



Assumptions and Over-inferences in the Psychology of Religion

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Does the scientific study of religion preserve the meaning of religious practices?

TWO COMMON ASSUMPTIONS

Two common assumptions in quantitative science are **instrumentalism** and **operationalization**. Both lead to a chasm in meaning between what is studied and what is intended to be studied.

INSTRUMENTALISM: The idea that the purpose of scientific inquiry is to discover the most efficient means to achieve desired ends (Fowers, 2010).

- Psychology generally assumes that the end that humans seek is subjective well-being
- Psychology of religion operates under instrumentalism (Nelson, 2009); thus, it seeks to discover if religious practices successfully increase well-being and happiness
- This view is contrasted to the view of many religious people who view religion as valuable, even if it does not increase subjective well-being.
- Thus, psychologists are studying their own instrumental definitions of religious practices, which may not be the same as those definitions espoused by religious leaders

OPERATIONALIZATION: "The translation of psychological concepts into specific variables that can be incorporated into hypotheses to be tested empirically" (Langdrige, 2004, p.17)

- Operationalization rests on the assumption that the operational definition is an accurate representation of the hypothetical concept
- Directly observable behaviors, such as church attendance, are used to measure a non-observable concept, such as conversion
- In the end, what is measured is the operational definition rather than the construct
- Thus, conclusions are one step removed from the construct studied

COMPARISON OF DEFINITIONS

Religious Practices	Definitions from the Psychology of Religion	Definitions from Religious Leaders
Prayer	"Praying can as mentioned be viewed as an active cognitive coping strategy" (Andersson, 2009, p.178) "Petitionary prayer [is] a form of prayer that invokes God's help in response to specific needs" (Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010, p.650)	"God by His Spirit makes His will known in us, and then we identify ourselves with it" (Wierand, 1953, p.195) "[Petitionary prayer] is therefore a worthy Friendship—a Comradeship in planning, in labor, and in communion—and not merely a 'cloud of mystic light.'" (Buttrick, 1942, p. 221)
Forgiveness	"Decision-based forgiveness is defined as the cognitive letting go of resentment and bitterness and need for vengeance" (DiIulio, 1998, p.78) "One commonly used definition of forgiveness consists of giving up one's right to retribution and releasing or letting go of negative affect directed toward an offender" (Toussain et al., 2008, p.487)	"The production of morality is not the immediate purpose of forgiveness. ... Its primary aim is not to affect character but to rectify our personal relationship with God. When religion has been presented as valuable chiefly for the ordering of life, it has been misrepresented" (Mackintosh, 1954, p. 260) "As such, a Christian account of forgiveness ought not simply or even primarily be focused on the absolution of guilt; rather it ought to be focused on the reconciliation of brokenness, the restoration of communion – With God, with one another, and with the whole creation" (Jones, 1995, p.32)
Conversion	"Forgiveness is prosocial change in the motivations to avoid or to seek revenge against a transgressor" (McCullough, 2000, p.44) "Encounters between potential converts and religious advocates (or missionaries) involve a dynamic interaction in which reciprocal needs are met" (Kahn & Greene, 2004, p. 235)	"To pass from estrangement from God to be a son of God is the basic fact of conversion. That altered relationship with God gives you an altered relationship with yourself—with your brother man, with nature, with the universe" (Jones, 1959, p.132)
Meditation	"We can still analyze conversion decisions in terms of the benefits and costs as perceived by individuals" (Barrow, Hwang, & McClurey, 2010, p.15)	"What does converted mean? It means completely changed. Converted is not synonymous with reformed. Reforms are from without—conversion is from within. Conversion is a complete surrender to Jesus. It's a willingness to do what he wants you to do" (Ellis, 1914, p.148)
Image of God	"Mindfulness meditation can be defined as the effort to intentionally pay attention, nonjudgmentally, to present moment experience and sustain this attention over time. The aim is to cultivate a stable and nonreactive present moment awareness" (Miller, Fletcher & Kabat-Zinn, 1995, p. 193) "Deity Yoga is a self-transformational practice aimed at overcoming neuroses by cultivating the positive cognitive and affective states associated with the deity" (Kozhevnikov, Louchakova, Josipovic, & Motes, 2009, p. 646) "On the other hand, it can also be argued ... that some relationships within religious experience, such as one's relationship with God take on multiple functions" (Hill, Hall, & Todd, 2002, p.366) "The primary mechanism through which people develop an image of God is through religious teaching and modeling from parents, a process that leads to the development of a God image with parental qualities" (Steenwyk, Atkins, Bedics, & Whaley, 2010, p.86) "The foundation for one's image of God is likely established in the earliest periods of life (again with the mother, not the father playing the more influential role) and then the image is further refined through contributions of significant others in later developmental periods" (Hill et al., 2002, p. 370)	"The aim of Tantra [Deity Yoga is a part of Tantra] is to achieve Buddhahood on a faster path in order to be of service to others more quickly" (Hopkins, 2002, p.197) "What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them." (Romans 1:19 The New International Version) "God Himself is the real content of His revelation. What He reveals of Himself and His actual self-revealing are one and the same. These are complementary, the Being of God in His Act and the Act of God in His Being." (Torrance, 1982, p. 15)

IMPLICATIONS

- When psychology of religion researchers operationalize the instrumental definitions of religious practices, the definitions become twice removed from the original religious meanings of the practices
- Therefore, psychology of religion researchers are not preserving the meanings of religious practices
- This is particularly problematic when psychology of religion researchers use their results to inform religiously people about religious practice

EXAMPLE

Consider Andersson (2008) as an example of the instrumentalism and operationalization that is common in psychology of religion research. Andersson conceptualizes prayer as "an active cognitive coping strategy" (p.178) and delineates its functions as either problem-focused or emotion-focused. Here, Andersson is defining prayer primarily in terms of its ability to increase subjective well being. This characteristic of instrumentalism. This instrumentalism leads to operationalization in Andersson's measurement of prayer through a 3-item questionnaire, with each question characterizing prayer in terms of its ability to decrease pain, such as "I pray for the pain to stop" (p.180). A participant's response to these three items is used for the rest of the study to characterize prayer. It should be noted that Andersson is now studying his operational definition of prayer rather than the original construct of prayer. All further conclusions are talking about this specific way of defining prayer. Andersson, however, seems unaware of this as he assumes that his findings have significant import for "how religion and spirituality affects all people, including persons with health problems" (p. 185). Thus, Andersson's theoretical conception, method of measurement, and inferential implication are reflective of the impact of instrumentalism and operationalization in the psychology of religion.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Researchers should be educated about the richness and thickness of religious meanings
- Researchers should understand the importance of altering assumptions in relation to spirituality
- Theological meanings should be discussed more in research reports
- The construct actually studied should be compared with the construct intended to be studied
- Researchers should be more aware of the limitations of their definitions.

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