

## Relations among gender, religiosity and personality traits in homophobia: a sample of school student and teacher from Southern Italy

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Recognizing the multifactorial discrimination towards gays and lesbians, Hudson and Rickett (1980) proposed a distinction between homo-negativity, conceptualized as the set of behaviors and negative patterns towards the homosexual community, and homophobia thought as an emotional response to anxiety and discomfort.

**Aims:** The main objective of this research was to investigate psychological characteristics of southern young and older adults, divided in two groups, and with different religious convictions and behaviors in relation to the different presence of homophobic attitudes and behavior.

**Methods:** 300 subjects, were recruited with reference to the gender (52% F, 48% M), selected among students and teachers of a high school in the Calabrian region. It was administered a *socio-cultural questionnaire* to collect general information. In order to evaluate personality traits, the *Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised-Short Form* Italian version was administered. *The Modern Homophobia Scale* (Morrison and Morrison, 2002) was administered to evaluate the homophobic behavior, analyzing gayphobia and lesbophobia separately.

**Results:** The study revealed significant differences in the tendency to assume homophobic behaviors related to the two different generational bands. Adults showed greater tendencies to take homophobic behaviors, both for gays and lesbians, in comparison with the generation of young adults. Moreover, it was analyzed the discomfort that could emerge in the relation with gays and lesbians, believing that homosexuality is a deviant behavior and the support to institutions which discriminate against homosexuality.

**Discussion:** Older adults had greater homophobia traits than young people living in the same southern territory. This result is important from the application point of view because it shows that the continuous, attempts at intervention and campaigns on homophobic behavior are leading important results and this should stimulate to always and deeply promote it on the basis of correlational studies presented by scientific community.

**Keywords:** *ADHD; Adults with ADHD; Attention; Problem solving; Decision making*

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## Introduction

It is known that hostility and discrimination against homosexuals are a destabilizing phenomenon. A careful analysis of the involved factors could be fundamental to act against homophobia and uproot it.

Although the term “homophobia” recalls an irrational fear of homosexuals, it actually refers to negative attitudes towards homosexual persons (Rolle, Brustia, Caldarera, 2014) and it is related to a wide range of patterns, negative attitudes and behaviors towards LGBT people “ranging from the casual use of derogatory language to aggressive staff attacks” (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p.27).

Recognizing the multifactorial discrimination towards gays and lesbians, Hudson and Rickett (1980) proposed a distinction between homo-negativity, conceptualized as the set of behaviors and negative patterns towards the homosexual community, and homophobia thought as an emotional response to anxiety and discomfort.

Pacilli et al. (2011) showed that higher levels of a conservative ideology are related both to an increased internalized homophobia and to a more negative attitude in assessing the skills of same-sex parents.

Lingiardi, Falanga, D’Augelli (2005) were among the first to analyze the issue of a sample of Italians, highlighting that further studies should be useful above all in Italian culture, so much influenced by a purely religious and conservative customs.

Moreover, it is important to comprehend the way homosexuals are perceived by a younger generation in comparison with an oldest one, in which more absolute mental patterns could be rigid and rooted.

With reference to personality, Ciocca et al. (2015), analyzing psychological aspects associated with homophobia, such as psychopathological symptoms, defense system and attachment styles, showed how homophobic behavior was related to traits of psychoticism, while extroversion was related to lower levels of homophobia. Eysenk (1988) proposes a three-factor model of personality description. These three factors neuroticism, extroversion and psychoticism, imply a series of different biological and behavioral correlates.

Specifically, the extroverted subjects tend to seek new or more intense external stimulations to preserve or achieve an optimal level of stimulation. The super-factor “neuroticism” refers to the emotional sphere, while in the “psychoticism” converge elements of impulsiveness, search for sensations, unsociality, irresponsibility, autonomy, aggression and, in extreme forms, reactions frequently associated with crime, paranoid schizophrenia and manic-depressive psychosis.

This topic is characterized by several delicate aspects, which potential could interfere with investigation and data detection. The topic on homophobia risks involving some disturbance

variables, such as the social desirability of the recruited subjects. In fact, some individuals often have difficulty in “declaring” their homophobia as they recognize the negative character of this construct and then seek strategies to hide the disdain felt towards homosexuals and LGBT community. Moreover, subjects could give altered responses due to the sensation of feeling under examination about close identity, thus generating answers that do not really self-reflect. Thus, in this particular field of research it is basically fundamental to apply adequate strategies to eliminate the effect of such disturbing variables.

The main objective of this research was to investigate psychological characteristics of young and older adults, divided in two groups, and with different religious convictions and behaviors in relation to the different presence of homophobic attitudes and behavior. This study was carried out in the South of Italy, according to the suggestion of recent studies (Lingiardi, et al. 2016) with regard to the typical religious and conservative culture of this area.

Specifically, the objectives of the research were:

1. evaluate the differences between two different generational groups (adults vs. over 50 adults) compared to the homophobic attitude towards gays and lesbians;
2. compare genders (males vs. females) with reference to the homophobic attitude towards gays and lesbians;
3. verify the differences in religious style (Believers, Not-practicing Believers and Not Believers) with respect to the homophobic attitude towards gays and lesbians;
4. appraise the relationship between some personality characteristics and the homophobic attitude towards gays and lesbians in the two generational groups;
5. assess the relationship between some personality characteristics and the homophobic attitude towards gays and lesbians in relation to gender;
6. verify the relationship between some personality characteristics and the homophobic attitude towards gays and lesbians in subjects with different religious styles (Believers, Not-practicing Believers and Not Believers).

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

300 subjects, of which 150 aged from 18 to 30 ( $M = 19.03$ ;  $DS = 2.71$ ) and 150 aged between 50 and 70 ( $M = 58.11$ ;  $DS = 5.90$ ) were recruited with reference to the gender 52% were female and 48% male.

Participants were selected among students and teachers of a high school in the Calabrian region, as members of associations and sports clubs. All the participants, who has been guaranteed privacy,

have been informed and thus invited to sign an informed consent, in which the voluntary adhesion to the study was underlined.

### ***Instruments and Procedure***

All subjects were given three self-report tools. It was administered a *socio-cultural questionnaire* to collect information about sex, age, education, marital status, and thus to obtain information on the subject's religious lifestyle (if believer and practitioner, not practicing or atheist).

In order to evaluate personality traits, the *Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised–Short Form* Italian version (Eysenck&Eysenck, 2004) was administered. Participants were asked to complete the 48-item short-scale version of the EPQ-R, which measures four major personality dimensions: *Psychoticism, Neuroticism, Extraversion* and *Social Desirability/Lie Scale*. Participants were asked to rate each item with “yes” or “no” (coded as 1 and 0) depending on how applicable the statement was to them. Accordingly, sub-scale scores ranged from 0 to 12. Differently from the full version of the tool, the Short Form version appeared more adequate since it was not used for clinical purposes, but exclusively for research purposes. This test was also preferred as it is scientifically valid to measure the main aspects investigated in this study, extroversion levels, psychoticism and neuroticism. The data on the reliability of the test reported by Eysenck for males and females are respectively for the scale Neuroticism (N) .84 and .80, for the scale Extroversion €.88 and .84, for the scale Psychoticism (P) .62 and .61 and finally for the Lie (L) ladder .77 and .73.

*The Modern Homophobia Scale* (Morrison and Morrison, 2002) was administered to evaluate the homophobic behavior. Specifically, it was chosen to analyze gayphobia and lesbophobia separately. It is made of two different formats: one that investigates the homo negative attitudes in the confines of gays (MHS-G) and one against lesbians (MHS-L). Moreover, this test allow analyzing the various constructs which constitute the homophobic thought, in order to highlight implicit or not aware forms of homophobia. The two formats are composed for the gay version of 22 items, and for the lesbian of 24. The items consist of statements on homosexuals for which the subject should express the assent or dissent on the basis of a Likert scale from 0 (= strongly disagree) to 5 (= strongly agree). The items were constructed to reflect the following dimensions: personal distress with lesbians and gays, support for institutionalized discrimination against gays and lesbians. Specifically, the items on personal discomfort cover the following domains: socializing with gays and lesbians, feeling comfortable going out with gays and lesbians, homosexuality seen as deviant and unwanted behavior and negative stereotypes.

Considering the delicacy of the topic and its close connotation at the social and cultural level, to control the variables of disturbance, such as the social desirability of the subjects, the procedure applied was the single blind.

To ensure anonymity and privacy, the set of tools was handed in a closed envelope to each subject who, after filling out, replaced it personally in the same envelope. The compilation order was the same for all participants. The time taken to compile the protocol was approximately 20 minutes. The compilation took place in the classroom or at the association's headquarters, but of course, in a quiet setting with the presence of the researcher in order to provide clarifications if requested.

## Results

### *Statistical analysis*

Data analysis was performed using the SPSS statistical package. The *t* test for independent samples was used on the scores obtained at the Modern Homophobia Scale in order to verify the differences between age, gender and religious style compared to the homophobic attitude towards gays and lesbians.

With reference to correlational analyzes, it was performed the Pearson's  $\chi^2$ , between scores obtained at the EPQ-R scales and at MHS. These analyzes were conducted separately, on the basis of the variables considered (age, gender, religious style).

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations of the scores obtained at the Modern Homophobia Scale by subjects of the two different age levels considered, by gender and by religious style.

	N	GAYPHOBIA	LESBOPHOBIA
Young Adults	150	1.90 (.72)	1.90 (.63)
Adults	150	2.70 (1.10)	2.70 (1.08)
Males	144	2.46 (1.01)	1.92 (.63)
Females	156	2.15 (1.03)	2.70 (1.08)
Believers	97	2.5 (1.0)	2.5 (.98)
Not-practicing believers	145	2.3 (1.0)	2.3 (.98)
Not Believers	58	2.1(.99)	2.0 (.84)

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviation of the scores at the MHS

Statistical analysis highlighted significant differences in homophobic behavior between the generation of young adults and adults. In particular, it emerged that adults had higher homophobia traits compared to younger adults with reference both to lesbophobia [ $t(298) = 7.63; p < .001$ ], and gayphobia [ $t(298) = 7.27; p < .001$ ].

Statistical analysis revealed significant differences between males and females only in gayphobia. Specifically, males had higher levels of gayphobia [ $t(298)=2.70$ ;  $p = .007$ ]. Differently, no statistical differences were found comparing males and females in lesbophobia [ $t(298)=.659$ ;  $p = .511$ ].

With regard to the style of religious life, analyzing the differences between the group of practicing believers versus non-practicing believers, no significant differences emerged with regard to homophobic behavior, both in lesbophobia [ $t(240) = .97$ ;  $p = .33$ ] and in gayphobia [ $t(240) = .75$ ;  $p = .45$ ].

Analyzing the comparison between practicing believers' versus not believers' subjects, the existence of significant differences only in relation to lesbophobia emerged. Specifically, practicing believers showed higher levels of homophobia than others [ $t(153) = 3.17$ ;  $p = .002$ ].

Similarly, in the comparison between not-practicing believers and not-believer, it emerged that there were statistically significant differences only in the area of lesbophobia: the not-practicing believers obtained the highest scores [ $t(201) = 1.24$ ;  $p = .01$ ], while there were not significant differences with respect to gayphobia [ $t(201) = 1.21$ ;  $p = .23$ ].

With regard to the group of young adults, Pearson's correlational analysis highlighted a statistical significance in term of negative correlation between neurotic traits and homophobic behavior, for both lesbians [ $\chi^2(149) = -.10$ ,  $p = .01$ ] and gays [ $\chi^2(149) = -.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. No significant correlation neither emerged between the traits of psychoticism, nor of extroversion with gayphobia and lesbophobia, as shown in Table 2.

		GAYPHOBIA	LESBOPHOBIA
Young Adults	<i>Psychoticism</i>	.05; $p = .47$	-.00; $p = .93$
	<i>Extroversion</i>	-.10; $p = .20$	.01; $p = .90$
	<i>Neuroticism</i>	<b>-.28**</b> ; $p < .001$	<b>-.20*</b> ; $p = .01$
Adults	<i>Psychoticism</i>	<b>.23**</b> ; $p < .001$	<b>.17*</b> ; $p = .04$
	<i>Extroversion</i>	<b>-.18*</b> ; $p = .03$	-.15; $p = .06$
	<i>Neuroticism</i>	-.03; $p = .75$	.03; $p = .75$

Table 2. Correlations between personality traits and homophobia in young adults and in adults.

Respect to adults (see table 2), on the other side, the levels of psychoticism were significantly related both to gay phobia [ $\chi^2(149) = .23$ ;  $p < .001$ ] and to lesbophobia [ $\chi^2(149) = .17$ ;  $p = .04$ ]. Extroversion was negatively related, but only to gayphobia [ $\chi^2(149) = -.18$ ;  $p = .03$ ].

Pearson's correlational analysis between personality traits and homophobia in males showed significant correlations between psychoticism and gayphobia [ $\chi^2(143) = .26$ ;  $p < .001$ ]. Similarly, significant positive correlations were found with lesbophobia [ $\chi^2(143) = .21$ ;  $p = .01$ ]. Differently, in

females' negative correlations were found only between extroversion and lesbophobia [ $\chi^2(155) = .18, p = .03$ ]. There were no other significant correlations, as showed in table 3.

		GAYPHOBIA	LESBOPHOBIA
Males	<i>Psychoticism</i>	<b>.26**</b> ; p<.001	<b>.21*</b> ; p=.01
	<i>Extroversion</i>	-.03; p=.7	-.05; p=.6
	<i>Neuroticism</i>	-.1; p=.2	-.07; p=.41
Females	<i>Psychoticism</i>	.13; p=.09	.15; p=.07
	<i>Extroversion</i>	-.14; p=.09	<b>-.18*</b> ; p=.03
	<i>Neuroticism</i>	-.06; p=.41	-.04; p=.62

Table 3. Correlations between personality traits and homophobia in males and in females

Pearson's correlational analysis between personality traits and homophobia carried out on the subjects belonging to the different religious' style (believer-practitioners, believers-non-practitioners, non-believers-non-practitioners) highlighted significant correlations.

The believing and practicing subjects presented significant correlations between psychoticism and gayphobia [ $\chi^2(96) = .38; p < .001$ ] and lesbophobia [ $\chi^2(96) = .34, p = .01$ ]. A significant negative correlation between neuroticism and gay phobia [ $\chi^2(96) = -.28, p = .04$ ] was found. No significant correlations with extroversion were found (table 4).

		GAYPHOBIA	LESBOPHOBIA
Believers	<i>Psychoticism</i>	<b>.38**</b> ; p<.001	<b>.34*</b> ; p=.01
	<i>Extroversion</i>	-.09; p=.49	-.11; p=.42
	<i>Neuroticism</i>	<b>-.28**</b> ; p=.04	-.21; p=.13
Not-practicing Believers	<i>Psychoticism</i>	<b>.30**</b> ; p<.001	<b>.25*</b> ; p<.001
	<i>Extroversion</i>	<b>-.18*</b> ; p=.03	<b>-.24*</b> ; p<.001
	<i>Neuroticism</i>	-.08; p=.34	.00; p=.99
Not Believers	<i>Psychoticism</i>	.14; p=.16	.16; p=.12
	<i>Extroversion</i>	.01; p=.94	-.02; p=.84
	<i>Neuroticism</i>	-.09; p=.37	-.07; p=.47

Table 4. Correlations between personality traits and homophobia in relation with religion style

Even in Not-practicing Believers' group, significant positive correlations between psychoticism and homophobia were found. Subjects presented significant correlations between psychoticism and gayphobia [ $\chi^2(144) = .30; p < .001$ ] and lesbophobia [ $\chi^2(144) = .25, p < .001$ ].

Differently from the previous group, negative correlations emerged between extroversion and gay phobia [ $\chi^2(144)=-.18$ ,  $p = .03$ ] and lesbophobia [ $\chi^2(144)=-.24$ ,  $p<.001$ ].

Finally, as showed in table 4, in not believers subjects no statistically significant correlations emerged.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The study revealed significant differences in the tendency to assume homophobic behaviors related to the two different generational bands taken into consideration. Specifically, it was found that adults had greater tendencies to take homophobic behaviors, both for gays and lesbians, in comparison with the generation of young adults.

Moreover, it was specifically analyzed the discomfort that could emerge in coming in contact with gays and lesbians, the belief that homosexuality is a deviant behavior and the support to institutions which discriminate against homosexuality.

On this basis, as expected, the study showed a greater tendency to assume homophobic behaviors, both for lesbians and gays, by those who had a southern culture much more rooted in their lifestyle. In fact, older adults had greater homophobia traits than young people living in the same southern territory. This result is very important from the application point of view because it shows that the continuous, but too recent, attempts at intervention and campaigns on homophobic behavior are leading important results and this should stimulate to always and deeply promote it on the basis of correlational studies presented by scientific community.

With regard to gender, according to the previous studies examined (Nagoshi, Adams, et al.2008; Fisher, Seidman, 2016), it emerged that males showed higher homophobic behaviors than females. At the same way, compared to the discriminatory behavior towards homosexuals of their own sex, males showed higher levels of homophobia about gays than females against lesbians. This result must certainly be placed in relation to the importance of gender roles, proposed by Herek (1988) and confirmed by further studies (Herek, 2000; Theodore and Basow, 2000; Polimeni, Hardie & Buzwell, 2000).

Beyond both general discriminatory and homophobic behavior, this result should lead to a more specific considerations relative to the concept that in a century in which gender differences should be rare, such a strong anchoring on the respective roles of male and female it should not exist. Therefore, intervention programs are needed to favor the gradual reduction of such prejudices based on ancestral gender stereotypes. Compared to religious morality, the expected results have been confirmed.

Already, Fisher & Seidman (2016), Lingiardi, Nardelli, Ioverno et al. (2016), in various studies with different samples, underlined the correlation between homophobia and religiosity.

This study, in agreement with the previous (Yeck, Anderson, 2018), showed that the subjects who claimed to be believers had tendencies to assume greater homophobic behavior, especially lesbophobia, instead of those who declared themselves atheists. This condition should not be underestimated. Although intuitive, this result should promote interpretative reasoning on the adopted life style by those who professed a religion. Compared to the previous results, this kind of intervention is a delicate and complex task, since the religious sphere is a too private and personal aspect of individuals, which rarely changes. However, it could be effective to act on the new generation's thought, as it could be more open to possible changes and more sensitive to injustices perpetrated by discrimination, as showed by Olson, Key, Eaton (2015).

With regard to personality traits, it should be noted that neuroticism refers to the emotional sphere and the subjects' ability to contain and recognize their emotions. Extroversion, on the other hand, implies a sociable personality which desires a continuous relationship with individuals, open to new things and able to accept differences and changes. The trait of psychoticism, instead, refers to the dimension of anti-conformism, unsociality, social maladjustment and may include aspects of hostility and unsociality.

In light of this, correlations have been found between high levels of psychoticism and homophobic behavior especially in the generational range of adults, in males and in those who were believers and practicing.

On the other hand, traits of neuroticism were negatively related with homophobic behavior in young adults and Extroversion correlated negatively with lesbophobia, especially in females.

From these results it is clear how homophobic behaviors were typical of those personalities which were more antisocial, with difficulty in getting in touch with unusual life situations. These conditions tended to be more present in those whose personality was well-constructed and fully formed or by those who, on the contrary, adopted a rigid lifestyle, according to a religious education. This condition allows this kind of personality to hardly accept the new experiences and changes, as already shown by Nagoshi & Brzuzy (2010) that demonstrated as homophobia was related to the strictly conservative personalities, linked to social norms.

On the other hand, young people, whose personality is still evolving, were able to accept diversity in a more functional way, without an absolute criterion of "normality", and with opened mind to new situations. It is also important to underline, as expected, that homophobia was linked to emotions, such as anxiety and discomfort, but only when the subject was not able to contain them.

This study highlighted the personological and cultural factors related to homophobic behavior in the Southern of Italy. The results should be used to promote more specific interventions aimed at extinguishing discriminatory behavior towards gays and lesbians.

These results should also conduct to deeply investigate a larger sample in the same Calabrian region or in other southern regions, as it should be interesting and opportune to analyze even more representative territories of different cultural systems. It should be useful in future researches to investigate specific religious belief, which represent a limit in this study, in which we analyzed only religiosity in general.

The method used to conduct the research allowed to control some potentially disturbing variables, such as social desirability, but we recognize that the items of the Modern Homonegativity Scale suggests the object of analysis, thus it is essential to look for other tools in able to control social desirability internally.

It would also be advisable for further studies to analyze aspects which can act as protective factors, such as empathy and more specific personality factors, as well as the role of contact and friendship with homosexual persons should be taken into account.

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