

Faith, Conservatism, and Discrimination

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Although significant strides have been made for sexual and gender minority (SGM) rights in the United States, there continues to be opposition to these rights from many conservative Christians and political conservatives. In our research, we wanted to understand reasons that help to explain why this opposition occurs. We focused on two variables related to a system of Christian power and privilege. We examined support for Christian hegemony (i.e., the idea that Christianity should be the norm and that Christians should be in power in the U.S.)



Figure 1 Photograph by GDJ on Pixabay. CCo

“This study advances the understanding of how unawareness of Christian privilege and support for Christian hegemony help to explain the association between Christian and political conservatism and opposition to SGM [sexual and gender minority] rights.” p. 10.

and unawareness of Christian privilege. Our guiding questions were, how does support for the idea that Christians should be in power help to explain why Christian and political conservatives oppose SGM rights? How does a lack of awareness of Christian privilege help to explain this opposition?

Highlights

Sexual and gender minorities rights are being challenged at an alarming rate in the United States.

There is an association between Christian and political conservatism and opposition to sexual and gender minority rights.

Our work demonstrated that support for Christian hegemony and unawareness of privilege helped to explain the association between Christian and political conservatism and opposition to SGM rights. Thus, greater support for the idea that Christians should be in power in the U.S. may be one reason why Christian and political conservatives oppose SGM rights. We also demonstrated that even among Areligious students (atheist and agnostic), support for Christian hegemony helped to explain the association between political conservatism and opposition to SGM rights. Overall, we hope these findings invite greater understanding and dialogue around the larger question of the interface between Christianity, politics, and SGM rights.

Methods

In this study, we gave an online survey to heterosexual cisgender Christian ($n = 688$) and Areligious (atheists and agnostics, $n = 327$) students at a large Midwestern university who were taking an introductory psychology course. The survey questions asked students how strongly they support different types of sexual and gender minority rights (i.e., same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, non-discrimination policies in jobs and housing for SGMs, and bills regarding transgender public bathroom use) along with questions focused on Christian conservatism and political conservatism. Another set of questions asked students how strongly they agreed that Christians were privileged in the U.S., and how strongly they agreed that Christians should be in power in the U.S.

Results

- Support for Christian power and privilege in the United States was linked to opposition to SGM rights, and such support helped to explain the association between Christian and political conservatism and opposition to SGM rights.
- The impact of Christian hegemony and power was not limited to conservative Christians, but also helped to explain the link between political conservatism and opposition to SGM rights even for those who did not identify as Christian.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Community Psychology has called for critical research that centralizes systems of power and privilege as part of research. Raising awareness about systems of power is needed to inform action to challenge these systems. In this study, we drew from a critical-community perspective focused on power and privilege, where we focused on a system of Christian power and privilege in the U.S. and how this system is linked to opposition to SGM rights. Thus, our Community Psychology perspective informed the focus of our study, both on SGM rights as well as a system of Christian power and privilege that may contribute to the marginalization of SGMs.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Future research is needed to study the process of change as individuals become more aware of Christian privilege and hegemony, and how such awareness is linked to support for SGM rights. More work is needed to capture the voices and experiences of SGMs to understand the multiple ways they are affected by Christian privilege and Christian hegemony.

Practice: In working with individuals or communities to garner support for SGM rights, it is important to understand how religious beliefs and beliefs about religious power contribute to support or opposition to SGM rights.

Social Action: We aim to increase awareness of these issues and to promote dialogue in support for SGM rights.

Policy Action: Our findings help to contextualize contemporary religious liberty legislative bills as another example of Christian power and privilege. Action is needed at local, state, and federal levels to ensure such bills adequately balance religious liberty without institutionalizing a Christian norm that legitimizes discrimination toward any group.

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