

2016

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Kienzle, Jennifer; Wertley, Chad M.; and Soliz, Jordan, "Religious Pluralistic Language in a Computer-Mediated Context: Effects of Intergroup Salience and Religious Orientation" (2016). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 180.

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Religious Pluralistic Language in a Computer-Mediated Context: Effects of Intergroup Salience and Religious Orientation

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Abstract

This study investigated the degree to which religious pluralistic language varies as a function of the intergroup salience of a context and religious orientation. Based on a 2 (Religious Salience of Context) × 3 (Religious Salience of Topic) experimental design, participants (N = 239) were instructed to compose an e-mail to an interactional partner based on the randomly assigned condition. Messages were coded for religious pluralistic language, and participants completed measures of religious orientation and evaluations of the conversational partner. Modest effects were found for both intergroup salience of the context and topic as well as religious orientation.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication, Interfaith Dialogue, Intergroup Contact, Pluralism

Religious identity is a central part of our self-concept and a foundation for one's worldview, which often fosters religious exclusivism, in-group favoritism, mistrust, and discrimination toward religious out-groups (Haji & Lalonde, 2012). A majority of religions or religious orientations espouse an exclusivist position in claims about the existence of God(s), morality, and worldviews. Interfaith communication, therefore, is often wrapped in exclusive language as individuals approach the interaction with the orientation of one true belief system that can lead to negative outcomes during

interfaith interactions (e.g., conflict, bias). Conversely, religious pluralism intends to preserve a follower's commitment to one's religion, while simultaneously respecting (or, in some cases, adopting) the inherent value of every religion. Further, a pluralistic approach embraces the differences between faiths and emphasizes reciprocity and honesty about those differences. As such, this study attends to the call for a pluralistic approach to interfaith relations. Keaten and Soukup's (2009) model of interfaith dialogue is based on the idea of religious pluralistic language (RPL) with the goal of increasing understanding of difference, rather than opposing or fearing difference, and embracing the similarities and differences of both perspectives. However, enacting RPL is "much easier said than done." To identify potential factors that may differentiate enactment of RPL compared to more exclusivist language, we focus on the intergroup nature of the context, religious salience of the interaction, and religious orientation.

Intergroup Context and Religious Salience of Conversation

Religious identity's role in social relations can be informed by an intergroup perspective (Verkuyten, 2007), which outlines how we define and compare ourselves in relation to others based on social categorizations (e.g., culture, race/ethnicity, gender) and how those categorizations can lead to favorable in-group bias and negative out-group bias (Tajfel, 1982). Yet, these biases are a function of the salience of a given social category in that different social identities may or may not be central to the interaction. It is when an interaction is characterized by salient divergent social identities that it is more likely to be tainted with intergroup biases (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005). An *intergroup* interaction reflects a context in which divergent religious identities are salient, as opposed to an *intragroup* context in which other inclusive social collectives transcend religious difference. Thus, language shifts as it reflects exclusive (i.e., intergroup) rather than inclusive (i.e., intragroup) motivations. Further, religiously salient topics likely prime interfaith distinctions and, thus, limit enactment of RPL.

H1: Religious pluralistic language is more evident in an intragroup context than an intergroup context.

H2: Religious pluralistic language is more evident in nonreligious topics of conversation.

RQ1: Is there an interaction between intergroup context and religious nature of the topic in predicting religious pluralistic language?

Further, intergroup salience is, at times, associated with more negative perceptions of individuals or groups (Harwood et al., 2005).

RQ2: Does the religious salience of the conversation predict evaluation of the conversational partner?

Religious Orientation

Allport and Ross (1967) conceptualized religious orientations to describe the manner in which religion shapes self-concept, behavior, and perspectives on other religions. An *intrinsic orientation* positions religion as more deeply rooted in personal identity, with individuals actively striving to live according to the teachings of their religion. An *extrinsic orientation* positions religion as more embedded as a social identity, with individuals establishing social networks, status, and self-justification by claiming a religious identification. A third religious orientation, *quest*, examines the extent that individuals view their religious practices as a continual search for “truth.” (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). Religious orientation research indicates that intrinsic and quest orientations are negatively related to discriminatory attitudes (i.e., less discrimination) with the inverse effect for extrinsic orientation (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). Shifting the focus from psychological attitudes to actual language (i.e., RPL) used during interactions, we pose the following research question:

RQ3: Is religious orientation associated with the use of religious pluralistic language?

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 239$) were recruited from a large Midwestern university (120 females, 119 males; ages 18–27, $M = 19.73$, $SD = 1.43$) identifying primarily as White (82.7%), followed by Asian (9.1%), African American (2.1%), Hispanic (1.6%), other/multiple ethnicities (2.5%), and unreported (2.1%). A majority of participants reported that they believed in a God (82%).

Experimental Manipulation and Measures

Our design was partially based on Palomares’s work (2008) on language in computer-mediated communication (CMC) contexts. Participants were informed that we were interested in understanding dialogue about certain social issues and were randomly assigned to an *intergroup* or *intragroup* condition in addition to one of three topics of conversation. The design was constructed such that the participant always interacted with someone of a different belief structure; however, the extent to which that difference is highlighted (i.e., intergroup) or transcended (i.e., intragroup) varied. In the *intergroup* condition, participants were informed that we were interested in dialogue between individuals of differing religious views. For the *intragroup* condition, participants were informed that we were interested in how college students (i.e., collective in-group) discuss social issues compared to high school students. The religiosity of the conversation topics differed as determined by a pilot test: low religious

salience (significance of climate change), moderate religious salience (appropriateness of corporal punishment), high religious salience (pharmacists' rights to refuse distribution of medication based on religious beliefs).

After being introduced to the study and assigned to a condition, participants provided their opinion on the randomly assigned topic and answered additional items including belief in God(s).¹ Participants were then instructed to write an e-mail about the topic to a "randomly selected fellow student." In truth, all participants received the same fictitious student profile that included a gender-neutral name ("Chris"), age ("21"), race/ethnicity ("did not answer"), university attended (same as participant), and major ("undecided"). This profile was created to limit the possibility of other intergroup dynamics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity) coming into play in the interaction. However, the profile did vary on the opinion of the topic and belief in God(s) as to always be the opposite of what the participant indicated.

Participants completed the *Religious Orientation Scale* (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; extrinsic-personal, $\alpha = .79$; extrinsic-social, $\alpha = .75$; intrinsic, $\alpha = .89$) and the *Quest Orientation Scale* (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991; $\alpha = .77$). Participants also completed two items assessing perceived trustworthiness and intelligence (McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975) of the conversational partner. For those in the intergroup condition, religious questions were asked prior to the composition of the e-mail as to further activate the religious salience of the condition. For other conditions, measures were completed after the e-mail composition.

Coding for Religious Pluralistic Language

E-mails were coded for RPL using Eersel, Hermans, and Slegers's (2008) categories of verbal response modes. These categories reflect the underpinnings of Keaten and Soukup's (2009) model of religious pluralism. Categories were altered accordingly to match the tenets of RPL (see Table 1). Two trained raters assessed the RPL categories

Table 1. Categories for Religious Pluralistic Language (RPL)

Category	Description
Religious Language	Religion or religious beliefs are a feature of the message.
Collective Language	The use of "we" or "us" by stating similarities to transcend differences.
Advisement	The intention to guide the receiver by describing ways in which the receiver can learn about a different belief system.
Confirmation	The recognition and affirmation of the different belief system.
Questions	Demonstration of genuine curiosity in the other belief system.
Evaluation	Negative judgment on the receiver based in different belief systems.
Acknowledgement	To state the different belief system through repetition or rewording of the receiver's beliefs.

Except for evaluation, higher scores indicate more pluralistic language.

using a 0–4-point scale and established interrater reliability using interclass correlations (.74–.92) on approximately 20% of the data.

Results

H1, H2, and RQ1 were assessed with a series of 2 × 3 ANOVAs with each RPL category serving as the dependent variable. Mean effects are presented in Table 2. There was a main effect for religious topic, $F(2, 231) = 76.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .399$, in that more religious language was evident in the high religious salience topic ($M = 2.285$) compared to the moderate ($M = 1.16$) and low salience topic ($M = 1.28$).

Examining the main effects of the RPL dimensions, H1 was supported for use of *collective language*, $F(1, 231) = 4.79, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02$, in that collective language was higher in the intragroup context ($M = 1.15$) compared to the intergroup context ($M = 1.06$), meaning more messages featured more inclusive language when individuals were primed to consider in-group status (e.g., college students), even though there were still different religious orientations. No other significant differences emerged for the RPL dimensions.

H2 was partially supported for *collective language*, $F(2, 231) = 3.81, p = .02, \eta^2 = .032$, as inclusive language was featured more in the low religious salience topic ($M = 1.19$) compared to the moderate ($M = 1.07$) and high conditions ($M = 1.07$). A similar trend was found for *evaluation*, $F(2, 231) = 3.95, p = .02, \eta^2 = .033$, in that statements with negative judgments were more prevalent in the high ($M = 1.42$) and moderate religious salience topic ($M = 1.41$) compared to the low condition ($M = 1.19$).²

Table 2. Mean Effects of Religious Pluralistic Language and Perceptions of Partner (M/SD)

	Intergroup condition			Intragroup condition		
	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	High
Religious Language	1.41a/0.73	1.08a/0.27	2.21b/0.72	1.15a/0.54	1.25a/0.59	2.36c/0.77
Collective Language	1.10/0.29	1.03/0.18	1.04/0.19	1.27/0.48	1.10/0.30	1.09/0.32
Confirmation	1.21/0.41	1.23/0.43	1.40/0.58	1.23/0.49	1.37/0.58	1.31/0.55
Questions	1.47/0.92	1.09/0.28	1.36/0.58	1.36/0.67	1.30/0.65	1.40/0.58
Evaluation	1.19/0.45	1.50/0.82	1.43/0.72	1.19/0.51	1.33/0.53	1.39/0.62
Acknowledgement	1.38/0.48	1.36/0.51	1.54/0.55	1.49/0.59	1.51/0.59	1.51/0.67
Advisement	1.05/0.23	1.15/0.48	1.17/0.43	1.13/0.39	1.12/0.33	1.19/0.59
Trustworthiness	3.82/1.43	3.56/1.35	3.22/1.44	4.05/1.06	3.90/1.30	3.70/1.24
Intelligence	3.95/1.45	3.62/1.46	3.49/1.63	4.30/1.55	3.55/1.28	3.40/1.58

For Religious Language, means in the same row with a different subscript vary significantly from each other at $p < .05$.

Low = Climate Change; Moderate = Corporal Punishment; High = Pharmacist’s Right.

There was no difference between the low and high condition. It would be interesting to ascertain the tone of questions in further inquiries on RPL.

Assessing RQ2, we found a significant difference in *trustworthiness* based on the intergroup versus intragroup condition, $F(1, 230) = 4.22, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$. Participants rated the conversational partner higher when conceptualizing the interaction in terms of intragroup ($M = 3.88$) versus an interfaith context ($M = 3.53$). Trustworthiness was higher in low salience ($M = 3.93$) compared to high salience ($M = 3.46$). There was no difference between the moderate condition ($M = 3.73$) and the other two.

Bivariate correlations were examined to assess RQ3. Overall, there were four significant correlations between these orientation dimensions and RPL categories: religious language-intrinsic ($r = .18, p < .05$); advisement-general extrinsic ($r = -.14, p < .05$); questions-general extrinsic ($r = -.13, p < .05$); questions-extrinsic-personal ($r = -.13, p < .05$). Individuals with more intrinsic orientation tend to use more religious language, whereas individuals with more extrinsic orientation use advisement and questions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which contextual (i.e., intergroup salience) and discourse (i.e., religious salience of topics) factors differentiate the enactment of religious pluralistic language (RPL). Although not all hypotheses were supported, and the significant effects were relatively small, the results demonstrate that some aspects of RPL can vary simply based on how a conversation is framed and the topic of conversation. This supports foundational work on intergroup relations demonstrating that minimal variations in (inter)group salience can influence not only attitudes, but also the language in the interaction. Future research would benefit by not only investigating the dyadic nature of interaction (i.e., dialogue) but also the extent to which the salience of the interaction coupled with the prevalence of RPL influences attitudes toward religious out-groups. Further, we believe a CMC context is appropriate for understanding RPL and other intergroup relations, since the Internet has become a space where interfaith and intercultural dialogue thrives (Mustafa, Ahmad, & Siarap, 2012).

One important limitation to note is that specific (ir)religious beliefs of the participants were not included (e.g., Christian, Muslim, Jewish, atheism) as we focused more generally on theism-atheism comparisons. It is possible that certain religious beliefs and/or denominations have different orientations toward interfaith dialogue. A second limitation involves the classification of atheists and agnostics. Since atheism and agnosticism are defined in terms of religious beliefs, the extent to which this identity is central to an individual's self-concept should affect RPL during religiously salient interactions. However, since "nonbelievers" of God were underrepresented in this study, future research should explicitly explore this relationship. Finally, given the nature of university education, college students may be more likely to engage in pluralistic language in general. Future research would benefit from noncollege samples.

Notes

1. From an intergroup perspective, atheism can be considered an out-group for those who believe in God(s) and thus is a suitable social collective when conceptualizing an interfaith context.
2. A nonsignificant effect emerged for *questions*, $F(2, 231) = 2.74$, $p = .06$, $\eta^2 = .023$. However, the trend was unexpected, as there was a higher amount of questions for both the low ($M = 1.42$) and high ($M = 1.38$) religious salience topic compared to the moderate topic ($M = 1.20$).

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