High School Religious Context and Reports of Same-Sex Attraction and Sexual Identity in Young Adulthood

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Abstract  
This study examines the association between high school religious context in adolescence and the reporting of same-sex attraction and sexual identity in young adulthood. We also examine how these associations vary by gender. Previous studies have considered how high school contexts shape the well-being of sexual minority youth, yet few have examined the extent to which these contexts shape sexual desire and identity. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we find that women who attended more religious high schools were less likely to report same-sex attraction in young adulthood. We also find that both men and women who attended more religious high schools were somewhat less likely to report a bisexual or flexible (mostly heterosexual or mostly homosexual) sexual identity, but more likely to report a homosexual identity in young adulthood.

Keywords: childhood/adolescence, stigma, identity processes, sexuality
Recent research has shown that social context is an important factor to consider when predicting the sexual desire and identity of individuals, particularly women (Diamond 2008; Hammack, Thompson, and Pilecki 2009), and sociologists have long argued that sexual scripts play a powerful role in individuals’ interpretations and labeling of their desires and sexual identities (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Schools are important social contexts in which to examine the social construction of sexual desire and identity, as they are socializing institutions in which adolescents struggle to define themselves in relation to others, primarily peers. Differences in sexual scripts present in high schools may socialize adolescents to internalize heteronormativity to different degrees. Heteronormativity involves the celebration and enforcement of heterosexual relationships and socially constructed gendered behaviors, and the internalization of heteronormativity in adolescence may influence young people’s reporting of same-sex sexual desires and nonheterosexual identities during the transition to adulthood.

Previous research has not directly examined how the exposure to religious beliefs and behaviors of high school peers in adolescence shapes the sexuality of young adults, yet religious attendance, beliefs, and affiliation play powerful roles in shaping social beliefs and behavior related to sexuality. Individual religiosity is a strong and persistent predictor of negative attitudes toward same-sex sexuality (Sherkat et al. 2011) as well as an aspect of school context that shapes behavior (Adamczyk 2009) and the well-being of same-sex-attracted youth (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). Borrowing from symbolic interaction theories, specifically scripting theory (Gagnon and Simon 1973), this study uses data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine how religion embedded within high school contexts shapes the reporting of sexual desires and identities during the transition to adulthood. Given that prior research has found that women’s sexuality is more fluid and influenced more by contextual
factors, relative to men (Diamond 2008), this study will examine how the association between school religious context and reports of same-sex attraction and sexual identity in adulthood varies by gender.

**BACKGROUND**

*Sexual Scripts and Sexual Development*

Adolescence is often identified as the most important period for sexual development, including the development of a sexual identity (Hammack et al. 2009). As young people navigate the physical, social, and emotional changes of puberty, begin to form romantic relationships, and have sex for the first time, they do so within the context of sexual scripts. Sexual scripts can be understood as structures of socio-cultural expectations through which individuals learn patterns of sexual conduct that are appropriate within local contexts. Without an available script indicating whether or not a specific interaction should be interpreted as sexual, some feelings or experiences may not be interpreted as such (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Sexual scripts also work to stigmatize specific desires or behaviors, so that individuals who do interpret physiological or psychological arousal to same-sex others as “sexual” may actively deny or suppress such feelings. These sexual scripts are highly variable, fluid, and context dependent and may shape how young people understand and report feelings towards others of the same sex, as well as how they integrate those feelings into their identities (Diamond 2008).

*Sexual Scripts, Heteronormativity, and Religion*

Heteronormativity, the dominant sexual script in U.S. culture and in most schools, involves the celebration and enforcement of heterosexual relationships as well as the celebration of socially constructed gendered behaviors (Kitzinger 2005). Religious factors play an important role in organizing this heteronormative sexual script: many major religions reaffirm heteronormativity through the creation of powerful rituals and beliefs that celebrate
“appropriate” expressions of sexuality and gender differences (Heath 2009) and by teaching the restriction of sexual activity to married, heterosexual couples (Rose 2005).

Research on individuals’ attitudes toward homosexuality and gendered expectations of behavior has linked religiosity, including religious attendance, fundamentalism, and denominational affiliation, with the internalization of heteronormative scripts (Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006; Sherkat et al. 2011). Regular religious participation often entails exposure to messages about sexuality through sermons and interactions with church leaders and congregants (Hertel and Hughes 1987). Passages in many religious texts stigmatize same-sex sexuality, by proscribing sexuality only within marriage and for the purpose of reproduction, and scriptures in the Bible have been interpreted as condemnations of homosexual behavior (Burdette, Ellison, and Hill 2005). Research demonstrates that church attendance negatively predicts attitudes toward civil rights for gays and lesbians, and scriptural inerrancy—or the belief that sacred scriptures are the word of God and without mistake—is negatively associated with support for same-sex marriage (Sherkat et al. 2011).

In addition, members of sectarian or conservative Protestant denominations tend to believe that homosexuality is morally wrong and are considerably less supportive of civil rights for gays and lesbians when compared to mainstream Protestants, Jews, and the unaffiliated (Burdette et al. 2005; Olson et al. 2006). Sectarian Protestants stress conformity to traditional morality and orthodox religious beliefs, including a moral code that stresses traditional gender roles and sexuality for the purposes of procreation (Peterson and Donnenwerth 1997), and emphasize the conversion of others (Woodberry and Smith 1998). In addition, sectarian Protestants have remained staunch in their opposition to civil rights for gays and lesbians over time (Sherkat et al. 2011) and have been key proponents of legislation limiting the rights of
same-sex couples (Campbell and Monson 2008). Thus, religious youth in the United States are likely to promote scripts that devalue and stigmatize nonheterosexual desires, behaviors, and identities.

*Religiosity and Fundamentalism in High Schools*

Religion may pervade and become integrated into high school culture in multiple ways: through formal means, such as in the curriculum or religious teachings of religiously affiliated private schools, as well as through suprapersonal means, including the aggregation of students’ beliefs and behaviors within schools (Chesir-Teran 2003). While public schools in the United States are prohibited from creating coercive religious environments that may violate the rights of students, public-school students may express their religious beliefs through individual or group prayer and discussion, reading of scriptures, and in homework, artwork, and religious messages on their clothing (Haynes and Thomas 2007). These subtle social processes occurring within schools are an important component of social contexts that may shape scripts available in schools (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009).

Religious students may individually shape the available scripts within schools, either by being less likely to express same-sex sexuality themselves (and therefore making same-sex sexuality less visible) or by relaying heteronormative messages to other students through everyday interactions or active attempts at conversion (Stark and Bainbridge 1996). As more students within a school operate within heteronormative cultural schemas produced by their own religious beliefs and behaviors, heteronormativity acquires more legitimacy and power. Moreover, the prevalence of religious discourses and symbols within a school may strengthen heteronormative scripts within the school environment even in the absence of explicit discussion of sexuality. Given the power of religious beliefs, symbols, and practices in shaping individual
attitudes and behaviors related to gender and sexuality, school religious contexts likely play a role in young people’s sexual development.

**High School Religious Context and Sexual Attraction and Identity**

Sexual scripts within high schools may shape young people’s recognition and interpretation of attractions to same-sex peers or may encourage young people to deny or suppress (and thus not report) same-sex attraction (Hyde and Jaffee 2000). Given the importance of the adolescent period for sexual development, high school religious context may continue to shape the recognition and reporting of same-sex attraction into young adulthood. In addition, high school religious contexts may shape how young people understand and incorporate same-sex desires into their developing sexual identities (Diamond and Savin-Williams 2000). Adolescents experiencing same-sex attractions in highly religious contexts may not consider or may actively avoid accepting a lesbian or gay identity. Alternatively, same-sex attracted students may see a lesbian or gay identity as resourceful in combatting heterosexism, providing them with strength and support in coping with sexual stigma (Hammack et al. 2009). Thus, highly religious contexts may simultaneously repress and produce lesbian and gay identities, leaving little room for fluid sexual identities. As a result, youth who attend religious high schools may be more likely to identify as gay or straight, rather than bisexual or sexually flexible.

**Current Study**

To examine how high school religious context shapes sexual attraction and sexual identity in adulthood, we address the following research questions, separately by gender:

**Research Question 1:** What is the association between high school religious context and reports of same-sex attraction in young adulthood?
Research Question 2: What is the association between high school religious context and reports of sexual identity in young adulthood?

We expect that young adults who attended high schools with higher levels of religious attendance, fundamentalism, and sectarian Protestant affiliation will be less likely to report experiencing same-sex attraction and less likely to identify as lesbian-gay or bisexual-flexible, relative to heterosexual. We also expect that high school religious context may have a stronger negative effect on a bisexual-flexible identity relative to a lesbian-gay identity. Finally, we speculate that the impact of religious school context may have a greater influence on young women’s reports of same-sex attraction relative to men’s. Social context has been found to have a greater influence on young women’s sexuality, relative to men’s, and women are often provided more flexibility than boys and men to interpret feelings toward the same sex as romantic or sexual (Diamond 2008; Schwartz and Rutter 2000). However, bisexual and flexible identities are more common and perhaps more normative among women than among men, and young men often have greater access than young women to visible community ‘gay’ spaces that reinforce a gay identity (Stein 2006). Religious school context may, therefore, have a greater influence on young men’s reports of sexual identity.

DATA AND METHODS

We use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative, school-based study of over 20,000 seventh- to twelfth-grade students who were first interviewed during the 1994–1995 school year and followed up in 1996 and 2001 (Harris et al. 2003). Our analytic sample consists of 5,596 women and 5,111 men in 73 Add Health high schools. Our dependent variables include same-sex romantic attraction and sexual identity in young adulthood. We consider respondents to be same-sex attracted in young adulthood if they reported having ever been attracted to a person of the same sex in Wave III,
regardless of whether they also reported other-sex attractions in Wave III. We create three categories of sexual identity from the Wave III Add Health variable: (1) heterosexual (100 percent heterosexual), (2) bisexual-flexible (mostly heterosexual, but somewhat attracted to the same sex; bisexual; mostly homosexual, but somewhat attracted to the opposite sex), and (3) homosexual (100 percent homosexual). Those who reported no sexual attraction to either males or females were excluded from analyses.

Our key independent variables include the mean level of religious attendance, the school proportion fundamentalist, and the school proportion sectarian Protestant. School mean religious attendance is an average, at the school level, of individuals’ frequency of religious attendance in the past year School proportion fundamentalist is the proportion of individuals within the school who agree that “the sacred scriptures of your religion are the word of God and are completely without mistake.” School proportion sectarian Protestant represents the proportion of individuals within the school who report an affiliation with one of the following denominations: Baptist, National Baptist, Adventist, Latter Day Saints, Jehovah’s Witness, Assemblies of God, Holiness, Pentecostal, and Christian Science. In each model we control for individual respondents’ religion and other background characteristics, whether or not the respondent reported a same-sex attraction in adolescence, and whether or not the respondent reported having had vaginal intercourse at Wave I. All models also control for school size, region, locale, mean parental education, and proportion white.

We use hierarchical generalized linear modeling (HGLM) to estimate the separate effects of young adults’ individual characteristics from those effects related to the characteristics of the high schools they attended in adolescence. In addition, HGLM allows us to introduce interactions between individual- and school-level variables to test how gender shapes the
association between school religious context and reports of same-sex sexuality. All models control for reports of same-sex attraction in adolescence, individual religion, and individual, family, and school background characteristics. We run models with each school-level religiosity variable entered separately to estimate the main effect of school religious context. We then interact individual-level gender with each school-level religion variable to examine whether the estimated effect of school religious context on same-sex attraction varies by gender.

RESULTS

Our first research question examines the association between school religious context and reports of same-sex attraction in young adulthood, and results show a negative association between school religious context and reporting a same-sex attraction among women but not among men. At the bivariate level, young women who report same-sex attraction attended high schools that had lower levels of religious attendance, fewer students with fundamentalist beliefs, and fewer students affiliated with sectarian Protestant religions. Among men, however, none of the school religious context measures are associated with reports of same-sex romantic attraction in young adulthood. In multivariate models that control for individual religiosity and background characteristics, we also find that mean religious attendance is associated with the likelihood of reporting same-sex attraction in adulthood among women but not among men. As seen in Figure 1, the predicted probability of reporting ever having a same-sex attraction among women is highest in schools with “low” levels of mean student religious attendance and lowest in schools with “high” levels of mean student religious attendance. In contrast, the predicted probability of reporting ever having a same-sex attraction among men is similar in schools with “high” and “low” levels of mean student religious attendance.
Figure 1. Predicted Probabilities of Same-Sex Attraction in Adulthood by School Mean Religious Attendance and Gender

Note: Low, Medium, and High refer to 1 SD below the mean, the mean, and 1 SD above the mean, respectively.

Similar to results for mean religious attendance, the relationship between school proportion fundamentalist and reporting same-sex attraction in young adulthood is negative for women but not for men. We find no significant association between school proportion sectarian Protestant and young adults’ reports of same-sex attraction in adulthood, among men or women, after controlling for same-sex attraction in adolescence and other confounders.

Our second research question explores the association between school religious context and reports of sexual identity in young adulthood. Results show a negative association between school religious context and reports of a bisexual-flexible sexual identity among both women and men. However, we find a positive association between school mean religious attendance and the likelihood of reporting a 100 percent homosexual identity in young adulthood, although this finding should be interpreted with caution given a small sample size. As seen in Figure 2, the predicted probability of reporting a bisexual-flexible sexual identity in young adulthood is...
highest in schools with “low” levels of mean student religious attendance and lowest in schools with “high” levels of mean student religious attendance.

When predicting sexual identity in young adulthood, gender interactions were not significant, suggesting that the positive association between mean religious attendance and reporting a homosexual identity does not vary by gender. The estimated effects of school proportion fundamentalist and school proportion sectarian Protestant predicting homosexual identity, however, are not statistically significant, suggesting that the average religious attendance of schoolmates might be more important in predicting homosexual identity than is the proportion of schoolmates who report fundamentalist beliefs or a sectarian Protestant affiliation.

Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities of Identifying as Bisexual-Flexible and Homosexual in Adulthood by School Mean Religious Attendance

Note: Low, Medium, and High refer to 1SD below the mean, the mean, and 1 SD above the mean, respectively.
DISCUSSION

This study has taken a symbolic interaction approach to understanding sexuality, emphasizing scripting theory, by examining how school context shapes adolescents’ reports of sexual attraction and sexual identity in young adulthood. This study examined the intersection of two critical socializing institutions—education and religion—finding that suprapersonal aspects of schools, including the aggregation of students’ religious beliefs and behaviors, impact young adults’ reporting of same-sex sexuality above and beyond their own religious beliefs and behaviors. We argue that these aspects of schools provide sexual scripts through which adolescents learn the meanings attached to sexual desires and identities and learn to organize and interpret feelings toward others as sexual or nonsexual. These scripts also shape how emerging adults develop a label for and integrate their desires into their identities.

Specifically, we find that young women, but not young men, who attended more religious high schools are less likely to report ever experiencing a same-sex attraction. High school religious context could be impacting one of several possible processes: acknowledging same-sex desires in adolescence but then denying or suppressing these desires in young adulthood, acknowledging same-sex desires for the first time in young adulthood and experiencing an emergence of same-sex desire, or consistently reporting same-sex desires in adolescence and young adulthood. In our sample, women are almost three times more likely than men to report the emergence of same-sex attraction in young adulthood, and research suggests that women are more likely than men to reinterpret past feelings of emotional attachments and friendships as sexual, experience a shift in their sexual orientation, and broaden their range of attractions over time (Diamond 2008; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995). Our results suggest this may be particularly true when women are exposed to less heteronormative scripts in adolescence.
High school religious context appears to impact the reporting of same-sex attractions among women but not men. This may be due to the greater importance of context for girls’ sexual desire (Diamond and Savin-Williams 2000) and because girls and women are often provided more flexibility than boys and men to interpret feelings toward the same sex as romantic or sexual (Diamond 2008; Rutter and Schwartz 2011). In addition, religious institutions have focused more attention on the control of girls’ and women’s sexuality (Rose 2005), and research has found girls’ sexual behavior to be more influenced by religiosity than boys’ (Rostosky et al. 2004).

Turning to sexual identity, we find that both men and women who attended more religious high schools are less likely to report a bisexual-flexible sexual identity in young adulthood. Analyses not shown suggest that it is the heteroflexible group that is driving this association. This heteroflexible group, which comprises 78 percent of the bisexual-flexible women in our study and 71 percent of the bisexual-flexible men, may be important to disaggregate from those who identify as bisexual or mostly homosexual. Though bisexuality is stigmatized both within the larger culture as well as within the lesbian-gay subculture (Rutter and Schwartz 2011), bisexuality has received increased visibility within our society, becoming an established identity connected to social activism and social networks (Paul 1996). Access to an established identity and subculture may set self-identified bisexuals apart from those who identify as heteroflexible. Moreover, individuals who report a mostly heterosexual identity may experience more exclusive same-sex attractions but may feel uneasy about completely withdrawing from the institution of heterosexuality (Udis-Kessler 1990), especially when developing within a more heteronormative context.
We did not find a similar negative association between school religious context and reports of a homosexual identity in young adulthood. We believe this finding suggests that sexual scripts predominant in contexts with more religious and fundamentalist students reinforce a binary understanding of sexuality. This finding also demonstrates that sexual scripts expressed in contexts with more religiosity do not preclude young adults from identifying as gay or lesbian.

Although public attitudes in the United States have become increasingly accepting of same-sex sexuality, a majority of states have constitutional amendments or state laws prohibiting same-sex marriage (Rutter and Schwartz 2011) and young people continue to hold negative attitudes toward LGB peers (Poteat, Espelage, and Koenig 2009), demonstrating how same-sex sexuality remains marginalized in the United States. While initiatives have been undertaken to make schools safer for sexual minority youth and to study the impact of LGB organizations such as Gay Straight Alliances within schools, less research has been aimed at understanding the subtle yet pervasive influence of the social and suprapersonal features of schools shaping sexual scripts and the sexual development of adolescents. Examination of these suprapersonal features of schools furthers our understandings of the socially constructed nature of gender and sexuality and how institutions, including religion within high schools, may reinforce or deconstruct strongly embedded heteronormative scripts that shape and constrain individuals’ desires and identities. While the larger society, including schools, should continue to promote religious freedom and religious tolerance, it is important to recognize the potential constraints that others’ religious beliefs and behaviors place on the development of youth and how schools may unknowingly contribute to the reproduction of social categories and social inequalities.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research is based on data from the Add Health project, a program project designed by J. Richard Udry (PI) and Peter Bearman, and funded by grant P01 HD31921 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to the Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Opinions reflect those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the granting agencies.

FUNDING

This research was funded in part by a grant from the American Sociological Association’s Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline supported by the National Science Foundation.

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