

Social–Psychological Underpinning of Anti–Church Sentiment

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Summary

The aim of this research is to learn whether social alienation, Schwartz’s values, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism contribute to the prediction of results obtained on the scale of anti–Church sentiment. The survey was conducted on a convenience sample of full–aged citizens of Croatian ethnicity. Factor analysis was performed on the scales of anti–Church sentiment, social alienation, and Schwartz’s 10 individual values in order to establish the construct validity of these measurements. The results of the first multiple regression analysis revealed that social alienation and value orientations were significant predictors of anti–Church sentiment. The second multiple regression showed that primary psychopathy and Machiavellianism were also significant predictors of anti–Church sentiment. The construct of anti–Church sentiment was proven to be a hybrid of personal and attitudinal variables and motivated social cognition. Factor analysis performed was based on all variables investigated, and it revealed the existence of a latent “dark” attitudinal–personal construct of which anti–Church sentiment is a factorially significant component. Such a construct of anti–Church sentiment implicates the existence of a personality disorder and social dysfunction, and, at the same time, indirectly implies alienation or estrangement from the life of God.

Keywords: *social alienation; value orientation; psychopathy; Machiavellianism; anti–Church sentiment*

Introduction

In social psychology, the term “sentiment” does not refer to emotion but primarily to a social attitude indicating the cognitive relationship between a person and an object (Alsadhan & Skillicom, 2020). Specifically, anti–Church sentiment indicates the cognitive relationship between an individual and the Church, expressed as an attitude that essentially represents an individual’s disposition to

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evaluate the Church unfavourably. We defined the concept of anti–Church sentiment as a latent attitude towards the Church, the structure of which includes a perception of the Church as a socially backward and retrogressive institution, socially useless and morally hypocritical, an unhealthy and harmful institution for both society and the individual. Anti–Church sentiment, which contains a certain motivational structure, could have developed in the context of primary socialization, ideological indoctrination, and secularism (Gillis, 2020).

We hypothesized, however, that besides these sociological variables, several socio–psychological and individual–psychological dispositions may contribute to developing and maintaining anti–Church sentiment. Given that differences in personality traits play an important role in predicting attitudes and beliefs (Lall–Trail et al., 2023, 66; Sibley et al., 2012, 669–670), we hypothesized that personality dispositions which are manifested in constructs such as social alienation, values, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism would have a certain impact on the internalization of anti–Church sentiment. Considering the functional significance of attitudes in forming ego–defensive mechanisms (Katz, 1960, 170), we believe that studying the socio–psychological background of hostile attitudes towards the Church will provide a clearer picture of the type of personality inclined to express anti–Church sentiment. For example, a negative attitude towards the Church may compensate for one’s feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. We hypothesized that the psychological background of social alienation, certain value patterns, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism includes internal conflicts that generate feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and vulnerability, which might be “compensated” by expressing anti–Church sentiment.

1. Social alienation

In light of Seeman’s socio–psychological concept of alienation (Seeman, 1976, 404–408),¹ in this study, we conceptualized social alienation as the subjective state of an individual characterized by a lack of trust towards various “objects” in the social and interpersonal space. The individual expresses feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness (hopelessness), perceives an absence of social norms (anomie), and is prone to strong expressions of distrust in people (Šram, 2009, 13–14). Just as one can be alienated from society and other people, so too can one be alienated or estranged from God and the Church. Therefore, we hypothesized that social alienation would be positively correlated with anti–Church sentiment, which to some extent also indicates the presence of an atheist syndrome.

1 Melvin Seeman (1976, 404–408) conceptualized alienation as a socio–psychological phenomenon consisting of six dimensions: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness (anomie), cultural estrangement, self–estrangement, and social isolation.

2. *Schwartz’s Model of Individual Values*

Value orientations constitute cognitive representations of basic motivations as goals to be pursued or achieved (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022, 520–521). Schwartz’s model of individual values on the first level suggests the existence of ten motivational values that, at a higher–order level, form four types of values: self–transcendence, self–enhancement, openness to change, and conservation (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022, 522–523). These four types of values can form two dimensions: 1) openness to change versus conservation and 2) self–enhancement versus self–transcendence (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022, 522).

3. *Psychopathy and Machiavellianism*

In this study, we treated the concept of psychopathy as a two–factor psychological construct consisting of primary and secondary psychopathy (Levenson et al., 1995, 153). Primary psychopathy is defined by interpersonal and affective traits (a grandiose sense of self–worth, a tendency to lie, manipulation of others, lack of guilt or remorse, selfishness, shallow emotions, irresponsibility, emotional coldness, and lack of empathy), while secondary psychopathy is defined by personality traits or behaviours associated with antisocial and deviant behaviour, including impulsivity. Psychopathy is most commonly associated with Machiavellianism as a psychological construct that, along with narcissism, defines the structure of the so–called dark triad of personality (Neumann et al., 2022, 651–652). Individuals who score high on the Machiavellianism scale are typically highly manipulative, duplicitous in interpersonal relationships, express cynical contempt for morality, and exhibit a strong focus on self–interest and self–gain (Jones & Paulhus, 2009, 97–99).

4. *Research objectives*

In this study, we aimed to determine:

- 1) Whether social alienation, Schwartz’s models of individual values, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism are significant predictors of anti–Church sentiment.
- 2) Whether anti–Church sentiment is a component of a latent attitudinal–personal pattern indicating the “dark” nature of anti–Church sentiment.

5. *Research hypotheses*

Considering the socio–psychological significance of anti–Church sentiment, we formulated three hypotheses:

- 1) Social alienation and value frameworks will prove to be significant predictors of anti–Church sentiment.

- 2) Psychopathy and Machiavellianism will prove to be significant predictors of anti–Church sentiment.
- 3) Anti–Church sentiment will be shown to be a component of a broader latent socio–psychological pattern that may indicate the “dark” nature of anti–Church sentiment.

6. Method

6.1. Participants

The study was conducted on a convenience sample of adult Croatians (N = 558) in Eastern Slavonia and Baranja as part of a broader socio–psychological and political–psychological research project. The sample included 46% male and 54% female respondents. The average age was 43.30 years with a standard deviation of 16.20. The educational structure of the participants was as follows: primary school: 6.6%; three–year vocational high school: 15.2%; four–year high school: 40.5%; college: 12.0%; university degree: 25.6%. The distribution of educational attainment was skewed towards higher levels which was expected, given that such research requires a certain level of literacy. All participants were of Croatian nationality, and 89% identified as belonging to the Catholic Church.

6.2. Measurement instruments

Five measurement instruments were used in this study, as follows: (1) anti–Church sentiment, (2) social alienation, (3) Schwartz’s values, (4) psychopathy, and (5) Machiavellianism.

6.2.1. Anti–Church sentiment

We constructed the scale by adopting several items from the original scale for measuring attitudes towards the Church developed by Thurstone and Chave (1929, 59–66). The scale for measuring anti–Church Sentiment consisted of 10 items or statements.² On a 5–point Likert scale, respondents were asked to express their degree of agreement with each statement, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Exploratory factor analysis using the component model with Varimax rotation resulted in a one–factor solution explaining 66.26% of the variance (*Table 1*). The latent structure of the Anti–Church Sentiment scale indicates a hostile attitude towards the Church. Specifically, the Church is perceived as a backward, useless, and morally hypocritical institution, an opponent of science and progress, and an unhealthy and harmful institution for individuals and society. The magnitude of Cronbach’s coefficient ($\alpha = 0.94$) indicates a high reliability and homogeneity of the scale for measuring anti–Church sentiment.

2 This anti–Church orientation refers to the Catholic Church. Specifically, 89% of the respondents identified as belonging to the Catholic Church.

Table 1. Factor analysis of anti–Church sentiment

Tablica 1. Faktorska analiza anticrkvenoga sentimenta

Variable	Loading
I think that the organized Church is an enemy of science and truth	0.85
In my experience, the Church is hopelessly outdated	0.85
I believe that the Church wants to impose many outdated dogmas and medieval superstitions	0.84
The Church represents shallowness, hypocrisy, and prejudice	0.83
I think that the Church is a parasite of society	0.81
I think the Church is hundreds of years behind and cannot influence modern life	0.81
I believe our country would be better off if churches were closed and priests started doing some useful work	0.80
I believe the Church is “losing ground” as education advances	0.78
I consider the Church a static and unchanging institution, which as such is unhealthy and harmful to society and individuals	0.74

6.2.2. Social alienation

The 12–item scale was constructed based on the socio–psychological concept referring to the subjective state of an individual characterized by expressions of distrust and alienation from society, other people, and oneself (Seeman, 1959, 784–787; Šram, 2007, 107; Šram, 2009, 11–12). On a 5–point Likert scale, respondents expressed their degree of agreement with each statement, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Exploratory factor analysis using the component model with Varimax rotation resulted in a one–factor solution explaining 51.65% of the variance. *Table 2* shows that the latent structure of social alienation is defined by anomie, hopelessness, powerlessness, and distrust in people. The magnitude of Cronbach’s coefficient ($\alpha = 0.91$) indicates high reliability and homogeneity of the scale for measuring social alienation.

Table 2. Factor analysis of social alienation

Tablica 2. Faktorska analiza socijalne alijenacije

Variable	Loading
In our society, we can only live from day to day and cannot plan for the future	0.77
There is little I can do in life because everything depends on other people	0.76
People only pretend to be our friends	0.75
Nowadays, you can’t trust anyone	0.74

To achieve something today, a person is forced to cheat and lie	0.73
We cannot expect anything good from the future	0.72
Deep down, most people are evil and corrupt	0.71
Only criminals can get rich in our society	0.70
The society we live in sometimes seems worse than hell	0.69
There are only a few things in my life that are under my control	0.68
Very few people respect the law in our society	0.67
Most people care only about themselves	0.65

6.2.3. *Schwartz's individual values*

The scale consists of 10 basic values, namely: independence, stimulation, hedonism, achievement (success), power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism (Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004, 239). On a 5–point Likert scale, respondents were asked to express the importance of these values in their lives, ranging from 1 = not at all important to 5 = very important. Exploratory factor analysis using the component model with Varimax rotation extracted two factors that together explained 56.87% of the variance. However, the variable “independence” appeared in both factors with loadings of 0.49 and 0.54, so it was excluded from the final analysis. The variable “conformity” had a low communality (0.31) and was also removed from the re–factorization of the scale. Based on the correlation matrix of 8 manifest variables, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis using the component model with Varimax rotation. Two factors were extracted, explaining 62.94% of the variance (*Table 3*). The first factor explained 36.70% of the variance, and the second factor explained an additional 26.23%. We named the first factor Self–Transcendence and the second factor Self–Enhancement.

Table 3. Factor analysis of Schwartz's individual values

Tablica 3. Faktorska analiza Schwartzovih individualnih vrijednosti

Variable	Loading
<i>Self–Transcendence</i>	
Independence	0.84
Tradition	0.79
Benevolence	0.77
Universalism	0.73
<i>Self–Enhancement</i>	
Stimulation	0.82
Hedonism	0.80

Achievement (Success)	0.74
Power	0.72
Security	0.62

Notes: Self–Transcendence includes values such as tradition, benevolence, and universalism, which focus on the well–being of others and societal norms. Self–Enhancement includes values like stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, and security, which focus on personal success and satisfaction. This factor structure indicates that Schwartz’s values can be broadly categorized into Self–Transcendence and Self–Enhancement, reflecting different orientations toward personal and social goals.

6.2.4. *Psychopathy*

The self–report psychopathy scale was used to measure Primary and Secondary Psychopathy (Levenson et al., 1995, 153). The 26–item scale asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 4–point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. The internal reliability for the primary psychopathy subscale, measured by Cronbach’s alpha, was 0.81, and for the secondary psychopathy subscale, it was 0.64. The lower alpha for secondary psychopathy aligns with other studies where alpha ranged from 0.62 to 0.68 (Miller et al., 2008, 453). The correlation between primary and secondary psychopathy was 0.54.

6.2.5. *Machiavellianism*

We used the Machiavellianism scale developed by Dahling et al. (2009, 237), which indicates the presence of immoral manipulation, a desire to control others, a need for status, and distrust of others. The 16–item scale asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5–point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The scale demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.90).

7. *Results*

7.1. *Pearson correlation coefficients between examined variables*

Table 4 shows that anti–Church sentiment has positive and statistically significant correlations with social alienation, self–interest, primary psychopathy, secondary psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Anti–Church sentiment has a negative and statistically significant correlation with self–transcendence. Based on the Pearson correlation coefficients between the examined variables, we can already see that certain social attitudes, value orientations, and personality traits are behind the anti–Church sentiment, indicating that specific social and psychological dispositions can stipulate the emergence of anti–Church sentiment.

Table 4. Intercorrelations among the investigated variables

Tablica 4. Korelacije između ispitivanih varijabli

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Anti–Church sentiment	1.00						
2. Social alienation	0.24**	1.00					
3. Self–transcendence	–0.25**	–0.04	1.00				
4. Self–interest	0.25**	0.07	0.15**	1.00			
5. Primary psychopathy	0.36**	0.32**	–0.35**	0.33**	1.00		
6. Secondary psychopathy	0.28**	0.38**	–0.28**	0.04	0.54**	1.00	
7. Machiavellianism	0.35**	0.34**	–0.21**	0.34**	0.68**	0.43**	1.00
**p<0.01							

7.2 Results of regression analyses of social alienation and Schwartz's model of individual values on the anti–Church sentiment variable

To determine the effect of social alienation, self–transcendence, maintaining traditional relationships, and self–interest in predicting the results on the criterion variable of anti–Church sentiment, we applied multiple regression analysis. We aimed to explain the internalization of anti–Church sentiment using a system of predictors defined by social attitudes and value orientations. The results of this regression analysis are shown in *Table 5*. Social alienation and self–interest were found to be statistically significant positive predictors of anti–Church sentiment, while self–transcendence was a significant negative predictor. About 19% of the variance in anti–Church sentiment was explained by the predictor variables. It is noteworthy that self–interest is positively correlated with anti–Church sentiment, while self–transcendence is negatively correlated.

Table 5. Results of regression analysis of social alienation and Schwartz's values on the anti–Church sentiment variable

Tablica 5. Rezultati regresijske analize socijalne alienacije i Schwartzovih vrijednosti na varijabli "Anticrkveni sentiment"

Predictors	Anti–Church Sentiment (beta)
Social alienation	0.20***
Self–Transcendence	–0.28***
Self–Enhancement	0.28***
F(3,515) = 42.42***, R = 0.44, R ² = 0.19	
***p<0.001	

7.3. Results of regression analysis of primary psychopathy, secondary psychopathy, and Machiavellianism on the anti–Church sentiment variable

In this analysis, we aimed to predict the internalization of anti–Church sentiment using a system defined by certain personality traits. The results of the regression analysis are shown in *Table 5*. Primary psychopathy and Machiavellianism were found to be statistically significant predictors of anti–Church sentiment, while secondary psychopathy was not a significant predictor of the criterion variable. Thus, we see that interpersonal and affective components of psychopathy and Machiavellianism underpin anti–Church sentiment. The dimension of psychopathy indicating the presence of risky and impulsive behaviours was not a significant predictor of anti–Church sentiment.

Table 6. Results of regression analysis of primary psychopathy, secondary psychopathy, and Machiavellianism on the anti–Church sentiment variable
Tablica 6. Rezultati regresijske analize primarne psihopatije, sekundarne psihopatije i makijavelizma na varijabli anticrkveni sentiment

Predictors	Anti–Church sentiment (beta)
Primary psychopathy	0.19**
Secondary psychopathy	0.08ns
Machiavellianism	0.18**
F(2,512) = 31.56***, R = 0.39, R ² = 0.15 ** < 0.01, *** p < 0.001, ns = not significant	

7.4. Anti–Church sentiment as a component of a broader socio–psychological latent construct

To determine whether anti–Church sentiment is a component of a latent socio–psychological construct that might reveal the “dark” nature of anti–Church sentiment, we subjected all examined variables to factor analysis using the principal axis method with Promax rotation. The factor analysis extracted two factors that together explain 57.93% of the variance. The first factor explained as much as 40.59% of the variance, indicating the presence of an internally coherent socio–psychological construct significantly defined by anti–Church sentiment along with personality traits and social alienation (*Table 6*). Given the factor loadings, the first factor is primarily defined by both dimensions of psychopathy, Machiavellianism, anti–Church sentiment, and social alienation. We tentatively named this factor the “‘Dark’ Anti–Church Sentiment.” Although value orientations have lower factor loadings, they still contribute to the formation of the first factor’s configuration. The second factor indicates an internally contradictory latent value orientation defined by only two variables. The specific nature of this latent value orientation is also shown by the absence of a correlation between the first and second factors ($r = -0.02$).

Table 7. Factor analysis of examined variables

Tablica 7. Faktorska analiza ispitivanih varijabli

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2
Primary psychopathy	0.85	
Machiavellianism	0.80	
Secondary psychopathy	0.70	
Anti–Church sentiment	0.60	
Social alienation	0.53	
Self–interest	0.39	0.80
Self–denial	–0.40	0.66

8. Discussion

8.1. Social alienation, Schwartz’s individual values, and anti–Church sentiment

We aimed to determine whether social alienation and the internalization of certain dimensions of Schwartz’s individual values could predict the presence of anti–Church sentiment. The results of the regression analysis showed that social alienation and self–interest are significant positive predictors of anti–Church sentiment, while self–denial is a significant negative predictor. Respondents who express feelings of social helplessness and meaninglessness, perceive an absence of norms and order in society (express anomie), and have a high degree of distrust in people are more likely to express anti–Church sentiment. The psychological meaning of social alienation corresponds significantly with the components of Beck’s cognitive theory of depression (Beck & Haigh, 2014, 4). This involves a negative way of thinking, consisting of negative thoughts about oneself, negative interpretations of experiences in society, and a negative outlook on the future. Such individuals have logical errors in thinking that lead to cognitive distortions or misperceptions of reality, the formation of a negative cognitive style, a depressive way of interpreting reality, and unjustified generalizations and prejudices. Depressively tinged social alienation in its psychological foundation contains a cognitive, affective, and motivational system that serves as protection against various social and psychological injuries (Beck & Haigh, 2014, 3). This indicates that social alienation may suggest the presence of a certain ego–defensive mechanism.

In the realm of value orientations, we have seen that behind anti–Church sentiment lies a value dimension called “self–interest versus self–denial” (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022, 522). Respondents who express anti–Church sentiment are more likely to have a need for power, wealth, success, reputation, dominance over others, pleasures, sensory satisfaction, and an exciting life. At the same time, respondents who express anti–Church sentiment are less concerned with the welfare of others and overcoming selfish interests, are less loyal to members of their own group, and are less interested in harmonious social relationships and

maintaining the existing social order. We see that the value dimension we call “self-interest versus self-denial” indicates the presence of an asocial and egoistic lifestyle that, in its psychological meaning, may suggest a certain ego-defensive mechanism. The need to expand the ego while simultaneously being unable to transcend the ego indicates a need for superiority that implies a sense of inferiority and thus insecurity (Katz, 1960, 172). We see that behind anti-Church sentiment lies a combination of depressively tinged social alienation and a value pattern indicating the presence of an asocial and egoistic lifestyle. This confirms our first hypothesis about the significant contribution of social alienation and Schwartz’s model of individual values in predicting anti-Church sentiment.

8.2. Psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and anti-Church sentiment

We further aimed to determine whether primary and secondary psychopathy and Machiavellianism could predict the presence of anti-Church sentiment. The results of the regression analysis showed that primary psychopathy and Machiavellianism are significant predictors of anti-Church sentiment. Individuals prone to grandiosity, lying, manipulation of others, lack of remorse, emotional coldness, and lack of empathy are more likely to express anti-Church sentiment. We also found that individuals who express anti-Church sentiment are more willing to manipulate others, have a desire to control others, seek high social status, and have greater distrust of others and duplicity in interpersonal relationships. Primary psychopathy and Machiavellianism, which lie at the psychological core of anti-Church sentiment, indicate highly manipulative and emotionally cold individual traits (Sharpe et al., 2021, 664). Considering that psychopathy and Machiavellianism are the main components of the so-called dark triad of personality (along with narcissism), we see that anti-Church sentiment is more prevalent among individuals who are socially aversive and destructive (Jones & Paulhus, 2014, 28) and who express the malevolent side of human nature to a greater extent (Muris et al., 2017, 188 & 192). This confirms our second hypothesis about the association of psychopathy and Machiavellianism with anti-Church sentiment.

8.3. The latent socio-psychological “dark” background of anti-Church sentiment

We sought to determine whether there is a “dark” latent socio-psychological structure within which anti-Church sentiment would be a significant component. Factor analysis showed that there is a latent attitude-personality pattern significantly defined by anti-Church sentiment. This “dark” latent socio-psychological structure is defined by anti-Church sentiment, social alienation, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and self-interest versus self-denial. Given that anti-Church sentiment is found within the structure of a latent dimension defined by the dark triad of personality (Jones & Paulhus, 2014, 28) and an asocial and egoistic lifestyle (Hilbig et al., 2023, 202), we can conclude that “dark” anti-Church sentiment is a socio-psychological hybrid characterized by attitudinal-value

preferences and personality traits (Jost et al., 2003, 340), containing various ego-defensive mechanisms (Katz, 1960, 172). Our third hypothesis, about the existence of the “dark” nature of anti-Church sentiment, is thus confirmed.

Conclusion

Based on the understanding of the degree of social alienation and the preferences or rejection of certain individual value systems, which essentially point to a certain “life philosophy”, we can predict the degree to which anti-Church sentiment may be expressed. In other words, anti-Church sentiment does not necessarily or always result from atheism or antitheism, nor is it solely a product of certain ideological indoctrination; it can also be the result of certain intrapsychic processes. Distrust in society and humanity, combined with a negative self-image and an asocial “life philosophy”, can generate intrapsychic processes that partially lead to anti-Church sentiment. Primary psychopathy and Machiavellianism as significant predictors further indicate the complexity of the intrapsychic processes behind anti-Church sentiment. Considering the percentage of explained variance in anti-Church sentiment by social alienation variables and value orientations (19%) and personality traits (15%), we can conclude that other socio-psychological and individual-psychological variables also influence the emergence of a hostile attitude towards the Church.

Despite this, the concept of anti-Church sentiment, as defined in this article, can certainly be partially explained in terms of personality psychodynamics, considering the different contents of ego-defense mechanisms present in the socio-psychological background of this attitudinal-personal construct. The socio-psychological background of anti-Church sentiment includes a depressively colored social alienation, an asocial and egoistic lifestyle, and the “dark” triad of personality traits. We have thus established the existence of a “dark” nature in a hostile attitude towards the Catholic Church. This attitudinal-personal construct of anti-Church sentiment may imply the existence of certain personality disorder syndromes and social dysfunctionality, which could partially result from alienation or distance from the life of God (Eph. 4:18).

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Socijalno–psihološka pozadina anticrkvenoga sentimenta

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Sažetak

U ovom smo istraživanju nastojali utvrditi doprinose li socijalna alienacija, Schwartzov model individualnih vrijednosti, psihopatija i makijavelizam u predikciji rezultata na skali anticrkvenoga sentimenta. Istraživanje je provedeno na prigodnom uzorku punoljetnih građana hrvatske nacionalnosti. Rezultati regresijskih analiza pokazali su da socijalna alienacija i orijentacija na vlastiti probitak te primarna psihopatija i makijavelizam u bitnoj mjeri doprinose pojavljivanju anticrkvenoga sentimenta. Rezultati faktorske analize provedene na ispitivanim varijablama ukazali su na postojanje latentnoga “mračnoga” stavovsko–personalnoga obrasca, čiju strukturu definira i anticrkveni sentiment.

Ključne riječi: socijalna alienacija; vrijednosne orijentacije; psihopatija; makijavelizam; anticrkveni sentiment

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