The loyalty of Roman Catholic religious priests as a function of perceived level of interpersonal communication

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This exploratory study investigated the extent to which the perceived level of interpersonal communication within a given religious institute influences a religious priest's stated desire to remain in his religious institute. A six-variable path model explained 28% of the variance in the decisions of a sample of 318 Catholic religious priests to stay on or to leave their religious institutes. Interpersonal communication affects loyalty positively both in a direct and in an indirect way, i.e., it lessens loneliness. Loneliness in its turn exercises both a direct and an indirect impact on the decision to continue. Problems coping with celibacy influence loyalty in a strong negative way.

Key words: religious priests, communication, loyalty, interpersonal relationships, loneliness, celibacy.

Almost all Catholic religious institutes¹ had been undergoing a tremendous change in membership between 1965 and 1974. Within that period the total of religious priests² in the U.S.A. decreased by 9%. Research done in this area cited, as the main reasons for resignation the following:

¹ Religious orders and congregations, collectively called "religious institutes," are societies sui generis within the Roman Catholic Church. Their members are called "religious". They live a community type of life based on rules and constitutions approved by Church authority. Through the profession and observance of public vows of poverty, chastity and obedience they try to follow Jesus. This way of life is, in Church law, called "religious life".

"Religious"—the term taken as a noun—is used for both male and female persons who are members of a religious institute. Among male religious in general, there are according to the Law of the Roman Catholic Church two categories, namely, brothers and priests. Religious women are usually called sisters.

² This study was directed only towards religious priests. A religious priest belongs to a religious institute. He is different from a diocesan or secular priest who does not belong to a religious institute, but to a diocese. A diocesan priest does not profess vows or promises as does a religious priest.

loneliness (Kennedy & Heckler, 1971; Schoenherr & Greeley, 1974), problems with authority (National Opinion Research Center (NORC), 1972), celibacy (NORC, 1972; Strack, 1973), emotional immaturity (Kennedy & Heckler, 1971), personal development and growth (NORC, 1972), and loss of identity (Schallert & Kelley, 1970; O'Brien, 1971).

The suggestions made by the diverse researchers pointed in the direction of both solving the authority problem and providing an atmosphere where religious can mature as persons (Schallert & Kelley, 1970; Kennedy & Heckler, 1971). As a means of achieving both objectives, education in, and application of, psychology and sociology were recommended (Schmidtchen, 1973; Strack, 1973). Also stressed were the areas of personal development, interpersonal communication, and group dynamics (Devaney & Domzall, 1972; Larkin, 1973; Dahm & Stenger, 1974).

To the knowledge of the researcher by then there was no explicit study conducted to investigate the relationship between interpersonal communication within a given religious institute and loyalty to one's religious institute. Thus, it was the objec-

tive of this study to explore this relationship; to stimulate interest in and awareness of interpersonal communication within religious institutes as a crucial factor of building a community where persons can grow and develop their human potentials, and to develop an instrument to investigate and measure this particular phenomenon in as valid a way as possible.

The basic assumption of this study was that the perceived level of interpersonal communication within a given religious institute has an effect on whether a religious will remain in his religious institute or leave. It was reasoned that if a religious is able to find a level of communication within his religious institute which enables him to communicate with his religious confreres in a meaningful way, he will be able to establish meaningful relationships or friendships within his religious institute. These meaningful relationships will help him to cope with loneliness, celibacy (Abbott, 1966), and if existing, with a desire to marry. If, however, his perceived level of interpersonal communication within his religious institute is so minimal that it does not allow him to communicate in a meaningful way, and thus establish meaningful relationships with his confreres, then loneliness, celibacy, and eventually the desire to marry will grow stronger and might make him think of leaving his religious institute. This does not necessarily mean leaving the active ministry.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a strong positive correlation between "perceived level of interpersonal communication" and "friendship within his religious institute."
2. There will be a strong negative correlation between "perceived level of interpersonal communication" and "loneliness."
3. There will be a strong negative correlation between "perceived level of interpersonal communication" and "problems coping with celibacy."

4. There will be a strong negative correlation between "perceived level of interpersonal communication" and "desire to marry."

5. There will be a strong positive correlation between "friendship within his religious institute" and "loyalty."

6. There will be a strong negative correlation between "loneliness" and "loyalty."

7. There will be a strong negative correlation between "problems coping with celibacy" and "loyalty."

8. There will be a strong negative correlation between "desire to marry" and "loyalty."

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 571 religious priests who were randomly selected from the 1141 religious priests who were cited as being residents within the boundaries of the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago in 1974. The age of the subjects ranged from 27 to 86 years.³

Instrument and procedure. A 15-page self-administered questionnaire, which was pre-tested and refined by means of a pilot study, was sent to the randomly selected subjects. Two weeks after the first mailing, the questionnaires were mailed again to 346 subjects who had not yet responded. A total of 318 usable questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 55.5%.

By using the questionnaire, information about the following six special interest characteristics was gathered: "perceived level of interpersonal communication within his religious institute," "friendship within his religious institute," "loneliness," "problems coping with celibacy," "desire to marry," and "loyalty to his religious institute."

The six characteristics were defined as

³ The survey was conducted from November, 1974 until January, 1975.

follows:

Perceived level of interpersonal communication within his religious institute: The expressed degree to which an individual experiences the quality of his relationships within his religious institute.

Friendship within his religious institute: A religious says that he has established one or more meaningful relationships within his own religious institute.

Loneliness: The expressed degree to which a religious feels he is forlorn.

Problems coping with celibacy: The difficulties sensed by an individual in remaining chaste.

Desire to marry: Manifested wish of a religious to change his status of being single.

Loyalty to his religious institute: The specific answer given by a religious regarding his future in his religious institute.

Particular attention is to be paid to perceived level of interpersonal communication and loyalty. Perceived level of interpersonal communication refers only to subjective statements made by individuals regarding the quality of their experienced relationships. This means that this study did not attempt to measure the level of interpersonal communication by a standardized test which could have produced objective data. It could have been used to

make comparisons between different group climates.

Regarding the second characteristic, namely, loyalty, it should be stressed that this study was not concerned with staying or leaving the active ministry as a priest but only with loyalty to one's own religious institute. It was reasoned that a religious would be more likely to state that he would "probably" or "definitely" leave his religious institute, due to the perceived level of interpersonal communication within his religious institute, rather than to leave the active ministry. It was assumed that the active ministry is of greater value than the membership within a religious institute. Thus, the perceived level of interpersonal communication within his religious institute would discriminate more powerfully when membership within a religious institute is at stake than when continuing or leaving the active ministry.

Integer scales were used to measure the individual characteristics, a high score indicating, e.g., much loneliness. The obtained data were analyzed through Pearson product moment correlation coefficients (r) and linear regression coefficients.

In Fig. 1, we present graphically the model—a path diagram—on which the

Fig. 1. Model for causal analysis of religious priests' characteristics.

Table 1
Correlation matrix of the six main characteristics of religious priestst

Variable	Perceived level of interpersonal communication	Friendship with- in his religious institute	Loneliness	Problems coping with celibacy	Desire to marry
Perceived level of interpersonal communication	—				
Friendship within his religious institute	.79**	—			
Loneliness	-.41**	-.43**	—		
Problems coping with celibacy	-.11	-.09	.17	—	
Desire to marry	-.07	-.06	.07	.56**	—
Loyalty to his religious institute	.34**	.30*	-.29*	-.42**	-.29*

† Pearson r ; $N=249$ * $p < .01$ two-tailed test.

** $p < .001$ two-tailed test.

analysis of this research is based. The causal flow goes from the characteristics at the left side to those at the right side. It is assumed that each characteristic has a possible direct and indirect causal relationship with each characteristic to its right. This influence may be direct or it may flow through intervening variables. The direct paths as well as the indirect ones will be expressed by drawing lines from one characteristic to another as often as the data meet the self-imposed criteria. The self-imposed criteria for including pathways was $\beta \geq .10$.

Results

Data related to hypotheses. Table 1 represents the Pearson product moment correlations between the six characteristics at the individual level.

1. It was hypothesized that there will be a strong positive correlation between "perceived level of interpersonal communication" and "friendship within his religious institute." The results showed that there was a strong positive relationship of .79 ($p < .001$). Subjects who perceived the quality of their relationships within their own religious institutes as being good were able to establish meaningful relationships among their co-religious.

2. The second hypothesis stated that there will be a strong negative correlation between "perceived level of interpersonal communication" and "loneliness." The results supported this hypothesis ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$). Religious who perceived the quality of their relationships within their own religious community as low stated they were lonely.

3. The hypothesis that there will be a strong negative correlation between "perceived level of interpersonal communication" and "problems coping with celibacy" was not supported at a significant level ($r = -.11$). Thus, the quality of one's relationships with his co-religious did not seem to be connected significantly with a religious' problems of coping with celibacy.

4. The hypothesis that there will be a strong negative correlation between "perceived level of interpersonal communication" and "desire to marry" was not supported at a significant level ($r = -.07$). Thus, the quality of one's relationships with his co-religious did not seem to have a significant connection with a religious' desire to get married.

5. The fifth hypothesis, namely, that there will be a strong positive correlation between "friendship within his religious institute" and "loyalty" was partially

convalidated by the findings. Friendship seemed to be related to a religious' decision to remain in his religious institute ($r = .30$, $p < .01$).

6. Hypothesis six, i.e., that there will be a strong negative correlation between "loneliness" and "loyalty" was partially supported by the results ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$). Loneliness seemed to have a negative relationship to a religious' decision to stay on in his religious institute.

7. The hypothesis that there will be a strong negative correlation between "problems coping with celibacy" and "loyalty" was supported by the findings of this study ($r = -.42$, $p < .001$). Problems coping with celibacy seemed to have a negative connection with a religious' decision to stay on in his religious institute.

8. The hypothesis that there will be a strong negative correlation between "desire to marry" and "loyalty" was also partially supported by the findings of this study ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$). It seemed to be obvious that a strong desire to marry is related to a religious' thinking of leaving his religious institute.

Data for the path diagram relating loyalty in his religious institute to the five characteristics.

The positive relationships shown in Table 1 revealed that those religious priests who perceived the level of interpersonal communication within their religious institutes as being high were therefore able to establish meaningful relationships (friendships) within their religious institutes. They were inclined to state that their future in their religious institutes was more certain. The positive relationships also disclosed that those religious priests who stated that celibacy is a great problem for them personally also agreed that the desire to marry is a subject of concern for them.

The negative relationships indicated that those religious priests who perceived the level of interpersonal communication within their religious institutes as being low and were not able to establish meaningful relationships (friendships) within their religious institutes were very lonely. The negative relationships also indicated that those who were lonely, who had difficulties remaining celibate and had a desire to marry, were more inclined to say that their future in their own religious institute was somewhat uncertain.

The obtained results will be explained further using the model for causal analysis

Fig. 2. Path diagram relating loyalty to his religious institute to prior variables. (All paths below .10 have been omitted from this figure.)

of religious priests' characteristics as outlined in Fig. 1. The relationships of the six characteristics are shown graphically in Fig. 2.

The relationship between perceived level of interpersonal communication and friendship within his religious institute is expressed by the simple r (.79) as shown in Table 1. There are two direct paths (beta $\geq .10$) on loneliness, namely, one from perceived level of interpersonal communication ($-.20$) and the second one from friendship ($-.26$). The data suggest that an improvement of the quality of both interpersonal communication and interpersonal relationships will result in less loneliness. The amount of variance in loneliness not explained by the two prior characteristics is .89 shown at the base of the residual path.

There is one direct path on problems coping with celibacy from loneliness (.15) which indicates that an increase in loneliness will have as its result an increase in problems coping with celibacy. The residual path shows that .98 of the variance on problems coping with celibacy were not explained by its three preceding characteristics.

From problems coping with celibacy goes the only direct path on desire to marry (.57). This suggests that an increase of problems coping with celibacy will most likely result in a much stronger desire to marry. The explained variance on desire to marry ($R^2 = .32$) is almost totally due to problems coping with celibacy (R^2 Change = .31).

There were three direct paths on loyalty in his religious institute, namely, one from perceived level of interpersonal communication (.21), the second one from loneliness ($-.11$), and the third one from problems coping with celibacy ($-.32$). The obtained values indicate that an increase both of problems coping with celibacy and loneliness will have a negative influence on a religious' plan for remaining in his religious institute. On the other hand, an

Table 2
Explanation of variance on loyalty in his religious institute†

Variable	$R^{2\dagger\dagger}$	R^2 Change	Beta
Perceived level of interpersonal communication	.12	.12	.21
Friendship within his religious institute	.12	.00	.04
Loneliness	.14	.02	-.11
Problems coping with celibacy	.28	.13	-.32
Desire to marry	.28	.00	-.07

† $N = 249$

†† The multiple R^2 corresponding to each variable is derived from the regression equation estimating the effects on loyalty in his religious institute of that variable and all others antecedent to it—those above it in the table—but not intervening between it and the dependent variable—those below it in the table. The value for perceived level of interpersonal communication is thus the r^2 . Any apparent errors in subtraction are due to rounding. (cf. Schoenherr & Greeley, 1974, p. 414.)

improvement of interpersonal communication will most likely have a positive impact on a religious' plan for remaining in his religious institute.

The model used in this study explained more than one-fourth of the variance on loyalty ($R^2 = .28$). The data revealed that 12% of the variance were explained by the perceived level of interpersonal communication. Loneliness added 2% and problems coping with celibacy contributed 13%. The remaining two characteristics added less than 1%. (cf. Table 2)

Discussion

The general hypothesis of this study stated that the perceived level of interpersonal communication within a given religious institute has an effect on whether a religious will remain in his religious institute or leave. Both the simple correlation coefficient and the linear regression coefficient

cient supported this hypothesis. Thus the study has served to confirm the basic assumption, i.e., the better the experienced quality of interpersonal communication within a given religious institute the more a religious will stay on in such a religious institute.

An improvement of the interpersonal climate within a given religious institute will result in religious priests who are less lonely, who have less problems coping with celibacy and who are more likely to continue on in their religious institutes.

The higher the level of interpersonal communication the more meaningful relationships a religious can establish within his religious institute. Those relationships will help him to feel less lonely and thus strengthen his commitment to his religious institute.

Loneliness and problems coping with celibacy exercise the strongest negative influences on loyalty. As it was stated above these negative influences can be lessened by improving the quality of interpersonal communication within a given religious community. The better the climate of a religious community the stronger the loyalty of its members will be.

A religious who perceives the level of interpersonal communication as high is able to establish meaningful relationships within his religious institute. Such a religious is less lonely, has less concerns regarding celibacy, has less a desire to marry, and his decision to continue is fairly strong.

Findings related to previous research. As it was previously stated, to the knowledge of the researcher there was no explicit study conducted to investigate the relationship between interpersonal communication within a given religious institute and loyalty to one's religious institute. Therefore there is only limited use of the findings of this study which can be related to previous research and vice versa.

The NORC study (1972) concluded that because work satisfaction is so high

among religious clergy (as being different from diocesan clergy) it does not cause them to want to resign from their jobs. Therefore the desire to marry and loneliness are left as the two single predictors of whether a religious priest will remain in or leave his community. Our study which differentiated between desire to marry and problems coping with celibacy (celibacy was thought more of as how a person is at home with his own sexuality whereas the desire to marry was considered more as a longing for a fulfilling and meaningful relationship with a partner of the opposite sex, the latter not being achieved successfully without having settled first the issue(s) involved in the first) found that the strongest negative predictor regarding retention is celibacy and loneliness.

The NORC study (1972) also concluded that in the years ahead most of the serious problems priests (both diocesan and religious) will be faced with will center around power and sex. Our study did not deal with power, i.e., authority and thus cannot make any statement regarding this subject. But as it was just mentioned above the issue of sex seems to be a very important one. The importance of this particular factor was apparent throughout the analysis of the data.

Conclusions

The importance of interpersonal communication within a given religious institute suggests that religious must become aware of this and foster communication. Ways to improve communication as well as an instrument to measure communication in a precise way must be found. The direct impact of interpersonal communication upon loyalty needs a more thorough investigation.

The integration of one's sexuality seems to be a necessary condition for a fruitful and meaningful celibate life. Such an integration needs a supportive and high quality climate within a given community.

Only if religious priests are enabled within their own communities to deal freely and openly with this particular issue they will grow in their commitment towards their religious communities. This fact again calls for improvement of interpersonal communication within religious institutes.

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