondling), other sexually arousing touch (not including breast or genitals), stimulating partner’s genitals with their fingers, oral sex, anal intercourse, or vaginal intercourse. Sexual attitudes were determined by having the respondents answer yes or no to whether they would feel comfortable doing the behaviors listed above prior to marriage.

**Findings**

The relationship between religious orientation (as measured by the Religious Life Inventory) and sexual activity and attitudes were investigated using a point-biserial correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

As was expected, internal and external scores had significant, inverse correlations with all of the sexual behaviors studied. Inverse correlations were also found between internal and external scores and whether or not the individual was comfortable engaging in a variety of sexual behaviors, including breast fondling, sexually arousing touch, genital stimulation, oral sex, anal intercourse, and vaginal intercourse.

Quest scores had weak positive correlations with the sexual behaviors tested, with only breast fondling and genital stimulation reaching significance. Quest scores also had weak correlations with almost all of the sexual behaviors an individual would be comfortable doing prior to marriage, with sexually arousing touch, genital stimulation, and vaginal intercourse reaching significance (Table 1). A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to compare individuals with scores in the highest and lowest quartiles of each scale to see whether there was a significant difference between quartiles.
As hypothesized, significant differences were found between internal scores in the highest quartile and the lowest quartile in sexual activity. The same was true for the highest and lowest quartiles of external scores. Significant differences were found between highest and lowest quartiles for both internal and external scores on sexual attitudes, with the exception of kissing.

While the only significant difference between quest scores in the highest quartile and the lowest quartile was for those who had or had not engaged in manual stimulation of their partner’s genitals \(Z(267) = -2.66, p < .01\), significant differences were found between those who would or would not be comfortable engaging in manual stimulation of their partner’s genitals \(Z(265) = -2.31, p < .05\), anal sex \(Z(260) = -2.55, p < .05\), and

**TABLE 1** Associations Between Religious Orientation and Sexual Activity and Sexual Attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Internal scale</th>
<th>External scale</th>
<th>Quest scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual activity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kissing</td>
<td>-.11**</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breast stimulation/fondling</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually arousing touch</td>
<td>-.14**</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulating partner’s genitals with fingers</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral sex</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anal intercourse</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaginal intercourse</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kissing</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breast stimulation/fondling</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually arousing touch</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulating partner’s genitals with fingers</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>.13**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral sex</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anal intercourse</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaginal intercourse</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to missing data, sample size ranged from \(n = 522\) to 563; *\(p < 0.05\). **\(p < 0.01\). (2-tailed).
Discussion

The correlations indicate that those who are higher on external or internal religiosity were significantly less likely to engage in sexual activities. These activities ranged from kissing to vaginal intercourse. In addition, these individuals were less likely to be comfortable engaging in those activities prior to marriage. Likewise, those higher in internal and external scores are more likely to have abstained from vaginal intercourse and are less comfortable engaging in vaginal intercourse prior to marriage, compared with those lower in internal and external scores.

The findings support the earlier statement that the external scale relates more to the Allport and Ross (1967) intrinsic scale, as the patterns in the external and internal correlations
and differences were very similar. As the internal and external scales both correlate with the intrinsic scale, their description of an intrinsically oriented individual may explain the inverse relationship found between internal and external orientations and sexual activity and attitudes. People with the intrinsic orientation find their master motive in religion. Other needs, strong as they may be, are regarded as ultimately less significant, and they are more likely to conform to religious beliefs and prescriptions. The individual internalizes personal beliefs and tries to follow them fully. The intrinsic believer’s obedience to the moral laws of orthodox religion produces an increase in appropriate social behavior, as defined by the religious tradition. In light of the stance that most Christian churches take on premarital sexuality, an internally or externally oriented person will likely adhere to that creed more strictly. Therefore, for the internally or externally oriented person, religious beliefs are more likely to outweigh sexual needs and desires.

The quest scores, on the other hand, tended to correlate positively, although often insignificantly, with sexual activity and attitudes, meaning that as quest scores increased, sexual activity and comfort engaging in sexual behaviors also increased. Likewise, when comparing those highest with those lowest in quest scores, those who were in the highest quartile of quest scores were significantly more likely to have engaged in manual stimulation of their partner’s genitals and more likely to be comfortable engaging in manual stimulation, anal intercourse, and vaginal intercourse. This finding supports the Batson et al. (1993) view that a quest orientation to religion is less restricting to one’s religious beliefs than an intrinsic orientation. Although the denomination associated with the university, which 94% of the sample identified with, holds a strong stance against premarital sexuality, those with higher quest scores were less likely to adhere to this creed in practice or in theory, through sexual activity or sexual attitudes, respectively. A quest-oriented individual not only asks religious questions, but also is comfortable in spite of, or perhaps because of, these doubts. In the same manner, a quest-oriented individual could be searching for answers about all manners of life, including sexuality, which would lead to a more open-minded position on sexuality, allowing for the person to be more comfortable engaging in sexual activities not condoned by the church.
In conclusion, the data suggest that faith communities can and do play a significant role in sexual morality. This suggests that it may be important for Christian colleges and universities to have active effective spiritual programs that engage students by providing a structural component to religious belief and involvement that fosters personal spiritual belief and value systems. It must be remembered that the associations, while statistically significant, are at best only moderate. Human sexual attitudes and behavior are very complex and while religiosity appears to be an important part of human sexual decisions, there are many other factors that are involved.

References


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