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Marital Infidelity and Religion; Unfaithful Individuals and Their Religiosity.

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### Abstract

Although the relationship between religion and deviance has been of broad interest in research for decades, little scholarship has examined the relationship between religion and marital infidelity. The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between extramarital sexual behaviors, frequency of church attendance, and identification with a religion. Marital infidelity and religion was also investigated in terms of gender, ethnicity, and respondent's location within the United States. This study examines data from the 2006 General Social Survey. As a whole, both higher frequencies of church attendance and identification with a religion are associated with lower odds of participating in extramarital affairs. There were significant findings when looking at gender, ethnicity, and the respondent's location within the United States in relation to extramarital affairs and religiosity.

## Self Inflicted Hardships and Religion; Deviant Individuals and Their Religiosity

### **Literature Review**

The relationship between religiosity and deviance is of growing interest in research. In the United States as well as across the world, monogamy in marital relationships is a standard and custom in most marriages. Previous scholarship has explored marital infidelity and effects on family dynamics, couple relationships, divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson & Sussman, 1982), AIDS (Choi, Catania, & Dolcini, 2003; Leigh, Temple, and Trocki, 1993), and mental health (Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001), but the lack of data and attention on the study of religion and marital infidelity has led to limited knowledge and understanding of the true affects of religion on marital infidelity and vice versa. Only few studies have investigated the predictors of marital infidelity and the connections between marital infidelity and religious factors have received minute attention (Treas & Giesen, 2000). Marital infidelity is one of the top motivators of divorce, conflict, domestic violence, and spousal dissatisfaction (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat & Gore, 2007). The lack of attention concerning predictors of marital infidelity has created a large gap when it comes to couple and family studies. No studies have delved into differences among gender, ethnicity, or location in the United States when it comes to comparing religious practices, identification with a religion, and marital infidelity. Only recent studies specifically on infidelity has been mainly centered on personal values, quality of couple's relationship, opportunities for extramarital sex, and certain demographic variables such as age and income variables (Treas & Giesen, 2000; Gore & Yeatman). The accumulation of such data is starting to allow deeper investigations the association between demographic and social factors and extramarital sexual relations. Further examination of the topic could aid in decreasing divorce rates, domestic violence, communicable diseases, and marital conflict.

Religion has been studied in relation to quality of family relationships (Pearce & Axinn, 1998), marital satisfaction (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995; Heaton & Pratt, 1990; Scanzoni & Arnett, 1987), conflicts (Curtis and Ellison), likelihood of divorce (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993), and domestic violence (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999). Religion has been studied when it comes to family life and relations, but limited focus has been done on extramarital infidelity and religion. Surprisingly enough no research has been done that focuses on predictors of marital infidelity, including gender, ethnicity, and location within the United States.

Considering almost every religion looks down upon extramarital affairs, there has been much speculation and concern for the rising number of divorces in the United States. Americans rank among the most faithful in the world with 63% believing that religion can answer today's problems and 79% believing that God guides them in making decisions (Wolfe, 1998). There have been multiple laws and precautions that the government has taken as well as individuals in significant relationships to avoid divorce and conflict at all costs (Feld, Rossier & Manning, 2002). These precautions include pre-marital counseling and couple's counseling which provide individuals with the skills to deal with stress, use effective communication, and learn to deal with conflict in productive ways. Often counseling is done by pastors or individuals with licenses to facilitate counseling services. Most religions do not condone extramarital affairs or infidelity which would bring you to the conclusion that participation in religious activities would deter individuals from participating in extramarital sex or what some would consider deviant behaviors. Multiple personal beliefs have been positively associated with permissive attitudes about extramarital sex. Individuals who have higher beliefs in monogamous relationships are less likely to have extramarital sex (Choi, Catania & Dolcini, 1994). But, both sexual and political

liberalism are also associated with greater acceptance of extramarital sex (Bell, Turner & Rosen, 1975; Reis, Anderson & Sponaugle, 1980). Other findings suggest that people who evaluate their marriage as being unhappy (Bell, Turner & Rosen, 1975; Weis & Jurich, 1985) and those with lower sexual satisfaction in their marriage (Johnson, 1970) have more permissive attitudes about extramarital sex.

Religious factors have been found to deter individuals from participating in deviant behaviors as a whole. Religious students were least likely to engage in at-risk behavior and that religiosity was the most powerful predictor of at-risk behavior (Benson & Donahue, 1989). Benson & Donahue concluded that people that attended church and participated in religious activities regularly were less likely to engage in deviant behavior. Religiosity has also been shown to reduce risk taking consequences it has when anticipating or thinking of contracting HIV (Miller & Gur, 2002). When individuals thought about suffering from HIV and possibly becoming pregnant it was positively related to personal devotion and frequency of attendance to church (Miller & Gur, 2002). Although these studies concern illegal and health-risky behavior, most religious individuals would also consider committing adultery as a rule or law within their moral and religious belief systems. In conclusion you could assume it would be the same in predicting marital infidelity. One study concerning marital infidelity and religion found that religious involvement is in fact linked with extramarital infidelity (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat & Gore, 2007). They found that identification with a specific religion and frequency of church can in fact reduce the likelihood of marital infidelity (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat & Gore, 2007).

In addition to findings relevant to the three major domains mentioned above, there are also numerous demographic variables associated with extramarital sex. Extramarital sex is also more prevalent among higher educated individuals (Kinsey et al., 1948; 1953; Leigh, Temple &

Trocki, 1993; Smith, 1994; Weis & Jurich, 1985) and younger people (Choi, Catania & Dolcini, 1994; Leigh, Temple & Trocki, 1993). When looking at specific household in which the respondent lives, having children and owning a house have been previously shown to decrease the chance of divorce (South & Lloyd, 1995).

But other researchers have noted that there is no significance when it comes to religion and deviant behaviors. Attending religious services has not been found statistically significant in predicting extramarital sex in some studies (Treas & Giesen, 2000; Weis & Jurich, 1985). Religious affiliation has not been included in many studies. Only one study (Bell, Turner & Rosen, 1975) could be found that includes religious denomination in an analysis, and the results for these variables were deemed to be unimportant. A recent study shows that when looking at the size of the respondent's location whether urban or rural was not a significant predictor of marital infidelity. Other studies concerning religiosity and risk taking behavior, in this case drunk driving is not statistically significant (Forthun, L. F., Bell, N. J., Peek, C. W., & Sun, S). This study concluded that religiosity, when it came to obeying laws and fearing jail or punishment, did not deter individuals from participating in religious activities. A study in Asia, suggests that there is not relationship between risk and religiosity and in the U.S. there is no distinct relation between risk preference and denomination (Miller, A. S., 2000). This would suggest that perhaps religious and nonreligious people act in risk taking ways and since no relationship was suggested, there could be no relation when looking at religion and marital infidelity.

Little research has been done on the contradictory views, being that deviant behavior (unemployment, teen sexuality, abortion, drunk driving, substance abuse, infidelity, and imprisonment) can actually cause religiosity. Research found that people dealing with issues of

economic hardships such as unemployment, have been shown to have certain coping techniques such as religiosity in order to deal with the financial strain and other stresses involved with unemployment (Meyer & Labao, 2003). This idea could suggest that people that are religious are more likely to commit adultery and participate in extramarital affairs if they are more religious. Individuals could use their religion as a way to cope with their guilt and stress created by cheating on their spouse.

### **Hypothesis**

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between marital infidelity and religion. It has been studied to an extent, but this study will include the following variables: the respondent's participation in an extramarital affair, the respondent's frequency of church attendance, the respondent's identification with a religion, the respondent's gender, ethnicity, and location within the United States. The literature review would lead to the conclusion that the more often an individual attends church or identifies with a religion the less likely that an individual would have an extramarital affair. Since no research has been done on demographic variables, I would assume that males would be more likely to participate in an extramarital affairs and I think there will be some significance when looking at ethnicity and location in the United States.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Procedures***

Data for this research was obtained through the annual General Social Survey (GSS) that is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) (Davis & Smith, 2006). The GSS conducts a probability sample of non-institutionalized adults in the United States. Data collection procedures consist of in-person interviews that last approximately ninety minutes long.

In order to take part in the study, respondents had to be above the age of eighteen, live in the United States, and speak either English or Spanish. The total sample size for respondents in 2006 was 4510 individuals. Questions in the 2006 GSS included in the study are demographic questions such as gender, age, ethnicity, respondent's location in the United States, and marital status. Other questions included in the study are religious self-identification, church attendance, and marital infidelity. SPSS 16.0 was utilized in running a chi-square analysis on data. The alpha set for the statistical tests was set at .05. This study makes a unique contribution to literature in three ways. First, it examines the differences between gender when it comes to marital infidelity and religion. Second, it also considers ethnic differences in marital infidelity and religion. Third, it considers the respondents region of interview, and describes differences in norms and likelihood of extramarital affairs in different regions on the United States.

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of a total of 4,510 adults living in households across the United States. The adults had to be able to speak either English or Spanish. 44.4% of the participants were male and 55.6% of participants were female. When respondents were asked their age, 18.9% were between the ages of 18 and 30, 28.7% between the ages of 31 to 44, 35.5% between the ages of 45 and 64, and 16.9% above the age of 65. When respondents were asked their race, 72.8% reported they were White, 14.1% reported they were Black, and 13.1% reported Other. When determining region of respondents, 3.6% of respondents were from the New England region on the United States, 12.2% from the Mid-Atlantic region, 16.9% from the North Eastern Central region, 6.1% from the North Western region, 22.4% from the South-Atlantic Region, 5.7% from the South Eastern region, 10.6 from the South Western region, 8.1% from the mountain region, and 14.5% from the Pacific region.

### *Measurement*

Two independent variables were used when measuring religiosity. The first question used is related to frequency of religious practices and in particular church attendance. Respondents were asked “How often do you attend religious services?” Interviewees were given the following response options: Never, less than once a year, once or twice a year, several times a year, once a month, two to three times a month, about weekly, and weekly. 22.6% reported they never attend, 6.7% reported they attended less than once a year, 12.7% reported they attended once or twice a year, 11.1% attended several times a year, 6.8% attended once a month, 8.4% attended two to three times a month, 5.3% attended about weekly, and 18.6% reported they attended weekly. The variable was recoded and grouped accordingly. Never attended was “never.” Attended yearly was “less than once a year,” “once or twice a year,” and “several times a year.” Attended monthly was “once a month” and “two to three times a month.” Attended weekly was “about weekly,” and “weekly.” 22.7% reported they never attend, 30.6% reported they attend yearly, 15.3% reported they attend monthly, and 31.4% reported weekly attendance to religious services. The next independent variable used in determining religiosity was an individual’s particular identification with a religion. Those participating in the study were asked “What is your religious preference, is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?” 51.9% reported being Protestant, 24.8% Catholic, 1.7% Jewish, 5.0% reported some other religion, and 16.5% reported no religion. This variable was recoded to identify those that reported they were Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and some other religion as religious. Those that reported no religion were considered non religious. Overall 83.5% were considered religious and 16.5% were considered non religious. These questions measure the respondent’s religiosity by determining frequency and affiliation with a practiced religion.

When examining marital infidelity in household's across the United States one independent variable was used. Respondents that reported they were currently married or have been married in the past were asked, "Have you ever had sex with someone other than your husband or wife while married?" Response options were yes, no, I never married, I don't know, and no answer. This question was recoded to only include yes and no answers. Overall 14.5% of respondents said they had engaged in intercourse with someone other than their spouse while married. 58.6% of respondents reported no infidelity.

When comparing frequency of church attendance and marital infidelity, a control mechanism for gender was also used. Overall for the population as a whole, those that attended church more often were less likely to participate in an extramarital affair (Fig. 1). When controlling for gender, significance was found. In females, those that participated in extramarital affairs were more likely to never attend church or attend monthly than those individuals that attended yearly or weekly (Fig. 2). In males, those that attended church weekly were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair than those that attended monthly (Fig. 3). This finding suggests that when controlling for gender, frequency of church attendance cannot always suggest less likelihood of participating in an extramarital affair.

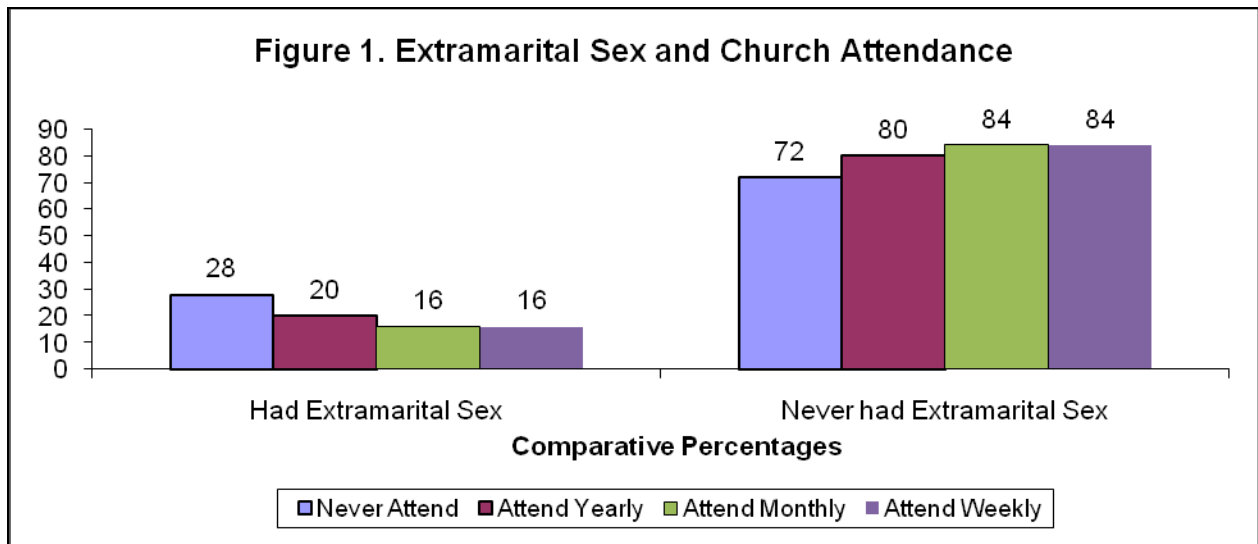
When comparing marital infidelity and those that reported as either being religious or non religious, those that identified with a specific religion were less likely to participate in an extramarital affair (Fig.4). Then analysis was controlled for gender. There some significant findings when controlling for gender. Females overall, were less likely to report an extramarital affair, but those that did report an extramarital affair about equally reported they were religious or nonreligious (Fig. 5). When it came to males, they were more likely to report an extramarital affair, but the majority of those that did report an extramarital affair considered themselves

nonreligious (Fig. 6). This finding is significant and suggests that men who engage in extramarital affairs are more likely not to be religious, whereas women who engage in extramarital affairs, religiousness and no religiousness was evenly distributed.

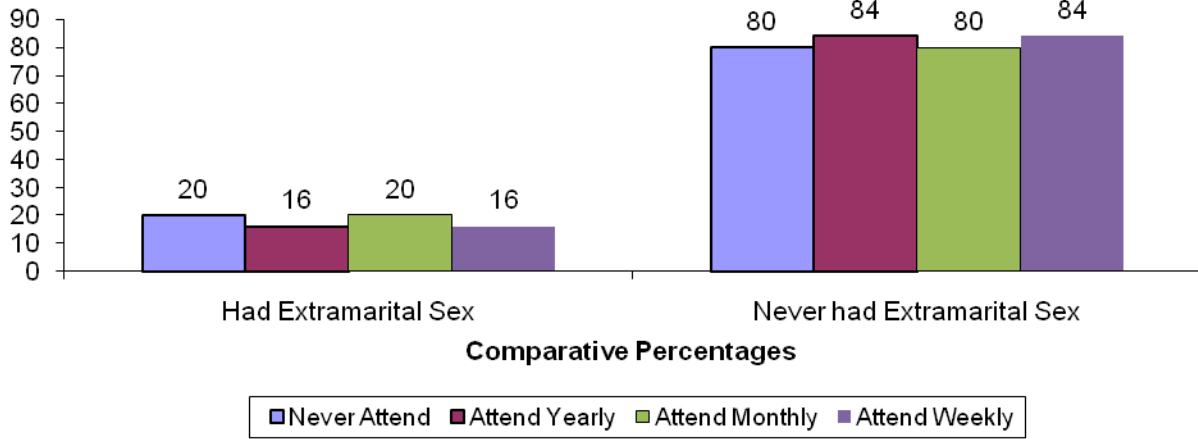
Marital infidelity and religiosity was also compared in terms of region of interview. Region information is provided with the demographics of participants above. When looking at region, the variable was recoded for easier analysis and was categorized accordingly: Pacific/Mountain, North Central, South, and Atlantic Regions. Figure 7 examines the relationship between those that reported infidelity, if the respondent identified with a religion or not, and the respondents region of their interview. Those that reported they were non-religious were more likely to report participating in an extramarital affair (Fig.7). There was some significance concerning the North Central part of the United States. In relation to other regions, respondents from the North Central part of the United States that were considered religious were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair than any other region of the United States (Fig. 7). Region of interview was also compared with frequency of church attendance (Fig. 10). Figure 10 examines the relationship between respondents that reported an extramarital affair, frequency of church attendance, and the respondent's region of interview. Overall those that never attended church were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair than their counterparts. There was some significance concerning the southern region. Respondents that attended church weekly in the south were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair than individuals that never attended church, attended yearly, or monthly (Fig. 10).

Marital infidelity and religiosity were also compared in terms of race. Race was not recoded and was categorized as white, black, and other. Figure 8 examines the relationship between respondents that reported infidelity, whether they identified with a religion or not, and

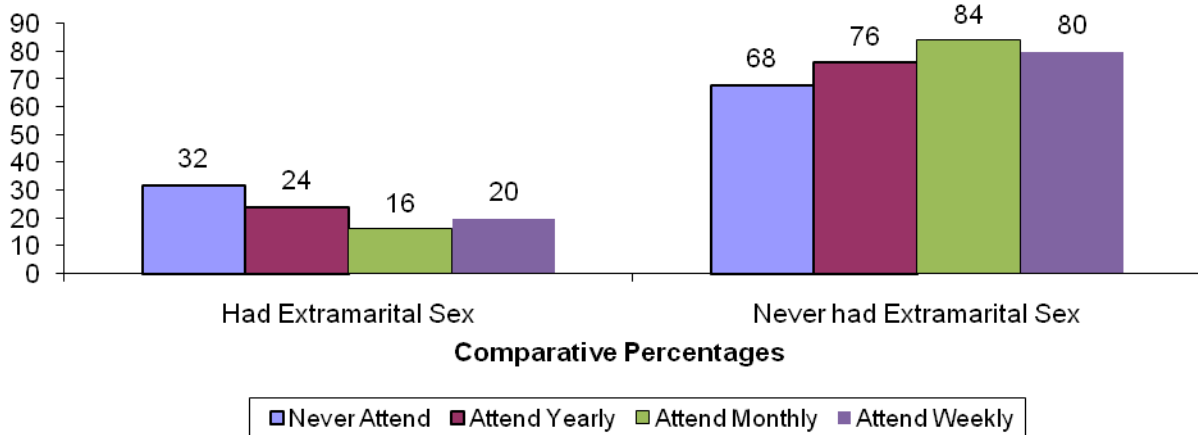
their race. Religious white individuals were more likely to report an extramarital affair than religious blacks and religious individuals of an (other) race (Fig. 8). Non-religious whites were less likely to report an extramarital affair in comparison to the other race categories. Race was also compared with frequency of church attendance. Figure 9 examines the relationship between respondents that reported an extramarital affair, their frequency of church attendance, and their race. Overall for Whites, and the (other) race, the higher frequency of church attendance was related to less likelihood of participating in an extramarital affair (Fig. 9). For black's, those that attended church weekly were more likely to report an extramarital affair than black's that never attended church, attended yearly, and monthly (Fig.9).



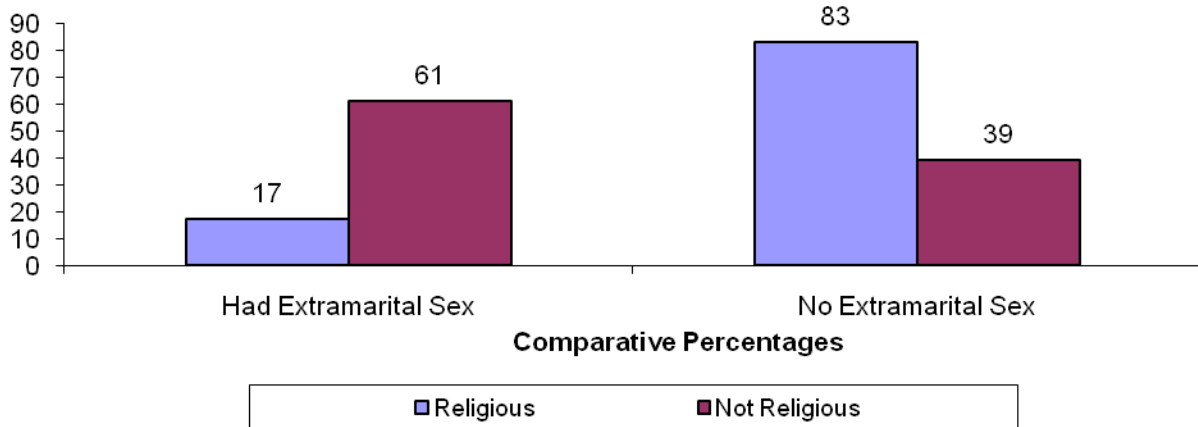
**Figure 2. Female Extramarital Sex and Church Attendance**



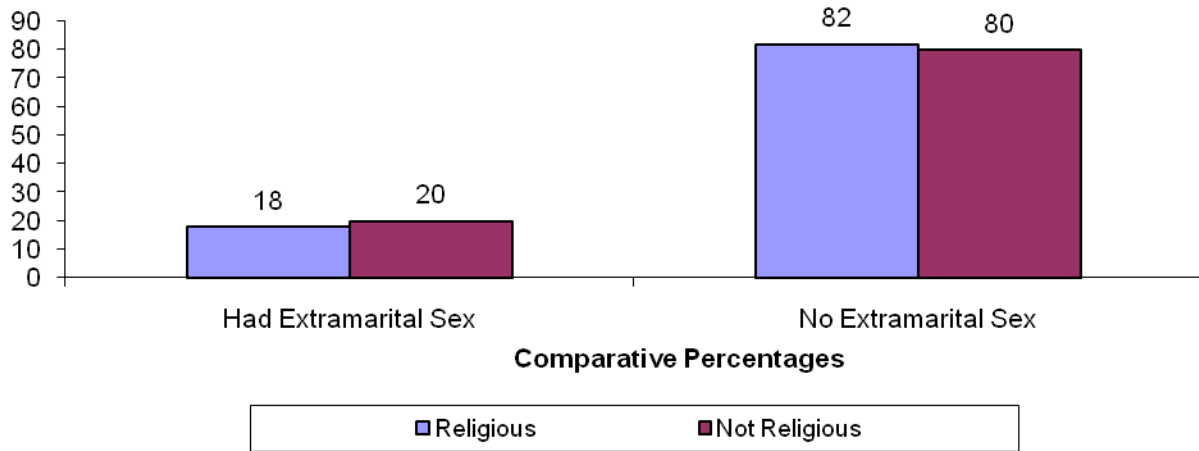
**Figure 3. Male Extramarital Sex and Church Attendance**



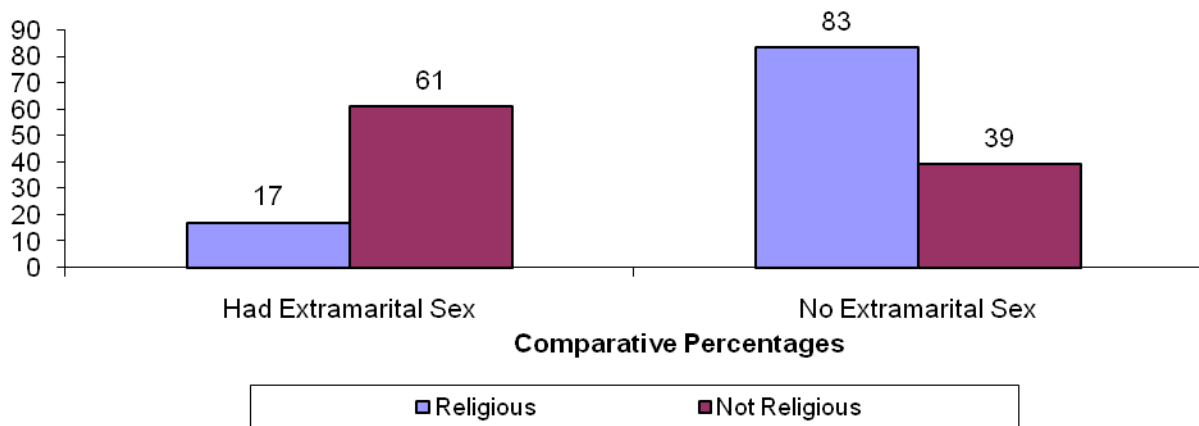
**Figure 4. Extramarital Sex and Religion**



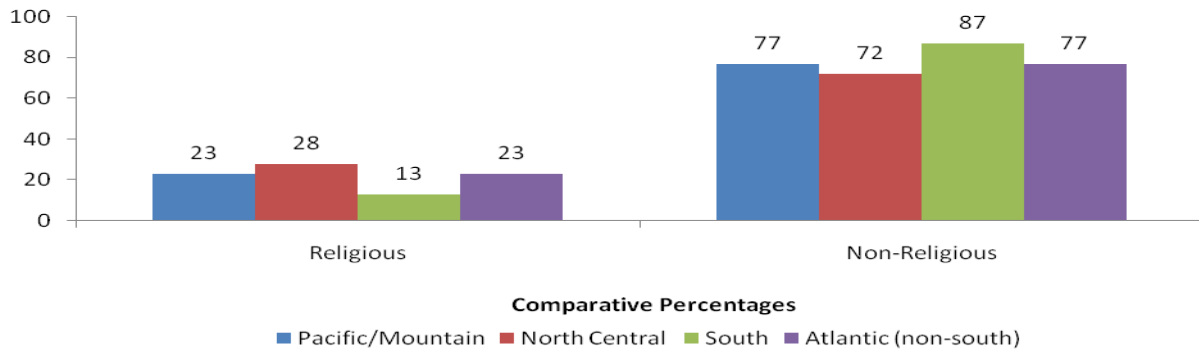
**Figure 5. Female Extramarital Sex and Religion**



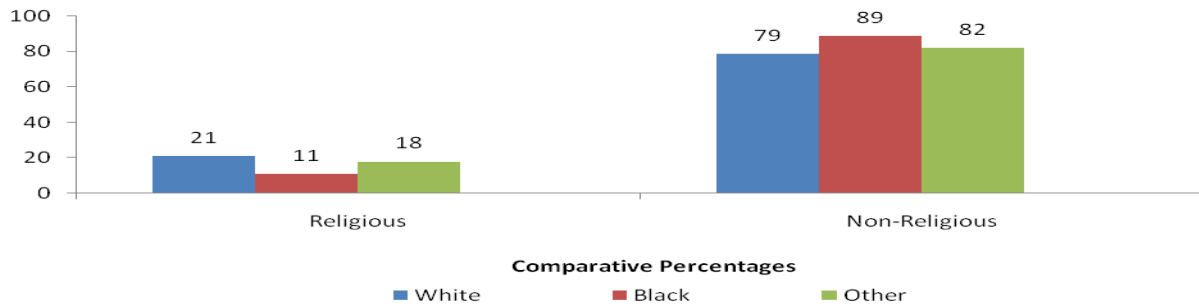
**Figure 6. Male Extramarital Sex and Religion**



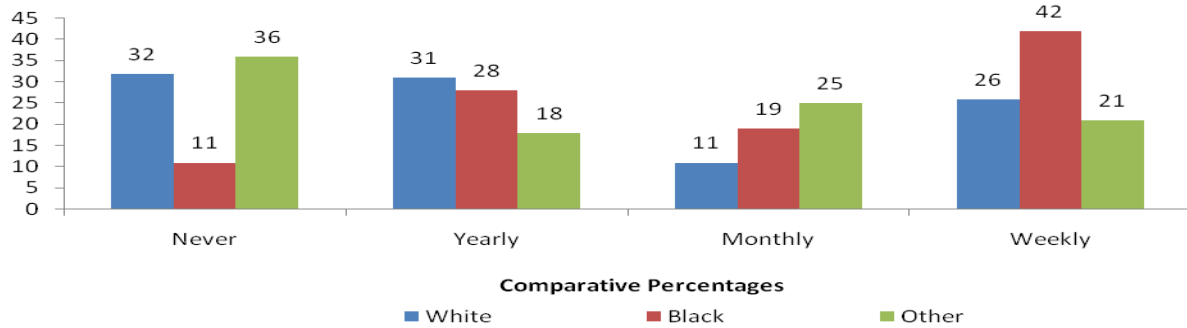
**Fig. 7 Infidelity/Religion/Region of Interview**



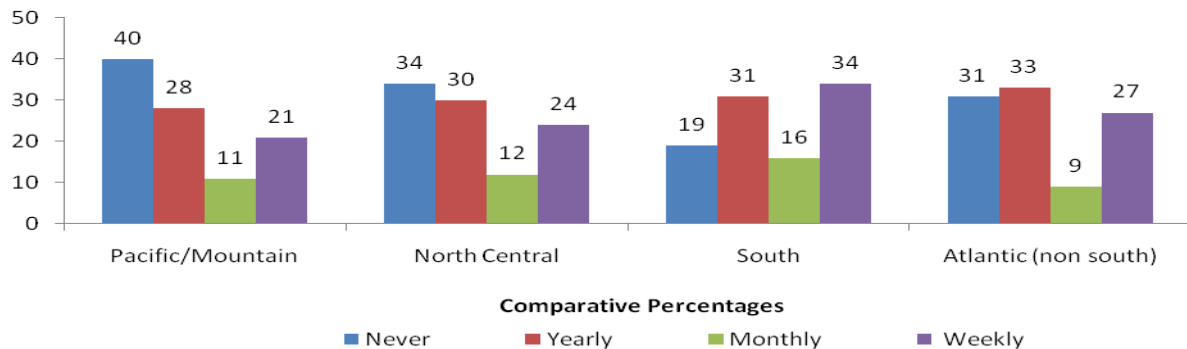
**Fig. 8 Infidelity/Religion/Race**



**Fig. 9 Infidelity/Church Attendance/Race**



**Fig. 10 Infidelity/Church Attendance/Region of Interview**



## Discussion

Due to the prevalence of infidelity, and the influence of religion in America, it is important to consider what predicts marital infidelity and what makes an individual have these certain characteristics that creates these issues that are emerging more frequently in relationships, marriages, and homes across the United States. Examining and suggesting certain predictors of marital infidelity will add to literature and will perhaps aid in decreasing marital conflict, infidelity, domestic violence, mental illness, and communicable diseases. Acknowledging, respecting, and empathizing with the emotions experienced in a religious context can be beneficial to the married couple when they are dealing with a relationship betrayal. Although specific demographics were used, it is not inclusive of all instances of marital infidelity. However, it offers a way of conceptualizing marital infidelity, ways to prevent it, and it gives ground for speculation of certain characteristics of an individual and the impact religiosity can have on the likelihood of marital infidelity.

Results from this paper contribute to the knowledge about extramarital sex gained by earlier studies. But, while some findings are in agreement, others are not. In past research, frequency of church attendance has predicted less likelihood of participating in extramarital sexual activity. Overall for individuals as a whole, the more frequent a person attended church the less likely that participated in an extramarital affair. Most surprising is that women who attended church never or monthly were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair than women who yearly attended church or attended weekly. For men the same was true and there was more significance, those that attended weekly were more likely to have extramarital encounters than those that attended less frequently. Perhaps extramarital sex and church relations and attendance are both factors in contributing to the affair because of their social context. For

centuries churches and congregations have gathered, provided support for one another, and have aided in individual and spiritual environment.

Identification with a religion yielded predictable results and findings. Our hypothesis was supported which suggests that individuals that identified with a specific religion were less likely to participate in an extramarital affair. When controlled for gender results suggested the same for both males and females. This idea is somewhat counterintuitive considering the higher frequency of church attendance when controlling for gender was not necessarily a predictor of less likelihood of marital infidelity.

Focusing more on region in which the respondent lives in the United States, those that live in the North Central part of the United States were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair. While enticing, it is hard to speculate why those living in this region of the United States were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair. Could their location contribute to possible marital dissatisfaction or could their religious belief systems in this area contribute to less popular views when it comes to loyalty to your partner in a married union. Surprising results were also related to frequency of church attendance and region of interview. People in the South region of the United States that attended church weekly were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair than those that attended less frequently. This idea is surprising in some ways and in others not so surprising. The south is considered the “Bible Belt,” and is often stereotyped as conservative in nature and specifically when it comes to abiding by a specific set of moral and religious codes. But also you have to look at the roles of men and women in the South which are considered to be more traditional. Stereotypically, men tend to work, women tend to bear children and raise them. Although this idea yearly is continuing to

change since more women are entering the workforce, perhaps these traditional roles contribute to the male dominance because males are more likely to participate in extramarital affairs.

Surprising results are also associated with the ethnicity. White's that considered themselves religious were more likely than individuals that black or of an "other" race were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair. It's hard to speculate why this result was found considering in previous studies African American's were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair. When looking at church attendance, black's that attended church more frequently were more likely to participate in an extramarital affair than any of the other races.

Findings in this study also have implications for future research. The most obvious question that arises from this analysis has to do with the causal direction between religious service attendance and extramarital sex. Causation simply cannot be addressed with this data. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between these factors and to survey how attitudes about extramarital sex in general are changing. While this study is beneficial since a large, nationally representative sample was used, the GSS is not a longitudinal survey. Therefore, it must be remembered that variables found to be significant predictors do not specifically determine that specific individuals will have extramarital sex. Another problem with the GSS does not explore why respondents chose certain answers, nor are the questionnaires allowed to define or explain any questions asked.

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