



Explaining attitudes about homosexuality in Confucian and non-Confucian nations: Is there a ‘cultural’ influence?

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ABSTRACT

The majority of research on attitudes about homosexuality has concentrated on the global North and on Christian and Muslim majority nations. Little research attention has been given to the factors that shape tolerance in societies with a Confucian heritage. Residents of Confucian counties are less tolerant than Europeans and Americans. One reason given for this difference is the emphasis on Confucian values in many Asian societies. Using data from the World Values Survey, we examine whether values that could be described as Confucian influence attitudes in Confucian and non-Confucian nations. We find a unique Confucian cultural effect, which can partially be explained with concerns about keeping the family intact. Conversely, in Confucian societies values related to obedience, conformity, and filial piety are unrelated to attitudes. There is also a small Buddhist contextual effect, resulting in more tolerant attitudes, and the Confucian influence cannot be reduced to an Asian regional effect.

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1. Introduction

Over the last ten years researchers have devoted considerable energy to examining the cross-cultural factors that shape tolerance for homosexuality. Within countries a range of characteristics, including age, gender, personal religiosity, educational attainment, and sex-role values are associated with attitudes about homosexuality (Brown and Henriquez, 2008; Burdette et al., 2005; Hinrichs and Rosenberg, 2002; Ohlander et al., 2005; Herek, 1991; Kerns and Fine, 1994). Across nations, researchers have found that lower levels of economic development and education, stronger religious beliefs, and an Islamic religious history are associated with less tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality (Adamczyk and Pitt, 2009; van den Akker et al., 2013; Scheepers et al., 2002). These country-level factors appear to have an influence over and above individual-level characteristics. Hence, even if an individual is not particularly religious, living in a highly religious society can influence his or her attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Finke and Adamczyk, 2008).

While there has been a lot of research on the factors that shape cross-national attitudes about homosexuality, the vast majority of this work has focused on attitudes across the global North and between nations with monotheistic religious traditions (i.e. Christianity and Islam) (van den Akker et al., 2013; Scheepers et al., 2002; Stulhofer and Rimac, 2009). Almost no research attention has been given to the factors that shape tolerance for homosexuality in Confucian nations (i.e. societies that are influenced by Chinese Confucian culture) which constitute nearly a fifth of global population. As shown in Chart 1,

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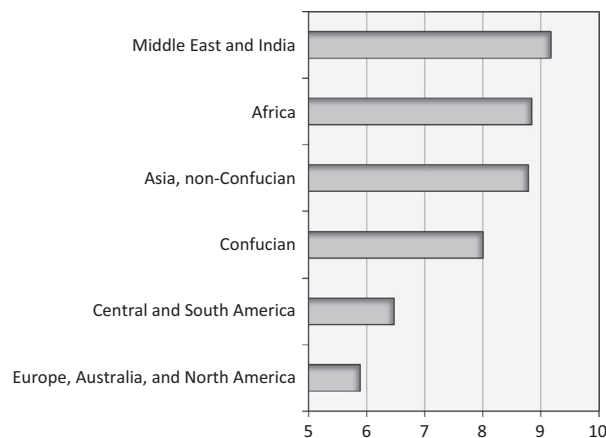


Chart 1. Mean level of disapproval for homosexuality (Data are taken from the 2008, World Values Survey for nations included in the current study.) across groups of nations (The societies included in the category for the Middle East and India are: India, Turkey, Iran, Jordan. The societies included in the category for Africa are: South Africa, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, Rwanda, and Zambia. The societies included in the category for Asia, non-Confucian are: Thailand and Indonesia. The Confucian societies are: Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The Central and South American societies are: Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Trinidad and Tobago. The societies included in the category for Europe, Australia, and North America are: France, Great Britain, Netherlands, Spain, USA, Canada, Australia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Switzerland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, Georgia, Serbia, Cyprus, Andorra, and Germany.) (0 = always justified; 10 = never justified).

these countries are more tolerant of homosexuality than many Islamic, Middle Eastern and African nations, but they are less tolerant than their neighbors in the global North, Australia, and Central and South America.

Researchers (Adamczyk and Pitt, 2009; Štulhofer and Rimac, 2009) have argued that economic development is an important predictor of cross-national variation in attitudes about homosexuality. However, many societies with a Confucian heritage (i.e. have Chinese cultural and historical influences), including Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan and Singapore, have well-developed economies. The remaining Confucian countries (i.e. China and Vietnam) are far from the poorest in the world. Additionally, none of these nations have Christianity or Islam as a dominant faith and average levels of religious belief are the lowest of any region of the world.¹ Yet, despite their relatively high levels of economic development and low levels of religious belief, these nations lag behind countries in the global north and Central and South America in terms of their residents' tolerance for homosexuality. Additionally, several of these countries have been slow to change laws regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights. Until 2001 homosexuality was still considered a mental illness in China (Wu, 2003), and as of 2014, same sex unions have not been legally recognized in any Confucian society.

One reason given for differences in attitudes and behaviors between Asian and other nations is the emphasis in many Asian societies on Confucian values, including a greater acceptance of hierarchical authority and paternalism, stronger community orientation, and a heavy emphasis on family and filial piety (Cheng, 1944; Tu, 1988). There is a rich history of work that has tried to separate the values found in many Confucian and Asian nations from those found in other countries (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Hofstede and McCrae, 2004; Monkhhouse et al., 2013). There have also been a lot of challenges to the idea that there is a unique set of "Asian" or "Confucian" values (Dalton and Ong, 2005; Kim, 2010). This study aims to unravel whether or not residents in societies with "Confucian" (i.e. Chinese) heritage significantly differ in their feelings about homosexuality from people in other countries. To do this we draw on data from the fifth wave of the World Values Survey and account for both micro and macro level effects that are linked to a range of demographic and development factors. Additionally, using ordinary least square regression and hierarchical linear modeling techniques, we assess whether characteristics that may fit within the Confucian imagination are indeed unique to Confucian countries and can explain individual and cultural differences in attitudes about homosexuality for people who live in Confucian and non-Confucian societies.

2. Confucian values

Based on the influence of Confucius, the idea has emerged that nations with Chinese heritage have cultural values that are distinctly different from those found in other parts of the world (Hill, 2000). The general argument is that among other things Confucian societies are more likely to be paternalist and accept hierarchical authority, put a heavy emphasis on the family, and are more community-oriented, which promotes order and consensus. In contrast, Western societies are seen as rights-based and individualistic. There are some important implications to the idea that there is a distinctive Confucian

¹ In the current study religious importance ranges from 1 = not at all important to 4 = very important. The Confucian nations presented in Chart 1 have an average score of 2.1, followed by Europe, Australia, and North America (2.6), Central and South America (3.2), the Middle East and India (3.6), and then Africa (3.7), and Asia, non-Confucian (3.7).

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