

An Analysis of College Students' Stories About How Their Religious Backgrounds Impacted
Their Sexual Attitudes

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By
Brookelyn Bochenek
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Dr. Leslie Nelson
Senior Project Advisor

Dr. Lauren Kolodziejcki
Department Chair

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Abstract

The goal of this paper was to examine the impact of college students' religious background on their sexual attitudes. Grounded in the Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1984), qualitative interviews were conducted to allow participants to share their experiences. Thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted to uncover the themes that animated their narratives. The themes that emerged were a) conceptualization of sex, b) exploration of sexuality and dating, and c) negotiation of religious identity and beliefs. Findings were consistent with and corroborated past research regarding sexual socialization and religious dualities. Study limitations and directions for further research are addressed.

Keywords: religion, religious background, sex, sexual attitudes, the Narrative Paradigm

An Analysis of College Students' Stories About How Their Religious Backgrounds Impacted Their Sexual Attitudes

Sexuality is one of the most personal and intimate aspects of human identity (Ansuini et al., 1996). How we view sexuality and the exploration of sex through behaviors constitutes “sexual attitudes.” Just like other deeply personal aspects of our identity, sexual attitudes are shaped by our backgrounds, cultures, experiences, and through other aspects of our identity (Silva et al., 2021). So, too, is religious identity. Religion can act as a “moral compass” or “internal locus of control” for some (Murray et al., 2007) and a source of sexual guilt for others (Azim et al., 2021). One key period in which religious and sexual identity are shaped, maintained, and negotiated is during college (Arnett, 2006). College and early adulthood are transformational and reflective periods in an individual’s life (Azim et al., 2021).

Importantly, during this time, sexuality and religious identities are often put into conversation with each other. Researchers have examined the impact of religious affiliations on sex, finding that aspects of religion such as denomination and attendance of religious services is linked to later sexual activity, fewer sexual partners, and overall, more conservative views towards sex (Regnerus, 2005). Specifically, the goal of this study is to better understand individuals from religious backgrounds negotiate their religious beliefs that often contrast with American popular culture and media that “actively promote[s] a sexual ideology characterized primarily (often entirely) by pleasure” (Regnerus, 2005). Moreover, individuals often rely on narrative to make sense of their identities (Fisher, 1984). Thus, the current study is grounded in the Narrative Paradigm. Through analyzing college students’ stories, this study hopes to identify the major themes that animate participants’ experiences of how their religious background has impacted their sexual attitudes. Specifically, this work will illuminate the complex relationship

between religious background and sexual attitudes as individuals transition from childhood to adulthood.

Religion and Sex

In contrast to the sexual attitudes popularized in media and American culture, religious institutions have “prescrib[ed] and proscrib[ed] the cultural scenarios and behavioral standards (the with whom, what, when, where, and how) of sexual activity” (Regnerus, 2005). For adolescents, how religious parents communicate ideas about sex plays a role in their social sexualization. These include discussions or lack thereof about birth control, and comfort level and ease of conversations. Religious parents are less apt and comfortable when it comes to discussions about sex and birth control with their children, especially those who are more devoutly religious. Additionally, the focus on moral implications versus the physical implications of sex is apparent in conversations about sex from religious parents. It is also important to note that not all communication is two-way conversations between parents and children; parents can convey their religious attitudes towards sex in other ways, such as commenting on “sex-saturated popular culture” (Regnerus, 2005, p. 101). In other words, research suggests that religious parents communicate less frequent and more negative messages about sex. For individuals who are navigating their sexuality and experiencing social sexualization through religious discourse communicated through parental influence, the intersection between religion and sex can be difficult to navigate.

This brings us to the idea of religious dualities, that “religion can seem simultaneously connected to both the confusion and the clearer perspective of sexuality for individuals” (Clarke et al., 2022). Clarke et al. highlights the need for more research that qualitatively investigates the intersections of religion and sex through evaluating individuals’ sexual attitudes and behavior. In this study, interviews with families of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faith revealed four core

themes including “boundaries and rules around sex, purpose of sex, navigating culture and media, and concerns regarding children” (Clarke et al., 2022). Focusing on college students is imperative to gain a better understanding of where adolescents receive information about sex and what aspects of their social development have impacted and shaped their sexual attitudes. This research has important implications for informing policies, education, and understanding the impacts and breadth of religious discourse.

Research suggests that institutions have a gender bias when it comes to sexual education, with women receiving more information than men (Andre, 1989). Understanding how this is reflected in religious institutions is another potential implication for my study. Azim et al. explored this phenomenon amongst sexually active female college students, finding that “sex guilt acted as full mediator between religiosity and painful sex” and advocating for “evidence-based information on pain-free and guilt-free sexual experiences inside and outside religious contexts” (2021). Further research could reveal the religious “mechanisms” that result in the sexual guilt and shame many women experience.

Studies linking religiosity and painful sex constitute an important justification for research in this context. Specifically, an examination of the implications between religious affiliations and sex is worthwhile (Azim et al., 2021). A helpful way to study these implications is by listening to college students share their personal experiences of how their religious background impacted their own sexual attitudes. Storytelling, or narration, is one of the richest forms of human communication that allows for expression and connection among individuals (Fisher, 1984). The goal of this study is to analyze the impact of college students’ religious backgrounds on their sexual attitudes through their own narrations of their experiences. Thus, the current study is grounded in the Narrative Paradigm.

Narrative Paradigm

The Narrative Paradigm serves as an effective framework for understanding human communication. Proposed by communication theorist Walter Fisher, it presupposes that humans are essentially storytellers, and through narratives, we come to connect and understand others' experiences. Fisher asserts that through narration, individuals can reflect real-world experiences by "simultaneously appealing to the various senses, to reason and emotion, to intellect and imagination, and to fact and value" (1984, p.15). Additionally, he argues that storytelling is part of human nature, a faculty that is acquired culturally rather than something individuals must be taught. Situating it against other social scientific theories, the Narrative Paradigm goes beyond other theories by offering what Fisher calls "narrative rationality" which is further broken down into narrative probability and narrative fidelity. The former refers to the coherence of the story, or whether it is free of contradictions. The latter refers to the soundness and truth qualities of the story (Fisher, 1985). This posits narrativity as a way of interpreting and understanding human connection, as well as suggesting that stories are not devoid of context, and they work in relation to other discourse. Meta discussions of narrative and its importance to communication date back centuries to early rhetoricians like Plato. Since then, narration as the basis of human communication have been corroborated by scholars across communication subdisciplines. Narrative theory can be helpful to ground research in by providing a framework for individuals to share their stories that lend insight to societal narratives, or grand narratives, that help us to understand contemporary culture (Clair et al., 2014). When it comes to evaluating narratives, the grounding principles of narrative rationality, coherence and fidelity, can be applied to understand why people think and behave the way they do. Like a 2016 study in which the Narrative Paradigm was used to examine why certain individuals believed in the discourse about a link between vaccines and autism (Hoppin, 2016), I plan to use the Narrative Paradigm as the

grounding communication theory to analyze college student's stories about the link between their religious backgrounds and their sexual attitudes.

College Students' Narratives about Religion and Sex

In summary, research shows that religious discourse has the potential and ability to shape an individual's sexual attitudes and behaviors. Religious sexual ideologies seem to be at odds with American popular culture and the need for additional research to evaluate the intersection between religiosity, sex, and culture has important implications, especially among adolescent and college-aged individuals. The Narrative Paradigm theorized by Fisher (1984) presents a useful communication framework to evaluate human communication and in turn uncover themes that animate the most personal aspects of an individual's identity. Here I propose my research question for the present study:

RQ1: What themes animate college students' stories about how their religious backgrounds impacted their sexual attitudes?

Method

The goal of this study was to analyze college students' stories about how their religious backgrounds impacted their sexual attitudes.

Participants

11 volunteer participants were recruited from a large Western University. Participants reported their gender as 9.1% males, 81.8% females, and 9.1% gender fluid with a mean age of 18.5 years. Additionally, participants identified their sexual orientation as the following: 63.6% Homosexual or Straight, 18.2% Bisexual, 9.1% Pansexual, and 9.1% Not Listed. For race, 63.6% identified as White, 27.3% Asian or Asian American, and 9.1% as not listed. Participants reported their religious affiliation as Catholic or Christian. One participant reported their religious affiliation as Catholic and Hindu. For current romantic relationship status, 72.7% of

participants reported Single and 27.3% Dating. Highest educational attainment was reported as 90.9% high school diploma/GED and 9.1% Associate's or Vocational degree.

Procedures

Participants were recruited using both convenience and volunteer sampling techniques. I reached out to several religious groups at the university, asking them to share with their fellow group members. I also asked university professors to share the survey with students, announcing the opportunity to participate in the survey in both online and in-person settings. Additionally, I shared the survey on open social media pages targeted toward university students and the local community. Upon self-selecting to participate, respondents clicked the link and were directed to an online survey. The survey began with a consent form to inform individuals that participation was voluntary and confidential. If individuals qualified and wanted to participate, they were directed to share relevant demographic information and contact information to schedule the interview.

Interviews took place via Zoom and lasted approximately 30 minutes each (mean= 26 minutes). The interviews were semi-structured and asked participants questions about the impact of their religious background on their sexual attitudes. All participants were asked the same questions. The interviews were audio-recorded. Following the interviews, the audios were transcribed word for word. After the interviews, the participants were provided with the same debrief and contact information for the research team.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interview data, I followed Braun and Clarke's method of thematic analysis (2006). First, I compiled all the transcripts into one large document. I read through the transcripts several times to familiarize myself with the data and make any necessary changes to inaccurate transcriptions. I then began to note any initial codes from features of the data that stood out to

me. I moved through the data systematically to “give full and equal attention” to each data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were then categorized into overarching themes and reviewed to ensure themes were internally coherent and distinct from one another. Themes were then named and defined. Lastly, I selected participant quotes and anecdotes to use as exemplars to demonstrate each theme and tell the story of the data.

Data Verification

Once the data was analyzed and organized into major themes, a verification process was needed to ensure the validity of the data. I completed a “member check” where participants are asked to “reflect on the accuracy of the account” as a strategy for validating the data (Cresswell, 2007). To verify the study findings, participants were asked to complete a follow up survey via google forms that asked them to evaluate the themes that emerged from the data as they related to their experience and what they had shared during our interview. 7 participants completed the form and all 7 (100%) verified that all three themes were somewhat or wholly representative of their experiences shared during the interviews.

Findings

The present study was conducted to explore what themes animate college students’ stories about how their religious background impacted their sexual attitudes. The following three themes emerged from the data: a) conceptualization of sex, b) exploration of sexuality and dating, and c) negotiation of religious identity and beliefs.

Conceptualization of Sex

Participants shared how their religious background promoted ideas and structures around when sex should happen, whom sex should happen between, and for what purpose people should have sex. Some examples of this include discourse around sex being saved for marriage, sex as a sacred act between husband and wife, heteronormativity, and invalidation of other sexual

orientations. As Ankita shares, “In Catholicism and Christianity, at least the way I grew up, it was very much: sex was only between a man and a woman. Sex was only for the purpose of, you know, making children, and that would only happen after marriage.” Noelle reiterated this point, sharing that it was “emphasized that the point of sex is to conceive” and that it “was not intended to happen outside of marriage.” Participants also reflected on references to sexual purity.

Samantha talked about her experience at a youth group:

“The pastor showed us a piece of gum, and they were like ‘does anyone want this gum?’ And everyone's like, ‘yeah, like, we'll take it.’ And then he chewed it up, like put it in his mouth, chewed it, and then he took it out, and was like, ‘does anyone else want it now?’ And we were like ‘no.’” And he was like, ‘well, that's what you are. If you had sex, you're used. No one ever wants you again.’ Basically. He didn't say that word for word. So, I just viewed it as bad. Like if I ever had sex, or engaged in any type of sexual activity, then I would be worthless, I'd be useless. No one would ever want me after that.”

And some participants noted the difference between the messages for men and women. As Kate states, “What we heard from the church, especially for women was, you know, focus on virginity, focus on respecting yourself.”

Interviewees explained how sex was emphasized to fit within these boundaries. These boundaries sometimes had lasting impacts for participants when it came to exploring their sexuality.

Exploration of Sexuality and Dating

Participants shared how their religious background impacted the exploration of their sexuality and dating practices. Positive, negative, and neutral impacts were shared. Negative examples include feeling timid or reserved due to religious ideologies regarding sex, repressed guilt or shame, and feeling "behind" or stifled sexually. “There are always some residual feelings of ‘this is wrong,’” Nathan explained. “I've had sex with people, and you have like a feeling of guilt. Or you're like ‘Oh, I shouldn't have done that.’ And it's like, is that just my repressed, you know, sexuality because of religious institution, or is it something else?” For another participant,

Hailey, she felt as though it hindered her ability to explore her “own thoughts and feelings about sexuality.” Kate stated how she found herself “reserved and timid” when it came to sexual encounters, noting she was not as “sexually open” as her peers. The stigmatism Ayaka encountered growing up created shame around having sexual thoughts, sharing that “I feel like I discovered things like pornography and erotica a lot earlier than other kids because I was interested in ‘what is this thing that everyone is saying is so bad?’ I would have had a more comfortable relationship with sex growing up if it hadn't been for the stigmatism in the church.”

Some participants noted a neutral impact, sharing that their religious background didn't significantly shape their sexual attitudes, citing outside influences and/or figures. “I'm pansexual and gender fluid,” Meg shared. “But the teachings at the Church, to me, were just ‘oh, marriage should only be between men and women.’ And I've had that told to me through the church a lot, which is a reason why I'm not a big fan of that anymore. But I don't know. I had a lot of LGBTQ+ people around in my life so that was kind of comforting. I didn't really let the church tell me what to think in that sense.” Abby reflected on the sentiment of saving yourself for marriage, stating, “I think as I got older, even throughout middle school and high school, I kind of never really thought that that would be realistic.” For other participants, sexuality and religion weren't interconnected. “Personally, it's been a very separate thing for me,” Claire said. “I feel like God would love me any way I am.”

Other participants noted the positive impact of their religious background on their exploration of sexuality and dating, sharing that it created more awareness and reflection when it comes to engaging in sexual behaviors. “In the back of my mind, I'm probably subconsciously thinking ‘you can't just have sex with anyone because your body is a temple’, and everything that Catholicism enforces,” Audrey puts it.

Overall, participants' evaluations of how the exploration of their sexuality was impacted by religion varied between positive, negative, and neutral impacts. These evaluations allowed participants to better understand their religious identity and their attitudes toward sex.

Negotiation of Religious Identity and Beliefs

Participants shared how they have negotiated their personal religious identity and beliefs with their sexual attitudes. Some shared that religious viewpoints/ideologies caused them to feel disconnected and/or distanced from their religious background. "I feel like that disconnect with religion," Hailey expressed. "Because I think when you have all those beliefs internalized, you don't really question anything. You kind of are always like 'oh, yeah, I agree with everything because this is what I've been taught to agree with.' But then, as you grow older, it's just kind of like 'oh, I see kind of differently now.'" Samantha revealed, "I shouldn't be taught as a kid that if I had sex, I'm worthless...Like it just makes me disappointed that I was taught that, and kids are being taught that, because I don't believe that's true anymore." For Audrey, her personal stance on abortion has led her to question the viewpoints of the Catholic Church. "I'm pro-choice and Catholicism is very pro-life," Audrey explained. "But growing up, that was all I knew. I thought that was just it, I thought that was just normal. But now that I'm in college and I'm exposed to more things in general, I'd say that I just disagree a lot with the Catholic Church."

Some participants noted how major transitions, such as moving to college, or personal experiences impacted their involvement or alignment with religion. Ankita expressed the changes she experienced coming into college. "I came face to face with people that were openly like bisexual or openly gay. And I think at that point, I realized like 'oh, it, you know, liking men isn't the only path that I should consider or the only path that I should kind of close myself to.'" Nathan wondered about his upbringing and asked "What is all this? What are all these things that I believe? Not even just in terms of sexuality, but just God, or anything?" He continues, "And I

just kind of started questioning everything. And it was, you know, it was really kicked off by my departure, from my kind of forced exit from that church because of the environment.”

Others rejected some aspects of their religion, while also noting the positive impact of their religious upbringing and/or current religious status. Ayaka shared

“I’ve kind of been coming to terms with my own spirituality, and for a long time, I really hung on to the moniker of Christian. But I kind of realized that I liked being able to belong to something. But I realize now that doesn’t really fit with my beliefs. And so, you know, I’m kind of exploring more...I still go to church, not just to please my parents, but also because I do enjoy the community that it gives. Because all the people, they’re very friendly, and they assume that we all kind of have the same beliefs. So, yeah, I would say that even if someone is not religious, raising your child in a community like that can be very, very valuable.”

This theme was reflected by interviewees in several different ways. Participants shared how they navigated their religious identity or lack thereof, whether it was due to a feeling of distance, a major life change or transition, or a new evaluation of their personal beliefs.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the themes animated in college students’ narratives about how their religious background impacted their sexual attitudes. Qualitative interviews were conducted and grounded in Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm (1984) which posits that storytelling and narration allows us to connect and understand human experiences. After analysis of the data guided by Braun and Clarke’s model for thematic analysis (2006), codes were organized into 3 themes. The emergent themes are both consistent with and corroborate past research.

Regnerus claimed that religious institutions enforce “the cultural scenarios and behavioral standards of sexual activity” (2005). This is reflected in the emergent theme *conceptualization of sex* in which participants outlined specific and limited structures of sexuality and sexual behavior. These structures were forceful, poignant, and reiterated throughout different aspects of their religious experiences. Additionally, an important connection between the theme *negotiations around religious identity and beliefs* is the idea of “religious dualities” (Clarke,

2022). The concept of religious dualities is exemplified through participants' citing positive, negative, and neutral experiences with their religious experience in regard to their sexual attitudes. Furthermore, some participants noted the apparent gender bias in religious discourse regarding sex, citing that virginity and sexual purity was heavily imposed on and directed towards women. These findings are consistent with past research on the topic (Andre, 1989 and Azim et al., 2021). Social sexualization is also an important part of adolescent development (Regnerus, 2005), and participants shared how religion also played a large role in identity development. Negotiating religious ideologies with internal and external ideas of sex had lasting impacts on the formation of sexual attitudes for participants, causing some participants to reject religion all together or reevaluate aspects of their religiosity, as demonstrated through the theme *negotiation of religious identity and beliefs*.

This study is grounded in the Narrative Paradigm because it serves as an effective framework for understanding human communication. Humans are storytellers (Fisher, 1984) and narration allows us to share and connect over the most personal and impactful experiences. Subdisciplines across the communication studies field the Narrative Paradigm to not only explore personal narratives but larger societal narratives as well. Through analyzing the themes that emerge from college students' stories of how their religious background impacted their sexual attitudes, we can understand larger religious narratives as well as the impact and breadth of religious discourse. This can help inform education around how we talk about sex and sexuality and provide a clearer picture of how sexual attitudes vary across religious backgrounds and other identity categories.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The majority of participants (63.6% or 7) identified as white or Caucasian, followed by 3 participants who identified as Asian or Asian American (27.3%). Additionally, 9 of the 11

participants (81.1%) identified as females and 7 participants (63.7%) identified as heterosexual. 2 participants (18.2%) identified as bisexual, 1 (9.1%) identified as pansexual, and 1 (9.1%) identified their sexual orientation as not listed. A larger and more diverse sample of participants across race, gender identity, and sexual orientation is needed to better understand the narratives college students have to share regarding the impact of their religious background on their sexual attitudes. Likewise, all participants came from a Catholic or Christian background. To truly understand the relationship between religion and sexual attitudes, a sample of people from a variety of religious backgrounds is necessary.

Additionally, participants were mostly recruited through convenience sampling techniques, all from the same university. Further research should be more expansive, conducted across colleges and regions to create a more accurate depiction of the themes animated in these narratives. Furthermore, many young adults choose to not attend college. Widening the sample to include young adults who not particularly “college students” could be beneficial for future studies. Research can also be focused on studying the long-term impacts of religiosity on sexual attitudes beyond college-age individuals and across diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the impact of college students’ religious background on their sexual attitudes. Grounded in the Narrative Paradigm proposed by Walter Fisher (1984), qualitative interviews were conducted and thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to uncover the themes that animated their narratives. Emergent themes were a) conceptualization of sex, b) exploration of sexuality and dating, and c) negotiation of religious identity and beliefs. Findings were consistent with and corroborated past research.

Seeking to understand the relationship between religion and sex through telling stories is one way we can explore how our background, identity, and attitudes are interconnected. The

implications of such research are far-reaching and necessary. Humans are storytellers and will continue to use narration to connect and educate. Harnessing this paradigm and using it as a framework will allow for future and more robust research to reveal the interconnectedness and impact of religion and sex.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**DON'T FORGET TO PUSH RECORD ON THE ZOOM MEETING!
TURN ON TRANSCRIPTION.**

Hi, (INSERT PARTICIPANT'S NAME)! Thanks again for agreeing to participate in this study! This interview should last approximately 30 minutes and will be recorded. I am going to ask you some questions about how your religious background has impacted your sexual attitudes. If at any point you do not want to answer a question, that is totally fine. Names will be changed to preserve confidentiality. Are you ready to begin?

1. For this research project we are specifically interested in learning more about how your religious background has impacted your sexual attitudes, and how that makes you feel.
2. That said, would you mind sharing an experience or experiences about how your religious background has impacted your sexual attitudes?
 1. IF UNCLEAR TO PARTICIPANT: How has your religious background, (whatever that may be), impacted or shaped you attitudes towards sex? Would you mind sharing your experience with me?
 2. If unclear on definition: **sexual attitudes**--the attitudes that one has towards sexuality or sexual behaviors.
 3. Tell me about the interpersonal context of how religion has impacted your sexual attitudes.
 1. What is your religious background?
 2. Are you still religious? If not, how long were you religious?
 3. What was your relationship with religion like?
 4. Are you or were you part of a community that practiced the same religion as you? (ex: youth group, family or friends, attended religious services in your community, etc.) If so, please tell me about it.
 5. How has your religious background impacted your sexual attitudes? How so?
 6. Have your sexual attitudes changed over time due to religion? How so?
 7. Has religion impacted your sexual attitudes in a positive, negative, or neutral way? Please explain!
 8. Are there specific aspects from your religious experiences that contributed to your sexual attitudes (ex: religious documents, religious leaders, religious family members or other individuals, etc.)? If so, please explain!
 9. How do you feel now about religion in general?
 10. How do you feel now about sex in general?

Debrief

So that is officially the end of the interview! Are there any other details you would like to provide or questions you would like me to revisit? Any questions you have for me?

If anything comes up, please don't hesitate to contact us via email: lrnelson@calpoly.edu or bbochene@calpoly.edu.

Before I let you go, would you be willing to review the results of this study later – likely in a few months? Basically, we will send you a summary of our findings and ask you if they ring true to your experience.

- IF YES: Can I get a good email address for you?
- IF NO: I totally understand, thank you anyway!

Would you also be willing to share this study opportunity with others you know who may qualify? If so, that would be great! Please share the link to the survey you completed.

Thanks so much for sharing your experience with me. I hope you have a wonderful day/night!