

BRIEF REPORT

Spiritual Intimacy and the Quality of Dating Relationships

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This study examined the associations between spiritual intimacy and the quality of dating relationships. Spiritual intimacy refers to partners vulnerably disclosing their religious/spiritual experiences, doubts, and/or struggles to one another and empathically listening to such disclosures. Regression analyses were conducted with 207 midwestern state university students (83% female, 85% White, 80% heterosexual, 56% theists) in a dating relationship ($M = 19.2$ months). Greater spiritual intimacy was associated with greater emotional intimacy ($\beta = .31, p < .0001$), relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .44, p < .0001$), and commitment ($\beta = .34, p < .0001$) after controlling for religious attendance, theism, partners' shared religious views, union length, cohabitation, age, sex, and ethnicity. Spiritual intimacy continued to predict relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .24, p < .0001$) and commitment ($\beta = .19, p < .01$) after controlling for emotional intimacy. Spiritually intimate dialogues contribute to relationship satisfaction and commitment beyond emotional intimacy.

Keywords: dating relationships, spiritual intimacy, religion, spirituality

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000532.supp>

Traditional theological teachings about dating relationships offered by most religious institutions in the United States have emphasized the goal of getting married in early adulthood and delaying sexual intercourse until marriage. However, the national median age of first marriage in 2021 was 29.2 years compared with 22.2 in 1973 (USAFacts, 2023). Moreover, based on 2006–2010 U.S. surveys, half to two thirds of unmarried adults who attended religious services frequently (i.e., several times a month) had sex outside marriage in the past year (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). Such trends raise questions about whether religious/spiritual (R/S) factors are relevant to the dating relationships of contemporary emerging adults. Social science research on this question is very scarce (Aragoni et al., 2023) and has focused on global indicators of individual religiosity, such as religious attendance or overall importance of religion. According to Langlais and Schwanz (2018), but not Aragoni et al. (2023), greater individual religiosity related to greater relational satisfaction of dating individuals. Unexpectedly, according to Norona et al. (2016), the more college students reported that religion was central to their lives, the more they engaged in sexual and emotional intimacy with a person outside their established dating union; other studies

have found religiosity to be unrelated to extradyadic sex among unmarried adults (Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Negash et al., 2019). These mixed findings echo a 2020 large-scale project that used machine learning to identify predictors of relationship satisfaction and commitment across 43 longitudinal studies of couples (Joel et al., 2020); individual religiosity was significant in 48% of the 16 cases assessed. Global indices of individual religiosity may yield marginal, unexpected, or null results for two reasons. Such measures confound specific R/S factors that theoretically would help or harm relational well-being, and they fail to capture dyadic R/S constructs likely to be tied robustly to relational well-being (Aragoni et al., 2023; Mahoney et al., 2023).

In this study, we focus on a specific and dyadic R/S factor that should be unambiguously tied to better relationship functioning and spiritual intimacy. This construct refers to partners disclosing their R/S experiences, doubts, and/or struggles to one another and empathically listening to such disclosures. Partners may especially hesitate to reveal their beliefs about supernatural beings, (non)religious views, and spiritual journeys due to fears or experiences of being dismissed, misunderstood, or ridiculed by the listener and may find it especially challenging to respond to R/S disclosures in an empathic, open-minded manner (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008; Hatch et al., 1986). However, greater spiritual intimacy may foster people's sense as they have found a special romantic partner with whom they can share their deepest sources of meaning and inspiration as well as distressing R/S experiences, a discovery that would be expected to be tied to relational satisfaction and commitment. Indeed, among married couples, greater spiritual intimacy longitudinally predicts better communication patterns (Padgett et al., 2019) and relates to marital satisfaction (Hatch et al., 1986), even after controlling couples' stable characteristics in fixed-effects models (Kusner et al., 2014; Mahoney et al., 2021). This study adds to prior findings on

This article was published Online First September 9, 2024.

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spiritual intimacy by testing if this construct relates to relationship satisfaction and commitment in nonmarital relationships, after controlling for global individual religiosity (religious attendance, theism) and dyadic religiosity (shared religious views), relationship length, cohabitation, age, sex assigned at birth, and ethnicity. Indirect evidence suggests that this hypothesis has merit. For example, college students who report fewer differences between their own and their dating partner's religious views based on one R/S item report greater relationship satisfaction and commitment net of control variables (Aragoni et al., 2023).

A critical question is whether spiritual intimacy predicts relationship satisfaction or commitment beyond perceptions of emotional intimacy with a partner. According to J. V. Cordova and Scott (2001), emotional intimacy refers to feeling comfortable engaging in vulnerable self-disclosure (e.g., sharing sensitive information, emotions, insecurities) and perceiving a partner to respond with support (e.g., active listening, warmth). Spiritual intimacy would be expected to be moderately to highly correlated with emotional intimacy. However, because the content of spiritually intimate dialogues involves highly value-laden information that partners may find especially bonding or divisive, spiritual intimacy may uniquely predict one's relationship satisfaction and commitment even beyond the contributions of emotional intimacy. To our knowledge, this study is the first to test this hypothesis and one of the few to examine direct links of emotional intimacy with relational satisfaction and commitment for dating unions.

Method

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, and the measures used in this study, and we followed Journal Article Reporting Standards published by the American Psychological Association. Data were analyzed using SAS 9.4, Windows Version 6.2.9200. The design and its analysis were not preregistered. The institutional review board at the authors' university approved the data collection that took place in 2021.

Participants

Eligibility criteria for this study required participants to be over age 18, enrolled in psychology classes at a midwestern state university, and involved in a nonmarital romantic relationship. Eleven participants who met these criteria were excluded due to missing data. The 207 participants' age averaged 19.7 years old ($SD = 2.1$), and 83% were assigned female at birth. The average length of their dating relationship with their partner was 19.1 months ($SD = 18.9$), and 26% of the unions involved cohabitation more than 50% of the time. Regarding sexual orientation, 80% identified as heterosexual, 14% bisexual, 2% gay/lesbian/queer, and 4% other. For race/ethnicity, 85.0% identified as White/Caucasian, followed by Black/African American (10.6%), Hispanic/Latino (2.4%), multiracial (2.4%), and other (1.5%). The average religious service attendance was 2.63 ($SD = 1.5$) based on a single item with anchors of never (34.8%), less than a few times a year (19%), few times a year (13%), few times per month (16%), about weekly (13.5%), and more than once a week (3%). Regarding religious affiliation, 42% identified as Protestant/non-denominational Christian, 24% none, 20% Catholic, 11% other, and 3% Muslim,

Jewish, or Buddhist. Based on one item, 56% of the respondents endorsed believing in God (i.e., theistic), with 12% identifying as atheist, 23% agnostic, 3% polytheistic, and 6% do not know/other. These reports of global individual religiosity approximate national norms for U.S. college-age adults.

Measures

Spiritual Intimacy

The eight-item Spiritual Intimacy Questionnaire was used to assess participants' perceptions of their own (four items) and their partners' (four items) R/S disclosures and empathic responses to one another (Mahoney et al., 2021). Sample items include: "I tend to keep my spiritual side private and separate from my relationship (reverse scored)," "My partner shares his or her spiritual questions or struggles with me," "I try not to be judgmental or critical when my partner shares his or her ideas about spirituality," "My partner is supportive when I reveal my spiritual questions or struggles to her or him." Items were rated on a Likert scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a great deal*). The term "spiritual" was intentionally employed, so items would be applicable across diverse R/S beliefs (e.g., theistic, agnostic, atheist). As in prior studies, Cronbach's α was acceptable (.71). The total score M equaled 19.2 ($SD = 3.7$) with a range from 9 to 24.

Emotional Intimacy

Seven items from the Intimate Safety Questionnaire (J. Cordova et al., 2005) were used to assess the participants' perceptions of the extent and their comfort with emotional intimacy with their partner. Items were selected based on factor analyses conducted by Bartos (2018) that yielded an eight-item emotional intimacy subscale from the 28-item version of the Intimate Safety Questionnaire that also assesses perceptions of intimacy related to conversations about sex, disagreements, being oneself, and emotional safety in public spaces. Specifically, this study used the emotional intimacy Items 4, 6, 10, 13, 19, 21, and 22, with a Likert scale of 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a great deal*); Item 9 on the emotional subscale identified by Bartos (2018) was inadvertently omitted in this study. Like prior research, these items yielded high internal reliability in this study ($\alpha = .89$). The total score M equaled 24.6 ($SD = 4.2$) with a range from 0 to 28.

Relationship Satisfaction

The 16-item version of the Couple's Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007) was used to assess the respondent's relationship satisfaction because it offers various types of items to obtain precision and power for detecting respondent variability to assess relationship satisfaction. The Couple's Satisfaction Index yielded high internal reliability in this study ($\alpha = .97$). The total score M equaled 67.0 ($SD = 13.4$) with a range from 11 to 81.

Romantic Commitment

The seven-item Romantic Commitment subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) was used to assess the respondent's commitment to their union. Participants completed items using a 0- to 8-point Likert scale, and the scale yielded high internal reliability in

this study ($\alpha = .91$). The total score M equaled 47.8 ($SD = 10.8$), ranging from 8 to 56.

Individual and Dyadic Global Religiosity and Other Demographic Control Variables

Individual global religiosity was assessed with one item about religious attendance and one item on theism (see the Participants section). Dyadic global religiosity was assessed with one item on whether the respondent and partner shared similar religious views, with a 5-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.2$). Age, sex assigned at birth, ethnicity, length of relationship, and cohabitation (see the Participants section) were also used as control variables.

Results

Pearson bivariate correlations were calculated between all study variables (see Supplemental Table 1). Because the control variables were each associated with at least one relationship variable, all of the control variables were entered as covariates into the primary regression equations. Otherwise, as expected, greater spiritual intimacy significantly correlated with greater emotional intimacy ($r = .33$,

$p < .0001$), relationship satisfaction ($r = .43$, $p < .0001$) and commitment ($r = .35$, $p < .0001$), and emotional intimacy correlated with relationship satisfaction ($r = .73$, $p < .0001$) and commitment ($r = .57$, $p < .0001$). Religious attendance correlated with satisfaction ($r = .17$, $p < .05$), similar religious views varied with satisfaction ($r = .14$, $p < .05$) and commitment ($r = .19$, $p < .01$), and theism was tied to commitment ($r = .16$, $p < .05$).

Table 1 displays the main analyses. As expected, in Model 1, greater spiritual intimacy was associated with greater emotional intimacy ($\beta = .31$, $p < .0001$), relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .44$, $p < .0001$), and commitment ($\beta = .34$, $p < .0001$) after controlling for religious attendance, theism, partners' shared religious views, union length, cohabitation, age, sex, and ethnicity. The total variance accounted for in Model 1 for each of the relationship functioning variables was $R^2 = .32$, $F(9, 197) 10.17$, $p < .0001$ for relationship satisfaction, $R^2 = .23$, $F(9, 197) 7.95$, $p < .0001$ for commitment, and $R^2 = .21$, $F(9, 197) 5.90$, $p < .0001$ for emotional intimacy.

In Model 2 where emotional intimacy was also entered as a control, spiritual intimacy continued to predict greater relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .24$, $p < .0001$) and commitment ($\beta = .19$, $p < .0001$). The total variance accounted for in Model 2 was $R^2 = .62$, $F(10, 196) 32.92$, $p < .0001$ for relationship satisfaction and $R^2 = .42$, $F(10, 196) 16.45$, $p < .0001$ for commitment.

Table 1
Regressions Predicting Relationship Satisfaction, Commitment, and Emotional Intimacy

Criterion	Model 1								
	Relationship satisfaction			Commitment			Emotional intimacy		
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	β
Age	-0.49	-1.12	-.07	0.22	.61	.04	-0.16	-1.14	-.08
Sex	4.48	2.03	.12	4.47	2.49	.15*	2.48	3.45	.22***
Ethnicity	7.36	3.14	.19**	2.18	1.14	.07	1.99	2.60	.17*
Length union	0.08	1.79	.11	0.11	2.82	.18**	0.02	1.01	.07
Cohabit	4.26	2.20	.13*	3.13	1.99	.13*	0.41	0.65	.04
Reli attend	0.99	1.43	.11	-.20	-0.35	-.03	0.18	0.81	.07
Similar reli	-0.47	-0.62	-.04	0.64	1.02	.07	0.00	0.02	.00
Theism	4.00	1.90	.14	5.57	3.29	.25**	0.13	0.20	.02
Spiritual int	1.63	6.65	.44****	0.99	4.96	.34****	0.35	4.38	.31****
Total R^2		.32****			.27****			.21****	

Criterion	Model 2					
	Relationship satisfaction			Commitment		
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	β
Age	-0.15	-0.48	-.02	0.42	1.37	.08
Sex	-0.66	-0.39	-.02	1.31	0.82	.05
Ethnicity	3.25	1.84	.08	-0.34	-0.21	-.01
Length union	0.05	1.49	.07	0.08	2.66	.15**
Cohabit	3.40	2.37	.11*	2.61	1.91	.10
Reli Attend	0.61	1.19	.07	-0.43	-0.88	-.06
Similar reli	-0.48	-0.85	-.04	0.62	1.16	.06
Theism	3.78	2.38	.13*	5.40	3.69	.25***
Emotional int	2.07	12.75	.63****	1.27	8.28	.49****
Spiritual int	0.91	4.77	.24****	0.54	3.02	.19**
Total R^2		.63***			.46***	

Note. Sex (1 = male/2 = female); ethnicity (0 = non-White/1 = White); cohabit (1 = > 50% time); Reli attend = Religious attendance of participant; Similar reli = Similar religious views of partners; Theism (0 = atheist, agnostic, polytheistic, other/1 = theistic); Spiritual int = Spiritual intimacy; Emotional int = emotional intimacy.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. **** $p < .0001$.

Discussion

This study highlights one specific and dyadic R/S process, namely, spiritual intimacy, that is uniquely tied with greater emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and commitment for dating couples after controlling for the frequency of individual religious attendance and theism, partners' shared religious views, union length, cohabitation, age, sex assigned at birth, and ethnicity. Furthermore, spiritual intimacy still predicts relationship satisfaction and commitment after also controlling for emotional intimacy. These findings are important due to the scarcity of prior research on R/S factors for dating couples, which has yielded mixed findings based on single-item indicators of individual or dyadic religiosity likely because such global indices confound beneficial and toxic R/S processes for relational functioning. Although this initial study is limited by reliance on a relatively homogenous group of university students, spiritual intimacy conceptually can apply to partners from diverse cultural backgrounds and sexual/gender identities who endorse beliefs across the spectrum from nonbelief to belief in supernatural entities and across politically and socially progressive to conservative values reinforced by R/S worldviews. Given the rise of college students who identify as atheist/agnostic rather than theistic (35% and 56%, respectively, in our sample and consistent with national norms), finding a romantic partner with whom one can disclose and receive support about positive and negative R/S experiences may represent a powerful avenue of relationship bonding. Furthermore, this study documents that greater emotional intimacy is robustly tied to relationship satisfaction and commitment for dating, not just marriage. Hopefully, our findings will spur more research on the distinctive roles of spiritual and emotional intimacy for contemporary couples.

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Received November 16, 2023

Revision received April 27, 2024

Accepted June 11, 2024 ■