

## Perspectives

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Heather Dean

*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

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# Students' Perceptions of Parental, Peer and Religious Influences on Sexual Attitudes and Behavior

Heather Dean

Sociological Research Methods  
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*The present study examines the association between parental, peer and religious influences and the sexual attitudes and behaviors of college students. A questionnaire was administered to 128 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 36 at the University of New Hampshire- Durham campus. The questionnaire consisted of 43 fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice questions that inquired about demographic information, social influences and sexual activities in the 12 month period before college and the 12 month period after and including the first day of college. Results indicate that students do not feel that they were influenced significantly by parents, peers or religion during this period. However, the data suggests that the participants feel that they are more influenced by peers than parents or religion. Results also suggest that participants did not feel that significance of the influences changed between the 12 month period before college and the 12 month period after and including the first day of college.*

## **Introduction**

Sexual attitudes and behaviors are important throughout the life course. Individuals are often introduced to the idea of sexual intercourse and other sexual activities in the early teenage years and begin experimenting within the following decade. Therefore, sexual attitudes and behaviors are important topics for all individuals to consider.

Later on in the life course, as parents, people must be aware of what their children are being exposed to. When the children are young, parents have much control over what friends their children have and who their children are exposed to. Parents are also able to change their parenting styles according to what they feel is best for their children. For example, parents can decide whether or not to have strict rules about friends or curfew, and can decide whether or not to discuss sexual behaviors with their children. Parents also have a say in whether or not they want their children to be involved in religious activities at a young age.

Throughout the life course, individuals must be aware of the potential consequences of sexual behaviors. There is always concern about sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy and abortion. Also, sexual behaviors can have significant effects on one's physical and mental health.

In addition to parents, school systems can also have an impact on students' sexual attitudes and behaviors. High schools can offer programs to students that promote either safe sex or abstinence. Post-secondary schools can offer religious services on campus and can hire groups to perform skits or have discussions about sexual topics. Colleges can also keep parents involved in their students' lives by sending mail and e-mails to the parents about activities, school involvement, or any lawbreaking activities.

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions: "To what extent do the participants in this survey think that parental, peer and religious influences impact their sexual

attitudes and behaviors?” and “How do participants in this survey feel that these influences changed from the 12 month period before college to the 12 month period after and including the first day of college?”

Before beginning my data collection, I hypothesized that participants in the survey would feel that parental and religious influences slightly impact their sexual attitudes and behaviors, but that they would be impacted slightly more by peer influences. I also hypothesized that participants would feel that these influences had changed moderately from the 12 month period before college to the 12 month period after and including the first day of college.

## **Literature Review**

### *Parental Influence*

The research and literature based around the influences of parents and guardians on their children's sexual attitudes and behaviors reports varied results. While some of the literature states that parent-child communication concerning sexual intercourse and activities decreases the likelihood of sexual behaviors, especially risky sexual behaviors, there are several studies that question the veracity of these statements (Fisher 1988).

Previous research has found that discussion between parents and their children about sexual matters decreases the likelihood that a child will engage in premarital sex and can lead to the child having fewer sexual partners (Blake et al. 2001; Fisher 1988). However, the effectiveness of the parent-child communication are affected by several mediating variables, such as “frequency and specificity of communications, the quality and nature of exchanges, parental knowledge, beliefs and comfort with the subject matter, content and timing of

communications” (Blake et al. 2001). Family structure and parenting style are also important when studying the effectiveness of parent-child communication.

Studies have also found that the process of living away from home while attending college increases a child’s affection for and satisfaction with his or her parents, and can increase communication between parents and their children (Fisher 1988).

A study conducted by Fisher (1988) collected data from 542 students, ages 18 to 24, attending Ohio State University and their parents found that parent-child communication about sexual behaviors does not decrease the likelihood of the child engaging in premarital sex. However, although these subjects were not likely to behave in the way their parents advises, it was found that adolescents that spoke with their parents about these matters had a tendency to adopt many of the same attitudes about sex as their parents. According to the social learning theory, this similarity may be due to the fact that people tend to imitate and model their own actions based on what they observe other doing around them (Blake 2001). Therefore, it would make sense that a child would internalize what the parent is saying, but would not act on the parent’s advice if the parent did not practice what he or she preached.

These findings were also reported through a study conducted by Blake in 2001, though the subsequent study found that behaviors of adolescents are also slightly affected by parent-child communication.

Although discussion about sexual matters can affect both males and females in positive ways, parents tend to discuss these matters with their daughters at significantly higher rates than with their sons (Fisher 1988).

### *Peer Influence*

According to past research, the influence of peers on individuals' sexual attitudes and behaviors appears to be stronger than the influence of either parents or religion. It is hypothesized that this is because of students' close social proximity with their peers and the emotional need to fit into social groups.

There are many ways that individuals may be influenced by their peers' actual or perceived sexual attitudes or behaviors. For example, if an individual perceives his or her peers as approving of one-night stand it increases the chances of that person becoming sexually active and is associated with having multiple sexual partners because love is not needed in the relationship. In fact, friends' approval of one-night stands increases the overall number of sexual partners by 200% and increases the incidence of brief sexual relationships by 300% (Potard et al. 2008). Also, if an individual's friends are sexually active, then he or she will be more likely to engage in sexual activities than if the individual's friends are not sexually active (Potard et al. 2008).

The research also states that the gender of an individual is an indicator as to how many sexual partners he or she may have. This is because females are more often socialized to be more conservative sexually than males, and males are pressured to have more sexual partners than girls; these norms may be promoted by the individual's peer group (Sheeran et al. 2003; Potard et al. 2008).

### *Religious Influence*

Researchers that study religion generally agree that there is a fairly strong correlation between religion and students' sexual attitudes and behavior

Several studies have found that religious individuals, although they may decided to refrain from engaging in sexual intercourse before marriage, do not see the need to refrain from

other sexual acts, such as oral and anal sex. This may be because individuals feel the need to conform to their peers, but do not want to sacrifice the beliefs of their religion (Woody et al. 2000; Sheeran et al. 1993).

Other studies have found that church attendance, although related to anticipation of sexual intercourse, is not significantly related to actually engaging in sexual intercourse or other sexual behaviors (Sheeran et al. 1993).

One of the more important findings, however, when dealing with religious influence on sexual attitudes and behaviors of college students is whether or not the individual has internalized their religion. It is generally agreed upon that, although attending church may increase the likelihood of an individual perceiving him- or herself as religious, also known as religious self-attitude, this is not the most important factor. If an individual does not attend church, but does perceive him- or herself as religious, it may be more effective in decreasing the likelihood of premarital sex than attending church without perceiving oneself to be religious (Sheeran et al. 1993). However, both religious self-attitude and church attendance are related to a decrease in the likelihood of engaging in premarital sex (Woody et al. 2000).

Although the research states that parents, peers and religion have an effect on sexual attitudes and behavior, I do not expect to find these results in my research. This is because the study has a cross-sectional design and requires participants to recall information about the past. Participants' memories may have been altered due to the passing of time, and they may not recall how strong these influences were during the specified time period.

## Methods

Although, going into data collection, I expected to find that participants in the survey would feel that parental, peer and religious influences impact their sexual attitudes, and that the sway of these influence would change during the specified time period, there was still the chance that my findings would report these hypotheses to be incorrect.

*Research Question #1- Hypothesis:* Participants in the survey would feel that parental and religious influences slightly impact their sexual attitudes and behaviors, but that they would be impacted slightly more by peer influences.

*Research Question #1- Null Hypothesis:* Participants in the survey would feel that parental, peer and religious influences did not impact their sexual attitudes and behavior.

*Research Question #2- Hypothesis:* Participants would feel that parental and religious influences had moderately decreased from the 12 month period before college to the 12 month period after and including the first day of college, and that peer influence moderately increased during this time period.

*Research Question #2- Null Hypothesis:* Participants would feel that none of the influences changed between the 12 month period before college and the 12 month period after and including the first day of college.

### *Participants*

The goal for this survey was to have 200 students from the University of New Hampshire-Durham campus participate in the questionnaire. The final sample included 128 participants from freshman year to graduate level and ranged in age from 18 to 36 years old. This sample included 54 freshman level students (42%), 23 sophomore level students (18%), 23 junior level students (18%), 24 senior level students (19%), and 4 students (3%) of another standing. The sample consisted of 85 females (67%) and 42 males (33%) with a mean age of 20 years.

This sample was the most logical for this study because access to the participants was relatively easy because professors tend to understand the benefits of research, it was relatively quick and easy to administer the surveys in a local area, the research question that I asked



concerned college-age students, and surveying classrooms allowed for greater numbers of participants to be surveyed at once, as opposed to tracking down individuals to participate.

### *Instrument*

The independent variables in this study were parental influence, peer influence and religious influence, and the dependent variables were sexual attitudes and sexual behaviors. Parental influence was measured by 8 questions concerning the perceived influence of friends on sexual attitudes and behaviors, presence of a strong relationship with a parent or guardian, and frequency of discussions about sexual behaviors. Peer influence was measured by 12 questions concerning the perceived influence of friends on sexual attitudes and behaviors, the presence of one or more close friends, and the ability of the participant to speak openly with a friend about sexual behaviors. Religious influence was measured by 12 questions concerning church attendance, perceived religiosity, and perceptions of the greatest amount of intimate activity allowed between two individuals before marriage. Sexual attitudes were measured by questions concerning participants' opinions about the greatest amount of intimate contacts that is acceptable before marriage and perceptions of whether or not sexual contact is necessary in every successful adult relationship. Sexual behaviors were measured by eight questions concerning numbers of partners for past sexual activity and past sexual intercourse, age at first sexual activity and first sexual intercourse, and reasons for engaging sexual activities and sexual intercourse for the first time.

All sections of the questionnaire, with exception of the demographic information, included two separate items measuring the same subject for the 12 month period before college and the 12 month period after and including the first day of college. This is because I wanted to get an idea of how being in college influences an individual's sexual attitudes and behavior, so I

asked participants to remember back to the two year period that would best help to illustrate these changes.

A questionnaire was developed that started with a section on informed consent and followed with demographic questions, as well as questions about parental, peer and religious influences, sexual attitudes and sexual behaviors. One question was included that was taken from a previously administered survey. However, the rest of the questions included on the survey were written specifically for this questionnaire. I had difficulty in trying to find survey questions that pertained to what I wanted to know, so I felt that it would be easier to write my own questions. However, while still in the process of administering the survey to classes, I found that I had written multiple questions incorrectly. (Specific issues will be discussed in the “Discussion” section of this paper.)

The reasons for using a questionnaire to collect data for this study were numerous. First, questionnaires allow for large amounts of data to be collected quickly and efficiently. Second, printing questionnaires is generally less expensive than hiring individuals to administer face-to-face interviews. Thirdly, when researchers would like to inquire about personal or taboo information, questionnaires are often the best survey instruments to use because participants are often more honest when completing questionnaires than face-to-face surveys. Finally, the answers from questionnaires are easily converted into numbers, which can then be turned into statistics; findings are then interpreted using these statistics.

However, there are also many drawbacks to using a questionnaire to collect data. For example, questions cannot be altered in any significant way once data collection has begun, unless the previous data is going to be thrown away. Questionnaire administrators are unable to verbally re-word or clarify any of the questions on the survey instrument, so issues are not able

to be resolved. In addition, for the type of data collection that our class took part in, questionnaires were more expensive than face-to-face interviews because of the costs of printing, though this is not typically the case.

### *Procedure*

After having the survey instrument approved by the University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began selecting the classes that I would ask to administer my survey to using the cluster sampling method with replacement. I began by obtaining a list of all of the departments at the UNH- Durham campus, typing the list into a random list generator (Random.org) and selecting the top 10 departments on the list. Next, I gathered a list of all of the courses in each of these departments and entered only the 400 through 799 level classes into the random list generator. From there, I recorded the top 20 classes and e-mailed or called the professors of the first 10 classes with information about the project and contact information for my Professor Catherine Moran and myself. If I was denied access to a classroom or the professor did not respond to my efforts at contact, I moved down the list to the next class. Although I was denied access or was not given a response for 14 of the classes on the list, I was eventually able to survey 5 classrooms and obtain 128 completed surveys.

In the classrooms, I spoke to the class about selecting only one answer, the ability to skip questions is desired, and the ability to return a blank survey if they students did not feel comfortable answering the questions. I also pointed out the section at the beginning of the survey with contact information if any students needed to speak with someone for emotional support.

After reviewing my class selection technique, I realize that there are several things that I would do differently if given the opportunity. Although it would have taken a substantially greater amount of time, I would have compiled a list of the 400 through 799 level classes from

*all* of the departments on the UNH-Durham campus. This is because many classes that were selected were taught by the same professor because I only selected classes from ten departments. Therefore, I had to ask two professors if I could survey multiple classes that they taught and the teachers were not inclined to let me do so.

Also, because I do not have to take labs, practicals or clinicals for my major, I did not realize that these sections of classes existed. If I were to re-administer this survey, I would leave these classes, as well as senior seminars and thesis classes, out of the list to survey. I surveyed multiple classes that had less than ten students, including one that had only two students that day. This was a problem because some of the students felt uncomfortable with answering such personal questions and having the potential of me knowing who wrote what answers, and I did not gather much information for the amount of time and effort I put into surveying those classes.

I chose this method of sampling because I wanted to survey students from a multitude of backgrounds and wanted to have students of all class standings participate. I initially thought that general education classes would be good to sample, but realized that this would likely lead to a disproportionate number of under classmen (freshmen and sophomores.)

## **Results**

To analyze my data, I used Small Stata. Frequency tables were used to illustrate how many individuals and what percent of the participants marked each answer. Summary tables were used to summarize the basic findings of the item, such as mean, standard deviation and percentiles. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to “determine if there significant differences among means.” Finally, chi-square statistics were used “[t]o analyze the relationship between two categorical variables” (Moran 2010).

The data from the 43-question survey was analyzed using frequency tables, summary tables, t-tests, analyses of variance and chi-square distributions. Unfortunately, I was only able to procure 128 surveys, so most of the data that I received was not statistically significant when entered into STATA. However, the data is still important to look at because it illustrates general patterns in the population surrounding perceived changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors of college students.

To answer my research question, “To what extent do the participants in this survey think that religious, parental, and peer influences impact their sexual attitudes and behaviors?” I analyzed a series of questions about each form of influence.

#### *Parental Influence*

After completing and comparing the chi-square charts on the items “In the 12 month period before your first day of college how often did you and a parent or guardian talk about sexual activity, including sexual intercourse?” and “In the 12 month period after and including your first day of college how often did you and a parent or guardian talk about sexual activity, including sexual intercourse?” I was able to observe a general pattern in the data. The trend in the data, with the exception of the “during” category for answer two, suggests that participants tended to recall talking with their parents approximately at the same frequency before and after college. This item was found to be statistically significant ( $P = 0.000$ ). Results for this analysis are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Talk of sex- before and during college

| Sex Talk During College | Sex Talk Before College |            |                |                 |             |             | Total        |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                         | Very Often              | Often      | Somewhat Often | Somewhat Seldom | Rarely      | Never       |              |
| Very Often              | 1<br>50.00              | 0<br>0.00  | 0<br>0.00      | 0<br>0.00       | 0<br>0.00   | 0<br>0.00   | 1<br>0.79    |
| Often                   | 1<br>50.00              | 4<br>80.00 | 6<br>30.00     | 0<br>0.00       | 1<br>2.33   | 0<br>0.00   | 12<br>9.45   |
| Somewhat Often          | 0<br>0.00               | 0<br>0.00  | 9<br>45.00     | 1<br>3.70       | 0<br>0.00   | 0<br>0.00   | 10<br>7.87   |
| Somewhat Seldom         | 0<br>0.00               | 1<br>20.00 | 5<br>25.00     | 18<br>66.67     | 2<br>4.65   | 0<br>0.00   | 26<br>20.47  |
| Rarely                  | 0<br>0.00               | 0<br>0.00  | 0<br>0.00      | 7<br>25.93      | 29<br>67.44 | 2<br>6.67   | 38<br>29.92  |
| Never                   | 0<br>0.00               | 0<br>0.00  | 0<br>0.00      | 1<br>3.70       | 11<br>25.58 | 28<br>93.33 | 40<br>31.50  |
| Total                   | 2<br>100.0              | 5<br>100.0 | 20<br>100.0    | 27<br>100.0     | 43<br>100.0 | 30<br>100.0 | 127<br>100.0 |

A chi-square analysis was also performed on the item “Overall, I feel that my parent(s) or guardian(s) \_\_\_\_ my sexual attitudes and behaviors in the 12 month period before my first day of college.” The findings suggest that both males and females feel that they were uninfluenced by their parents or guardians on matters concerning their sexual attitudes and behaviors. Fifty-four (43.55%) of the 124 respondents answered that their parent(s) or guardian(s) “Did not influence” their sexual attitudes and behaviors, including 22 (53.66%) of the 41 males respondents and 32 (38.55%) of the 83 female respondents. However, a higher percent of the female respondents (61.44%) felt that they were influenced in some way by their parent(s) or guardian(s) than male respondents (46.34%).

Another chi-square analysis was performed on the item “Overall, I feel that my parent(s) or guardian(s) \_\_\_\_ my sexual attitudes and behaviors in the 12 month period after and including my first day of college.” The findings suggest the same pattern as the previous findings- that both males and females feel that they were uninfluenced by their parents or guardians on matters concerning their sexual attitudes and behaviors. Sixty-four of the 123 respondents (52.03%)

answered that their parent(s) or guardian(s) “Did not influence” their sexual attitudes and behaviors, including 24 of the 40 males respondents (60.0%) and 40 of the 83 female respondents (48.19%). However, once again, a higher percent of the female respondents felt that they were influenced in some way by their parent(s) or guardian(s) than male respondents (51.81% and 40.0%, respectively).

### *Peer Influence*

A chi-square analysis was performed on the item “Overall, I feel that my peers \_\_\_\_ my sexual attitudes and behaviors in the 12 month period before my first day of college.” Overall, the most common answer was “Somewhat influenced”, which was selected by 52 participants (41.94%). This was the most common answer for males, as well; eighteen of the 41 male participants (43.9%) answered this way. The most common answer for females, on the other hand, was “Did not influence”, which was selected by 36 of the 83 female respondents (43.37%). However, the majority of males and females were influenced to a certain degree by their peers (65.85% and 56.62%, respectively).

A second chi-square analysis was then performed on the item “Overall, I feel that my peers \_\_\_\_ my sexual attitudes and behaviors in the 12 month period after and including my first day of college.” On the whole, the most common answer for this question was “Did not influence”, which was selected by 49 participants (39.84 %). This was the most common category for females, as well; 36 of the 41 female participants (42.17%) answered this way. The most common answer for males was, again, “Somewhat influenced”, which was selected by 16 of the 40 male respondents’ answers (40.0%). In this question, the majority of males and females were influenced to a certain degree by their peers (65.0% and 57.83%, respectively).

### *Religious Influence*

A chi-square test was performed looking at the items “Overall, I feel that religion \_\_\_\_ my sexual attitudes and behaviors in the 12 month period before my first day of college” and “Overall, I feel that religion \_\_\_\_ my sexual attitudes and behaviors in the 12 month period after and including my first day of college” and was found to be statistically significant ( $Pr = 0.000$ ). The majority of male respondents (80.0%) reported that religion “Did not influence” their sexual attitudes and behaviors for both the 12 month period before the first day of college and in the 12 month period after and including the first day of college. The majority of female respondents (65.85%) reported that religion “Did not influence” their sexual attitudes and behaviors in both the 12 month period before the first day of college and in the 12 month period after and including the first day of college. Overall, this pattern holds true for males and females, and is presented in Table 2 and Table 3. As is illustrated in the table, the pattern found in this analysis is that most respondents answered the same for the first item as they did for the second item and several respondents reported less of an influence after the first day of college. However, two female respondents reported an increased influence of religion on their sexual attitudes and behaviors after the first day of college.

**Table 2.** Religion’s influence on sexual attitudes and behaviors- before and during college (males)

| Religion’s Influence During College | Religion’s Influence Before College |            |                     |                   | Total       |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------|
|                                     | Strongly Influenced                 | Influenced | Somewhat Influenced | Did Not Influence |             |
| Strongly Influenced                 | 2<br>100.0                          | 0<br>0.00  | 0<br>0.00           | 0<br>0.00         | 2<br>5.00   |
| Influenced                          | 0<br>0.00                           | 1<br>33.33 | 0<br>0.00           | 0<br>0.00         | 1<br>2.50   |
| Somewhat Influenced                 | 0<br>0.00                           | 1<br>33.33 | 3<br>100.0          | 0<br>0.00         | 4<br>10.0   |
| Did Not Influence                   | 0<br>0.00                           | 1<br>33.33 | 0<br>0.00           | 32<br>100.0       | 33<br>82.50 |
| Total                               | 2<br>100.0                          | 3<br>100.0 | 3<br>100.0          | 32<br>100.0       | 40<br>100.0 |



**Table 3.** Religion’s influence on sexual attitudes and behaviors- before and during college (females)

| Religion’s Influence During College | Religion’s Influence Before College |            |                     |                   | Total       |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------|
|                                     | Strongly Influenced                 | Influenced | Somewhat Influenced | Did Not Influence |             |
| Strongly Influenced                 | 5<br>55.56                          | 1<br>11.11 | 1<br>10.00          | 0<br>0.00         | 7<br>8.54   |
| Influenced                          | 2<br>22.22                          | 6<br>66.67 | 0<br>0.00           | 0<br>0.00         | 8<br>9.76   |
| Somewhat Influenced                 | 1<br>11.11                          | 1<br>11.11 | 7<br>70.0           | 0<br>0.00         | 9<br>10.98  |
| Did Not Influence                   | 1<br>11.11                          | 1<br>33.33 | 2<br>20.00          | 54<br>100.0       | 58<br>70.73 |
| Total                               | 9<br>100.0                          | 9<br>100.0 | 10<br>100.0         | 54<br>100.0       | 82<br>100.0 |

An interesting result that I came across while analyzing the chi-square data on religion was that 29 of the 104 participants (27.88%) that had engaged in sexual activities, other than intercourse, and 7 of the 22 participants (31.82%) that had not engaged in sexual activities, other than intercourse, reported that “Kissing or holding hands” was the greatest amount of intimate contact that they felt their religion would accept before marriage.

In comparison, another chi-square distribution was performed that illustrated that 94 of the 105 participants (89.52%) that had engaged in sexual activities, other than intercourse, were most likely to report that “Genital-genital contact” was the greatest amount of intimate contact that they felt was acceptable before marriage and 9 of the 21 participants (42.86%) that had not engaged in sexual activities, other than intercourse, were most likely to answer “Kissing or holding hands” for this question.

Similar to this topic, I also analyzed data about religious and personal beliefs as compared to participation in sexual intercourse.

Several chi-square tests illustrated that the participants that had never engaged in sexual intercourse were most likely to report that their religion approved “Kissing or holding hands” as

the greatest amount of intimate contact acceptable between two individuals before marriage (9 of the 27, or 33.33%, of virgins), followed by 7 of the 27 virgin respondents (25.93%) marking “I am not religious”. Of the participants that had engaged in sexual intercourse, however, these findings were reversed; participants were most likely to mark “I am not religious” (36 of the 99, or 36.36%, of non-virgins), followed by 27 non-virgin respondents (27.27%) marking “Kissing or holding hands” as the greatest amount of intimate contact acceptable between two individuals before marriage. However, neither the virgin nor non-virgin groups reported high percentages for “Genital-genital contact” (3 of 27, or 11.11%, of virgins and 16 of 99, or 16.16%, of non-virgins).

Another set of chi-square charts comparing virginal status and acceptable levels of intimate contact was produced. The participants that had never engaged in sexual intercourse were most likely to report that they believe “Genital-genital contact” is the greatest amount of intimate contact acceptable between two individuals before marriage (13 of the 27, or 48.15%, of virgins), followed by 6 of the 27 virgin participants (22.22%) marking “Kissing or holding hands” as a response. Of the participants that had engaged in sexual intercourse, however, 90 (90.91%) felt that “Genital-genital contact” was the greatest amount of intimate contact acceptable before marriage.

To analyze how the participants’ beliefs about intimate contact between partners before compare with their beliefs about their religion’s beliefs about intimate contact, I performed four analyses of variance. The results for this analysis are presented in Table 4 through Table 7.

**Table 4.** Virgin activities and religion’s beliefs

| Greatest Amount of Contact- Religion’s Belief | Virgin (Sexual Activities) |             |              |
|---|----------------------------|-------------|--------------|
|   | No                         | Yes         | Total        |
| No Intimate Contact Is Acceptable             | 1<br>0.96                  | 2<br>9.09   | 3<br>2.38    |
| Kissing or Holding Hands                      | 29<br>27.88                | 7<br>31.82  | 36<br>28.57  |
| Erotically Touching Through Clothing          | 6<br>5.77                  | 1<br>4.55   | 7<br>5.56    |
| Hand-Genital Contact (including Breasts)      | 6<br>5.77                  | 0<br>0.00   | 6<br>4.76    |
| Oral-Genital Contact                          | 7<br>6.73                  | 0<br>0.00   | 7<br>5.56    |
| Genital-Genital Contact                       | 16<br>15.38                | 3<br>13.64  | 19<br>15.08  |
| I am Not Religious                            | 36<br>34.62                | 7<br>31.82  | 43<br>34.13  |
| Self-Reported*                                | 3<br>2.88                  | 2<br>9.09   | 5<br>3.97    |
| Total   | 104<br>100.0               | 22<br>100.0 | 126<br>100.0 |

**Table 5.** Virgin activities and own beliefs

| Greatest Amount of Contact- Own Beliefs  | Virgin (Sexual Activities) |              |              |
|--|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|
|  | No                         | Yes          | Total        |
| No Intimate Contact Is Acceptable        | 0<br>0.00                  | 2<br>9.52    | 2<br>1.59    |
| Kissing or Holding Hands                 | 0<br>0.00                  | 6<br>28.57   | 6<br>4.76    |
| Erotically Touching Through Clothing     | 2<br>1.90                  | 2<br>9.52    | 4<br>3.17    |
| Hand-Genital Contact (including Breasts) | 4<br>3.81                  | 2<br>9.52    | 6<br>6.76    |
| Oral-Genital Contact                     | 5<br>4.76                  | 0<br>0.00    | 5<br>3.97    |
| Genital-Genital Contact                  | 94<br>89.52                | 9<br>42.86   | 103<br>81.75 |
| Total                                    | 105<br>100.0               | 21<br>100.00 | 126<br>100.0 |

**Table 6.** Virgin intercourse and religion's beliefs

| Greatest Amount of Contact- Religion's Belief | Virgin (Sexual Intercourse) |             |              |
|---|-----------------------------|-------------|--------------|
|   | No                          | Yes         | Total        |
| No Intimate Contact Is Acceptable             | 1<br>1.01                   | 2<br>7.41   | 3<br>2.38    |
| Kissing or Holding Hands                      | 27<br>27.27                 | 9<br>33.33  | 36<br>28.57  |
| Erotically Touching Through Clothing          | 5<br>5.05                   | 2<br>7.41   | 7<br>5.56    |
| Hand-Genital Contact (including Breasts)      | 4<br>4.04                   | 2<br>7.41   | 6<br>4.76    |
| Oral-Genital Contact                          | 7<br>7.07                   | 0<br>0.00   | 7<br>5.56    |
| Genital-Genital Contact                       | 16<br>16.16                 | 3<br>11.11  | 19<br>15.08  |
| I am Not Religious                            | 36<br>36.36                 | 7<br>25.93  | 43<br>34.13  |
| Self-Reported*                                | 3<br>3.03                   | 2<br>7.41   | 5<br>3.97    |
| Total   | 99<br>100.0                 | 27<br>100.0 | 126<br>100.0 |

**Table 7.** Virgin intercourse and own beliefs

| Greatest Amount of Contact- Own Belief   | Virgin (Sexual Intercourse) |             |              |
|--|-----------------------------|-------------|--------------|
|  | No                          | Yes         | Total        |
| No Intimate Contact Is Acceptable        | 0<br>0.00                   | 2<br>7.41   | 2<br>1.59    |
| Kissing or Holding Hands                 | 0<br>0.00                   | 6<br>22.22  | 6<br>4.76    |
| Erotically Touching Through Clothing     | 2<br>2.02                   | 2<br>7.41   | 4<br>3.17    |
| Hand-Genital Contact (including Breasts) | 2<br>2.02                   | 4<br>14.81  | 6<br>6.76    |
| Oral-Genital Contact                     | 5<br>5.05                   | 0<br>0.00   | 5<br>3.97    |
| Genital-Genital Contact                  | 90<br>90.91                 | 13<br>48.15 | 103<br>81.75 |
| Total                                    | 99<br>100.0                 | 27<br>100.0 | 126<br>100.0 |

Analysis of the item "According to your religion's belief system, which of these is the greatest amount of intimate contact that is acceptable between two people before marriage?" established that, while the most common response was "I am not religious" (35.54% of

responses), of those individuals that were religious, 29.75% felt that “Kissing or holding hands” was the greatest amount of intimate contact that is acceptable by their religion’s standards.

Analysis of the item “According to your own belief system, which of these is the greatest amount of intimate contact that is acceptable between two people before marriage?” found that “Genital-genital contact” (81.75% of responses) was the greatest amount of intimate contact that is acceptable by their religion’s standards.

### *Other Findings*

I also analyzed several other items that were not directly connected to my research question, but had interesting and important findings, nonetheless.

Generation of two frequency tables resulted in two sets of statistics that I found particularly interesting; one hundred six of the participants (82.81%) responded that they had engaged in sexual activity, other than intercourse, at some point in their lives, while 22 participants (17.19%) responded that they had not yet engaged in sexual activities, other than sexual intercourse. A summary table illustrated that the youngest age recorded for engaging in sexual activities, other than sexual intercourse, was 8 years old, while the oldest age recorded for engaging in sexual activities, other than sexual intercourse, was 20 years old; the mean ages for males (15.53 years old) and females (15.71 years old) engaging in these activities for the first time were, essentially, the same.

I also analyzed respondents’ answers to these same questions for sexual intercourse. One hundred of the 128 respondents (78.13%) had engaged in sexual intercourse at some point in their lives, while 28 of the respondents (21.88%) had not. The youngest age recorded for engaging in sexual intercourse was 13 years old, while the oldest age recorded for engaging in sexual intercourse was 21 years old. The most common age for first intercourse was 16 years old,

followed by 18 years old, then 17 years old. The mean ages for males (17.08 years old) and females (17.0 years old) engaging in these activities for the first time were also very similar.

Two sets of chi-square data resulted in interesting findings that dealt with the reasons that participants engaged in sexual activities, including sexual intercourse, for the first time. The most commonly marked answer for why participants engaged in sexual activities, including sexual intercourse, for the first time, males and females, was "Affection for partner". Eighteen (43.9%) of the 41 male respondents marked this answer for their top reason for engaging in sexual activities, other than sexual intercourse, for the first time and 19 of the 40 male respondents (47.5%) marked this answer for their top reason for engaging in sexual intercourse for the first time. This was similar to the responses for females, which found that 41 of the 83 female respondents (49.4%) marked this answer for their top reason for engaging in both sexual activities, other than sexual intercourse, for the first time and 41 of the 83 female respondents (49.4%) marked this answer for their top reason for engaging in sexual intercourse for the first time. The responses for these questions are presented in Table 8 and Table 9.

**Table 8.** Top reason for sexual activity- male and female

| Beh2                                    | Sex         |             |              |
|---|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|   | Male        | Female      | Total        |
| I am Not Sexually Active                | 4<br>9.76   | 8<br>9.64   | 12<br>9.68   |
| Affection For Partner                   | 18<br>43.90 | 41<br>49.40 | 59<br>47.58  |
| Curious/ Ready for Sex                  | 13<br>31.71 | 20<br>24.10 | 33<br>26.61  |
| Physical Pleasure                       | 3<br>7.32   | 1<br>1.20   | 4<br>3.23    |
| Peer Pressure                           | 0<br>0.00   | 1<br>1.20   | 1<br>0.81    |
| Under the Influence of Drugs or Alcohol | 0<br>0.00   | 1<br>1.20   | 1<br>0.81    |
| Don't Know/ Don't Remember              | 1<br>2.44   | 3<br>3.61   | 4<br>3.23    |
| Other                                   | 0<br>0.00   | 7<br>8.43   | 7<br>5.65    |
| Marked Multiple Boxes                   | 2<br>4.88   | 1<br>1.20   | 3<br>2.42    |
| Total                                   | 41<br>100.0 | 83<br>100.0 | 124<br>100.0 |

**Table 9.** Top reason for sexual intercourse- male and female

| Beh6                                    | Sex         |             |              |
|---|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|   | Male        | Female      | Total        |
| I am Not Sexually Active                | 5<br>12.50  | 16<br>19.28 | 21<br>17.07  |
| Affection For Partner                   | 19<br>47.50 | 41<br>49.40 | 60<br>48.78  |
| Curious/ Ready for Sex                  | 9<br>22.50  | 10<br>12.05 | 19<br>15.45  |
| Physical Pleasure                       | 3<br>7.50   | 1<br>1.20   | 4<br>3.25    |
| Peer Pressure                           | 0<br>0.00   | 4<br>4.82   | 4<br>3.25    |
| Under the Influence of Drugs or Alcohol | 1<br>2.50   | 1<br>1.20   | 2<br>1.63    |
| Don't Know/ Don't Remember              | 1<br>2.50   | 2<br>2.41   | 3<br>2.44    |
| Other                                   | 0<br>0.00   | 5<br>6.02   | 5<br>4.07    |
| Marked Multiple Boxes                   | 2<br>5.00   | 3<br>3.61   | 5<br>4.07    |
| Total                                   | 40<br>100.0 | 83<br>100.0 | 123<br>100.0 |

Although the only two statistics that were considered significant at the Pr = 0.05 level or better involved how often parents speak with their children about sex and how strongly

participants felt they were influenced by religion, all of the information gathered is important to study, nonetheless.

## **Discussion**

The results of this research refute both of my hypotheses.

My first hypothesis was that participants in the survey would feel that parental and religious influences slightly impact their sexual attitudes and behaviors, but that they would be impacted slightly more by peer influences. The data suggests that the largest category of participants did not feel that their sexual attitudes and behaviors were influenced by their parents either in the 12 month period before the first day of college or in the 12 month period after and including the first day of college, but the overall majority of participants stated that they were affected by their parents in some way during these two times. However, males reported being influenced less than females.

On the other hand, the data shows that the largest category of participants claimed that their sexual attitudes and behaviors were “somewhat influenced” by their peers in the 12 month period before the first day of college, but the largest category claimed that their peers “did not influence” sexual attitudes and behaviors in the 12 month period after and including the first day of college. However, overall, slightly more participants claimed that they were influenced more by their peers in the 12 month period after and including the first day of college than in the 12 month period before college.

Finally, the data suggests that the majority of both male and female participants felt that religion “did not influence” their sexual attitudes and behaviors in the 12 month period before the first day of college or in the 12 month period after and including the first day of college.



After analyzing my data, I realized that my first hypothesis was incorrect in that participants, overall, did not feel that their sexual attitudes and behaviors were influenced at all by their religious beliefs. However, they did feel that they were slightly impacted by parental influence and slightly more by peer influence.

These findings were not supported by the research that I did before administering my survey. However, due to the design of the study, it is difficult to research the expected results because of the questions dealing with two separate timeframes. The research does suggest that peers influence individuals more than parents, but my findings contradict the research that states that individuals are greatly influenced by religion.

My second hypothesis was that participants would feel that these influences had changed moderately from the 12 month period before college to the 12 month period after and including the first day of college. The results of my study show that, for each of the question sets, students responded with the same answer for the 12 month period before the first day of college and the 12 month period after and including the first day of college. Therefore, this hypothesis was incorrect, as well.

This hypothesis was particularly difficult to support with research because I was unable to find articles that were comparable and extremely relevant to my study that dealt with influences on the two timeframes. Although I attempted to research these two timeframes by searching for parental, peer and religious influences on high school seniors and college freshmen, past research was not extremely relevant.

There are two significant reasons that I believe I received these results. First, human recall is famous for being incorrect because people do not usually have a reason for remembering most of their day-to-day thoughts and activities. Therefore, asking individuals questions about

their attitudes and behaviors from years back is not the most effective way of obtaining information on influences, especially if the influences were seen as trivial in the participants' lives. Also, many people feel that they are self-made and that they were not significantly influenced by the people around them. Therefore, if people feel that they made themselves rather than being socially formed into the person that they are, the participants are then less likely to state that they were greatly influenced by any one individual or group.

In retrospect, I realize that this project was too ambitious in that I was trying to get perfect recollection from each of the participants. If I were to do this study over again, I would alter the project and research questions to only include information about influences on participants while they have been in college.

If I could re-administer this survey, I would take more time before finalizing my questionnaire. I would have done a pilot study to make sure that my questions were clear and mutually exclusive. I would also have contacted professors earlier so that they did not feel as crunched for time trying to fit my survey into their class schedules.

I would also like to study campuses from around the United States, or even the world, in order to make my findings more generalizable. I think it would be extremely interesting to see how students feel that they are influenced by their parents, peers and religion. For example, I would like to know how religion influences sexual attitudes and behaviors of students in New England in comparison to students in the "Bible Belt."

One problem with my questionnaire was that questions 12 and 13 were repeated at the end of my survey and, therefore, should not have been included in that section. A second change that I would have made to my survey would have been to expand the possible answers for questions 14 and 15. It would have been more helpful to have given a wider selection for how

strong or weak the participants' relationships were with their parents at time one and time two. I would have also expanded the answer selection for question 18 to look like the answers for question 20 though 23. However, I would have included a neutral category for each of those questions.

Another error that I found was in questions 32-33 and 36-37. Both sets should have either concerned the entire period before college and the entire period after college, or the 12 month period before college and 12 month period after and including the first day of college.

The final error that I found was in questions 36 and 37, where I incorrectly included “(other than sexual intercourse)” when I meant to inquire about sexual intercourse. This error was due to copying and pasting questions to make the questions as similar as possible, then editing them to fit what I needed to know.

Through conducting this research I have gained knowledge on statistical analysis measures and the necessity of time management. I have also learned much on the topic of parental, peer and religious influences on sexual attitudes and behavior of college students. In addition, I have improved my public presentation skills, especially dealing with sociological information.

### **Implications of findings**

As was stated in the introduction, the topic of parental, peer and religious influences on students' sexual attitudes and behaviors is very sociologically important because of the potential implications of the findings. The findings state that peers are the most influential of the three groups, which suggests to parents that it is wise to help socialize their children with good people at an early age. This finding should also give school systems more of a reason to teach each

student about good behaviors and good morals at a young age so that the children influence each other in beneficial ways.

Although students feel that they are less influenced by parents or guardians than peers, they still admit to being slightly influenced. This has social implications for parents because parents would likely speak more openly and more often about sexual encounters if they were explicitly told about the effects that they were having on their children's sexual attitudes and behaviors.

The fact that students, overall, claim to not be religious, but those that are religious are less likely to engage in sexual activities and intercourse, also has implications for society. This suggests that the more a person is exposed to and internalizes religious ideals, the less likely he or she is to engage in sexual activities or intercourse.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Some limitations of this study were the geographical location of the study and the inability to broadly generalize information found in this study. Another limitation is the sample size. However, one of the greatest limiting factors in this research design was the time constraint. The restrictions time did not allow for a pilot study to be conducted, which would have greatly aided in this study being smoothly conducted. Having more time would have allowed for multiple tests of the survey instrument and would have given more time to contact professors, which would have created more leeway in when students could administer their questionnaires in the classroom. It also would have given more time for data collection and analysis.

Another limitation of this study was that only one researcher worked on this project. Triangulation, or the participation of multiple individuals in the research process, is commonly

used in qualitative research. However, participation of multiple researchers in data analysis decreases the chances of misinterpretations of any open-ended questions and aids the researchers in identifying the potential benefits and consequences of the study. If I had worked with a partner, we would have likely identified more policy implications and different ideas on ways to interpret the data.

### **Future Research**

Future researchers ought to have a much larger sample than 128 students, and should survey students from campuses around the country to make comparisons between regions. I also feel that doing a longitudinal study would yield more accurate results than doing a cross-sectional study that would ask about past influences, activities and beliefs. Although I was unable to perform any data collection of this nature, I think the results would be much more useful, especially if the information could be used for improving public policy.

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