Original Paper

Religiosity and Adolescent Females' Characterizations of Healthy Dating Dynamics

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Abstract

In this study, we utilize the Socialization Influence Framework to examine how personal religiosity may influence adolescent dating dynamics. We conducted fifty in-depth interviews with adolescent females aged 15-18 attending high schools in a mid-Atlantic city. Six broad themes characterizing healthy dating dynamics were identified: Investment in the Relationship; Healthy Communications; Harmonious Interactions; Non-Destructive Dynamics; Relations with Family, Friends and Others; and Maintenance of Personal Integrity. Differences in characterizations emerged in relation to the degree of personal religiosity. Findings have implications for faith-based initiatives and efforts to promote positive youth development. The process by which internalization of religious beliefs may also translate into risk for unhealthy dating dynamics remains an important area of study.

Keywords

Adolescence, religiosity, teen dating relationships

1. Introduction

U.S. national data suggest that adolescents consider religion as an important factor that operates invisibly in the background of their lives (Sinha, Cnaan, & Gelles, 2007; Smith & Denton, 2005; Fletcher & Kumar, 2014). As discussed by Rostosky and colleagues (2004) in their review of longitudinal studies assessing the impact of religiosity on adolescent sexual behavior, an examination of the potentially

important role of religiosity on adolescent romantic relationships; specifically, on the initiation, maintenance and quality of these relationships is notably absent (Rostosky, Wilcox, Wright, & Randall, 2004). Research is needed to better understand the mechanisms by which religiosity, as a personal belief system and cultural context, influences adolescent psychosocial development, specifically in dating dynamics.

1.1 Religion as a Protective Mediator of Teen Risk Behavior

The role that religion plays in protecting adolescents from risky behavior is not fully transparent, mainly due to inconsistent definitions and operationalization of the construct (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Wong, Rew, & Slaikeu, 2006). Definitions of religion range from an affiliation with denominational or worship practices, to prayer and religious service attendance (Howard, Qiu, & Boekeloo, 2003; Levin, Larson, & Puchalski, 1997). In addition, measures of religiosity include religious involvement, salience of religion and faith, religious affiliation, frequency of prayer, and religious identity (Cotton, Zebracki, Rosenthal, Tsevat, & Drotar, 2006; Lopez, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2011).

Religious involvement among adolescent heterosexual females is associated with reduced binge drinking and substance use, and is protective against heavy episodic drinking during adulthood (Drabble, Trocki, & Klinger, 2016; Michalak, Trocki, & Bond, 2007). In addition, literature reviews of studies published between 1980 and 2015 suggest that religious involvement is associated with delayed sexual debut, positive mental health outcomes, and decreased likelihood of premarital sex, alcohol, and drug use (Cotton et al., 2006; Rostosky et al., 2004; Wong et al., 2006). In one study, religiosity was a significant protective factor in buffering the association between adolescent dysfunctional dating attitudes and substance use (Tharp, DeWall, Richman, & Noonan, 2014).

Religious involvement (e.g., participating in religious services) may reinforce social norms and provide social support for adolescent engagement in pro-social behaviors (Lippman & Michelsen, 2004). Involvement with religious congregations offer adolescents unique opportunities to engage in group activities and learn new life skills, many of which can reinforce certain psychosocial outcomes (Hardie, Pearce, & Denton, 2016). Messages from parents, clergymen, other congregants, and peers can mediate adolescent risk behavior and outcomes by highlighting personal values and attitudes that are disapproving of alcohol, drugs and sexual activity (Barton, Snider, Vazsonyi, & Cox, 2014).

1.2 Religion as a Potential Risk Factor for Negative Adolescent Health Outcomes

Although religion is readily recognized as a protective factor, there is also evidence that religious doctrine can result in feelings of guilt which is then used to enact power, control, and harm (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). For example, Pearce and colleagues (2003) found that negative interpersonal religious experiences (i.e., negative and/or critical demands from their religious congregation) was associated with greater levels of depression in a sample of adolescents. Additionally, negative religious coping, defined as conflicts relating to spirituality or conflicts with God (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000), has been

12

associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsiveness, and somatization (McConnell, Paragment, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2006).

Specific to adolescent relationships, some theological doctrines suggest that the roles of males and females are not only specific and hierarchical but also must remain to prevent moral chaos (Nienhuis, 2005; Nason-Clark, 2000). While religious doctrine and practices may protect women, they may also serve to encourage males' dominant behavior and females' submission to men, which may lead to unhealthy dating dynamics. These observations raise questions as to whether certain religious beliefs or attitudes may be associated with staying in relationships that are emotionally, physically, and/or sexually unhealthy or harmful. In their systematic review of research on adolescent religiosity, Wong and colleagues argue that investigation is needed on the potentially negative dimensions, such as religious guilt and depression (from feeling criticized by their religious communities), as it may negatively impact mental health and interpersonal dynamics (Wong et al., 2006).

1.3 The Present Study

Given the complexity of adolescent dating attitudes and behaviors, we utilized the Socialization Influence Framework (SIF) to guide this research (Wallace & Williams, 1997). The SIF identifies multiple domains of socialization influence and mechanisms that shape adolescent health-related attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. In this framework, religion operates as a secondary socialization influence, which assists adolescents in fostering certain beliefs, values, and lifestyle patterns, and in turn influences behavior (Wallace & Williams, 1997). The present study is part of broader research which aims to better understand how conceptualizations of healthy and harmful dating relationships are formed by religious socialization and whether such socialization may be related to risk of, or protection against, Teen Dating Violence (TDV) victimization. This paper focuses specifically on personal religiosity, which is a measure of *internalized religious values and identity*, and a key construct within the SIF. The specific aims of this study include: 1) Identify themes associated with adolescent females' ideas of healthy teen dating dynamics; 2) Gain an understanding of how personal religiosity shapes adolescent females' conceptualizations of healthy dating relationships; 3) Examine similarities and differences in conceptualizations of healthy dating relationships that emerge based on the degree of personal religiosity. While qualitative data does not afford an opportunity to test mediation (nor construct a structural equation or examine power), it does allow for stratified analyses, which we conducted to determine whether differences emerge in the characterizations of healthy dating relationships by degree of personal religiosity.

2. Method

2.1 Eligibility and Recruitment

The research team was comprised of the Principal Investigator (PI), counselors, and educational

psychologists who head community-based organizations focused on female victims of domestic violence. Doctoral, masters, and undergraduate students enrolled in an academic public health program also participated in the research process.

The sampling frame consisted of adolescent females aged 15-18 years who were recruited from public, private, secular, and religious high schools from a U.S. mid-Atlantic state. The research team selected interested participants through purposive sampling in order to construct a sample with religious and ethnic diversity. The sampling frame purposively included religious and secular schools to inductively capture a range of personal religiosity levels from diverse educational settings. Sampling, recruitment, and interview protocols received approval from the [Blind for Review] Institutional Review Board (IRB). Eligibility criteria included: (a) Female high school student between the ages of 15 and 18 years old; (b) Enrolled in a participating high school; (3) Agreed to have the interview digitally recorded. Participants self-identified their race/ethnicity and grade level during the eligibility process and again in a socio-demographic survey completed prior to the interview.

We employed a *tri-pronged recruitment strategy* to gain approval and support of the community of parents, principals, teachers, and students. *First*, we held meetings with the school principals, guidance counselors, and teachers at each school to discuss the aims, logistics, and protocol of the study and to garner their support/involvement. *Second*, informational sessions took place during school hours and in the evening for interested students and parent/guardians at each school. Announcements with the date and time of the informational evening sessions were sent home to parents in monthly school newsletters. Project staff provided an overview of the study, distributed packets with program information (parental consent and youth assent forms), and were available to answer questions during these meetings. *Third*, we utilized passive recruitment methods, which included the following: flyers posted throughout each school, program announcements in school newspapers, newsletters sent to students' homes, emails sent via the school listserv, word of mouth, and snowball sampling. All recruitment materials included a telephone number, which connected interested students to a member of the research team who used a standardized script to determine the eligibility of callers, discuss the informed consent process, and check availability for scheduling an interview. If parents or teens seemed hesitant to participate, the staff implemented an additional script, per recommendations by Smith and Denton (2005). This script provided more information about the project and offered a phone number for the PI whom parents or teens could call with questions or concerns.

2.2 Conduct of Interview

Prior to conducting the interviews, all interviewers participated in a training session that covered the following: logistics of the interview; IRB concerns/protection of human subjects; safety and liability issues; review and discussion of the Interview Guide; and the proper use of recording equipment. Upon receiving consent from their parent/guardian, the interviewers conducted semi-structured one-on-one

14

interviews with adolescent females in a private room at their school. In order to maintain the confidentiality of participants, each school received information of the date and time of the interviews but did not receive any identifying information on the participant. All interviews lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours. If a participant disclosed that she or someone she knew was in danger during the interview, we employed an IRB protocol to determine the nature and degree of harm and the need for further reporting and notification. All participants received an incentive "gift" bag that contained: a list of local and national hotlines, websites that address teen dating violence, and a 20-dollar incentive.

2.3 The Interview Guide

The research team developed the Interview Guide to explore females' perceptions of healthy and unhealthy dating relationships and the role of different socialization spheres (family, neighborhood, school, faith-based organizations and media) in shaping those perceptions. Specific to this paper, participants were asked "*What do you value in a dating relationship?*" and "*What makes a relationship healthy?*" We used probing follow-up questions to elicit a detailed description of participants' perceptions of a healthy relationship. For example, if the participant responded that she believed the trust was important in a healthy relationship, one follow-up question was "*Can you describe what you mean by trust?*"

2.4 Personal Religiosity Index

We embedded a series of 5 closed-ended questions in the Interview Guide to facilitate the construction of a personal religiosity index. This personal religiosity index expands upon the measure used by Jang and Johnson (2001) and Rostosky, Regnerus, and Wright (2003) and follows the recommendations of Sinha, Cnaan, and Gelles (2007) with the inclusion of a critical question on religious beliefs. The scale has adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.69$), based on data from Wave 1 of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Two questions asked participants about their personal religious beliefs. Using a 5-point Likert scale *(strongly agree to strongly disagree)*, participants were asked: "*I don't need religion to have good values*" and "*God has nothing to do with what happens to me personally*" (Manlove, Terry-Humen, Ikramullah, & Moore, 2006). A third question asked, "*What role does religion play in your life?*" The response format included a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "*Very important*" to "*Not at all important*" (Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley, 2008). The remaining two questions asked participants to rate their frequency of attendance at religious services/activities and prayer use. These questions included: "*Do you participate in religious activities/programs/services? If so, in an average year how often do you engage in these activities?*" and "*How often do you pray?*" Response choices for both were "*Once a week or more*", "*Monthly*", "*Yearly*", or "*Less than yearly*" (Zelnick, Kanter, & Ford, 1981).

We constructed a tri-chotomized religiosity variable to stratify participants into groups that were labeled "High", "Moderate", and "Low" personal religiosity. High religiosity consisted of a response of

"*Strongly disagree*" or "*Disagree*" to the 2 religious beliefs questions, "*Very important*" or "*Somewhat important*" to the question on importance of religion, and "O*nce a week or more*" to the question on frequency of attendance at any religious services/activities and prayer. Responses of "*Neutral*", "*Strongly agree*", or "A*gree*" to the religious beliefs questions, "*Neutral*", "*Not at all important*", or "*Somewhat unimportant*" to the importance of religion question, and "*Less than yearly*" or "*Once a month or less*" to the questions on frequency of attendance at any religious services/activities or prayer placed participants in the Low religiosity group. The remaining responses were identified as Moderate religiosity. Participants were grouped into high, moderate, and low groups based on their responses across the individual items. Participants in the high religiosity group ($N = 4$) recorded "high" responses on all 5 religiosity items. Girls in the low religiosity group ($N = 6$) reported "low" on all 5 religiosity items. Girls who recorded mixed ratings of "high" and "low" on the religiosity items were included in the moderate religiosity group ($N = 40$).

2.5 Data Analysis

In order to ensure the dependability and reliability of our qualitative data, we employed strategies developed by Devers (1999). We transcribed audiotapes of interviews and entered word documents of each transcription into ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti, 6.1 ed, 2010).

Data analysis occurred in a series of phases. First, we created a codebook based on constructs of the SIF model and other terms and concepts extracted from repeated reading of the transcripts. All codes were given operational definitions. We included codes such as "healthy", "gender roles", "partner characteristics", and "unhealthy/harmful" to capture the perceptions of healthy dating relationships. Phase 2 included coding the transcripts. To ensure reliability and validity of the codebook, a primary and secondary coder independently coded two transcripts. These coders then met with the PI to review and revise codebook terms and definitions. Once we finalized the codebook, the coders and PI reviewed the first 10 transcripts twice to ensure consistent agreement. The primary coder coded the remainder of the transcripts. The secondary coder also reviewed coded transcripts after every 10 transcripts to ensure inter-rater reliability of the coding process. Systematic coding of transcripts in ATLAS.ti reduced the interview data into meaningful narrative segments associated with specific codes.

We stratified transcripts based on the High, Moderate and Low religiosity index. Within each of these strata, we conducted specific queries in ATLAS.ti using the "healthy" codebook term. We analyzed all narrative passages within each personal religiosity strata individually to identify emergent themes. We then used an iterative process of reading and rereading the narrative passages to increase comprehension, forming subcategories and categories from the themed data to capture context and dimensionality (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, we compared themes across personal religiosity groups to determine similarities and differences among the depictions of healthy relationship characteristics.

3. Results

The final sample included 50 adolescent females, the majority of whom were 16 (40%) or 17 (34%) years of age (M = 16.41, SD = .86). Participants self-reported their race, ethnicity, grade, and other demographic information. Participants self-identified as White (46%), Black (32%), Mixed race (16%), and Hispanic or Latino (6%). By grade classification, 42% of the participants were juniors, 36% were seniors, and 22% were sophomores. 20% of the participants attended a public coeducational school, 40% attended an all-girls Roman Catholic school, 20% attended an all-girls private independent school, and 20% attended a coeducational Jewish community school.

Qualitative analysis led to the identification of six broad themes and 17 sub-themes that characterized healthy dating dynamics. The High religiosity group endorsed 53%, the Moderate religiosity group endorsed 94%, and the Low religiosity group endorsed 71% of the sub-themes. Overall, the High religiosity group endorsed 18% fewer themes than the Low religiosity group and 41% fewer than the Moderate group. Descriptive differences in the narrative discourses emerged based religiosity (see Table 1). Quotations in this section include the participants' age and religiosity group.

Table 1. Healthy Dating Relationship Themes by Degree of Personal Religiosity

	Degree of Personal Religiosity		
	High (*N*=4)	**Moderate (*N*=40)**	**Low (*N*=6)**
Investment in the Relationship			
· *Staying Power*	X	X	
· *Provision and Receipt of Social Support*		X	X
Healthy Communication			
· *Open, Easy, Ongoing Communication*	X	X	X
· *Honest and Authentic Communication*	X	X	X
· *Conflict Resolution*	X	X	
Harmonious Interactions			
· *Compatibility*	X	X	X
· *Reciprocity*	X	X	X

· *Caring and Affectionate*		X	
· *Not Rushing Into Sex*		X	X
Non-Destructive Dynamic			
· *Faithful and Trustworthy*	X	X	X
· *Non-Abusive*		X	X
Interactions with Others			
· *Family*		X	
· *Friends*	X	X	X
· *Pride in Relationship*			X
Maintenance of Personal Integrity			
· *Self-Assured*		X	
· *Autonomous*		X	X
· *Self-Respecting*	X	X	X
Total # of sub-themes endorsed	9	16	12
Percent	53%	94%	71%

3.1 Investment in the Relationship

Investment in the relationship encompassed two sub-themes: *Staying Power* and *Provision and Receipt of Social Support*.

3.1.1 Staying Power

Staying Power reflected the participants' desires for a sustainable relationship and their recognition of the work this required. Key characteristics of *Staying Power* included "accept[ing] the hard times" and trusting that the other person would be there because of a shared commitment to the relationship. *Staying Power* manifested in the participants' comments about "standing up for" or defending one's partner or behaving in a way that demonstrates that the relationship is a priority. Participants used key adjectives, such as "patience", "loyalty", and "tolerance" to describe the currency of "investment" in the relationship's sustainability. Both High and Moderate religiosity groups addressed ideas about investing

18

in the relationship through *Staying Power*. Indeed, a key conviction that resonated across their interviews was that one should not leave a relationship when it gets tough and instead should be committed to working things out. As one participant said:

"Like I feel like if you really think you're mature enough to have a relationship, you have to work at it. And I mean an actually dating relationship, not friends with benefits anything like that…like something that you can work out; you're not just going to leave it when it gets tough. And I feel like a relationship should be like life, you handle it a bit at a time and you work at it (15, Moderate)".

Participants with High personal religiosity described a healthy dating relationship in ways that suggest a type of true grit and tenacity that had multiple points of reference: "Like a healthy relationship is something where people actually want to hang out with each other, be with each other, talk to each other, like effort in the relationship (15, High)". Participants with Moderate personal religiosity expressed a similar concept when describing *Staying Power*. An important element was being "loyal", which reduced worrying, showing "unity" and being "equals" which encouraged each partner to take initiative and make plans:

"Committed, like both of us are willing to work together, being each other's equal and be able to, you know, be with each other, tolerate each other, not fight every day, that's not healthy for anyone…be able to work things out, be able to work with each other (17, Moderate)".

3.1.2 Provision and Receipt of Social Support

The sub-theme of *Provision and Receipt of Social Support* captured the participants' descriptive and dimensional characterizations of healthy dating relationships in terms of reciprocal, emotional and instrumental assistance, advice, and appraisal. This comment by one participant summed up the varied utilities provided by a relationship:

"…like if the person gives you good advice or they help you like they benefit your life in some way they help you with advice or maybe they are helping you with your homework or maybe they are helping you get a job or maybe they are just a good person to be with, to talk to, maybe they make you feel better about some stuff, so that you both benefit from the relationship (15, Moderate)".

Emotional support reflected the amount of "empathy" from dating partners and involved a willingness to "confide in" each other. Comments about being sympathetic to each other's needs and struggles reflected this concept. One participant mentioned, "I think that a healthy relationship involves…I guess you can confide in somebody (16, Low)".

Instrumental support refers to help, aid, or assistance with tangible needs that the participants would receive (Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997). The ability to help each other was described as a valued characteristic of a healthy dating relationship. Participants mentioned their partner being physically present to provide concrete assistance, such as helping with homework or helping to prepare for a job interview or application. Appraisal support differs from instrumental support in that it relates to

help with decision making, giving appropriate feedback, or deciding which course of action to take (Langford et al., 1997). As one participant put it, "…you supported the other person's decisions. You're encouraging of any decisions that they make, and you would hope that they do the same for you (17, Moderate)".

Informational support denotes the provision of advice or information in the service of particular needs (Langford et al., 1997). Participants discussed this in the context of giving advice to each other, based on 'common principles' of attentiveness and good listening skills. Support in the form of "good" advice was seen as an asset in the relationship. One participant noted: "And if you do have advice, give it to them…(16, Moderate)". Participants within both Moderate and Low personal religiosity groups explicitly discussed how the *Provision and Receipt of Social Support* was an important characteristic of a healthy dating relationship. This was not overtly mentioned by those with High religiosity.

3.2 Healthy Communication

Healthy communication included the sub-themes of *Open, Easy, Ongoing Communication, Honest and Authentic Communication,* and *Conflict Resolution. Open, Easy, Ongoing Communication* dynamics were described as integral to a healthy relationship. Participants used adjectives such as "honest", "regular", "open", and "authentic" to characterize the form and substance of these communications. The following responses from participants across the personal religiosity spectrum underscore the importance of communication in a healthy dating relationship: "Um, communication is really important because that way the female and the guy are on the same page as to what they want out of their relationship…(16, High)"; "Um, communication definitely is a top thing because without communication you are going nowhere (16, Low)". Another participant mentioned: "Healthy? Um when they communicate. I think communication is a major factor in a relationship that everybody should have for the relationship to move forward. Because without communication, you really don't have anything (18, Moderate)".

3.2.1 Open, Easy, Ongoing Communication

Participants across all levels of personal religiosity described *Open, Easy, and Ongoing Communication* as "*talking to each other*". Indeed, this was the central characterization among participants with High personal religiosity. In contrast, participants with Moderate personal religiosity were more expressive in describing healthy communication as a key dynamic in healthy dating relationships. These participants noted that various forms of communication—whether it is in-person, via email, or through pictures being sent to each other—were equally acceptable if there was a "connection" and they were able to "express feelings". Conversations that were "fun", "laid back", and "not so serious" were described in a positive light that "leads to a comfortable feeling". Being able to talk about different "stuff" without it being "problematic" exemplified *Open, Easy, Ongoing Communication* for participants within the Moderate personal religiosity group. Communication that did not involve argument, "fighting over little things", or "being at each other's throat" allowed them to share their feelings with the other person. One participant

20

mentioned:

"Okay a healthy relationship would be talking to each other every day, um having things in common…being understanding of what the other person wants and what the other person needs and um just trusting the person and being very honest with the person and then enjoying all your time together and that's pretty much all (17, Moderate)".

3.2.2 Honest and Authentic Communication

While there was overlap between the sub-themes under Healthy Communications, *Honest and Authentic Communication* seemed to underscore critical elements of a healthy dating relationship. It included frank conversations about feelings that lead to a better understanding of the other person and contributed a healthy relationship. This type of communication was characterized as follows: "If you're mad at him or her for something and you just stay mad at them but you won't tell them what the problem is then you're going nowhere (16, Low)". "Not lying" exemplified *Honest and Authentic Communication* for participants with high personal religiosity. Participants with Moderate personal religiosity spoke about "expressing one's feelings" and "not withholding anything". For these participants, it was very important to be able to "be yourself" and not pretend or try to maintain an image that was not really you. "Authenticity" was an adjective they repeatedly used in the context of "being true to oneself and knowing who you really are", "no pretense", so that you communicate openly (i.e., "speaking your mind") and honestly with the other person. It also conveyed their belief that a healthy relationship has to not only include disclosure but a fundamental understanding that you can believe what your partner tells you.

3.2.3 Conflict Resolution

It was important for participants within the Moderate and Low personal religiosity groups to feel that they could express themselves without fighting or arguing and that conversations would flow easily, not be forced or awkward but instead allow mutual sharing. Among participants with Low personal religiosity, the amount of time spent talking to the other person was important. Communication that did not involve arguing, "fighting over little things" or "being at each other's throat" allowed them to share their feelings with the other person. In giving their view of healthy communication, participants acknowledged that arguments do occur in dating relationships and they needed to be addressed through *Conflict Resolution* than be ignored. The participants noted that good communication skills are often necessary to work through "obstacles" and solve problems.

Although participants with High personal religiosity did not talk much about *Conflict Resolution*, they did discuss the importance of being able to "get over arguments" in order to have healthy communication. This was expressed as follows: "If both people are happy. Like, if people can get along and get over arguments, like, then that's pretty much the general (16, High)". Participants with Moderate religiosity were much more descriptive about the dynamics of *Conflict Resolution*. They recognized that obstacles will arise and spoke about problem solving, acknowledging that differences need to be addressed in order

21

to "make it work". They even articulated what would appear to be a set of principles or ground rules for conflict resolution: 1) the importance of getting along or working together; 2) not yelling even when one was upset; and 3) putting effort into the relationship to make it work when distance was a factor. Participant with Low religiosity did not mention *Conflict Resolution* when describing healthy dating relationships or even in the context of their discussion of communication.

3.3 Harmonious Interactions

Harmonious Interactions included four sub-themes: *Compatibility; Reciprocity; Caring and Affectionate;* and *Not Rushing into Sex.*

3.3.1 Compatibility

Compatibility reflected the ability to get along with the other person to the point of truly enjoying his or her company. Wanting to "hang out with each other", being "tuned in to each other", and "fitting together" exemplified *Compatibility*. Participants mentioned the importance of getting to know the person and trying new things together. Overall, participants felt it was essential to spend time together and accept each other, as in "not trying to change them" and/or being "willing to do what each other likes" for the relationship to be healthy. As one participant put it: "… healthy relationship umm just really be able to…do stuff have it doesn't even have to have the same interest but as long as they'll be willing to do what you like also…(17, High)".

Participants within the High religiosity group highlighted the ability to get along and the desire to be around one's partner using adjectives such as "sleep well", "smiles", and "being fed into". The Moderate religiosity group used unique adjectives like "good person" and "strong", in addition to referencing "flaws". Only the Moderate and Low religiosity groups mentioned the term "best friends". Moreover, in the Low religiosity group, C*ompatibility* included "not moving quickly". The following quotes are illustrative:

"Um being in tune with the other person…Knowing of the other person's quirks and downsides, will allow you to see them and look past them. So I think you should discover all of each other's flaws before something happens and you notice something and it kills everything" (17, Moderate); and "I don't think you should just jump right into a relationship and when you dating'em, you should get to know'em better. Like, because y'all have that relationship…Like, y'all should be best friends as you get further into the relationship (16, Low)".

3.3.2 Reciprocity

Reciprocity overlapped somewhat with *Compatibility* but uniquely conveyed a clear sense of bi-directional dynamics. Specifically, it reflected participants' sensibility that a relationship requires give and take and doing what the other person may want, even if it is not always your preference. Participants expressed that it was important to make the person "feel stronger", to enable the relationship to flourish. One participant noted:

"I feel like both people should make the other person stronger instead of like not weaker cause the relationship in thriving would make both people feel better and they would feed off of each other and then it would just make the relationship better so (15, Moderate)".

The notion of mutuality and give and take was most evident among the High and Moderate religiosity narratives. Participants with High religiosity spoke about what healthy relationships should not be, i.e., "not greedy", "not selfish"; whereas Participants with Moderate religiosity repeatedly referred to mutuality in "feeling", "effort and commitment", "happiness", "respect", and "time". One participant cogently put it as follows: "Just have everything mutual because if one person is putting more effort into the relationship than the other, then what's the point of doing it. In the end, that person is just going to leave (17, Moderate)". Participants within the Low religiosity group described how the other person should be "good to you", and they also spoke about mutuality as in "mutual feelings about the relationship", and: "Yeah. Um, I don't know, it could like, share feelings with them, or and he doesn't cheat on you, and hmm, you feel like he's like good to you and just not abusive verbally or… (18, Low)".

3.3.3 Caring and Affectionate

Caring and Affectionate only really emerged as a sub-theme among participants with Moderate personal religiosity. They were quite expressive in this regard. The participants characterized healthy relationships as including public displays of affection with statements such as: "we are together", having "physical chemistry" and "strong feelings" but emphasized that this was "not just for sex". They described caring as "more than just words", "doing cute little things", "royal treatment", being loving and kind, and remembering events. Aspects of affection, physical chemistry, and physical attraction were displayed through kissing, hugs, hand holding; that is, showing love non-sexually, and public displays of affection. Caring, however, was described as something much deeper than the physical plane, as is expressed in this quote:

"If you care about each other a lot and really actually care and not just say you do…You have to actually be willing to do almost anything for that person. I mean, not like anything, but just like if something is important. Maybe he'll cancel his plans for you or something important because he wants to be with you…(17, Moderate)".

3.3.4 Not Rushing into Sex

Only participants within the Moderate and Low religiosity groups described *Not Rushing into Sex* as a characteristic of a healthy relationship. Participants with High religiosity did not explicitly mention sex. *Not Rushing into Sex* was seen as demonstration of respect for the participant and respecting the participants' "bodies and space, ideas and goals". Participants with Low personal religiosity made a singular reference to Not Rushing into Sex as not wanting to be pressured or rushed into sex, especially before marriage. One Moderate religiosity participant described this dynamic as follows: "These couples, that's the one probably the only consistent trend is that they don't rush into sex. They don't rush into love.

23

They just kind of enjoy each other's company and don't even rush into saying "oh we're together (17, Moderate)".

3.4 Non-destructive Dynamic

Another major theme that emerged was the notion of a *Non-Destructive Dynamic, which encompassed two sub-themes: Faithful and Trustworthy* and *Non-Abusive*. Indeed, as one participant stated: "I think like if you guys trust each other I think that's like one- like the most important thing for like a healthy relationship (15, Moderate)".

3.4.1 Faithful and Trustworthy

A *Faithful and Trustworthy* dating relationship was described as when the other person was honest and accountable; that is, their words could be trusted to be "truth" worthy. "Trust" and being "faithful", or "not being unfaithful", were frequent adjectives used to describe a healthy dating relationship. With such a foundation, participants felt their partners would be "dependable" and would not "question their loyalty". A key characteristic of *Faithful and Trustworthy* was "not cheating". This referred to "being faithful" to the other person *and* to the relationship.

While participants across all three levels of personal religiosity described *Faithful and Trustworthy* as an important characteristic for a healthy dating relationship, participants within the High religiosity group characterized this as "not having a double standard … saying one thing and doing something different"; i.e., "going where you say". As one participant mentioned:

"Trust. Like, if a guy tells me 'Okay, I'm going to go to this place and that place and I'll be back', then I'm going to trust him. I have no reason not to trust you unless you've lied to me and then I just can't trust you because if you lied to me once, you'll lie to me again. I mean that kind of goes for me too; there shouldn't be a double standard in any relationship (16, High)".

The comment of one participant summed up the sentiments of many of the participants:

"I feel like the most important thing in a relationship is trust like I feel like if you can't trust the person then you can't be comfortable with the person because you're always wondering you know 'what if this', 'what if that' (18, Moderate)".

Participants with both High and Moderate personal religiosity, discussed trust as follows: "trust that you have the best interest [and are] not self-motivation" and "trust that you have no reason not to trust [the other person]". Participants with Low personal religiosity were less descriptive about the idea of trustworthiness but said things such as "doesn't cheat on you" and "don't keep elaborating". The latter seemed to be a red flag or indication of one partner having something to hide or trying to rationalize a dynamic.

3.4.2 Non-abusive

Many participants spoke about what would not be characteristic of a healthy dating relationship. Being *Non-Abusive* included little to no fighting, "no hitting", "no hands", and "no physical, mental, emotional,

24

or verbal abuse". The Moderate and Low religiosity groups acknowledged not being partner to an abusive dynamic. They appeared well-aware of the multi-dimensional nature of abuse (physical, mental, and emotional). The following quotes are illustrative:

"Um...Not hitting each other, and like, physical-wise if you get mad, oh, slap him or if she gets mad, hit her. That's just not healthy at all (15, Moderate);" "…Belittling them with low blows essentially, with low blows meaning like inappropriate sayings or things that you know will hurt their feelings…(18, Moderate);" "Yeah. Um, I don't know, it could like, share feelings with them, or and he doesn't cheat on you, and hmm, you feel like he's like good to you and just not abusive verbally or…(18, Low)".

Participants within the Low religiosity group stressed the importance of not being controlled. One participant noted that a healthy dating relationship does not dictate what you can do or does not try to change who you are.

"Like, like let's say you wanna like go out with your friends on Saturday night and not see him for one night and he's like you know, not letting you go, or let's say you wanna, like have a job, and he wants you to stay home. And he like dictates what you do (18, Low)".

3.5 Interactions with Others

Interactions with Others included three sub-themes: *Relationship with Family, Relationship with Friends, and Perceptions by Others.*

3.5.1 Relationship with Family

Relationship with Family only emerged from the interviews with participants of Moderate personal religiosity. However, what they said was noteworthy. These participants characterized a healthy dating relationship as one where their partner would "respect me and my parents" and know their family. The participants noted that family history "helps figure out what's healthy and what is unhealthy" and that "knowing one's parent's background" was important. One participant mentioned:

"I think the perfect dating relationship is um like they can trust each other, like they have met their parents, they know their parents, their parents trust both of them to be together without doing anything they don't supposed to be doing…(17, Moderate)".

Another said:

"I guess just knowing like their background or stuff at least just knowing where they come from. And like if you see what type of parents they have or where they live or…that will explain to you like other reasons like, "Well that's why he does that" or "Well that's why he dresses like that" or does this or does that (16, Moderate)".

3.5.2 Relationship with Friends

All participants viewed *Relationship with Friends* such as "getting along with friends" and "respecting them" (i.e., one's friends) as vital to a healthy dating relationship. Participants underscored the importance of a bi-directional dynamic for respect: "my friends respect the guy…the guy respects my

friends". One participant mentioned, "respect that they are my friends and he can't say anything rude about them because that's like saying something rude about me. My friends reflect kind of who I am and so..., they need to respect my boyfriend (16, High)".

Participants within the High religiosity group felt that it was really important that anybody they dated "get along with friends, especially closest friends". Participants with Moderate personal religiosity spoke about the importance of gaining "approval from friends" as to whether they thought the relationship was healthy. These participants also mentioned the importance of a dating partner both knowing and liking friends and family. Participants with Low levels of religiosity only talked about friends in the context of "no mistreatment of you and friends". One participant stated:

"…having them know your friends and like are on good terms with them because if they're not on good terms…and like your friends don't like them then they could like always try to like break the relationship apart which isn't good (15, Moderate)".

3.5.3 Pride in the Relationship

Only participants within the Low religiosity group addressed *Pride in the Relationship*. They described this as "not afraid to tell others" and "not embarrassed about the relationship". As one participant stated: "Um I guess one that where they… are not like afraid to tell anyone that they're together and they are I guess that's pretty much (15, Low)".

3.6 Maintenance of Personal Integrity

Maintenance of Personal Integrity encompasses three sub-themes: *Self-Assured, Autonomous* and *Self-Respecting*.

3.6.1 Self-assured

Self-Assured only emerged from the narratives of participants with Moderate personal religiosity. These participants spoke about "confidence in [one's] choice" and underscored the importance of "be[ing] yourself", staying the "same person you were before going out, only more confident". One dimension of self-assuredness actually seemed to contradict elements of the *Interactions with Others* sub-theme. This contradiction was evident in the participants' beliefs that the opinions of others should not matter in a healthy dating relationship. Being self-assured included "not worrying about others" and "not needing approval". The participants' use of terms such as "accepting", "not judging", and "not letting society get to them" reflected being self-assured.

3.6.2 Autonomous

An important part of being *Autonomous* was the notion of having time and space for oneself without forsaking the relationship. The participants often described *Autonomous* as "taking a breath" and "taking time for yourself". Indeed, it appeared the time away strengthens and maintains the dating relationship by elaborating on the importance of the connection. These sentiments were cogently captured in the following quote:

"I think also with a healthy relationship, you have to understand that um people need time away so a lot of times people don't see that and um like yes you may wanna be with them 24/7 but occasionally, you know, you have to go out with their friends, your friends, and they have to go out with their friends, and I mean I think it's in that little span of time that you'll realize how much more you care about each other (17, Moderate)".

Only participants in the Moderate and Low religiosity groups discussed being *Autonomous*. *Autonomous* often meant "not exclusive to [the] relationship". They framed this as taking a breather. More specifically, participants with moderate religiosity mentioned: "being free" and having it be okay to spend time with others. Participants within the Low religiosity group additionally expressed the need for "keeping your independence", as illustrated by this quote:

"…a healthy relationship to me, is just keeping your independence to yourself like knowing who you are and not letting anybody touch that because if they don't like you for who you are, then maybe they don't belong in your life (16, Low)".

3.6.3 Self-respecting

Self-respecting encompassed the notion of having "confidence in [ones] self" and being "fully happy with who you are". The need to "speak up for yourself" illustrated this concept. It was important for the participants to "love themselves before loving anyone else". Participants addressed elements of *Self-Respecting* across all levels of religiosity. One participant with High religiosity stated that "being a good person was needed for being good in a relationship". Participants in the Moderate religiosity group spoke about *Self- Respect* in terms of "maturity", "true to self", and "respect for self" and referenced this in relation to both partners. As one participant puts it: "You should be confident in who you are and if the other person is confident who they are, and you both respect each other, then your relationship should be healthy (17, Moderate)". Participants with Low religiosity spoke about: being "fully happy with whom you are", "knowing who you are", "stand[ing up for] your own opinion", and "say something back or speak up for yourself".

4. Discussion

The current qualitative study sought to explore adolescent females' conceptualizations of healthy dating relationships by analyzing descriptive differences in their narrative discourses relative to the degree of personal religiosity; 6 broad themes and 17 sub-themes emerged. Our results suggest that personal religiosity is related to conceptions of dating dynamics among high school teenage females.

4.1 Differences by Personal Religiosity

Our personal religiosity construct used Likert response questions with adequate psychometrics, along with additional questions endorsed by previous research (Jang & Johnson, 2001; Rostosky, Regnerus, & Wright, 2003; Sinha et al., 2007). We stratified participants into High, Moderate or Low religiosity

categories based on their responses. With 80% of the sample being categorized as Moderate religiosity, this group endorsed the most sub-themes (16); the High religiosity group endorsed the least (9); and the Low religiosity group endorsed 12 sub-themes. Subthemes recognized by the Moderate religiosity group offer insights on the interplay of religiosity and attitudes regarding healthy dating relationships.

A commonly held notion is that religions practiced in America value marriage and often herald those who endure a difficult one (Murray, 2002; Pyles, 2007). The "*staying power*" sub-theme identified in the current study most closely demonstrates this concept by illustrating the attempts of participants to place a priority on relationships with their partners despite experiencing problems such as fighting or "*hard times*". Interestingly, this theme was endorsed by both High and Moderate religiosity sub-samples but not by participants in the Low religiosity group. Research indicates that adolescents with low religiosity have more favorable attitudes towards separation and ending romantic relationships than those with higher religiosity (Shimkowski, Punyanunt-Carter, Colwell, & Norman, 2018). The "*staying power*" sub-theme may pose challenges for counseling professionals who, when providing services to women with a strong religious affiliation, must find an acceptable resolution that addresses the religious concerns of the individual, family, and sometimes even the larger community in which they are embedded.

Another sub-theme endorsed by High and Moderate religiosity groups was that "*conflict resolution*" was part of a healthy relationship. This may also stem from religious teachings that encourage and value working through conflict in a marriage to preserve family stability (Johnston, 1996). It is possible that participants with Low religiosity did not perceive conflict to be part of a healthy relationship. Data from Add Health suggest that adolescents who exhibit at least one risk factor for violence are also likely to use violence as a conflict resolution strategy in their relationship (Halpern et al., 2001). Taken together, these findings suggest that participants with stronger religiosity may value overcoming obstacles to maintain their existing relationships more highly than those with lower religiosity.

It is heartening that the majority of participants (both Moderate and Low religiosity) directly mentioned the sub-theme of "*non-abusive*" when describing a healthy relationship. Interestingly, those in the High religiosity group did not specifically mention a relationship without abuse as characteristic of healthy dating. Another sub-theme with a similar pattern of endorsement was being "*autonomous*". Participants in the Moderate and Low religiosity groups made statements asserting their ability to be independent as indicative that the relationship was healthy; participants with High religiosity did not mention autonomy in their responses. Finally, participants with Moderate and Low religiosity indicated that a healthy relationship includes the bi-directional provision and receipt of social support. These findings differ from "*compatibility*" but overlap with "reciprocity" in acknowledging both the importance of support and the mutuality of the process.

Not endorsing sub-themes of "*non-abusive*", "*autonomous*", and "*provision of and receipt of social support*" should not be interpreted to mean that these participants with High religiosity value dependent,

unsupportive, and abusive relationships. As these participants were the only ones to discuss the "*staying power*" and "*conflict resolution*" sub-themes, this suggests the emergence of a more nuanced set of contrasts regarding ideas of what constitutes a healthy relationship. These findings are consistent with those of Bartkowski and colleagues, which indicate that adolescents with higher religious salience and personal religious commitment are more likely to resolve conflicts to maintain their relationships with their dating partner (Bartkowski, Xu, & Fondren, 2011).

4.2 Role of Religion in Dating Dynamics

Regardless of denomination, religion plays an important but seemingly invisible role in the lives of many American teenagers, and this could influence how adolescents construct definitions of healthy and unhealthy dating dynamics (Smith & Denton, 2005). The SIF guided our examination of the relationship between religiosity and adolescent dating relationships by addressing the influence of religion within primary and secondary socialization spheres of adolescent normative development (Wallace & Williams, 1997). The SIF suggests that religion relates to health outcomes but only indirectly through the socialization mechanisms of social control, social support, encouragement, rewards, values and identity formation (Wallace & Williams, 1997; Burkett & Warren, 1987). Furthermore, research suggests that socialization through doctrines, messages from, and ties to religious institutions reinforces attitudes, norms, and family practices, which do influence adolescent dating conceptualizations and experiences (Armet, 2009).

Teenagers increasingly confront social pressures to engage in sexual behavior within their romantic relationships. The current data indicate that, in contrast to the High religiosity group, participants in the Moderate and Low religiosity groups believed that "*not being rushed into sex*" was characteristic of a healthy dating relationship. Participants with High religiosity may not have spoken at all about this because they either believe or were socialized to regard pre-marital sex as inappropriate and/or unacceptable. In addition, though not mentioned in our interviews, abstinence education programs often use "virginity pledges" to encourage adolescents in making oral or written promises to refrain from sexual activity until marriage (Rosenbaum, 2009; Carpenter, 2011). Secondary virginity pledges assist sexually active teenagers with making decisions to refrain from sexual activity (Rosenbaum, 2009; Carpenter, 2011). It is possible that teens utilize defense mechanisms and adaptive strategies in an effort to preserve religious values when navigating the complex arena of sexual relationships during adolescence (Lefkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, & Boone, 2004). These paths that teens and young adults forge may well reflect their personal interpretation of what their chosen faith dictates around relationship expectations.

4.3 Strengths and Limitations

We endeavored to document conceptualizations of healthy dating relationships from the perspective or *voice* of adolescent participants, thus empowering them to contribute to our understanding of an issue

that has both personal importance and larger applicability. We conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 50 adolescent females across different types of schools and religious faiths. Our team also followed a detailed, stepwise and systematic analytic process to enhance the rigor—both dependability and reliability—of the data (Devers, 1999). We also made efforts to maximize adolescent participation by providing multiple opportunities to inform parents about the study. We asked questions in well-advertised orientation sessions and made frequent contacts with parents to address concerns or reservations. Our findings help fill gaps in understanding the potentially important role of religiosity on adolescent romantic relationships.

Despite the demonstrated strengths, this study does present some limitations. Since many of the study participants were minors and the data collection was not anonymous, we instructed participants, verbally and in writing, that we would have to break confidentiality and tell parents/and or authorities if teens reported abuse or if we had concerns of potential threat of abuse. Although we did emphasize our interest in their attitudes and beliefs, as opposed to personal relationships and experiences, our IRB protocol may have censured what participants were willing to disclose. We also did not interpret the current data based upon underlying spiritual belief systems or religious denomination. In addition, measuring religiosity is complicated by the multi-dimensional nature of the construct. Our purposive sampling endeavored to maximize religious diversity in terms of affiliation. However, an analysis of the personal religiosity index indicates that few participants were labeled as High or Low religiosity. That is, we stratified participants by degree of personal religiosity after all the interviews were completed, and thus, we could not correct for the imbalance in the distribution of High, Moderate and Low religiosity participants. While we could have tried to recruit our sample based upon adolescent's degree of religiosity, due to the dynamic and complex process of identity development among adolescents, it would have been difficult to determine how adolescents would rate their religiosity beforehand (Tanti, Stukas, Halloran, & Foddy, 2011). Finally, we based our analysis on the degree of religiosity, not by enrollment in different types of schools. A religious school context could inflate one's individual religiosity. Yet the fact that 80% of the sample were categorized as Moderate religiosity reduces that likelihood (Regnerus, 2000). While we did not see evidence of this effect within the data, it is possible that the school context is playing a "hidden" role in their dating behaviors.

4.4 Implications and Future Directions

Our findings have important implications for faith-based initiatives and other efforts to promote positive youth development. Focusing on the positive characteristics that teens associate with healthy dating relationships is both affirming and empowering and can facilitate ongoing dialog as well as their investment and co-ownership of school and faith-based programs. With over 80% of Americans identifying with a religious affiliation and 20-25% of women in America experiencing violence from an intimate partner over their lifetime, there is reason to believe the intersection of faith and gender is fertile

ground for continued examination of healthy and harmful dating dynamics (Pew Research Center, 2015; Breiding et al., 2014).

Future research should examine how other aspects of religion can mediate dating dynamics with respect to social control and social support mechanisms. Our study suggests a next step might be to examine how females' engagement in different faith-based activities including, but not limited to, worship and prayer shapes their attitudes and normative beliefs. Additional clarifications of how religion shapes intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional dynamics related to teen dating relationships can shed light as to what extent and why adolescent females may tolerate violence within their romantic relationships.

5. Conclusion

Our findings suggest that perceptions of what constitutes a healthy teen dating relationship may differ based on degrees of personal religiosity. It raises important questions regarding how youth internalize religious teachings about healthy dating dynamics. Future research should examine how other aspects of religion and socialization can mediate dating relationship dynamics with respect to social control and social support mechanisms.

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31

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33

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