

Religious Orientation and Prejudice: A Comparison of Racial and Sexual Attitudes

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Abstract

Past research on the relationship between religious orientation and prejudice against out-groups has focussed on racism. A greater tendency toward racist attitudes has been found among persons with an external religious orientation, while an intrinsic orientation has sometimes been associated with tolerance. The present study examined the influence of religious orientation on attitudes toward an outgroup not widely accepted by contemporary religions: lesbians and gay men. Using questionnaire data from white, heterosexual students on four university campuses, an extrinsic orientation was found to be positively correlated with racism, while an intrinsic orientation was not. Intrinsic, however, tended to be more prejudiced against gay people than were extrinsics. It is suggested that an intrinsic orientation does not foster unequivocal acceptance of others but instead encourages tolerance toward specific groups that are accepted by contemporary Judeo-Christian teachings. The hypothesis is discussed that attitudes toward out-groups serve different psychological functions for persons with extrinsic and intrinsic orientations.

Because Western religious teachings generally encourage love of one's neighbor, religious Americans presumably should be less prejudiced than their nonreligious compatriots. Yet social scientists have consistently found that people

who are more religious tend to be more bigoted as well. Gordon Allport proposed a resolution to this seeming paradox by suggesting that there really are two ways of being religious. Some people have a religious orientation that is primarily *extrinsic*, a self-serving, instrumental approach conforming to social conventions. Others, in contrast, have an *intrinsic* religious orientation; religion provides them with a meaning-endowing framework in terms of which all life is understood. Allport and Ross (1967) summarized this distinction by saying "the extrinsically motivated person *uses* his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated *lives* his religion" (p. 434; for reviews see Batson & Ventis, 1982; Donahue, 1985; Gorsuch & Aleshire, 1974).

Originally, the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction (or I-E, as it will be called hence) was conceived as a single, bipolar dimension. This conceptualization has yielded over time to a dualistic view that intrinsic and extrinsic orientations comprise two independent continua. This provides a fourfold typology of *intrinsic* (high on intrinsic, low on extrinsic), *extrinsic* (high on extrinsic, low on intrinsic), *non-religious* (low on both), and *indiscriminately pro-religious* (high on both).

Allport and Ross (1967) reported that an extrinsic orientation tends to be positively associated with prejudice, while an intrinsic orientation tends to be negatively correlated. In other words, since intrinsic use religious teachings to inform their everyday interactions with others, they love their neighbor; for them "there is no place for rejection, contempt, or condescension" toward other human beings (Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 441). The

extrinsically-motivated, in contrast, are religious primarily in order to enjoy social acceptance and integration; religion provides them with “security, comfort, status, or social support” (p. 441). Since prejudice often provides similar benefits, extrinsics are likely also to be prejudiced.

More recent empirical research has provided qualified support for Allport’s formulation. In a meta-analysis of studies using the I-E distinction, Donahue (1985) observed that an extrinsic orientation tends to be positively correlated with prejudice, but perhaps not as strongly as Allport had predicted. He also noted that while there is some support for the view that intrinsics are unprejudiced, many paper-and-pencil measures yield no correlation. This is also the case when behavioral measures are used (Batson, Flink, Schoenrade, Fultz, & Pych, 1986; Batson, Naifeh, & Pate, 1978).

Thus, an intrinsic motivation may be less a force for tolerance than an extrinsic motivation is a force for socially-fostered prejudice. To the extent that Allport was correct in characterizing intrinsics as less prejudiced, the source of their tolerance remains to be established. Is it true, as Allport asserted, that intrinsics have no room for rejection in their attitudes toward others? Or are they more charitable than extrinsics only toward specific groups targeted by their religious beliefs?

Such questions are not addressed by past studies of intergroup prejudice and religiosity, which have focussed principally on racial and ethnic prejudice – usually antiblack sentiment among whites. Since most denominations strongly condemn racial bigotry, intrinsics’ tolerance may reflect simple compliance rather than internalization of an ethic of love for one’s neighbor. What is needed, therefore, is study of the influence of religious orientation on attitudes toward a group that is itself condemned by many Western denominations. In contemporary American society, homosexual persons constitute such a group.

Lesbian women and gay men suffer from many forms of prejudice, including physical violence and discrimination in employment, housing, and

public accommodations (Herek, 1984a; Stoddard, Boggan, Haft, Lister, & Rupp, 1983; National Gay Task Force, 1984). As more lesbians and gay men have openly acknowledged their sexual orientation during the last decade, however, public response appears to have moderated; increasingly members of this group are viewed as persons rather than as homosexuals (Schneider & Lewis, 1984). This shift has been encouraged by influential organizations, including the American Psychological Association, that have strongly opposed prejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation (American Psychological Association Task Force, 1979). Many religious leaders and groups, in contrast, have publicly opposed attempts to prohibit anti-gay discrimination and have held that homosexual partnerships are inherently sinful (e.g., Batchelor, 1980; Drakeford, 1977; LaHaye, 1984). Thus attitudes toward homosexual persons may constitute a conflict for the intrinsically religious between two beliefs: that they should follow religious teachings and that they should love all human beings.

The outcome of this conflict was examined in the present study by comparing white heterosexuals’ attitudes toward lesbians and gay men with their racial attitudes. As in previous studies, extrinsics were expected to manifest more racism than were intrinsics. Further, because hostility toward gay people is generally the norm, extrinsics were expected to be hostile toward them as well. For intrinsics’ sexual attitudes, however, the outcome was not predicted. If intrinsics actually are more loving and accepting of all people than are extrinsics, their attitudes toward gay men and lesbians should be more tolerant. If, however, their racial tolerance primarily reflects compliance with a specific church teaching, they should be at least as prejudiced as extrinsics toward gay people, perhaps more so.

Method

Respondents

Questionnaires were distributed by instructors during class sessions to students at four

universities. Because antiblack racism and attitudes toward homosexual persons are conceptualized here as intergroup attitudes, respondents were included in the analysis only if they reported that they were white (non-Hispanic) and that they had engaged exclusively in heterosexual behaviors since age 16, using the behavioral scale described by Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948). This left a total sample of 126 respondents: 56 from the University of California at Davis (22 males and 34 females), 18 from California State University at Chico (5 males and 13 females), 36 from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (13 males and 23 females), and 16 from the University of Massachusetts at Boston (6 males and 10 females).

Questionnaires

Intrinsic-Extrinsic Religious Orientation. The Religious Orientation Scale (ROS) was used (Allport & Ross, 1967). Most items were rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Multiple-choice scale items (e.g., frequency of attendance at religious services) were adapted for scoring on a 9-point scale. Scores could range from 11 to 99 for the Extrinsic scale, and from 9 to 81 for the Intrinsic scale, with higher scores indicating a stronger orientation. Respondents were requested to respond to as many items as possible and to mark “NA” only if the item did not in any way apply to their religious values. Following standard scoring procedures, NA and blank responses were coded as 5 (the scale’s midpoint).

Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men. Students also completed the Attitudes Toward Lesbians (ATL) and Attitudes Toward Gay Men scales (ATG). Extensive reliability and validity data on these 10-item scales have been collected by Herek (1987). Scores on each scale can range from 10 to 90, with higher scores indicating more negative attitudes. For the present study, internal consistency (*alpha*) coefficients were .86 (ATL) and .91 (ATG). The scale items are reproduced in the Appendix.

Racism. Because white college students are generally reluctant to express overt antiblack

attitudes (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe 1980), seven items from the measure of symbolic racism used by Sears and his colleagues (as reproduced in Bobo, 1983) were adapted for this study. *Symbolic racism* is conceived to be a subtle form of racism, in contrast to overt expressions of racial hostility. It is “the expression [by whites], in terms of abstract ideological symbols and symbolic behaviors, [of] the feeling that blacks are violating cherished values and making illegitimate demands for change in the status quo” (McConahay & Hough, 1976, p. 38). Scores on the scale can range from 0 to 28, with higher scores indicating more racist attitudes.

Religious Ideology. Respondents also completed a 7-item Religious Ideology Scale (RIS) adapted from Putney and Middleton’s (1961) orthodoxy subscale. This scale includes items concerning life after death, the literal truth of the Bible, the existence of hell, and the value of prayer. Scores can range from 7 to 63, with higher scores indicating a more fundamentalist ideology.

Results

Scores on the intrinsic and extrinsic scales were not significantly correlated ($r = -.13$), providing further support for conceptualizing I and E as two orthogonal dimensions. As suggested by Donahue (1985), a median-split method was used with the I-E scales to construct a fourfold typology of extrinsics ($n = 25$), intrinsics ($n = 33$), indiscriminate pro-religious ($n = 30$), and non-religious ($n = 38$). Respondents also were assigned to the non-religious group if they reported both that they were atheist, agnostic, or had “no religion,” and that they had not attended any religious services in the previous year. As a check on whether such a typology obscures relationships within the data, analyses also were conducted with the I and E scale scores. The two approaches yielded complementary results.

Across categories, males’ scores on the ATL and ATG tended to be higher (more unfavorable) than females’, especially for the ATG. This replicates a frequently-observed pattern (Herek, 1987). In contrast to previous research (Henley & Pincus, 1978), scores for racism were only slightly

correlated with ATL ($r = .13, p < .08$) and ATG scores ($r = .20, p < .02$). The overall correlations, however, mask considerable variability among the subgroups. Racism was correlated with negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men for the extrinsics ($r = .34, p = .05$, for the ATG; $r = .27$, n.s., for the ATL) and the indiscriminate ($r = .47, p < .01$, for the ATG; $r = .39, p < .05$, for the ATL). For the intrinsics, however, the correlations were negative ($r = -.12$, n.s., for the ATG; $r = -.30, p < .05$, for the ATL). Correlations were positive but nonsignificant for the nonreligious ($r = .15$ for the ATG; $r = .21$ for the ATL).

The first substantive question to be addressed was whether the student respondents would replicate previous findings that extrinsics are more racist than intrinsics and non-religious. Scores for racial prejudice (see Table 1) were positively correlated with E scores ($r = .24, p < .01$) and uncorrelated with I scores ($r = .07$, n.s.). Racism scores were subjected to ANOVA with a 2 (Intrinsic: High vs. Low) \times 2 (Extrinsic: High vs. Low) \times 2 (Male vs. Female) design. As expected, a significant main effect was observed for extrinsic orientation [$F = 18.98, p < .001$], but not for intrinsic orientation or respondent's gender. Whites' extrinsically-motivated religious beliefs thus appear to be associated with antiblack prejudice.

Insert Table 1 about here

The next question to be addressed was how religious orientation is related to attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. As shown in Table 1, the results differ from the pattern with racism scores. Extrinsically oriented respondents did not score higher than those with an intrinsic orientation. To the extent that the groups differed, there was a trend for intrinsic persons to express slightly more hostile attitudes, especially toward gay men [main effect for intrinsic orientation: $F = 3.45, p < .07$, for the ATG; $F = 1.54$, n.s., for the ATL]. This trend is apparent in the correlations between I-E and attitude scores. While the correlations were not significant between E and ATG scores

($r = -.07$) or E and ATL scores ($r = -.06$), significant correlations were observed between I and ATG ($r = .18, p < .05$) and between I and ATL ($r = .24, p < .01$). Thus, intrinsics appear not to be globally more tolerant of out-groups than are extrinsics; the effect is limited to out-groups favored by religious doctrine. Once again there was no effect for gender.

Since attitudes concerning sexual orientation were not predicted by the motivation underlying religious beliefs, the influence of belief content was examined. Previous studies have shown an intrinsic orientation to be positively correlated with theologically conservative beliefs (Donahue, 1985). This pattern occurred in the present study as well. It can be seen in Table 1 that intrinsically-oriented respondents scored in the fundamentalist direction on the Religious Ideology Scale (RIS).¹ RIS and I scores were positively correlated ($r = .51, p < .001$), while RIS and E scores showed a small but significant negative correlation ($r = -.16, p < .05$). Perhaps, therefore, degree of fundamentalism better explains prejudice against members of out-groups than does religious orientation. To address this question, separate regression analyses were conducted for the dependent variables of antiblack racism, prejudice against gay men, and prejudice against lesbians. Each equation consisted of three steps. First, a vector was entered of three dummy variables representing the four religious orientations. On the second step, RIS scores were entered. Finally, three interaction terms (RIS \times orientation dummy variables) were entered on the last step.²

¹ The RIS assesses fundamentalist Christian beliefs. Since only four respondents identified themselves with a non-Christian denomination (all four were Reform Jews), this was considered appropriate.

² The dummy variables, rather than the actual I-E scores, were used in the analysis to permit ready interpretation of the multiplicative interaction terms. As with other analyses, the regression analysis also was conducted with I-E scale scores. The results were identical to the analysis with dummy coding: the RIS scores added significantly to explaining the

Insert Table 2 about here

Results were similar for the ATL and ATG (see Table 2): a significant proportion of variance was explained by RIS scores, but not by the orientation variables or interaction terms. In other words, RIS scores contribute significantly toward predicting ATL and ATG scores, but the orientation variables do not. For racial attitudes, in contrast, RIS scores did not contribute significantly to the explained variance, but the orientation variables did. Even when religious fundamentalism is taken into account, persons with intrinsic orientation and nonreligious persons manifest less racism. In addition, extrinsically-oriented persons with high RIS scores showed less racial prejudice. In short, persons with an extrinsic orientation were more racist, although the effect was moderated if they strongly endorsed a fundamentalist religious ideology. But persons endorsing such an ideology were generally more hostile toward lesbians and gay men regardless of whether their religious orientation was primarily intrinsic, extrinsic, or indiscriminate.

Discussion

The results suggest that the influence of religious orientation on prejudice depends on the out-group in question. When religious teachings encourage tolerance, intrinsic persons report less prejudice than do extrinsics. When religious teachings do not encourage tolerance or are themselves persecutory, however, intrinsics appear to be no less prejudiced than extrinsics and perhaps more so. In that case, conservatism of religious beliefs better predicts prejudice than does religious orientation. Intrinsically-oriented persons who adhere to religions that condemn homosexuality are more likely to be hostile to gay men and lesbian women than are those belonging to

variance in ATG and ATL scores (but not racism), while the I-E scores added significantly to the explained variance in racism scores (but not ATG and ATL scores).

denominations with a more accepting stance. Thus, an intrinsic orientation is not associated with tolerance *per se*. Rather, it is associated with tolerance toward groups identified as deserving of tolerance by one's religious philosophy. The fact that racial and sexual attitudes are negatively correlated for intrinsics suggests that tolerance for blacks and intolerance for gay men and lesbians may each be expressed with religious zeal.³

This finding is compatible with a functional approach to understanding the different motivations underlying attitudes (Herek, 1984a, 1984b, 1986). The differences between out-group attitudes based on extrinsic or intrinsic orientations can be understood with reference to the individual needs met by those attitudes. By expressing hostile attitudes toward out-groups, extrinsically-oriented persons are able to affirm their relationships with valued individuals and reference groups; their attitudes probably serve a *social adjustment* function (Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). For intrinsically-oriented persons, in contrast, expressing tolerant racial attitudes and intolerant sexual attitudes probably serves a *value-expressive* function (Katz, 1960), helping them to affirm their sense of self by expressing values central to their identity. Different strategies for reducing prejudice are likely to have different effects with each group. For the intrinsically-motivated, persuasive messages should appeal to ethical principles such as love of one's neighbor and tolerance of human rights.

³ The argument might be made that intrinsics are rejecting homosexual *behavior* rather than homosexual persons. Data obtained in the present study do not permit an empirical test of this hypothesis. Such a separation, however, may be primarily a rationalization for prejudice. This point becomes more apparent when such a person-behavior distinction is extended to other minority groups. We would still consider anti-semitic, for example, the Christian who professes love for Jews but objects to "Jewish behavior," i.e., expressions by Jews of their religious identity. Minority group identity and behavior appear to be too inextricably intertwined to permit bifurcation of this sort.

For the extrinsically-motivated, better results might obtain when persuasive messages highlight general trends in society toward greater tolerance for gay men and lesbians, focusing perhaps on highly-respected public figures who have expressed positive attitudes toward this group (see Herek, 1984a, for more discussion of attitude-change strategies).

The present study also indicates that the relationship between racial prejudice and hostility toward lesbians and gay men is more complex than previously assumed. While earlier researchers found a simple positive association between racism and hostility based on sexual orientation (Henley & Pincus, 1978), the data presented here show that for some people that relationship might actually be negative. Some white heterosexuals manifest racist attitudes or express prejudice against gay men and lesbians without doing both. Perhaps this can be better understood when one remembers that there are white gay men and lesbians who are racist, and heterosexual people of color who are prejudiced against gay people (Clayborne, 1978; Cornwell, 1983). Being oppressed oneself does not inevitably lead to sympathy for other minorities; and members of dominant groups can be accepting of some minorities while perpetuating the persecution of others. Consequently, global correlations between the two forms of bigotry are small. Researchers should not make the mistake of equating racial and sexual prejudice.

Since Allport first proposed the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction, empirical research has shown a propensity for prejudice among extrinsics that is not necessarily balanced by an abundance of tolerance among intrinsics. The data presented here suggest that the intrinsically-motivated are indeed capable of prejudice against specific out-groups.

Appendix

Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale Items

The first 10 items comprise the Attitudes Toward Lesbians (ATL) subscale, the second 10 items the

Attitudes Toward Gay Men (ATG) subscale. Scoring is reversed for items as indicated.

1. Lesbians just can't fit into our society.
2. A woman's homosexuality should *not* be a cause for job discrimination in any situation. (Reverse-scored)
3. Female homosexuality is detrimental to society because it breaks down the natural divisions between the sexes.
4. State laws regulating private, consenting lesbian behavior should be loosened. (Reverse-scored)
5. Female homosexuality is a sin.
6. The growing number of lesbians indicates a decline in American morals.
7. Female homosexuality in itself is no problem, but what society makes of it can be a problem. (Reverse-scored)
8. Female homosexuality is a threat to many of our basic social institutions.
9. Female homosexuality is an inferior form of sexuality.
10. Lesbians are sick.
11. Male homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children the same as heterosexual couples. (Reverse-scored)
12. I think male homosexuals are disgusting.
13. Male homosexuals should *not* be allowed to teach school.
14. Male homosexuality is a perversion.
15. Just as in other species, male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human men. (Reverse-scored)
16. If a man has homosexual feelings, he should do everything he can to overcome them.
17. I would *not* be too upset if I learned that my son were a homosexual. (Reverse-scored)
18. Homosexual behavior between two men is just plain wrong.
19. The idea of male homosexual marriages seems ridiculous to me.
20. Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should *not* be condemned. (Reverse-scored)

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Table 1

Prejudice Scores Broken Down By Religious Orientation

		INTRINSIC (MEAN SCORES)	
		LOW	HIGH
		[Non-religious]	[Intrinsic]
		RACE = 5.11	RACE = 4.29
		ATG = 46.29	ATG = 53.45
	LOW	ATL = 35.63	ATL = 41.42
		RIS = 27.22	RIS = 39.45
		<hr/>	
		[Extrinsic]	[Indiscriminate]
		RACE = 8.52	RACE = 13.61
		ATG = 47.28	ATG = 53.50
	HIGH	ATL = 38.00	ATL = 39.80
		RIS = 28.40	RIS = 39.79
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EXTRINSIC			
(MEAN SCORES)			

Table 2

Regression Coefficients for Religious Orientation and Ideology

	RACISM	ATG	ATL
Intrinsic	-7.54 [-.6588] (t = -1.93)*	0.02 [.0004] (t = 0.00)	1.69 [.0412] (t = 0.39)
Extrinsic	8.42 [.6672] (t = 2.24)*	-0.89 [-.0171] (t = -0.16)	3.64 [.0806] (t = 0.74)
Nonreligious	-3.12 [-.2843] (t = -2.20)*	-1.48 [-.0328] (t = -0.28)	1.68 [.0428] (t = 0.37)
RIS	-0.01 [-.0190] (t = -0.16)	0.48 [.2935] (t = 3.02)**	0.49 [.3444] (t = 3.57)***
RIS × Intrinsic	-0.02 [-.0805] (t = -0.82)	— — —	— — —
RIS × Extrinsic	-0.31 [-.7319] (t = -2.64)**	— — —	— — —
RIS × Nonreligious	0.09 [.3060] (t = 0.90)	— — —	— — —
R^2	.2043	.0954	.1098
Adjusted R^2	.1571	.0655	.0804
F	4.3283***	3.1901*	3.7332**

(* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$)

Figures presented are unstandardized (b) regression coefficients, followed in brackets by standardized (\hat{a}) coefficients and, in parentheses, associated t -values, with all variables in the equation. Multiplicative interaction terms were dropped from the analysis if their inclusion did not significantly increase R^2 .