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?

**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, instrumentalism leads to operationalization in Andersson’s measurement of prayer (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 assumptions in relation to spirituality

**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
- Theoemical meanings espoused by religious leaders
- Thus, psychologists are studying their own instrumental definitions of religious practices, which may not be the same as those definitions espoused by religious leaders
- Thus, conclusions are one step removed from the construct studied

**REFERENCES**


**IMPLICATIONS**

- When psychology of religion researchers operationalize the instrumental definitions of religious practices, the definitions become too 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 religious people about religious practice.