

The Development and Factor Structure of the Parishioner Perspectives of Homosexuals Within Religious Organizations Instrument (PPHRO): A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The development of the Parishioner Perspectives of Homosexuals within Religious Organizations Instrument (PPHRO) is described, including the initial examination of the construct validity through an exploratory factor analyses with a sample of primarily evangelical Christians. Using orthogonal rotation the factor analysis revealed a reduction in items and a possible two-structure solution.

Keywords: homosexual, parishioner, perspective, church, religious organizations

1. Introduction

During the last two decades the topic of religiosity and sexual identity has generated considerable research interest (Bozard & Sanders, 2011; Marshall, 2010; Olson & Cadge, 2002; Scheitle, Merino & Moore, 2010; Sherkat, 2002; Whitley, 2009; Worthington, 2004; Yarhouse & Tan, 2005; Yarhouse & Tan, 2005b). In the United States despite theological differences many evangelical churches and mainline tradition embrace the common view point that the practice of homosexuality should be shunned, but the individual, regardless of sexual orientation, should be accepted with love and non-prejudicial attitudes (Hodge, 2005; Davidson, 1999). The egalitarian nature of Christian doctrine dictates that homosexuals and heterosexuals are equally welcome inside the corridors of faith, yet doctrine prescribes abstinence from sexual behavior outside of marriage and outside of male-female dyads (Hodge, 2005). Zabniser and Boyd (2008) offer a reflective discourse on the theology of love and compassion toward homosexual individuals through a Wesleyan lens. While the distinction between acceptance of the individual and simultaneous rejection of the individual's sexuality may be understood by worshippers, this stance is widely interpreted as a rejection of homosexuals by Christian churches (Buchanan, Harris & Hecker, 2001). Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman (2011) report that homosexuals experience prejudice and abandonment by the church community. In a meta-analysis of the relationship between various forms of religiosity and attitudes to lesbians and gay men, Whitley (2009) concluded that in the majority of types of religiosity research shows a correlation with negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Research points toward a lower rate of homosexual participation in traditional religious organizations, an indication that one cost of accepting and embracing a homosexual identity is the rejection of faith (Buchanan et al., 2001). Lease, Horne, Noffsinger-Frazier (2005) maintain that it is unfeasible to incorporate both a homosexual and a spiritual identity within the confines of organized religion.

The gap between Christian doctrine and the day-to-day practices of Christians is a common criticism of Christianity. In light of the undeniable reality that Christians associate with coworkers, family members, and neighbors who are homosexual, the fidelity of congregations in accepting church doctrine in regard to homosexuality is an important and largely unanswered question. Church history is replete with examples of macro level doctrine being disregarded or imperfectly reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of parishioners.

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Djupe et al. (2006) found Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Episcopal Church clergy held significantly different viewpoints on homosexuality than their parishioners and were unable to reliably predict church members' perspectives. The authors suggest that incongruence exists between the perspectives of the clergy and those of congregational members in regards to homosexuality. Smith (2011) asserts that religious viewpoints related to political issues tend to follow rather than lead public opinion. Smith (2011) indicates "During periods of cultural transition, religious leaders often resist trends in attitudes, values, and behaviors that conflict with their doctrines, but they adjust their positions as their own members become affected by the same transformations sweeping across the rest of society (p. 2)." To better understand the degree to which the doctrine of Christian religious organizations or the official statements of church leaders are mirrored in the viewpoints of members, an assessment tool to measure parishioner perspectives is needed.

The purpose of this pilot study was to describe the development, piloting, adjustment, and initial validation of an assessment to measure perceptions of parishioners towards homosexual participation in religious organizations. The goal was to develop an assessment which could be utilized in church environments to assist researchers in understanding the dichotomy between religion and homosexuality. The objectives were to develop a very brief assessment appropriate for adults, readable at the 8th grade level of education, employing interdenominational language rather than theological terminology, and parsimonious. While the assessment could be used in a number of denominational and non-denominational church settings, the tool was designed primarily for use with Christian churches influenced by an evangelical perspective.

It may seem antithetical to measure the viewpoints of individual practitioners in a belief system where the authority of the divine is paramount. Orthodox Christians are called to embrace truth that transcends cultural trends, basing faith in external authority that rises above the impulses of contemporary society. Individualized subjective interpretations are generally inconsistent with Christian faith, as idiosyncratic opinion is less viable than centuries of doctrine. However, Christian doctrine also posits that the meaning of divine matters is interpreted in the context of the community of believers (Hodge, 2005). The doctrine of the orthodox Christian perspectives on gays in the church may be clear, but the collective beliefs of the community of believers has been given much less attention in research. Djupe et al., (2006) hypothesizes that asking parishioners for their perspectives is an uncommon practice because, due to the complexity of the issue and the desire to avoid discord within the congregation, religious leaders often avoid gathering this information and sometimes sidestepping a stance on the issue.

The significance of developing a measurement tool to capture parishioner perspectives is rooted in the suffering of both heterosexual and homosexual parishioners. In a study of homosexuality and religion, 68% of same sex partners identified with a specific religion and 71% asserted religious faith to be of great personal importance (Rostosky, Riggle, Brodnicki, & Olsen, 2008). Yet discrimination and conflicts within the Church on sexual identity have been linked with negative internal and external cognitions (Lease et al., 2005), suicidal ideation, stress, shame, varied levels of depression, and forms of internalized homophobia (Sherry et al, 2010). Qualitative research reports of interviews with gay men and lesbians often reflect personal suffering from discriminatory treatment in religious organizations (Buchanan et al., 200; Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Lease, Horne, Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005).

Method

The Parishioner Perspectives of Homosexuals within Religious Organizations Instrument (PPHRO) was developed on the basis of a comprehensive review of the literature. Within the context of the tool, *parishioners* refers to those interacting within a set of organized religious parameters, or have associated themselves with a religious discipline in a corporate nature of the greater North American continent. The term, *church* is sometimes associated with the Roman Catholic Church, but in the development of the tool the term church is used broadly, reflecting parishioners of a multitude of denominational and non-denominational orientations rather than referencing views of Catholicism. *Religiosity* refers to an individual's level of involvement and activity within the parameters of their chosen religion. *Spirituality* denotes the level of an individual's sense of spiritual involvement from a higher power or external being, including a reciprocal relationship with a higher power (Senreich, 2013).

Item Development

The initial step in the development of the PPHRO consisted of conducting a literature search for tools used to study parishioner attitudes toward homosexuals in the church.

Assessments measuring adjacent concepts were found, including the Reactions to Homosexuality Scale (Smolenski, Diamond, Ross & Rosser, 2010), a measure of internalized homonegativity, and the Sexual Orientation and Practices Scale (Basset, Kirnan, Hill & Schultz, 2005), a tool which measures viewpoints towards homosexual individuals and homosexual behavior. No assessments measuring parishioner viewpoints on homosexual participation in churches was discovered, though several useful qualitative studies on experiences of homosexuals in the church, literature on theological issues related to homosexuality, and results of attitudinal surveys provided useful guidance in item generation. One challenge in reviewing the literature was comprehending the meaning of research results despite researcher bias, common in this topical area. The voices of parishioners were largely silent in published research and literature. The domains in the literature that informed PPHRO item development might be roughly categorized as: 1) doctrine and norms on sexual activity; 2) homonegativity; 3) separation of spirituality and religion, and 4) participation in church leadership roles.

Doctrine and norms on sexual activity. Because the literature details doctrinal issues related to homosexuality, it was assumed that church doctrine may influence parishioner attitudes, leading to the development of a number of PPHRO items related to church doctrine and the congruence of the parishioner's beliefs with doctrine. Of particular interest is doctrine and church leadership related to the regulation of sexual activity. Most religions attempt to regulate the sexual activity of their followers to some degree (Cochran, Chamlin, Beeghley, and Fenwick, 2004), establishing social norms within the church culture and a unity of behavioral standards (Cochran et al., 2004). Conservative churches have been found to be the most regulatory on sexual issues, projecting overt judgment upon those who act outside the social norms of the church and denouncement of such individuals as sinners (Cochran et al., 2004). Conversely, less conservative Christian groups encourage individual decision-making concerning sexual matters, making little or no attempt to control sexual beliefs or behaviors (Cochran et al., 2004).

Internalized homonegativity. While homophobia addresses a more overt opposition to homosexuality tendered by others, Lease et al. (2005) suggest that internalized homonegativity could potentially be considered a larger problem for homosexuals. Homonegativity describes the process of adopting negative viewpoints toward one's sexual orientation, sexual identity or sexual behavior (Smolenski, Diamond, Ross & Rosser, 2010; Lease et al., 2005). Low levels of religious participation and religiosity have been found to be negatively correlated with levels of homonegativity, suggesting that as the level of homonegativity increases the level of religious participation by homosexual individuals decreases (Lease et al., 2005). This sense of homonegativity has been found to be associated with high levels of psychological distress and disturbance that is compounded by lower social support and decreased self-esteem (Lease et al., 2005). Lease et al. (2005) found that affirming experiences within an individual's faith group is positively correlated to levels of spirituality, while high levels of self homonegativity and perceived levels of bias and prejudice are negatively correlated with less affirming experiences (Lease et al., 2005). The degree to which parishioners are affirming or negative toward homosexuals who are participating in religious organizations influences homonegativity.

Separation of spirituality and religiosity. Sherry et al. (2010) noted a growing number of homosexuals drawing lines of separation between spirituality and religion, with 40% of survey respondents electing to reject their religious affiliation in favor of pursuing a more individual approach to spirituality. Ganzevoort et al. (2011) asserts that the desire to become spiritual rather than religious is directly associated with the abandonment of gay men and lesbian parishioners by their religious organization. Individuals who have left the church after they have come out rated their level of spirituality as higher than those who had no prior association with organized religion (Yarhouse et al., 2005). Respondents noted that religion provided a sense of hope and comfort even in the face of abandonment by the church.

Participation in leadership roles within the church. With the practice of homosexuality considered a sin in many sectors of religion, some churches are hesitant to promote or install homosexual individuals into leadership roles or other visible positions (Rostosky et al., 2008). Rostosky et al. (2008) found that when homosexual individuals were allowed to serve in leadership roles, often the roles were limited and in some cases lesser positions, with only one member of the homosexual couple allowed to serve in a leadership role (Rostosky et al., 2008).

Following the literature review the concepts for the initial item pool were discussed with experts, including three religious leaders (one doctoral level religion faculty member and two master's level evangelical church leaders) and a doctoral level counselor educator. The experts were asked to express their viewpoints on the factors associated with parishioner perspectives on homosexuals in the church, primarily to underscore key findings in the literature and to prioritize content areas for item development. On the basis of the expert interviews and the literature review, 25 items were developed for pilot testing. The pilot testing was conducted with students in a CACREP-accredited counselor education program, who considered the items in terms of relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of content. Student participants were primarily female with an average age of 31 years old representing a diversity of religious backgrounds including no religious interest to highly religious, with the majority of participants church affiliated. The feedback from the pilot testing was used to revise or eliminate duplicate items, unrelated items, and unclear items. Influencing factors on item selection and adjustment included readability of the items, interdenominational terminology, and general clarity of the content. Another important factor was the wording of items to convey a neutral position, which eventually led to inclusion of equal numbers of items which appeared to reflect positive and negative viewpoints on homosexual participation in religious environments.

Initial Content Validation

After adjusting the items for the feedback from the initial pilot, the 25-item survey was transferred into an electronic survey and sent to potential participants through a snowballing method. The pilot was conducted using procedures delineated by the university Human Subjects Review Board as part of the approval of the study. The initial content validation of the questionnaire was explored using an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Internal consistency of items was also considered.

Participants

The study included 148 participants who were primarily White, evangelical, heterosexual church parishioners. The participants' age ranged from 18-67 years, with an $M = 36.82$ ($SD = 12.47$). Participants were 51 (34.5%) male, 96 (64.9%) female, and .7% (1) non-respondent. Ethnicity responses indicated 142 (95.9%) identified themselves as White/Caucasian, 2 (1.4%) identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino, 3 (2%) identified themselves as other, and 1 (.7%) preferred not to answer. The level of education of participants was 4 (2.7%) high school education, 2 (1.4%) certificate, 31 (20.9%) some college, 64 (43.2%) Bachelor's degree, 35 (23.6%) Master's degree, and 12 (8.1%) held doctoral degrees. The participants years of practicing religion had a mean of 30.55 ($SD = 14.27$), suggesting that many of the participants were raised in Christian homes. Participants primarily identified themselves as both religious and spiritual (87.5%).

Procedures

Because the questionnaire was being developed for use with parishioners as a primary audience, the survey was initially sent to 85 individuals known to the researcher to be actively involved in primarily evangelical religions and representing a variety of denominational affiliations and local churches. The initial effort was to procure homogeneity in terms of attracting highly religious, active Christian participants, but heterogeneity across faiths. Though the survey was electronic, the predominant religious viewpoint in the region when the survey was conducted is evangelical. Attracting followers of non-Christian faiths, while desirable, was not feasible due to the lack of religious diversity in the catchment area. Using a snowballing method, participants were invited to forward the survey link to other participants, ultimately yielding 152 surveys. The snowballing process was used rather than sampling a single denomination in order to collect data from a diversity of faiths. After six weeks the data was checked for completeness, resulting in 148 total participants.

Instrumentation

Survey questions were measured on a 1-5 scale where 1 represented strongly disagree, 2 represented somewhat disagree, 3 represented neutral, 4 represented somewhat agree, and 5 represented strongly agree. The demographic portion of the survey included: age, gender, sexual orientation, and marital status, level of spirituality and religiosity, and level of involvement in a spiritual or religious arena. If participants indicated an age under 18, the survey was automatically terminated. Due to efforts to maintain the anonymous identity of the participants, demographic items did not include church, location or other identifying information.

The survey utilized a waiver of signed consent as approved in the Human Subjects Review Board. In the initial survey 25 items on parishioner views and behaviors toward homosexuals participating in religious organizations were included, four of which were reverse duplications to ascertain that respondents were reading items with care. After reversing the scoring on those items worded in the negative, the means on the individual items ranged from 2.11 to 4.33, with standard deviations for individual items ranging from .85 to 1.54.

Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

The data analysis was conducted using SPSS. To determine the underlying nature of the constructs being measured by the tool, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to identify underlying or unobservable factors. The extraction method used for the EFA was principal components. Varimax orthogonal rotation was utilized to assure that the factors were statistically independent from one another. Exceeding the .60 values recommended by Kaiser, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index was .86. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at beyond the .000 level, leading to the conclusion that the data were adequately correlated to warrant the use of EFA. Though interpretability was the key strategy in determining a two-factor solution, a visual examination of Cattell's scree supported the two-factor solution. The Eigenvalues were over 1.0 (F1 Eigenvalue = 4.75; F2 Eigenvalue = 1.33). Factor one contributed 31.56% to the total variance and factor two contributed 29.56%, with the two-factor solution accounting for 61.12% of the total variance. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, the lack of similar measurement tools, and the lack of a clear theory upon which to presume an underlying structure, two- through five-factor solutions were ran and considered from the standpoint of literature and interpretability. The three-factor solution increased the total variance accounted for to 69.27%, but the solution was uninterruptable. The four-factor solution accounted for 76.67% of the total variance and was interpretable, but the Eigenvalue of the fourth factor was .740, below the recommended 1.0. The two-factor solution included 10 of the original 25 items. Four of the fifteen items removed from the questionnaire were reverse-scored items originally in the tool to ascertain if participants were giving adequate attention to the reading of the items. The other ten items were removed because of low communality estimates or high cross-loadings. The remaining 10 items were analyzed further, reconsidering two-, three-, and four- factor solutions. Both Factor 1 and Factor 2 are composed of 5 items. All communalities were above .40. The Pearson correlation coefficient for the relationship between Factor 1 and Factor 2 was significant ($r = -.25, p < .05$), showing that a high score on Factor 1 is weakly (and slightly negatively) associated with Factor 2. Factor 1, named Congruence with Doctrine (CD), encompassed five items, which related to the literature on church positions, particularly in the evangelical churches. The CD factor included items related to sin, sexual activity, and agreement with the overall position of their church on homosexuality. Factor 2, named Personal Attitudes (PA), included three items reflecting relationships with homosexual individuals within the church and two items addressing the polarity between spirituality and religiosity referenced in the item development section.

Discussion

In this study we provide the description of the development and revision of a tool to measure parishioner viewpoints on homosexual individual's participation in organized religion and initial pilot data for the factor analysis of the assessment. The factor analysis of the revised tool led to the identification of two subscales, congruence with doctrine and personal attitudes. Congruence with doctrine is a factor composed of items related to church doctrine. Accounting for reverse scoring, a high score of this subscale reflects agreement with evangelical church doctrine. The personal attitudes factor encompassed items linked to personal opinions, such as the acceptability of leaving children in the care of homosexual individuals during Sunday School. Several items that we believed would be pertinent and important to better understanding the various viewpoints and perspectives of church parishioners were removed from the study because they made no unique contribution to the factors, even when considered in three, four, five, and six factor solutions. Few studies have specifically focused on the levels of understanding shared by parishioners and clergy or church leadership. It is often assumed that the individuals in regular attendance to a particular religious organization would align themselves with the views of those in leadership; otherwise they would not continue to attend that organization. However, as previous literature has indicated, there is often a divide between the clergy and parishioners as it pertains to controversial issues such as homosexuality.

Previous literature and publications have strongly suggested that homosexual individuals do not attend traditional religious organizations for several reasons, including perceptions of discrimination and prejudice towards their lifestyle coupled with their desire to develop spiritually.

The high level of education conjoined with high levels of religious involvement may have influenced the factor loadings. Yarhouse and Burkett (2002) found that 20% of the general population in the United States are antagonistic towards those Christians who identify as highly conservative, and a significantly higher 40% of educated individuals in the United States are antagonistic towards conservative Christians.

The study has several limitations. Snowball sampling methods do not allow for repetition of the same study. Future research should use the tool with controlled samples. Also the limited number of respondents may influence the results of the study. Christian viewpoints in the western states may differ significantly from other regions of the country.

Table 1: *Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis (Varimax Rotation)*

*Items	Communalities	Factors	
		Congruence with Doctrine (CD)	Personal Attitudes (PA)
Feelings that are homosexual in nature are not sin.	.47	.65	.20
Individuals who practice homosexuality are not homosexual; rather they struggle with homosexual tendencies.	.65	.80	.04
It is not a sin for homosexuals to engage in sexual acts together.	.80	.80	.38
Sex outside of marriage is compatible with the Christian faith.	.62	.74	.27
I agree with my church's stance concerning homosexuals' involvement within the church.	.61	.70	.32
I interact with homosexuals on a regular basis.	.56	.15	.73
If I discovered a member of the church was a homosexual, it would not affect my relationship with that person.	.62	.40	.67
I would be comfortable leaving my children with a Sunday School teacher who is homosexual.	.59	.42	.64
I believe a homosexual individual is able to be just as <i>spiritual</i> as a heterosexual.	.72	.13	.84
I believe a homosexual individual is able to be just as <i>religious</i> as a heterosexual.	.50	.11	.70
*Reverse items adjusted.			

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