

# Dating in Light of Christ: Young Evangelicals Negotiating Gender in the Context of Religious and Secular American Culture

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*Studies of young evangelicals' dating patterns tend to analyze gender by focusing on ideology. This paper suggests a view of gender and religion that examines the two institutions as interrelated by considering how and when gender and religion emerge as salient in Christian dating. Drawing on a study of young evangelicals' relationships, I explain how ideal discussions of Christian dating emerged as gender-neutral against a backdrop of secular conceptions of romantic relationships but how their personal accounts reveal a series of divergent gendered evangelical worldviews when they turn to focus on their experiences constructing relationships within the evangelical subculture. The three worldviews of idealist, independent, and ambivalent each represent different patterns of how young evangelicals emotionally understand their life as both gendered and religious indicating more complicated patterns of gender, dating, and religion than presented in previous studies.*

*Key words:* gender; religion; dating; young adults; evangelicals; relationships.

Over the past 30 years, scholars interested in gender regimes within conservative religions have tended to study the religious experiences of men and women independently, reflecting the complementarian understandings of gender in these faiths. Studies of women in conservative religions have examined women's conversions (Brasher 1998; Chong 2006; Davidman 1991) and how women strategically perform passivity in their religious contexts in order to improve their lives, most often in their families (Gallagher 2003; Griffith 2000). Studies of men in conservative religions, on the other hand, have tended to focus on how participation in religious organizations and movements shape the ideological scripts for masculinity (Bartkowski 2000; Lockhart 2000; Gallagher and Wood 2005). As a result of these studies' tendency to focus on either men or on

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women, the subsequent analyses obscure the relational dimensions of gender (Connell 2009) and reinforce the religious notion of gender difference held by many conservative religions (Burke 2012). By analyzing the dating experiences of young, evangelical men and women, the present paper complicates the study of gender and conservative religions by considering when and how gender emerges as salient in religious lives. Toward this end, the paper contributes more broadly to the sociology of religion by using the experiences associated with gendered relationships to understand how young religious adults make sense of their religious faith and work to position themselves within a religious community.

Much of the existing scholarship on the relational experiences of evangelical men and women focuses on married couples (Bartkowski 2001; Denton 2004; Gallagher and Smith 1999). While marriage is associated with increased pressure to enact particular gender scripts (Coltrane and Adams 2008), it inevitably is not the first time couples face gendered expectations for relationships. Before a couple says “I do” at the altar, they will have already constructed gendered relationship patterns that have been informed by both American culture and their particular religious tradition. Compared with marriage, dating operates more as a trial period because it is less bounded by responsibilities. Thus, the more nebulous and experimental dimension of dating provides an ideal context to analyze some of the existing themes on gender and evangelical relationships. Similar to marriage, dating can be organized by hierarchical patterns of gender (Bryant 2006), but unlike evangelical marriages, men are not invested with full power of male headship.<sup>1</sup> While some of the gendered expectations of marriage transfer to dating, it is widely understood within the subculture to be inappropriate for dating couples to “act” like married couples. Therefore, Christian dating operates as what Gerson (2002) refers to as a “moral dilemma”—a situation that has no institutionally or unambiguously “correct” course of action, but where all chosen actions will be judged.

Rather than view religious gender ideologies as a totalized institution, I follow feminist scholars who contend that by focusing on dilemmas that gendered institutions produce, we can view gender as an “incomplete institution” (Gerson 2002:13) and make better sense of the “articulations of hesitation, ambivalence, and desire for stability and change that emerge” (Avishai 2008:429). From this perspective, I find that while young evangelicals share an idealized conception of Christian dating, the ways they imagine accomplishing and their subsequent actions toward enacting this goal are shaped by a *gendered evangelical worldview* more than their social position as either a man or a woman. Focusing on the complexity and ambiguity in the young evangelicals’ accounts of Christian dating, I present an internal diversity within the faith by connecting

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<sup>1</sup>Some Christian premarital relationship books note the dangers of modeling too closely the intimate elements of marriage in dating relationships because they believe it puts the uniqueness and sanctity of marriage at risk. See Don Rauniker’s *Choosing God’s Best*.

young evangelical's gendered worldviews on dating to different evangelical subcultural repertoires that allow the youth to discuss gender and dating in seemingly contradictory ways. Rather than focus on gender differences as the result of dominant subcultural ideologies, I show how even within a conservative religion, gender is situational. Furthermore, for these young evangelicals, cultural work around gender becomes part of the process of self-authoring their faith (Avishai 2008).

## EVANGELICAL DATING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

In her comparison of hooking up and dating, Bogle's (2008:159–60) notes "In the dating era the rules were clear: young people, especially women, were not supposed to have sexual intercourse prior to marriage. Religious leaders played a primary role in communicating this standard to the American public." Bogle and other scholars studying union formation among contemporary young adults argue that this dating script with clear rules has been replaced by a more ambiguous hooking up script, especially on college campuses (England et al. 2007; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). At evangelical colleges and among evangelical paraministry groups on secular campuses, however, studies find that young Christians actively resist this dominant "hookup culture" and continue to operate with a modified dating script (Bryant 2006; Freitas 2008; Perry and Armstrong 2007; Wilkins 2008). These students intentionally attempt to set themselves apart from secular norms of relationship formation and provide a space for each other to construct their own distinctly Christian norms.

Students attending nonevangelical universities find themselves embedded in a social context where many of the public activities of students, such as drinking, partying, and casual sex, place evangelical students on the margins of the social scene (Perry and Armstrong 2007). Between the potentially challenging classroom context where students may feel their faith and learning conflict (Bryant 2007), to the social scene which leaves young evangelicals feeling like an "other" (Perry and Armstrong 2007; Wilkins 2008), young evangelicals at secular universities find their faith embattled, which leads them to seek out a community of like-minded individuals (Perry and Armstrong 2007; Wilkins 2008). Christian small groups help to alleviate the sense of being socially marginalized by providing Christian students with a social network of congruent peers and offering them norms more consistent with their worldview (Perry and Armstrong 2007; Wilkins 2008).

Despite studies that find contemporary patterns of relationship formation are characterized by ambiguity (Bogle 2008; Gerson 2010), research on young evangelicals on secular college campuses finds these students still learn clear and gendered rules for relationship formation (Bryant 2007; Perry and Armstrong 2008). The clearest rule in these communities is that sex should be reserved for marriage

(Perry and Armstrong 2008; Wilkins 2008). Sexual temptation often leads young evangelicals to abstain not just from sex but from relationships altogether (Bryant 2007; Wilkins 2008). This practice, which Wilkins (2008) calls “romantic abstinence,” allows the Christian young adults to avoid sexual temptation by also alleviating some of the distinct struggles they believe men and women face in relationships. For young evangelicals at either secular or Christian universities, complementarian gender ideologies frame understandings of sexuality and outline distinct gendered struggles (Bryant 2007; Freitas 2008). Popular purity discourses present men as biologically weak because of their sexual desires, thus women are expected to support them in their struggle by wearing modest clothing. Likewise, women are believed to be emotionally weak because of their excessive desire for attachment, necessitating men to protect them by setting clear boundaries and avoiding moving too quickly in the relationship. In the context of small groups on secular university campuses, this gendered view of relationships establishes clearer rules for negotiating relationships than the young Christians would have with outsiders who rely on a different script (Perry and Armstrong 2008). The perceived high-stakes of cross-gender interactions reduces the pattern of casual dating (or hookups) and encourages young Christians to work on themselves to be prepared for when God introduces their spouse to them.

Compared with secular campuses where young Christians feel pressured by hookup scripts, students on evangelical campuses face a different struggle: the pressure to find a spouse (Freitas 2008). According to one student at an evangelical college in Freitas’s (2008) study, “It’s like a shoe factory. I’ve heard it described like, you come in single, and they box you up paired” (113). The expectation to partner led another student in her study to joke that his campus promises: “ring by spring or your money back!” (114). The context of what Freitas calls a “purity culture” constrains young men and women at evangelical colleges to act within a gendered relationship script that has potentially dire consequences not only for their social lives but also their faith.

*The purity ideal sets a nearly impossible standard, requiring a girl to remain utterly “asleep” or “starved” when it comes to desire, romance and sexuality—until of course a prince comes along (at God’s command) to “wake her.” Missteps range from “giving the first kiss away” to someone you will not eventually marry to having sexual intercourse. (Freitas 2008:82)*

Unlike on secular campuses where Christian students felt pressure to hookup, students at evangelical campuses feel surrounded by peers who they fear are purer than they are able to be.

Past studies of young evangelicals’ relationships highlight the pervasiveness of gender by emphasizing how the complementarian system continues to disadvantage women (Freitas 2008; Wilkins 2008). While these studies illuminate the logics of gender and religion that young evangelicals face, they tend to focus first on the differences in the rhetoric and second on how these differences operate as

a series of constraints when young adults form relationships.<sup>2</sup> In comparison, my analysis emerges from discussions with young evangelicals about relationships more broadly that allowed me to analyze when and how gender emerges as salient in the self-authoring of religious identities (Avishai 2008). In the following study of young evangelicals at Christian colleges, I demonstrate how a single, ideal form of Christian dating exists within the context of the purity culture. However, while the young evangelicals describe the ideal itself in gender-neutral terms, how they imagine and pursue forming relationships draw from divergent, deeply held beliefs about religion and gender.

## STUDYING GENDER IN CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

The early studies of gender and conservative religion tended to focus on women's experiences (Brasher 1998; Davidman 1991; Griffith 2000; Stacey and Gerad 1990), emerging from a feminist framework, this research sought to challenge the androcentric bias of religion research (Neitz 2003) and theorize about why women would actively participate in religions that perpetuated their subordinate position (see Avishai 2008 or Burke 2012 for a critique of this approach). Following a similar trajectory as the sociology of gender more broadly, however, scholars began to shift their attention to men's experiences in conservative religions starting in the late 1990s (Bartkowski 2000; Gallagher and Wood 2005; Lockhart 2000) because they realized that "attending to gender . . . cannot merely be a matter of 'add women and stir'" (Neitz 2003:292). The development of the subfield in this way has meant that much of the analysis of gender within conservative religions remains a study of religious women or religious men but does not theoretically analyze the intersection of religion and gender as social institutions. As a result, gender is defined by presumed cultural differences rather than conceptualized as a relational arrangement (Connell 2009). According to Connell (2009), defining gender by cultural differences constructs an image of a dichotomy that does not reflect reality and filters our analysis so that we only see gender when we see difference, yet often do not account for differences among men and women or the similarities between men and women.

By drawing on social constructionists approaches to gender that conceptualize it as a series of social relations (Connell 2009; Lorber 1994), the present study contributes to a smaller set of literature of evangelicals and gender that have analyzed the religious experiences and perspectives of both men and women (Bartkowski 2001; Denton 2004; Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999;

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<sup>2</sup>This point applies less to Wilkins (2008) because her analysis focuses more on how abstinence rhetoric recreates particular raced, classed, and gendered moral claims about sexuality.

Wilkins 2008). However, this study differs in two ways that helps to extend studies of gender and conservative religion. First, most of this research focuses on the relational dimension of gender within marriage, whereas the present paper analyzes how premarital relationships are gendered. By studying how religion constructs gendered relationships outside of marriage, the paper contributes to the field by helping to assess how much of the existing insights are particular to marriage. In other words, how are relationships informed by religious constructions of gender when issues such as the division of labor and financial contributions are not present? Second, existing studies tend to limit analyses of gender to ideology, often ideology of elites. An overemphasis on gender ideology misses other important dimensions of gender, such as how it simultaneously operates as “sources of pleasure, recognition, identity, and sources of injustice and harm” (Connell 2009:7). Both religion and gender exist as social institutions external to individuals, but they also are important identities in peoples’ lives. As such, it is important to analyze how these institutions become self-authoring projects that involve a process of *becoming* rather than a static state of being (Avishai 2008; Connell 2009). Toward this end, the present paper draws on young evangelicals’ discussions of dating to assess when and how gender emerges, as well as connects their accounts to their efforts to become religious and gendered beings.

## DATA AND METHODS

The present paper emerges from a qualitative study of unmarried evangelicals’ relationships. While the broader project includes analysis of 10 popular Christian premarital advice books (Irby 2013), this paper focuses on in-depth interviews about Christian relationships with young evangelical men and women. When relevant I reference evangelical cultural elites’ discourses on relationships to provide a subcultural context for the interviewees’ accounts; however, drawing upon insights from the lived religion perspective that emphasizes the experiences, emotions, and practices of religious individuals (Edgell 2012; McGuire 2008), I center the following analysis on the interviewee’s perception and experiences. This approach, which is consistent with feminist methodologies that emphasize beginning with women’s experiences (Smith 1990), enables a relational analysis of how religion and gender intersect in the lives of young evangelicals.

I conducted in-depth interviews with 19 unmarried, self-identified evangelical Protestant Christians.<sup>3</sup> There were a total of nine men and 10 women

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<sup>3</sup>“Evangelical” is a contested category because it refers to identity, tradition, a practice of evangelizing, set of beliefs, and denominations (Bryant 2007). Following the example of Smith (1998), I conceptualize evangelicalism as a subculture that contains a set of theological and social dispositions. Therefore, I selected self-identification for recruitment because it allowed me to focus on people for whom evangelicalism is most salient.

between the ages of 18 and 25. For sampling reasons, I limited my interviews to evangelicals aged 18–25 who were either students or alumni of an evangelical college. Practically, I limited my study to evangelical colleges because this age group tends to have lower rates of church attendance (Uecker et al. 2007); therefore, evangelical colleges provided the most accessible space for conducting a snowball sampling recruitment of the population due to the high density of young evangelicals. Additionally, I theoretically chose to limit the study to evangelical colleges because I sought participants who were deeply embedded in the subculture. Students at evangelical colleges interact with evangelical beliefs and individuals on a near constant basis because “campus culture is religiously infused on every level” (Freitas 2008:14). Since evangelical colleges have chapel, religious curriculum, and religious requirements for their students and faculty, compared with other populations, the students at these colleges are consistently embedded within the evangelical subculture. To ensure that the sample was broadly evangelical and to avoid placing too much emphasis on a particular campus culture, I recruited from three different colleges located in a Midwestern suburb, large Midwestern city, and a West coast city.

The resulting sample all identified as evangelical and actively participated in their faith through regular church attendance and socializing with other evangelicals. The sample was predominantly white, heterosexual, and on average 22 years old.<sup>4</sup> Based on the description of their home lives and parent’s professions, most of the sample grew up middle class. For instance, respondent’s reported that their parents’ professions included doctors, scientists, and professors. Thirteen of the 19 participants were not in relationships at the time of the interview and their experiences ranged from never having dated to recently having broken up.

To analyze how young evangelicals conceptualize Christian relationships, I used inductive qualitative coding. In reviewing the interview transcripts, I first looked for emergent themes in how interviewees defined Christian dating. After collecting all the portions of the transcripts that discussed dating, I used open coding which involved giving sections of the interview a term or phrase that denoted a theme (Lofland et al. 2006). This strategy produced a set of emergent, shared themes about how Christian dating should look but it obscured the variety of emotions, perspectives, and experiences of Christian dating the interviewees had shared throughout our talks. In particular, these collectively held themes did not capture how relationships represented a disputed and incomplete

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<sup>4</sup>While I did not directly ask interviewees about how they identified their sexual orientation, I asked a variety of indirect questions to assess their relationship preferences. Additionally, I was careful to frame all questions about dating relationships with gender neutral language of “significant other.” This tactic allowed the interviewees to select the appropriate pronoun and describe important qualities in a significant other. From these answers, I discuss the sexual orientation that participants presented at the time of the interview.

gendered institution within American evangelicalism. Therefore, in a second round of coding, rather than use a “focused coding” strategy that sorts and analyzes the codes from the open coding (Lofland et al. 2006), I concentrated on understanding how young evangelicals conceptualized gender by examining the whole transcript which included discussion about relationships in their families, among their friends and at church. In particular, I used the insight from interviewees that gender and relationships had become a source of hot debate on evangelical college campuses to inform the second round of coding. During this phase, I mapped out their social world by creating ideal types of how religion and gender intersected in divergent religious worldviews.

As Gerson (2010:234) notes, “the challenge in analyzing qualitative material is to use thick description to build or reframe theory”. Rather than offer a set of ideal types that I believe can be generalized to all young evangelicals, the following analysis contributes to the sociology of religion by drawing on the narratives of these young adults to reframe its theoretical views of gender and relationships. By inductively analyzing when gender emerges as salient in structuring evangelical relationships, I seek to bridge contemporary theories of gender and of religion to analyze how the institutions intersect in divergent ways within dating. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how the process of becoming a religious being is infused with other social institutions, such as gender. Toward this end, the following analysis is presented in an interpretation presentation style that alternates data and analysis as text (Lofland et al. 2006).

## WHAT IS CHRISTIAN DATING?

Evangelicals are not isolated from recent shifts in the meaning of relationships that emphasize love and personal fulfillment (Cherlin 2009; Coontz 2005), as can be seen in self-help relationship guides that romanticize the involvement of God in dating and marriage (Freitas 2008), yet when asked to define “Christian dating” the young evangelicals interviewed highlighted components that distinguished the practice from secular culture. Despite differences in gendered evangelical worldviews which will be discussed in the next section, the young evangelical men and women shared an image of how Christian dating should operate that emphasized their commitment to their religious community, rather than personal feelings. Five related themes emerged as descriptors of a Christian relationship: commitment, future orientation, physical boundaries, spiritual dimension, and community. Collectively, these themes construct a gender-neutral ideal that young evangelicals hold themselves and others accountable to as a way to distinguish their relationships from secular patterns of hooking up.

Distinguishing themselves from the perceived transient nature of secular relationship practices, *commitment* became an essential defining characteristic of Christian dating. According to the young evangelicals, Christian relationships are serious and involve commitment to the other person and to God because as



one interviewee put it “you are not in it for giggles and kicks.” Not only did emphasizing commitment rhetorically act as boundary-work against hooking up, but it became a way to live out relationships and even became viewed as a solution for some. For instance, when I asked Josh to list potential “deal-breakers” in a partner he admitted, “Maybe a fault of mine but, in any case, a trait of mine is saying ‘I could work it out with that person. If we’re really committed, I think I could work it out.’”<sup>5</sup> In fact, commitment appeared more centrally in their discussions of relationships than love or emotions, which were considered too fleeting because, as one participant explained, “relationships are about commitment, not necessarily about emotional feelings.”

A consequence of focusing on commitment was the strong emphasis on a *future orientation toward relationships*. As Holly explains, “if you’re actually dating then you’re saying, ‘I am spending time with this person because I can potentially marry them and serve Christ with them.’” For young evangelicals, dating, like all other stages in Christian relationships, is not something to be taken lightly. Rather than view dating as a process of self-discovery, young evangelicals evaluated even “casual dating” for its marriage potential. The importance of this future orientation contributed to the limited dating histories of the participants because, in order to begin dating, they had to perceive marriage potential in both a person and relationship. Anna, a young woman who had never dated, explained how early in college a possible relationship stalled because the young man “thought he couldn’t marry me.” Compared with their secular peers who form intimate relationships with little expectation of marriage (Bogle 2008), for young evangelicals marriage potential serves as a criterion for the initial development of Christian dating and thus remains a constant presence in their relationships. As Brendan notes, “the interesting thing about being evangelical is that I think you consider marriage younger than a lot of people do,” an insight corroborated by the fact that evangelicals are amongst the most likely to marry young (Regnerus and Uecker 2011).

At least part of the emphasis on the future orientation of relationships, specifically the early consideration of marriage, is connected to *chastity*. The interviewees, even those who had not been successful in their commitment to this goal, unanimously agreed that Christian dating must be physically pure. As Ted put it, purity means “only having sex with your spouse” and if a couple is not married then “they should always have their clothes on together.” The consensus that only married couples can have sex meant all Christian dating relationships required establishing and negotiating physical intimacy boundaries that, at the very least, exclude sexual intercourse. These physical boundaries, however, were contested and no universal answer existed to the question “how far is too far?” From Sarah, who had never kissed because she heard from “friends that when they started kissing, that’s when a lot of trouble started,” to Jimmy, who had

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<sup>5</sup>The names of all participants have been changed.

initially not kissed in his relationship but eventually felt that this practice “caused a wedge” between himself and his girlfriend, the young evangelicals developed different boundaries for physical intimacy in relationships. No matter where they set the boundary, however, everyone agreed that Christian dating always requires a physical boundary with sex on the other side.

All of the characteristics reviewed above were motivated and framed by religious discourses but they could exist in secular relationships; therefore, for dating to be “Christian,” it must additionally have a *spiritual dimension*. A base requirement for establishing a spiritual connection in Christian dating was that both partners must be Christian. When I asked Holly if a potential partner had to be Christian, she seriously replied, “For Christians, there *isn’t* an option for dating someone who is not a Christian. That is a pretty strict command in scripture.” While the young evangelicals noted that denomination and style of worship were not important, their descriptions of desired spiritual characteristics in a significant other and the role they believed a significant other should play in their own spiritual lives indicated an underlying preference for evangelical Christians. For instance, Emily’s point that “I’ve had so many friends in the past year come to the conclusion that they need to find a guy who loves Jesus as much as they do” uses an evangelical style religious discourse to prioritize a personal relationship with Jesus. Otherwise the interviewees often abstractly described the spiritual dimension of relationship such as Josh’s assertion that Christian dating means “to grow as people, and as servants of God in this world, under the authority of God” or Jimmy’s claim that “Christian dating is realizing that your relationship is a reflection of God.” In the context of the other more actionable and definitional components to Christian dating, these types of abstract description of the spiritual dimension code the relationships as religious and emphasize the need for couples to grow spiritually in their own faith and together.

Recognizing the difficulty in forming any relationship, let alone one that they perceived as counter-cultural, the young evangelicals explained Christians dating must be embedded in *community*. As Jacqui explains, the definitive difference between secular and Christian relationships is “the aspect of engaging God in the relationship and being accountable to him as well as friends and other people.” The young evangelicals enlisted members of their church, youth group, bible study, or evangelical college to help them successfully date as Christians by providing advice and acting as an accountability group to help maintain commitments, especially in the case of chastity. As Leslie clarified, “Christian dating should stick to trying to honor God by the moral implications of choosing to be pure, choosing to wait, choosing to have discipline, self-control [and] things like that. Just have people to hold you accountable if you don’t have those things.” The young evangelicals realized, either from personal experience or from watching their peers, that it was difficult to remain abstinent until marriage, thus community was the most often cited resource for dealing with sexual temptation.

In sum, while the young evangelicals consistently described Christian dating as having these five characteristics, all of them recognized they offered an ideal

description. In fact, when I asked about Christian dating, the interviewees often sought clarification on whether I wanted to know how Christian dating *should* look or how it *does* look. The realization of the gap between reality and the ideal led some, such as Jessica to question the term saying, “I don’t think Christian dating exists but I think there’s a way to date in light of Christ.” Despite the realization that most Christians in relationships do not always live up to the described ideal, young evangelicals still strongly believe that Christian dating, “dating in light of Christ” or “Godly dating” should be a different goal for evangelicals than the culturally provided secular model of “hooking up.” Their accounts of actual relationships all contained descriptions of how they attempted to actualize these values into practice because even as they thought it may not be possible to always or fully live up to this standard, it represents a way to perform their faith in what they perceived as a broader secular context. The discussion of the ideal form of Christian dating was distinctly gender neutral, but the explanations for *how* to accomplish this goal relied on gendered evangelical worldviews that drew on the religious subculture.

### DIVERGENT GENDERED EVANGELICAL WORLDVIEWS IN CHRISTIAN DATING

When I asked young evangelicals to describe Christian dating, I received consistent answers that focused on what it *should* look like and how this ideal form should differ from the “unhealthier” pattern of hooking up. This question, however, came at the end of the section of the interview on their dating relationships and tended to mark a break in the previous gendered discussion. The more concrete questions—their dating histories, recounting of relationship advice they liked and disliked, important qualities in a significant other, and descriptions of dating at an evangelical college—revealed distinctly *gendered evangelical worldviews* shaping their approach to Christian dating.

The gendered evangelical worldviews discussed below represent deeper and more complicated narratives than gender ideologies. The young evangelicals provided narratives of their lives that exposed how gender operating concurrently with their evangelical faith creates an outlook toward action which is not reducible to either religion or gender. Below, I describe three ideal types of gendered evangelical worldviews on Christian dating that emerged from the interviews that I call *idealists*, *independents*, and *ambivalents*. The interviewee’s participation and dedication to their evangelical faith enables members of each perspective to draw on different evangelical logics and cultural resources to address from within their faith the broader American “moral dilemma” facing young adults who attempt to form relationships in a context where the previous and predictable gendered patterns have destabilized (Gerson 2002). Likewise, the worldviews shaped how they attempted to pursue the shared subcultural ideal of “Christian dating.”

While I describe the idealists, independents, and ambivalents in their own subsections, it is important to note that these are relational worldviews operating within the same religious space. The social and organizational context of evangelical colleges meant that the participants regularly interacted with other Christians from different denominational and theological backgrounds and within this context, students wrestled with the question about how to form relationships as Christians. As a result of wrestling with these questions as a community, a highly charged debate emerged on the campuses. The three described worldviews represent different points on a continuum in this debate. Idealists, with their neotraditional worldview, and independents, with their autonomous and egalitarian perspective, represent the two poles. Members of both worldviews quickly and frequently volunteered articulate positions about how gender should and should not operate in relationships. Comparatively, ambivalents represent the larger “mainstream” that has attempted to step out of the debate or reserve judgment by individualizing both gender and relationships (table 1).

**Idealists**

The idealists follow the standard story about evangelicals and their beliefs about gender and relationships. Undergirding discussions about both dating and marriage in the evangelical subculture is a belief in gender essentialism and complementarianism that conceptualizes men and women as occupying different roles in relationships (Brasher 1998; Bryant 2006; Freitas 2008; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Griffith 2000). Gender roles, for evangelicals, operate as more than directives for action because, according to essentialist ideology, roles describe men and women’s inner desires, personalities, and struggles. For the idealists, who drew on dominant gender discourses within the faith, gender complementarianism operated as a lens through which they understood how to “do” gender in their relationships but also how they “do” their faith.

At the core of the idealists’ worldview is the belief in gender essentialism. Emily offers a typical example about the view of differences between men and women:

TABLE 1 Gendered Evangelical Worldviews

	Idealist	Independents	Ambivalents
Gender Framework	Complementarianism	Egalitarianism	Individualism
Emphasis	Difference	Independence	Choice
Evangelical cultural resource	Popular evangelical discourses on gender and relationship	Interpretations of scripture	Free-will individualism
Gender Breakdown	2 men and 2 women	4 men and 2 women	3 men and 6 women

*I think girls are very uneducated about the male mind and the way that the mind perceives things so visually and physically, like how the physical attraction can so often take over and make [it] hard to see clearly the emotional or spiritual connection.*

Emily presents men's biology as posing a struggle to their own spirituality which she contends women fail to understand because this struggle is an innate characteristic of men. Gender essentialism exists here as a struggle, but not a problem. In Emily's quote, the problem she outlines is that "girls are uneducated about the male mind," but the construction of gender essentialism remains unproblematic. From the idealist gendered evangelical worldview, gender differences represent a fact of life because they are part of God's plan and gender problems only emerge when people begin to ignore or try to reduce these differences. As Logan notes,

*Women and men complement each other and that's why I think that 99% of the gender debates are completely useless . . . they sort of frame that women are women because they have female reproductive organs and men are men because of male reproductive organs, not because of the way they think or all different kind of stuff.*

Compared with some secular understandings of gender essentialism that focus on biology (Bem 1993), idealists believe gender differences embody larger spiritual and God-given distinctions. On the surface, gender essentialism constructs different and polarized struggles to negotiate in relationships, such as men's biological weakness and women's relational weakness (Freitas 2008; Perry and Armstrong 2007). On a deeper level, however, gender essentialism represents their overall approach to faith and relationships while providing them a template for how to emotionally understand the intersection of the two.

The belief in spiritual and natural gender differences structured action within the idealists' relationships by creating presumed gender boundaries that required negotiation. While many of the young evangelicals reported gender homogenous peer networks, idealists detailed an intentional practice of establishing boundaries in friendships based on gender. Although they found "hanging-out" in large mixed-gender groups acceptable, idealists expressed concern about maintaining close friendships with the other gender. For example, Leslie explained how when she started dating her boyfriend, they decided to not develop any new close friendships with people of the other gender and refrain from socializing with their preexisting friends of the other gender in one-on-one situations. All idealists, even those who were not currently in a dating relationship, expressed concerns about "appropriate" friendships and reported feeling friendships with the other gender had limited potential intimacy because of essential gender differences. In the quote below, Mark notes how friendships with girls fail to be as emotionally and spiritually involved as with his guy friends.

*With my guy friends, I won't hesitate to bring up sin in my life and just be able to share and seek counsel from them and work through it, [by] pray[ing] together and stuff like that. But I mean*

*praying one-on-one with one of my girl-friends is something that occasionally happens, but it's not something that regular. It just gets kind of weird.*

The gender boundaries in relationships simultaneously operated as an intentional project for idealists but also as one they viewed as an inevitable reality of gender differences. Thus, gender essentialism informs not only ideas about what men and women are like, but also shapes the way idealists position themselves and their peers in their faith and their subsequent actions.

Studies of evangelical, married couples find that gender complementarianism and gender essentialism become ideologically enacted in the practice of male headship (Bartkowski 2001; Gallagher and Smith 1999). For unmarried evangelicals, however, they first have to form relationships and for idealists, gender essentialism creates a social boundary between men and women that must be negotiated before they can couple. Therefore, they tended to support and practice courtship, and other practices where the man acts as the initiator, to form Christian relationships because it provides a clear way to traverse the social boundary. Although the definition of courtship is contested (Irby 2013), most agree it involves the man assuming the lead in the premarital relationship by the man asking the father for permission to date his daughter, as well as continuing to involve him in the relationship development (Irby 2013; see Chediak 2005 for an example). Important to note, support for male-headship or courtship among idealists did not break down by gender. In fact, as Bryant (2006) found women were equally supportive of the practice. Idealist women believed the man should lead the relationship and explicitly explained the importance of women's roles in supporting men as leaders. Emily, a single woman who never dated, told me she "realized in the past year that I absolutely have to have the guy be pursuing me" because "it's almost a confirmation that he's from God." For Emily, pursuing a man herself went against not only her belief in women's nature but potentially positioned her against God's will. The support of male headship did not wane for the women in relationships either. Leslie and her friends, for instance, relied on each other to learn how to encourage leadership in their boyfriends.

*All of us have talked about the man being the spiritual leader, like Carla and her fiancé Greg, he really sets the tone for the relationship and I think in a lot of other things, even physically. We've had conversations [about] how [we] really believe that the guy has to be strong and he steers the relationship. [We've talked about] some guys' ability to lead, how we can encourage them to lead. We've talked a lot about [how to] encourage the people we're dating to be better men.*

Leslie relied on her friends to help her understand and practice what she viewed as her role as a helpmate in relationships. Given the future orientation to relationships, these women are investing in their future by developing a skill and disposition that prepares them for marriage.

The gender essentialism and complementarianism that constitute the gendered evangelical worldview of idealists informed ideas about masculinity and

femininity, as well as provided a deeper structuring of their faith. The belief in innate differences between men and women resulted in a spiritual, as well as social, distance which can be seen in the idealists' difficulty in forging emotional intimacy across a gender boundary. These boundaries created barriers to establishing relationships that while emerging from a belief about gender, also represented an understanding of how to act as a person of faith in ways that were consistent with and adulated God. Complementarianism did not just create barriers; however, it also established an understanding that men and women are complete in heterosexual relationships. As part of God's plan, men and women have different characteristics that they believe balance in marriage which makes striving for relationships a part of their spiritual journey. Perhaps due to this perspective, singleness did not figure as predominantly in the idealists' accounts as it did in the independents and ambivalents. For the couple idealists not in a relationship at the time of the interview, they appeared to demonstrate a trust that relationships would develop in the future and focused on preparing themselves spiritually for them in the present.

### *Independents*

While much of the existing scholarship on gender and relationships among evangelicals concentrates on gender complementarian beliefs (Freitas 2008; Gallagher and Smith 1999), this only describes one of the many religious understandings of gender and relationships among evangelicals. Evangelical beliefs on gender essentialism and complementarianism are not universal or uncontested within the subculture (Bartkowski 2001). As equally outspoken about gender as the idealists are independents that focused on gender egalitarianism. Josh, for example, early in the interview without prompting, offered "I think about gender roles a lot. I don't believe in essentialist roles, as in the man is to lead, protect and to provide. The woman is to serve, nurture and submit." Recognizing that their perspective on gender and relationships do not support dominant evangelical views, they explicitly offered religiously framed, contradicting rationales that focused on independence *in* relationships, as well as *from* relationships.

All of the independents interviewed had been raised evangelical and were well versed in the dominant messages about gender complementarianism. However, they also had witnessed their evangelical parents embody their faith differently in their relationships. In reflecting on how their parents *talked* about gender and how they *did* gender, they found a contradiction which they used to argue for a gendered evangelical worldview rooted more in egalitarian action than religious rhetoric. While many of the independents reported admiring their parents for not following traditional, evangelical gender roles in their relationships, they also critiqued their parents for not being more explicitly egalitarian. Erin's discussion of how her parents negotiated roles in their relationship typifies this tension. When I asked Erin what she admired in her parent's relationship, she first stated, "I like that they have pretty flexible ideas about roles and function-

wise they have pretty equal standing in the family.” However, when I asked her what she would do differently in her own relationship, she replied,

*I feel like I've watched [my parents] go through [a] thinking process about the whole roles of the female and male in marriage and what that means. And, while I feel like they function pretty equally, I don't know that they would say that they do. I think my dad would say that his role spiritually is different than my mom's. And, that really bothers me a lot. I couldn't ever be in a marriage like that.*

Erin, and other independents, witnessed Gallagher and Smith's (1999) “symbolic traditionalism” and “pragmatic egalitarianism,” but as the children of these relationships they saw a contradiction where their parents apparently did not. By focusing on the egalitarian practices they witnessed, rather than the symbolic rhetoric about roles, their parents' actions became the more salient evangelical model. Ryan, for instance, downplayed his parent's beliefs about male headship, saying, “despite the lip service they give to that certain theology, that's not practically how things work out.” In privileging action over talk, they negated the importance of public religious rhetoric on gender difference and their religiously committed parents' egalitarian actions became a model for how to construct and act within their own evangelical relationships.

Instead of viewing relationships as consisting of two complementary parts, independents discussed relationships as a union of two independent people. When describing her recent break-up with her boyfriend, Erin said that one problem with the relationship was that she “wanted a lot more independence and he wanted a lot less independence.” Whether in recounting their past relationships, or when thinking forward to how they aspired to construct Christian relationships, they stressed the independence of each person. For instance, Brendan described his ideal interaction with a partner as a “balance of independent interest but with a sort of shared concern because we care about each other.” From independents' perspective, men and women did not face different struggles but instead all Christians faced similar struggles in forming a relationship of independent equals.

On the surface, the independents' gender egalitarianism constructed a set of expectations for how men and women would interact in a relationship based on mutually supporting each other. On a deeper level, gender egalitarianism combatted the logic of gender complementarianism and provided these young evangelicals a way to conceptualize a religious period of singleness. Given the pressure of “ring by spring” on evangelical campuses, all the young evangelicals described the salience of coupling. Whereas the idealists emphasized relationships and believed that in relationships “a woman's job is to be patient and to pray to God” (Freitas 2008:114), the independents viewed this pressure as cultural and not religious. Below, Holly presents the tension that the independents' gendered evangelical worldview created between her and her mother, but ultimately she reframes her mother's religious concerns.



*My sister and I were both raised under the Southern mentality of you grow up and you become an ideal, nice, Southern homeschooling mommy. We had to be like "Okay, what if we don't" . . . My mother has never known adulthood outside of marriage. She got married out of college. And because marriage means so much to who she is and her spiritual life, I think she's very concerned for us. "How will we develop spiritually without marriage?" I am not concerned, because my sister is so independent and she looks after herself very well. So, when my mother voices these concerns to me, I try to comfort her but there's that tension, "What will happen to the daughters if they won't get married?" (Laughs) Well, I'll tell you what will happen, they'll just [become] more and more independent and it will be lots of fun.*

From the independents' perspective, singleness is a period to enjoy and grow spiritually. Since they do not hold gender complementarian views, the prospect of a single life provides no conflict to their religious development.

The independents not only critiqued the subcultural pressure to couple as cultural, they offered a scripturally informed counter-position that recast singleness as, at the very least, equally Christian. Holly offers a typical example,

*In Paul's time singleness was something that was assumed for everybody unless you got married. And, now marriage is something that is assumed for everybody, unless "Oh my goodness you stay single."*

Drawing on the scriptural literacy they learned at evangelical colleges, independents offered articulate theological and scriptural critiques about the evangelical emphasis on marriage. By offering a counter-argument rooted in a literal view of scripture, independents re-appropriated the tools of evangelicalism to argue for a nondominant social position but ensure their argument is itself evangelical, and thus is not tainted with secular liberalism.

As with the idealists, the independents held a gendered evangelical worldview, but one where gender egalitarianism structured how they believed faith should be practiced, as well as how Christian relationships should be constructed. For independents, both men and women are similarly positioned religious beings. While gender egalitarianism does not result in viewing themselves as differently positioned by gender in the faith, it also does not negate the influence of gender in their religious lives. Independents frequently thought about and engaged with gender through direct critiques of many of the dominant gendered logics about relationships, such as essentialism or complementarianism. Their critiques of the subculture were motivated from their deep commitment to the evangelical tradition, their religious participation empowered and motivated them to discuss where they believed people strayed from Christian values. Just as Dillon (2001) notes that "through their immersion in routines, narratives, and dispositions of Catholicism provides Catholics with the interpretive authority and symbolic resources to make official church teaching a site of . . . 'contested knowledge'" (422), these young evangelicals do the same with American evangelicalism. By decoupling the social from evangelical practices and offering a religiously articulate scriptural analysis, independents construct a counter-position within evangelicalism to redeem singleness and promote gender equality.

### *Ambivalents*

Idealists and independents confidently and frequently asserted their perspective on how gender should operate in Christian relationships, but the undecided ambivalents nearly outnumbered their more vocal peers. Compared with the other young evangelicals, ambivalents' often had the shortest and least confident interviews, because they appear to discuss gender less often due to their belief that it works out individually in relationships. In the larger debate they witness between gender complementarianism and gender egalitarianism, ambivalents represent a hesitant and unsure "mainstream." At times ambivalents would appear to lean toward the perspective of one of these other worldviews, but ultimately relying on the tradition of individualism within evangelicalism, they adopted a laissez-faire perspective that asserted whatever works best for people is acceptable.

Throughout the interviews, ambivalents missed opportunities to highlight gender where their independent or idealist peers might have. For instance, when I asked Kristi about her parents' relationship, she replied, "My mom has said that you should always have some way to make income, in case something happened. But in my mind I never even had serious questions that they [would] stay together, no matter what happened." While she never explicitly mentions gender, she implicitly and ambivalently evaluates it. Compared with the independents who used these types of statements to support gender egalitarianism and independence, Kristi de-prioritizes the gendered undercurrent in her mother's comment and instead shifts the understanding toward the religious domain of commitment. Likewise, below Jimmy draws on his own personal dating history to counter gender complementarian positions he had learned about earlier.

*When you start dating [an] independent women who's not that damsel in distress, you don't know how to save her because she's not in need of your saving. (Laughs) So it's ridiculous. And I never thought it was a fallacy in [Wild at Heart] until I got to college and started to realize that that book has a very limited idea of what it means to be a man.*

Jimmy's realization of the "fallacy in [Wild at Heart]" did not result in the development of an overarching gender ideology. Instead, similar to other ambivalents, he deemphasized gender ideologies and focused instead on his individual experience.

Ambivalents individualized not only their own position but also that of their religious peers who promoted gender complementarianism and gender egalitarianism. In the following quote, Jessica highlights action in relationships over ideology.

*I think in terms of complementarianism or egalitarianism, whatever model works for you and your relationship, [as long as] you both are serving each other equally and you both feel safe and secure and loved and are glorifying God.*

Unwilling to prescribe one gender ideology, ambivalents try to see both options as equally valid and *dependent* on the people in the relationship and surrounding context. For instance, Anna expresses a similar message about understanding and actualizing ideas of gender in relationships.

*My experience is that a lot of it is worked out in relationships and based on personalities. [It] is just much more play it by ear, depending on who you're with, type of thing than people really let on.*

Ambivalents tended to favor the language of “submission” over the language of “independence.” Focusing only on their language, it would appear they lean more toward idealists who also use the language of submission to describe male headship in relationships. However, their position is more complicated than it first appears because they also often tempered the language with explicit individualizing asides and actions that make them appear to lean more toward the independents. For instance, Jessica, quoted above, helped to start a Christian feminist club on her campus to stimulate discussions about sex and gender from a Christian perspective, but she adamantly asserted the club is about “emphasizing things like service, not necessarily equality.” For Jessica, Christian feminism is about individual action and allowing for disparate views on gender. Likewise, when describing her ideal relationship, Anna said, “[I] definitely don’t want to be a little submissive, obedient wife. I mean, I basically want submission to each other.” Ambivalents drew on the tradition of individualism within evangelicalism (Smith 1998) to deprioritize gender and reduce its salience, a practice that remains a position about how gender should operate within relationships but differs from the other two worldviews.

On the surface, religious individualism overrides any gender ideology because ambivalents refuse to commit to either idealists’ gender essentialism or independents’ gender egalitarianism. On a deeper level, however, religious individualism creates dual tensions for ambivalents because they face expectations from both idealists and independents. Their lens of individualism and mid-position on this continuum means that their gendered evangelical worldview does not produce defenses that challenge the other perspectives and instead they remain vulnerable to a set of contradictory expectations. As a result, religious individualism requires that they personally negotiate their feelings and actions without a single overarching gender ideology to help organize them. The strain of facing expectations from both poles of the debates manifests strongest in the comparative case of single women. Compared with independents who have constructed a scriptural and social critique of relationship expectations, ambivalent women viewing singleness through religious individualism experienced a personal struggle. For instance, in the following quote Jessica tempers her longing for marriage with an attempt to consider the possibility of it never occurring.

*I think marriage is [a] very unique experience and I think it would be an interesting experience to have, to be in a long-term committed relationship with someone and have to go through all those*

*different processes. In my heart of hearts it's something I desire but I'm learning to not hold on as much, since it's something that may not be in my future.*

As opposed to independent's gender egalitarianism that allowed women to initiate relationships, the ambivalent women's religious individualism meant they refused to commit to the egalitarian position and thus they almost never initiated relationships. When I probed further with these women I found that unlike the idealist women they were not opposed to women initiating, but they feared men's responses to their taking the leadership role, especially if they asked a man who believed in male headship. As a result, single ambivalent women never discussed singleness as a period of spiritual growth but rather as something they must learn to accept and to cope with. In the following quote by Anna, she outlines the emotional struggle she experienced as a result of her singleness, "It has been really hard to let go of what I think is the perfect life. Most of the girls and guys I know that are Christian think a perfect life involves marriage and kids." Not yet 22, Anna emotionally describes her failure to get married and follow the relationship script of "ring by spring."

While the ambivalents relied on religious individualism to deemphasize any overarching gender ideology, gender did not disappear. As with the other worldviews, the ability to critique existing gendered frameworks for evangelical relationships emerges from ambivalents' commitment to and positioning within the faith. The importance evangelicalism places on personal experiences and the preexisting tendency to address social problems by using the subcultural tool of individualism (Emerson et al. 1999) situates their worldview within the evangelical subculture, but in a different way than the other two worldviews.

## CONCLUSION

By analyzing when and how gender emerges as salient in the construction and experience of young evangelicals' premarital relationships, this paper complicates existing studies of gender in conservative religions by demonstrating the situationality and relationality of gender. In the definition of Christian dating, young evangelicals focused on establishing a clear boundary with secular conceptions of relationships. Gender only emerged when they bracketed the conversations to within the evangelical community. In other words, in the context of the secular boundary, the salience of how gender structures relationships subsided for the perceived more pressing distinction of what makes Christian dating different and often by extension "better" and "healthier" than secular relationships. As Edgell (2012) notes, religious communities often use boundaries to shape ideal forms and expressions of gender and relationships which in turn constructs stigmatized practices. The gender-neutral ideal of Christian dating, while admittedly difficult to obtain, became a way young evangelicals distinguish themselves from what Avishai (2008) calls the "secular Other" and helps to ground religious

individuals in a community of observers. This definitional coherence breaks down, however, when the discussions turned to the lived experiences of young evangelicals within a campus community of other observers whose ways of understanding and doing religion varied. Demonstrating a greater variety of ways that young evangelicals can view and embody religion and gender than previous research, this paper shows how and when gender emerges as a deeply held *gendered evangelical worldview* that is not reducible to either institution.

While relationships are a deeply personal practice that involve forming an intimate connection with another person, how people form relationships and make sense of them reveals a significant amount about the social institutions individuals are embedded within. At different points in these interviews, narratives about relationships served as ways for young evangelicals to wrestle with questions about gender, faith, and culture. Relationships provided ways for young evangelicals to distinguish themselves from their secular peers, as well as to exert their own religious agency by creatively applying religious resources and logics provided to them by their community to a local construction of the broader moral dilemma of changing patterns of gender and relationships (Gerson 2010). Compared with previous studies that focus on static “roles,” this study highlights how gender and religion intersect in a variety of ways that produce different emotional responses and narratives.

In analyzing the intersection of gender and religion among young evangelicals’ dating practices, a number of important themes emerge that offer broader theoretical insights. First, by conceptualizing relationship formation as a religious project, this paper bridges discussions of religious agency with recent studies examining how young adults respond to changing gendered patterns of relationships (Bogle 2008; Gerson 2010; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). The young evangelicals’ participation in the evangelical subculture does not protect them from the larger shifts in secular America. However, their views on the shifts and the solutions they imagine are filtered through lens emerging from their religious community. Even in the context of conservative religion, where nostalgic images of gender roles remain pervasive (Gallagher and Smith 1999), gender remains an unfinished institution. Existing both within secular and religious contexts, relational ambiguity has produced an opportunity for young evangelicals to exert their religious agency not just toward their own relationships but sometimes, like in the case of independents, with the broader goal of challenging and reforming their religious tradition. They do not seek to dismantle but rather to improve gender regimes and align it with their view of Christianity. For all the young evangelicals, even the idealists and ambivalents who did not seek substantial shifts to evangelicalism, the context of contested relationship beliefs within both the broader culture and their religious community meant that relationship formation represented a religious project. Specifically, the religious project was part of a broader process of becoming a religious subject that had implications for what it means to be a Christian in secular America.

Second, by bridging social constructionist approaches to gender (Connell 2009; Lorber 1994) with more cultural approaches to religion that emphasize religiosity as a state of becoming (Avishai 2008) and how people emotionally make sense of their faith through narratives (Edgell 2012), this paper deconstructs different ways that religion and gender can intersect. Starting with emergent themes about how young evangelicals themselves debate and attempt to formulate views that they find religiously consistent, this paper presents a continuum of gendered evangelical worldviews that move beyond ideological beliefs about what men and women should do, offering instead an analysis of how religion and gender are intimately and emotionally connected in the lives of young evangelicals. For instance, while language about complementarian roles emerged throughout the interviews, especially with the idealists, gender complementarianism more deeply impacted idealists' relationships and religious lives because it emotionally structured who they viewed themselves praying with and the importance of relationships. Likewise, analyzing the gendered experiences of both men and women illuminates greater nuance into the relational dimensions of gender as an institution while avoiding monolithic presentations of the experiences of men or women in conservative religions.

While this paper offers new theoretical and empirical insights into how gender and religion operate as simultaneously incomplete institutions in the relationship of evangelical young adults, it also reveals new questions for future research. First, much of the scholarship on unmarried evangelicals has focused on religious college students negotiating relationship norms either on secular campuses (Bryant 2006; Perry and Armstrong 2007; Wilkins 2008) or on religious campuses (Irby 2013; Freitas 2008). As a result, little is known about the gendered and religious relationship patterns of young evangelicals who do not attend college. Future research into this population would provide greater insight into how these accounts are classed and the degree to which peer accountability influences these patterns. A second, and related, area for future research would be to interview older unmarried evangelicals. While I included alumni in my study, all the participants were under the age of 25 and often only a few years out of college. Previous research has found that scripts and opportunities for relationship formation often change postgraduation (Bogle 2008). In the case of unmarried evangelicals, what will happen to the independent women who embraced their singleness? Do they reach a point where relationship pressures begin to resurface and if so how do they respond? Outside of the context of Christian colleges, young evangelical women may find it more difficult to find suitable partners because churches tend to be dominated by women. Therefore, do the experiences of single men and women at older ages increasingly diverge? Studying the gendered and religious relationship patterns for these populations would provide insight into the role of contexts in shaping how unmarried evangelicals "do" their religion (Avishai 2008).

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