

Religious, Spiritual Beliefs, and Sexual Behaviors: Views of College Students

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RAFFY R. LUQUIS, PHD, MCHES
PENN STATE HARRISBURG
&
GINA BRELSFORD, PHD.
PENN STATE HARRISBURG

Background & Purpose

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- Recent research suggests that many college students engage in sexual practices that increase their likelihood of serious health problem including sexually transmitted infections, HIV infection, and unintended pregnancy.
- Several studies have examined and supported the relationship between religiosity, spirituality, sexual attitudes, and sexual behaviors among adolescents and young adults.
- Few research studies have used qualitative measures to examine religious and spiritual views and sexual behaviors among college students.
- The **purpose** of this analysis was to examine the views of college students regarding religious beliefs, spirituality and its impact on sexual behaviors.

Sample

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- Data were collected from a convenience sample of college students enrolled at four northeastern universities (n=960) during the 2008-09 academic year.
- Students were recruited through general education courses, face-to-face presentation and emails to students' organizations. These recruitment strategies were used to attract a cross-sectional sample of students from diverse background and year in college.

Instrument

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- The survey contained several sections to elicit demographic information, sexual behaviors, sexual attitudes, measurement of religiousness and spirituality, and spiritual disclosure.
- In addition, the survey asked three open-ended questions:
 - How do you define your religious beliefs?
 - How do you define your spiritual beliefs?
 - How do your religious and spiritual beliefs affect your views on sexual behaviors?

Data Collection & Analysis

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- Each student, who agreed to participate, received a package with a copy of the questionnaire, a self-addressed stamped envelope, and a letter with information regarding the study.
- Students were asked to send the completed survey to the principal investigator in the envelope provided or to complete the survey electronically within two weeks.
- Through content analysis, the researchers grouped each participant's response to the open ended questions into descriptive categories.
- Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine any differences based on gender.

Participants

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- The analysis included 441 participants who provided a response to at least one of the open-ended questions.
- These participants were between 18 and 25 years of age with the mean being 19.48 (SD = 1.27).
- Eighty-seven percent of the participants were White, seventy-four percent of the participants were female, 97% were single and 93% were heterosexual.
- When asked about their academic status, 31% of the participants reported being freshmen, followed by 26% sophomore, 19% junior, and 24% senior.

Results: Religious Beliefs

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- **Religious beliefs:**
 - 57% described it as institution, tenet, and practice based , or belief in higher power.
 - 17% described themselves as atheist/agnostics
 - 11% described as a combination from multiple religious views
 - 11% described as other views
 - 3% described as spiritual based
- **A Chi-Square analysis showed no differences in their definitions by gender.**

Results: Religious Beliefs

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- **Institution, tenet, and practice based**
 - “I believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ will descend upon the earth once again.”
 - “I love God and know he's always there for me. I believe in the Bible and have my own views and interpretations about it.”
- **Atheist/Agnostic**
 - “I would say that I am somewhere in between atheist and agnostic.”
- **Multiple views**
 - “I would say that I follow the philosophy of deism. I believe an all powerful God created multiple universes for its own entertainment.”
- **Spiritual based**
 - “I believe I was put on this Earth for a purpose I believe in being a good person. I believe in Karma...”

Results: Spiritual Beliefs

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- **Spirituality**
 - 46% defined as a belief in a higher power or religious based
 - 24% did not have an spiritual belief
 - 20% defined as a belief on nature and other views
 - 10% defined as an individual interpretation
- **A Chi-Square analysis showed no differences in their definitions by gender.**

Results: Spiritual Beliefs

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- Higher power or religious based
 - “I believe I am spiritual, but spiritual for God.”
- No spiritual belief
 - “I have no major spiritual beliefs and do not meditate.”
- Belief on nature and other views
 - “I love the beach and nature and am mostly spiritual or feel positive when I am outside.”
- Individual interpretation
 - “Everyday I contemplate my life and why I am still here and to be grateful for what I have.”

Results: Sexual Behaviors

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- Impact on their views about sexual behaviors
 - Religion and spirituality have an impact on my views
 - ✦ 19% - wait until marriage/soul mate
 - ✦ 11% - in other ways
 - ✦ 8% - follow the religion/tenets
 - ✦ 5% - moderate influence
 - Religion and spirituality have no impact on my views
 - ✦ 29% - does not affect, no specific reason given
 - ✦ 21% - personal beliefs about sex have more impact
 - ✦ 7% - it is okay to have sex within the context of a relationship (i.e., in love)

Results

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- **Impact on views about sexual behaviors:**
 - “I am saving sexual intercourse for my husband as the Bible teaches.”
 - “If I had not been instilled with my religious beliefs I would most likely have different views on sexual behaviors and be sexually active.”
 - “God intended sex to be between a married man and woman. Sex was a gift for expressing love and feelings for the marriage mate and to reproduce. It was never meant to occur outside the marriage and never with the same sex.”
- **No impact on views about sexual behaviors**
 - “I don't think it really has an affect, it depends more on a person's morals and if they want to participate in sexual behavior just to do it.”
 - “When I first began having sex I felt guilty because premarital sex is technically against my religion, but it does/did not play a factor in my decision to begin or continue to have sex.”
 - “I don't think they have anything to do with one another.”

Results

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- A Chi-Square analysis showed a significant difference between males and females ($p < 0.001$)
 - 70% of males reported that their religion or spirituality has no effect on their views about sexual behaviors compare to 52% of females.

Discussion

- This is one of few studies in which students were asked to define religious and spiritual beliefs and how these affect their views about sexual behaviors.
- The majority of the students (60%) defined religious beliefs based on an institution, tenet, belief on a higher power, their religions practices, or spiritual beliefs; while other (20%) defined it based on multiple beliefs.
- The majority of respondents defined their spiritual beliefs based on a belief in a higher power or religion (46%), followed by a belief on nature or other views. Yet, almost 1 in 4 students reported no spiritual belief.

Discussion

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- The majority of the students (57%) reported that their religious and/or spiritual beliefs had no effect in their views about sexual behaviors.
 - More males than female verbalized this opinion.
- It seems that personal beliefs about sexual activity and other factors have more impact in the sexual behaviors among this group than religion or spirituality.

Implications

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- Results of this analysis can help health educators in understanding the relationship between college students' religious/spiritual beliefs and views of sexual behaviors.
- While the results of this study contradict previous findings in which religion and spirituality have been associated with students' sexual views and behaviors; for some students religion and spiritual beliefs still have an impact on their views about sexual behaviors.
- Health educators can use these findings to help students understand and explore religious and spiritual beliefs when discussing sexual practices among college students.
- Further research using qualitative measures is needed before final conclusion can be made on the relationship between religion, spirituality, and sexual behaviors among college students.

Author Contact Information

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Raffy R. Luquis, Ph.D., MCHES

Associate Professor of Health Education

School of Behavioral Sciences and Education

Penn State Harrisburg

777 W. Harrisburg Pike

Middletown, Pa 17057

Email: rлуquis@psu.edu