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# Use of the MMPI-3 with Catholic and Episcopal Seminary and Religious Life Applicants

Thomas G. Plante<sup>1</sup> · Elena Peng<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 4 November 2023  
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## Abstract

Psychological evaluations and testing using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) among other instruments have been used to screen clerical and religious life applicants for decades. While much research has been conducted and published regarding these evaluations, the newer MMPI-3 has not been examined among this population. This study reviewed MMPI-3 results from 18 applicants to seminary and religious life from the Roman Catholic and Episcopal faith traditions to determine if the participants are generally psychological healthy and if they have any consistent elevations in their MMPI-3 testing scores. Additionally, we examined MMPI-3 differences among Catholics versus Episcopal applicants. Our preliminary results using a small sample suggest that applicants to seminary and religious life are generally psychologically healthy but tend to be defensive, presenting themselves in a favorable and virtuous manner. Additionally, Catholics tend to score higher on inconsistent responses but lower on psychoticism than Episcopalians. Further research should use larger and more diverse sample sizes to better understand how the MMPI-3 performs among this population.

**Keywords** MMPI-3 · Catholic · Episcopal · Assessment · Clerics · Religious life

Careful, thoughtful, and evidence-based psychological screening and testing are an important step in evaluating candidates for potential roles as pastors, priests, deacons, and other clerics as well as for those interested in attending seminary and entering religious life (Ingram et al., 2021; Isacco et al., 2020; McGlone & Sperry, 2020; Plante & Boccaccini, 1998). Many faith traditions require their seminary and clerical applicants to undergo a comprehensive psychological evaluation by a licensed psychologist or other mental health professional before they are admitted to their training and formation programs or are ordained (Bonney & Park, 2012; McGlone et al., 2010; Nortomaa, 2016). In recent decades, concerns about possible psychopathology and abusive behavior among clerics and those in religious life (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse, gambling problems, personality disorders, affective disorders, pedophilia and other sexual victimizing behaviors) have drawn

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increased attention to these screening evaluations (Amrom et al., 2019; Dundon, 2013; Plante, 2020, 2022). These concerns have underscored the importance and critical need to conduct a professional state-of-the-art evaluation of seminary and clerical candidates before they are admitted to religious life and are given positions of authority and access to potentially vulnerable populations such as children. These evaluations seek to uncover any evidence of psychopathology or destructive behavioral patterns and identify any potential psychiatric or behavioral risk factors among applicants to seminary and religious life formation (Ingram et al., 2021; Isacco et al., 2020; Plante, 2020; Plante & Boccaccini, 1998).

These psychological screening evaluations typically use a battery of psychological assessment instruments that may vary by religious tradition or by the individual preferences of the mental health professional conducting them or the particular religious group requesting them (Isacco et al., 2020; McGlone & Sperry, 2020; Plante & Boccaccini, 1998). However, perhaps the one constant in psychological testing that almost everyone agrees upon and uses is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI; Friedman et al., 2014; Ingram et al., 2021; Plante & Boccaccini, 1998; Thomas & Plante, 2015). A number of research studies have been conducted and published that report patterns of scores from the MMPI among clerical and seminary applicants (e.g., Ingram et al., 2021; Isacco et al., 2020; McGlone & Sperry, 2020; Plante & Boccaccini, 1998). These studies have generally highlighted that clerical and seminary applicants are generally psychologically healthy but tend to score in elevated ranges on defensiveness as well as repressed emotions, especially on repressed anger and hostility (Isacco et al., 2020; Kuchan et al., 2013; McGlone & Sperry, 2020; Thomas & Plante, 2015). Most of this research reports on results obtained from earlier versions of the test (i.e., MMPI, MMPI-2, MMPI-2-RF). For example, recently Ingram et al. (2021) examined 147 MMPI-RF profiles of clerical applicants, finding significant differences in test scores among those admitted and not admitted and those who did not complete seminary training. Results suggested that the MMPI-RF is a useful instrument for predicting seminary acceptance, performance, and completion, with lower MMPI-RF scores being more positively associated with acceptance in and completion of seminary formation.

The new and updated MMPI-3, available since 2020, is now often used in current evaluations. Although not a radical departure from earlier editions, including the MMPI-2-RF, the new MMPI-3 does include several new and updated elements, scales, and norms in comparison to the older versions (Brown & Sellbom, 2021; Reeves et al., 2022; Whitman et al., 2021). For example, the test item regarding “thoughts of the life hereafter” has been eliminated due to false elevation frequency, particularly among clergy. Thus, it becomes important to determine how the new MMPI-3 is performing and how its results might differ from earlier findings using previous versions of the MMPI among clerical and seminary applicants. The well-researched testing result expectations and norms that have been developed using the MMPI-2, MMPI-RF, and other earlier versions of the MMPI may not be generalizable to the newly released MMPI-3. For example, the new MMPI-3 norms mean that the existing comparison groups from the MMPI-2-RF are no longer available.

The purpose of this investigation is to examine MMPI-3 data among clerical and seminary applicants in the Roman Catholic and Episcopal traditions. Although this preliminary study is based on a small sample size, it is important to develop a sense of how the new MMPI-3 might reveal potential trends among these clerical and seminary candidates. Hopefully, this small pilot study will stimulate further research on the MMPI-3 using larger and more diverse seminary and religious life applicants over time.

## Methods

### Participants

Research participants were 18 applicants to seminary and religious life from the Roman Catholic ( $n=8$ ) and Episcopal faith traditions ( $n=10$ ) from the western part of the United States. Fifteen of the applicants identified themselves as White, with two reporting Asian identity and one reporting being African. Ten of the participants were male and eight were female. The age range of applicants was from 24 to 76 years, with a mean age of 43.7 years ( $SD=16.62$ ).

### Procedures

Applicants for seminary and religious life formation were asked by their vocations office to complete a questionnaire and several psychological testing instruments as part of their application process. The evaluation also included a semistructured clinical interview with a licensed psychologist. The consent document signed by all applicants included the following statement: "I understand that should any aspects of my evaluation be published in medical or scientific journals, scholarly books, or presented at professional conferences or presentations, all possible precautions will be taken to protect my anonymity."

After receiving university institutional review board approval, MMPI-3 data were removed from individual applicant files, with only age and gender data noted as identifying information. A student research assistant and the second author, trained and certified through institutional review board protocols, entered the MMPI-3 data into a computer spreadsheet for analysis. Means and standard deviations were obtained for each of the MMPI-3 variables. A series of independent  $t$ -tests were calculated examining any differences between men and women and between Catholic and Episcopal applicants.

## Results

Means and standard deviations were calculated for all MMPI-3 scores for the sample as well as separately for Catholics and Episcopalians. National means for the MMPI-3 measures are 50, with a standard deviation of 10. Participants collectively scored in the average range on all of the MMPI-3 measures. Average MMPI-3 scores for Episcopalians was 46.02 ( $SD=9.01$ ) and for Catholics 45.79 ( $SD=7.03$ ). However, the overall sample did tend to score higher on a measure of defensiveness or presenting oneself in an overly virtuous and healthy manner (i.e., MMPI-3 K score), with an overall mean of 58.67 ( $SD=9.48$ ). Additionally, the sample tended to score especially low on the cynicism measure (MMPI-3 CYN score), with a mean of 39.17 ( $SD=5.18$ ), suggesting that the sample was generally hopeful and optimistic.

Next, independent  $t$ -tests were performed to examine any significant differences between Episcopal and Catholic participants. Several statistically significant differences were found after completing these analyses. Catholics tended to score higher on the MMPI-3 CRIN (i.e., combined response inconsistency) scale compared to Episcopalians (Catholic  $M=48.00$ ,  $SD=4.54$ , vs. Episcopal  $M=42.30$ ,  $SD=6.24$ ,  $t(16)=-2.16$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), while

Episcopalians tended to score higher on the MMPI-3 PSYC scale (i.e., psychoticism) compared to Catholics (Episcopal  $M=45.80$ ,  $SD=5.81$ , vs. Catholic  $M=40.25$ ,  $SD=4.17$ ,  $t(16)=2.27$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

Overall, results suggest that applicants to seminary and religious life formation from both the Catholic and Episcopal faith traditions are generally psychologically healthy as assessed by the new MMPI-3. As found in previous research using the MMPI-2, MMPI, and MMPI-RF, these applicants tend to be defensive, presenting themselves in a generally problem-free and virtuous manner. They also tend to score low on cynicism and thus present themselves as being hopeful and optimistic. Of course, these participants are applying to enter into religious communities that highly values moral and virtuous living, and thus it is not surprising that they would generally present themselves as functioning very well and free of psychopathology.

Other significant difference between the Catholic and Episcopal participants in the current study was that Catholics scored higher on combined response inconsistency but lower on psychoticism than Episcopalians. While these results are statistically significant, they may not be clinically significant. Certainly, further research with a larger sample size and with participants that are more diverse are needed to determine whether these findings could be replicated and are thus consistent.

Results must be viewed carefully and cautiously due to the small sample size of only 18 participants, and thus the project is a pilot investigation that will hopefully lead to additional and more comprehensive future research. Further research should examine larger numbers of clerical and religious life applicants and applicants from backgrounds that are more diverse. However, preliminary findings using the new MMPI-3 suggest that, consistent with earlier versions of the MMPI, clerical applicants in the Catholic and Episcopal traditions tend to be psychologically healthy, with no evidence of psychopathology as a group. Elevated defensiveness scores that are consistent with earlier research suggest that a careful evaluation is needed to obtain an accurate understanding of the psychological health, wellness, and risk factors among those who wish to become clerics within these faith traditions.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by SCEL, Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium

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