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The Effect of Religiosity & Congregational Status on Tolerance for Religious Disagreement

Among Jehovah's Witnesses

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Abstract

This post-positivist study is designed to examine intercultural/interpersonal communication phenomena between members of Jehovah's Witnesses and those of differing beliefs. Specifically the focus is on what occurs when conflict arises between two parties and utilizes Critical Cultural Dialogue theory as the lens through which to view this research. Surveys will be administered to 20 congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses and use proportional stratified sampling in order to better generalize to the world population of Jehovah's Witnesses. My prediction is (a) that religiosity will have a negative relationship with tolerance for religious disagreement, (b) congregational status will not have a relationship with religiosity, and (c) congregational status will not have a relationship with tolerance for religious disagreement. The data will be analyzed using both Simple Linear Regression and Univariate ANOVA.

Introduction

Religious beliefs and perspectives greatly impact communication between both individuals and cultures. Thus, religion modifies relationships among people of both identical as well as opposing beliefs. Religion has been evaluated in extensive detail from the psychological and social viewpoints, but there is considerably less research examining religion through the lens of communication. More specifically, research focusing on Jehovah's Witnesses (JW's) and communication is virtually nonexistent. Stark and Iannaccone (1997) commented on this lack of research noting that since 1947 there have only been two significant studies concerning JW's published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (Wah, 2001). This study focuses on intercultural and interpersonal communication between Jehovah's Witnesses and those of differing beliefs with the main objective to determine the effects of religiosity and congregational status on tolerance for religious disagreement.

Culture shapes morals, judgments, perceptions, and essentially worldview. It serves as the foundation of one's cosmological, ontological, and even etymological views. When two groups communicate their beliefs, there are bound to be disagreements. It is important to take notice of the distinction between a disagreement and a conflict. A disagreement can transform into a conflict when one party begins to take things personally (Burgoon, Heston, & McCroskey, 1974). "Moral conflict [...] occurs when groups argue from incommensurate positions in fractious debate" (Freeman, Littlejohn, Pearce, 1992, p. 310). There are three characteristics of moral conflicts: 1) Persistent: Both sides feed off each other, essentially making the argument self-sustaining (Freeman et al., 1992). 2) Patterned: Each side misunderstands the other, confused as to why their reasoning is being rejected by the opposing side, resulting in "frustration, anger, and aggression [that] can catapult the dispute to new levels of discord"

(Freeman et al., 1992, p. 316). 3) Attenuated: Moral positions are weak and not clearly stated.

In an attempt to provide clarity, users resort to shallow slogans and rhetoric not conducive to healthy communication (Freeman et al., 1992).

Parties respond to moral conflict with rhetorical eloquence and reciprocated diatribe (Freeman et al., 1992), with each belief using wholly different methods to defend their position. Both sides are playing the “game” but in different “fields of argument,” abiding by incompatible rules that are not understood by the opposition. Reciprocated diatribe is the attack on another belief in order to protect one’s own beliefs. It is inherently “confrontational, agonistic, and redressive,” and has the potential to turn violent (Freeman et al., 1992, p. 318-319):

If advocates can see the rationality behind an opponent’s position, they will no longer be able to characterize the opponent as insane, stupid, or misguided. When they realize the limits of their own philosophical assumptions, they will have more respect for the powers of their opponent’s views. And, in the end, disputants will find the ability to disagree without silencing the other side through repression, injury and destruction, or death (Freeman et al., 1992, p. 327).

Moral conflict arises naturally in society, so it would be wise to learn to understand, if not at least tolerate, people with different beliefs (Freeman et al., 1992, p. 327). The importance of understanding something that plays such a significant role in the public sphere and in our day-to-day communication is great. The communication of one’s religion is a fascinating phenomenon because historically it has been the cause of war, terrorism, and death, yet on the other hand it is a community-strengthening practice inspiring good will, even promoting civil rights, giving

people hope for the future, and creating a sense of meaning and understanding in the lives of numerous members. The effects of religion are broad, impacting individual psychology, public institutions, political decisions, and much more, including interpersonal communication and relationships. This study attempts to further comprehend these events.

Literature Review

Variables

Religiosity

Gender and race are significant predictors of religiosity. Almost all studies assessing religiosity have found that women are more likely than men to be religious (Miller & Hoffman, 1995). In addition, African Americans are also more likely to be religious than Caucasians (Miller & Hoffman, 1995). Religiosity has also been found to be related to a desire to control what can not be controlled (Miller & Hoffman, 1995).

There is a large amount of inadequate assessments of religiosity in previous research. Numerous studies use single-item questionnaires for religiosity, simply equating frequency of religious service attendance with an individual's religiosity (Miller & Hoffman, 1995). The problem with this is the possibility that individual's may attend their religious services because they feel pressured by friends or family, want to save face, or may face negative consequences if they choose not to attend (adolescents being more prone due to possible requirements by parents to attend religious services). Therefore, scales such as this do not reliably assess individual religiosity due to behavioral requirements that may be imposed on them (Miller & Hoffman, 1995). Faulkner and DeJong's (1976) six dimensional empirical analysis solves this problem

and determines an individual's religiosity through evaluation of both behaviors and held beliefs of the individual.

Congregational Status

There is a theocratic hierarchy of titles that exist in each congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. It is directly associated with one's privileges and level of power and authority exercised within the congregation. The two highest positions within the congregation, Ministerial Servant and Elder, can only be held by males.

Tolerance for Religious Disagreement

Tolerance for religious disagreement has been found to have a negative relationship with religious fundamentalism and ethnocentrism (Wrench, Corrigan, McCroskey, Punyanunt-Carter, 2006). Ethnocentrism is how a group views itself as superior to others. Gudykunst and Mody found that while helpful to groups in small amounts, a high level of ethnocentrism is harmful to intercultural communication (2002). Adorno, FrenkelBrunswick, and Levinson defend the notion that ethnocentricity is a way to express one's authoritarian personality, a personality defect (1950). Altemeyer and Hunsberger defined religious fundamentalism as believing in a single truth, theorizing that the more extreme one's religious fundamentalist views, the less tolerant they will be of religious disagreements (1992). Given the definitions and relationship between tolerance for religious disagreement, ethnocentrism, and religious fundamentalism, it is reasonable to conclude that religious fundamentalist ideology promotes inequality. However, it is important to note that religious fundamentalism is not synonymous with religiosity. Faulkner and DeJong's empirical analysis of religiosity (1976) is a six dimensional scale that includes

religious fundamentalism as an item. Therefore, the measure of religiosity used in this study utilizes several other paradigms of religiousness that religious fundamentalism by itself can not encompass, incorporating not only religious beliefs, but behaviors as well. This will provide a more complete, fuller analysis of the participants.

Theoretical Lens

Critical Intercultural Dialogue (CID) is a theory developed by Michael Rabinder James (1999) and is ultimately a solution to moral conflict, rhetorical eloquence, and reciprocated diatribe. At the basis of this theory is the idea that in order for valid criticism to occur, one must first understand the beliefs and culture of the opposition (James 1999). There are three criteria in order for CID to work effectively: 1) Each party must be open-minded toward the other cultural perspective and believe it has the potential to be understood (James, 1999). This establishes trust within their dialogue and eliminates both manipulation and deceptive speech (James, 1999). 2) True understanding will come through dialogue, not empathy for the opposing party, which only gives the façade of understanding (James, 1999). 3) Both parties must agree on a set of fair ground rules. Using these three criteria, CID outlines how to achieve an atmosphere of understanding, leaving the actual resolution of the conflict to the participants (James, 1999).

Religiosity is related to a desire to control what can not be controlled (Miller & Hoffman, 1995). Other people's beliefs and opinions can not be controlled, hence:

H1: Religiosity will have a negative relationship with tolerance for religious disagreement.

Additionally, because females have been shown to be more religious than males (Miller & Hoffman, 1995), and two of the hierarchy positions in the congregations of Jehovah's

Witnesses can only be held by males, congregational status/power could make up for the difference of religiosity lost in males due to their gender. Therefore, I propose a null hypothesis:

H2: Congregational status will not have a relationship with religiosity.

H3: Congregational status will not have a relationship with tolerance for religious disagreement.

Methods

Participants

20 congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses will be randomly selected in the United States. Participants will consist of all members in each congregation, giving a broad range of demographics. This study will use proportional stratified sampling to ensure the members with different congregational statuses are accurately represented. This will allow the sample to be generalized to the worldwide population of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The goal of the survey is to determine if there is a correlation between religiosity, congregational status, and tolerance for religious disagreement.

Design

This study will utilize a cross-sectional survey containing measures of religiosity, tolerance for religious disagreement, and an item on the questionnaire asking respondents their current status in the congregation. Using a cross-sectional survey, the major threat to internal validity is that the outcome is very much influenced by the circumstances the participants are in at that moment in time. Therefore, it is impossible to determine a causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables, but the goal of this study is to find a correlation between variables.

Measures and Variables

Glock was the first scholar to propose that religiosity be measured multi-dimensionally (1950). Since then, dimensions have been added, combined, adapted, and fine-tuned. The most recent scale is Faulkner and DeJong's revision of their 1966 five dimensional measure which has been designed to accommodate cross-cultural research and now includes six dimensions. Religiosity will be measured using a six dimensional scale tailored for Judeo-Christian beliefs developed by Faulkner and DeJong (1976). This scale includes various types of items including Likert-type questions, fill-in-the-blank, open-ended questions, and sentence-long alternative belief statements. Cronbach's alpha for each dimension is above .7 (Faulkner and Dejong, 1976).

Tolerance for religious disagreement is defined by McCroskey, Richmond, and McCroskey (2006) as "the degree to which we can deal with disagreement from another person before we take it personally" (p. 125). Tevon, McCroskey, and Richmond (1998) created the Tolerance for Disagreement Scale. This scale was later adapted to specifically measure one's tolerance for others disagreeing with their religious beliefs. Their revised version contains 20 Likert-type items listed from (1) *strongly agree* to (5) *strongly disagree*. Cronbach's alpha is .86 (Punyanunt-Carter et al., 2010).

Congregational status is a categorical variable and will make use of nominal measurement. Respondents will be asked to place a check mark next to one of the corresponding categories: *Unbaptized Publisher, Baptized Publisher, Regular Pioneer, Congregation Ministerial Servant, Congregation Elder*.

Procedures

20 congregations throughout the United States will first be randomly called to participate in the study. The first 20 to accept will be mailed a sufficient number of questionnaires to distribute to their congregation. Congregations will be reimbursed with a donation of \$500 for completing the survey. There are some negative aspects in mailing questionnaires. 1) The fact that people can easily throw them out, lowering the response rate. 2) There may be some members not in attendance the day the questionnaire is administered. To minimize these threats, I will use brown heavyweight nine by twelve bubble mailer envelopes in order to give the appearance of importance. I will also hand write the addresses to lessen any chance of giving the impression that this is an advertisement. To eliminate any inaccuracies due to absences on the day the questionnaire is given, I will allot a time period of one month to complete the survey, allowing enough time for everyone to finish. I am hoping to achieve a response rate of 75% (15 congregations).

Data Analysis

This study measures two independent variables (religiosity and congregational status) and one dependant variable (tolerance for religious disagreement). Due to this structure, three statistical tests must be run. The first test will be simple linear regression to explore the relationship between the two continuous variables (religiosity and tolerance for religious disagreement). The second test conducted will be a Univariate ANOVA to check for differences in means among the five possible groups (Unbaptized Publisher, Baptized Publisher, Regular Pioneer, Congregation Ministerial Servant, Congregation Elder) within the categorical variable (congregational status) and their affect on the continuous variable religiosity. The third and final

test will be another Univariate ANOVA to check for differences in means between congregational status (categorical variable) and tolerance for religious disagreement (continuous variable).

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