

Extraversion, Openness to new Experience, Spirituality and Sexual Attitudes in Irish College Students

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the potential relationship between openness to new experience, extraversion, spirituality, gender and sexual attitudes in Irish college students. In a correlational mixed method design, the participants were given a set of three quantitative self-report questionnaires with one additional qualitative question. The analysis showed a weak relationship between openness and sexual communion. Spirituality was found to correlate positively with communion and negatively with permissiveness. Significant gender differences were found for sexual permissiveness. Research into the area of sexual attitudes should be continued as it seems to be changing over time and influences are not entirely clear yet.

INTRODUCTION

A change in sexual attitudes, similarly happening in western countries between 1950s - 1990s, called The Great Transition (Weeks, 2011) has impacted the traditional view of sexuality promoted by the Irish Catholic teachings and led to a society with both conservative and liberal views on topics like same-sex marriage. As several factors have been proposed in relation to the Great Transition, it is this study's aim to investigate the relations of personality traits, spirituality, gender and sexual attitudes in Irish college students. Research has suggested links between extraversion, openness to new experience and sexuality (i.e. Lameiras Fernández and Rodríguez Castro (2003)) as well as between spirituality and more conservative, less permissive sexual attitudes (Murray-Swank, Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). More spiritual individuals also oppose contraception (Murray, Ciarrocchi & Murray-Swank, 2007). Regarding gender differences, men were found to be more permissive than women (i.e. Fisher, 2007), which lead Luquis and colleagues (2012) to believe that social norms rather than spirituality are responsible for a change in sexual attitudes. As most of the research was conducted in the USA, there is not much recent data for Irish students aged 18 to 30, particularly regarding a joint analysis of the factors personality, spirituality, gender and sexual attitudes.

The last section included the Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale (Hatch et al., 1998) to measure spirituality. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree', '1' to 'strongly agree', '5'. Therefore the higher the score, the higher the participant's agreement with the item statement. Finally, participants were asked if their personal spirituality affects their sexual attitudes.

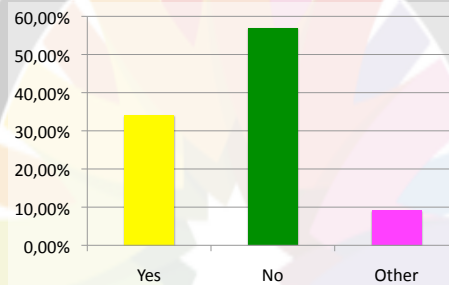


Figure 1: Answer Distribution to Qualitative Question

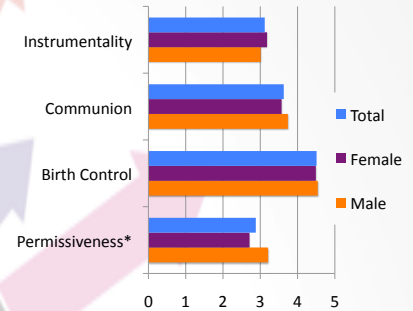


Figure 2: Gender split on sexual attitudes

- ▶ Hypothesis 1: Openness and extraversion are linked to sexual permissiveness.
- ▶ Hypothesis 2: Spiritual involvement is linked to sexual communion.
- ▶ Hypothesis 3: There will be differences between genders for the four sexual attitudes.

METHODS

This study received ethical approval from Dublin Business School. A non-interventional correlational mixed method research design and convenience sampling were used to collect data. 88 subjects (30 males, 58 females) aged 18 to 30, Irish and currently in college education completed 3 quantitative psychometric questionnaires and one qualitative as well as questions on gender, inclusion criteria and consent. 18 items from the Big Five Inventory (John et al., 2008) measuring extraversion and openness to new experience were followed by the Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006) to measure sexual attitudes on permissiveness, birth control, communion and instrumentality.

RESULTS

Using (SPSS) in the 22nd version, two-tailed analysis with a level of statistical significance of $p < 0.05$ and tests for normal distribution were run. Birth control and communion were not normally distributed, therefore parametric and nonparametric tests were used. The 88 participants consisted of 58 females (65,9 %) and 30 males (39,9%). Results from inferential analysis showed that the relationship between openness, extraversion and permissiveness were not significant. Spearman's rho correlation found a weak positive significant correlation between spirituality and communion ($r(88) = .25, p = .018$). $r_s = .25. (.25)^2 = 0.06$. Therefore, spirituality accounts for 6% of the variance between individuals regarding communion. In additional analyses, a weak negative significant relationship between spirituality and permissiveness was found ($r_s(88) = -.22, p = 0.43$). Independent samples t-tests showed a significant difference between permissiveness of males ($M = 3.21, SD = .69$) and females ($M = 2.71, SD = .94$) ($t(88) = 2.81, p = .006, CI (95\%) .14 - .85$) with a mean difference of .50. No other significant genders differences were found. Figure 1 shows the distribution of answers to whether spirituality affects participant's sexual attitudes and Figure 2 shows the split of sexual attitudes by gender, showing only permissiveness to be significant.

DISCUSSION

The current findings are in line with those of Lameiras Fernández and Rodríguez Castro (2003), who also did not find a direct significant relationship between extraversion, openness and sexual attitudes. With regard to the findings, the relationship between personality traits and sexual attitudes does not seem to be as strong as suggested by some of the previous research. While the negative link found between spirituality and permissiveness is concordant with the research of Murray, Ciarrocchi & Murray-Swank (2007), the relationship between spirituality and sexual communion is not. The findings on gender differences are in line with those of previous research (i.e. Fisher (2007)), with males being more permissive than females. This could be a sign that the gender gap is still not closed. Opposing to Luquis and colleagues (2012), a gender difference regarding birth control was not found, which might be an outcome of sex education in Irish schools.

The generalizability of results might be limited due to the use of a small, gender - imbalanced sample and a self-report correlational design that did not lead to causal explanatory factors.

CONCLUSIONS

The ambivalent findings from this study are valuable as they bring new insights to sexuality research and might be the first to target Irish college students in particular. Furthermore, they indicate that education on birth control as a part of healthy sexuality has been successful but needs to be continued. Future research should focus on variables that might be closer related to sexuality than personality traits i.e. an (Irish) culture factor or the distinction between biological sex and gender affiliation.

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