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Was Religiousness/Spirituality Divided into Typologies or Strata?

Comment on Article of Park NS et al.: Typologies of Religiousness/Spirituality: Implications for Health and Well-Being, JRH 52: 828–839

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In a recent edition of the *Journal of Religion and Health* (2013, volume 52), an article by Park and colleagues appeared, in which they developed an empirically based multidimensional typology of religiousness/spirituality (R/S). However, the only value we find in this study is that it points out a possibly curvilinear relationship between R/S factors and distress, not that it demonstrates types of R/S.

Most studies that analysed the relationship between religiousness/spirituality (R/S) and outcome variables such as well-being or distress have considered R/S to be a continuous variable. However, in some situations, it may be more informative to distinguish between different types of R/S instead of different degrees of R/S. An example of such a typology is the distinction between religious, existential and non-religious/spiritual beliefs (Riley et al. 1998). Such R/S types are qualitatively different and are possibly differentially related to well-being and distress. 'People are thus categorized not as being more or less religious but as being religious in different ways' (Klemmack et al. 2007, p. 165).

Park et al. (2013) have tried to empirically develop a R/S typology, with the use of a sophisticated cluster analysis method and data on measures of the frequency of religious service attendance, frequency of prayer, positive religious coping, and daily spiritual experiences, which they had gathered from a large population sample. Now, in order to find qualitatively different clusters, the chosen R/S measures should represent theoretically distinguishable, but related, aspects of R/S. Park and colleagues do not provide a clear theoretical rationale for their choice of variables. We assume that the first and second measures represent organizational and non-organizational religiousness, respectively, but the theoretical place of spiritual experiences and positive religious coping in this set of variables is not quite clear to us.

In addition, the outcome of the cluster analysis seems questionable, even though it was statistically sound. The assumption of Park et al. would have been confirmed if the clusters

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represented qualitatively different R/S types. But, if the clusters only quantitatively differed from each other—representing higher or lower scores on the sets of variables—the assumption of a typology would have been rejected or at least the conclusion would have been that the set of variables or the type of analysis was unsuited for the development of a typology.

What Park and colleagues found was a quantitative difference between the clusters; each of the constituent variables gradually decreased from the first to the last cluster. The frequency of religious service attendance, frequency of prayer, intensity of spiritual experiences and use of positive religious coping were highest in the first—‘highly religious’—cluster. The scores to these four variables were somewhat lower in the second—‘moderately religious’—cluster, and so on to the last cluster. Thus, our conclusion is that the analysis did not yield the typology of qualitatively different clusters of R/S variables that was hoped for, but only resulted in an artificial categorization of continuous variables.

One of the reasons Park and colleagues attempted to develop a typology was that dimensions of R/S may interact to produce their effect on an outcome, instead of simply adding to each other. So, though the four types are not qualitatively different, they may have interesting relationships with other variables. However, such an effect only seemed present for psychological distress, which was higher in clusters 2 and 3 compared to that in cluster 1, but lower in cluster 4 compared to that in clusters 2 and 3. This outcome is very similar to the relatively low depression level among minimally religious people in the preceding study (Klemmack et al. 2007). Although, the authors do not discuss it further, it seems to reflect a curvilinear relationship. But, this might also have appeared if each R/S factor had been separately related to distress. So, in our view, the only profit of the present study is the awareness of a possibly curvilinear relationship between R/S factors and distress, not the demonstration of R/S typologies or interactive R/S effects.

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