

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL
SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION FROM 1997 TO 2001:
WHERE WE HAVE BEEN AND WHERE WE
HOPE TO GO*

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ABSTRACT

This study reports the results of a content analysis of articles published in *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* for the period, 1997 to 2001. The 50 articles published in the five-year period were examined with regard to the following information: 1) authors' nations of origin and academic background; 2) types of information sources used; 3) religious affiliations represented; 4) the most frequent types of topics covered; and, 5) differences in presentation of research (empirical, non-empirical). The results of the content analysis revealed four points of interest: 1) a need for empirical research employing more sophisticated methodological and analytical techniques; 2) a need for more non-Christian samples; 3) a need for better documentation of the religious affiliation of participants; and, 4) a need for studies from disciplines outside of the social sciences (e.g., medicine and physical sciences).

Religious research is a rapidly growing field (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). One barometer of this phenomenal growth in research on religious and spiritual variables is the rapid increase in the numbers of articles published in this area from 1950 to 2001 (over 13,000 articles were published, according to *psychInfo*). In a recent *psycINFO* search on the terms "religion" or "spirituality", from 1951-1959, 866 articles were published versus 5,135 articles published in the interval from 1990-1999! Another *psycINFO* search that compared the number of articles containing these same terms in the five-year periods

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of 1992–1996 (2,142) and 1997–2001 (3,711), showed a 73% increase in the number of such papers.

Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) noted that this rapid growth of the field has been accompanied by a growing scientific interest in religious and spiritual variables. There has been a concomitant increase in the number of scales developed to measure these constructs (e.g., Hill & Hood, 2000). The aim of this scientific interest in religious and spiritual variables is to determine the unique contributions of religiosity and spirituality in mental and physical health outcomes (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2000; Pargament, 1997; Piedmont, 1999; Plante & Sherman, 2001). Given such rapid growth in this field, the need arises to review the literature in order to examine some of the larger issues and topical trends that describe and characterize this body of work. As Baumeister and Leary (1997) have noted, literature reviews can be important for surveying the state of knowledge in a field and for identifying conceptual and empirical problems that may be present. The current study aims to begin a systematic effort of characterizing research in the field of religious and spiritual research through a content analysis of studies published in *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* (RSSSR).

RSSSR is an annual serial that is committed to publishing interdisciplinary research on religion and spirituality for an international audience. Its articles provide a sampling of work that is being conducted in this area from a wide array of researchers of diverse nationalities. As RSSSR marks its 14th year of publication, it seems a propitious moment to review what has been presented. The value of such a review is threefold. First, a content analysis of the articles in RSSSR will give a snapshot of recent research interests and methodological trends within the field. Second, the review can identify content areas of high and low interest as well as current methodological practices and analytic strategies. Finally, this review can provide potential authors and researchers with information on what has been published in RSSSR and the type of directions it may likely move toward in the future.

METHOD

The data for this study consists of all articles published in RSSSR from 1997 to 2001. Each article was reviewed to determine the type

of information contained, characteristics of participants, general topic, type of analysis used, and type of design. Editorial statements and introductory statements were excluded from the study. A total of 50 articles were coded. A copy of the coding form is available from the second author (RLP).

This study was coded as part of a larger study consisting of a team of six individuals coding articles from several religious/spiritual-oriented journals in a comprehensive review of literature conducted by Dy-Liacco, Piedmont, Leach, and Nelson (2003). Members of the team coded one article each from their respective journals, then met as a group to discuss the coding system, focusing on questions about how elements were to be coded and whether new categories needed to be added. Decisions were made as a group to answer those questions and the coding form was revised as needed. All the remaining articles were then coded. Discrepancies in coding were handled through a group discussion. In this way, relevant coding issues were clarified for all members of the coding team.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined the 50 articles by frequency of category endorsement by the coder. Categories that were found in at least 10% of the articles were considered significant. Categories that were found in less than 10% of the articles may represent opportunities for growth in material coverage for RSSSR. RSSSR published an average of 10 articles per year in the five-year period. Articles published per issue ranged from eight (1998) to 13 (2000). The articles will be discussed with regard to: 1) authors' nation of origin and academic discipline; 2) types of information sources being used; 3) religious affiliations represented; 4) the most frequent types of topics covered; and, 5) types of research designs and analytic methods employed.

Authors' Demographics

There were a total of 85 authors listed on the 50 reviewed papers. Of this total, 74% were from the United States, while 19% were from Europe, 2% were from Africa, 4% from Australia, and 1% from Asia. Although mostly dominated by American authors, RSSSR does pull in an international list of contributors. In terms of academic discipline, 33% were in Psychology, 41% were in Sociology,

Table 1. *Types of Information Sources Being Used in RSSSR Articles From 1997 Through 2001*

Types Information Sources	Percentage (%)
Self-Report	56
Theoretical Report	28
Documents	16
Literature Review	6
Observer	4
Life Outcome	2
Test Data	2
Meta-Analysis	-
Multiple Studies	2
Total Number of Participants	46
Numbers of Male/Female Participants	74 ^a
Type of Subject	56
Clergy	75 ^b
Lay	15 ^b
Combined	10 ^b
Type of Sample	42
Random	57 ^c
Convenience	43 ^c
Age Group of Subject	
Adults	36
General/Mixed	19
College Students	17
Professionals	14
Children	6
Youth	3
Graduate Students	-
Elderly	-
Families	-

Notes. *N* = 50, unless otherwise indicated by superscript. ^a*n* = 23. ^b*n* = 28. ^c*n* = 21.

21% were in Theology, and the remaining 5% were either in Anthropology or Statistics. RISSR does seem to be interdisciplinary, publishing a diversity of perspectives from the social sciences. However, lacking from this list are any medical or physical science authors.

Types of Information Sources Being Used

Table 1 presents the information sources used in RISSR over the five-year period.

Fifty-six percent of the articles used self-report data, 28% were

theoretical reports, and 16% used documents (various official and personal papers such as church registries and diaries). Total numbers of participants were reported in 46% of the 50 articles. There were as few as 22 participants in one correlational study to as many as 36,670 participants used in an international survey project. The median number of participants per study was 380. Gender was reported in 74% of the articles reporting total numbers of participants. The average number of participants per article was 452 males (SD = 685) and 379 females (SD = 641). Fifty-six percent of all articles reported on the category, "type of subject," i.e., whether the participants were comprised of clergy, lay, or a combined group of clergy and laypersons. Of these, 75% (*n* = 28) used lay participants, 15% used clergy, and 10% used a combined sample. Forty-two percent reported the sampling method used. A slightly greater percentage of studies claimed to have used random samples (57%) versus convenience samples (43%). The majority of participants were sampled from the adult, college student, and professional age groups.

Self-report data was by far the leading information source used in RISSR articles. This was likely due to the convenience, ease, and relative cost-effectiveness associated with gathering self-report data versus test and life outcome data. There is an encouraging trend of publishing data-driven studies in RISSR, with 56% of all articles being empirical, compared with 28% of the articles being strictly theoretical in nature (the remaining 16% being literature reviews and descriptive studies). This finding stands in contrast to criticisms that the field of scientific religious research trails far behind mainstream social science disciplines in the use of the scientific method to conduct soundly constructed empirical studies of religious and spiritual variables (e.g., Sloan, Bagiella, & Powell, 2001).

The use of "documents" as a source of data is particularly notable. Personal and institutional documents (e.g., diaries, letters, baptismal registries, marriage registries, annulments, books of the dead, frequency and amount of tithes, to name a few) provide information not usually analyzed scientifically and can offer insights into religious behaviors, motivations, and social trends that are just unavailable from the perspective of other information sources. Such documents can provide empirical records of past behavior and choices related to religious activity, and intact documents spanning long periods of time can provide insights into sociological and cultural trends.

For those articles that report the use of participants, most did

delineate by gender and type of subject. Such information gives readers a clearer picture of possible subject factors that may influence the interpretation of the results of a study. The large range of sample sizes (from 22 to 36,648) provided insight into the type of study conducted, from the correlational designs with relatively smaller sample sizes (N s in the 200s–400s) more common to psychological research, to survey designs with larger sample sizes (N s in the thousands) more common to sociological survey research. RSSSR is committed to having authors provide detailed information about samples used, measures given, and procedures followed so that readers can have both a crisp appreciation for the technical characteristics of a report and sufficient information to allow for adequate replications.

In contrast to the methodological strengths centering on sample sizes and data sources noted above, there is a conspicuous lack of studies employing observer ratings of behavior and feelings (observer data were used in only two articles). Observer ratings provide a useful criterion for use in validating self-report data. Observer data can be instrumental in documenting the observability of religious and spiritual constructs and the pervasiveness of their influence on behavior. Another noteworthy gap was the dearth of multiple studies (only one article contained multiple studies). Papers that contain multiple studies are able both to develop an idea empirically and to show that the major findings can be replicated. Thus, most research in RSSSR was based on one-shot designs aimed at capturing very specific data with no demonstration of the robustness of their findings.

Twenty-eight percent of the articles were theoretical reports. Theoretical reports can be valuable contributions to the conceptualization of relationships among variables, and stimulate the formulation and investigation of hypotheses about these relationships. RSSSR provided a forum for such discussion and idea-generation by devoting nearly one-third of its space to theoretical reports. However, there were no meta-analytic studies published in RSSSR in the five-year period 1997–2001. The value of a meta-analysis is its ability to extract empirically broad trends and to promote high-level abstractions from the research literature. Such studies can help to discern how much religious and spiritual variables may contribute to salient life outcomes over and above other factors such as personality, social and cultural context, and other well-established psychological or sociological constructs. Meta analyses can also help to document the overall value of spiritual constructs (i.e., their predictive power) in

Table 2. *The Representation of Religious Affiliations in RSSSR Articles From 1997 Through 2001*

Religious Affiliation	Overall Percentage (%)
Catholic	34
Not Stated	23
Protestant	20
Other Christian	14
Episcopal	11

Notes. $N = 50$. Only those religious affiliations found in 10% or more of the articles are included in the table.

diverse contexts, such as health status (e.g., Smith, 2001). Furthermore, meta-analyses can control for covariates or confounds, giving more accurate pictures of association and effect uniquely attributable to the study variable. Encouraging more meta-analytic work to be done is a responsible position that holds much promise for the scientific study of religion and spirituality.

Religious Affiliations Represented

Twenty-five categories were used to classify the religious affiliation of samples, including a "not stated" option. Seventy percent of the articles were coded as reporting religious affiliation. Table 2 presents the most frequently cited of the 25 religious affiliations (i.e., with 10% or greater representation), and includes Catholics at 34%, Not Stated at 23%, Protestants at 20%, Other Christian at 14%, and Episcopal at 11%. These figures indicate two important facts. First, there was clearly a bias in the research literature to employ Christian samples. There are many possible reasons for this, including the predominance of Christians among those who are conducting research in this area and the prevalence of Christians who are available and willing to serve as participants. This lack of religious diversity preempts the field's ability to demonstrate the value of spirituality by capturing its basic, common elements. This in turn compromises our ability to develop comprehensive models of spiritual development and experience that have practical significance and ecological validity (Piedmont & Leach, 2002). There is also a need to employ multiple methods, both quantitative and qualitative, which addresses both the specifics of particular faiths and the overlapping themes common

among faiths (Moberg, 2002). Second, for those monitoring religious affiliation, many were vague in their categorizations, frequently relying on a simple dichotomy of Catholic versus Protestant. There are many differences among the Protestant traditions (especially in terms of their levels of conservatism-liberalism and religious behaviors) that render combining them into a single global category unwarranted. These trends raise the issue of cultural insularity in the published research along with its attendant impact on the external validity of results to groups beyond the scope of the studies. Similarly, broad classifications of affiliation may serve to mask important inter-denominational differences that may be of psychosocial import (Otani, 2002).

Given the international background of both the contributors and readers of RSSSR, it would seem that RSSSR is in an ideal position to solicit articles with a broader representation of diverse religious groups. It is surprising that there are so few inter-faith articles published. Such studies can help address issues concerning the extent to which spirituality and religiosity reflect universal aspects of the human experience as well as the degree and manner in which these variables carry faith-specific benefits and liabilities to adherents.

Another interesting trend that deserves the attention of the journal's editors, reviewers, and future contributors is the proportion of studies that were coded as not stating the religious affiliation of participants. Nearly one-fourth of the 50 articles did not state the religious affiliation of their participants. It is entirely possible that consideration of religious affiliation was immaterial to the scope of some articles, but this seems somewhat ironic in a publication dedicated to studying religion.

The Most Frequent Types of Topics Covered

Table 3 presents the 15 topics that were found in 10% or more of RSSSR articles between 1997 and 2001. RSSSR has drawn articles mainly from a broad spectrum of topics within the sociological and psychological study of religion and spirituality. The top six topics (with frequencies above 20%) were: Religious practices, social/societal movements, personality, spirituality, theological issues, and cross-cultural issues. It is interesting to note that although the topics of forgiveness, stress, and coping have been receiving increasing attention in the psychology of religion (e.g., Plante & Sherman, 2001), they were minimally represented in RSSSR (these topics combined

Table 3. *Types of Topics Appearing in RSSSR Articles During the Five-year Period 1997-2001*

Topic	Overall Percentage (%)
Religious Practices	42
Social/Societal Movements	34
Personality	26
Spirituality	24
Theological Issues	22
Cross-cultural Issues	22
Within Culture Studies	18
Well-Being	14
Philosophical Issues	14
Cognitive Processes	14
Mental Health	12
Beliefs	10
Gender	10
Scale Validation	10
Religious Differences	10

N = 50. Topics under 10% were not reported.

represented less than 10% of all articles). There has been also a paucity of studies on methodological issues, test construction, and the usage of broad, empirically-based models of personality within which to situate, or from which to differentiate, hypothesized religious and spiritual variables. The lack of such studies presents an opportunity for researchers to step in and fill a gap.

Given the comments above about the lack of theological pluralism, it is encouraging to note that RSSSR does contain a number of studies that examine cross-cultural issues that impact faith and spirituality. Although most of these employ primarily Christian samples, they do provide insights into how culture may impact the development and expression of one's faith tradition as well as allowing for examinations of culturally independent faith qualities.

Differences in Presentation of Research (Empirical versus Non-empirical)

Empirical presentations of research were found in more than 50% of RSSSR articles. Table 4 presents the types of data analyses and study designs that were utilized most in the 50 coded articles. In terms of study design, the majority of articles used the survey and correlational designs (44% and 25%, respectively), which are commonly

Table 4. *Types of Data Analyses and Study Design Used in RSSSR Articles Across the Five-year Period 1997-2001*

Type of Data Analysis/Study Design	Overall Percentage (%)
Analysis	
Descriptive	56
Descriptive only	30
Correlations	28
Regression	25
Non-empirical	22
ANOVA	14
Factor Analysis	11
Design	
Survey	44
Correlational	25
Qualitative	22

Notes. $N = 50$. Only those religious affiliations found in 10% or more of the articles are included in the table.

used in sociological and psychological research. Five methods of data analysis were used in greater than 10% of articles: descriptive statistics (56%), correlations (28%), regression (25%), ANOVA (14%), and factor analysis (11%). Studies using only descriptive statistics in data analysis comprised 30% of all articles, and non-empirical analyses were found in 22% of the articles. Qualitative designs were found in 22% of the articles. Thus a broad range of research designs and analytic strategies are represented in RSSSR. However, given recent criticisms of this field's research as being methodologically weak and interpretively misleading (Sloan, Bagiella, & Powell, 1999, 2001), it may be in our better interests to move toward more sophisticated designs and analyses (e.g., multivariate analyses, structural equation modeling, longitudinal designs) in studies that are statistically based.

CONCLUSION

This relatively recent review reveals that RSSSR has published articles reflecting a rich mixture of sociological and psychological perspectives. These articles encompass a broad spectrum of topics, all of which are consistent with the interdisciplinary philosophy of the publication. The published articles bring a unique perspective to the study of religious and spiritual constructs by employing underutilized

information sources such as documents, or through the use of survey designs with large random samples. The inclusion of factor analysis and regression-based analyses is a refreshing indicator that some researchers are seeking answers to more complex questions about the structure, roles, and validity of religious and spiritual constructs. RSSSR's diverse perspective is further enriched by the presence of articles submitted by authors from the international community.

As a microcosm of what may be published in other periodicals in this area, this review certainly can make recommendations for how the field, and RSSSR, may wish to orient themselves in the future. First, researchers need to give more specific attention to religious affiliation, and other indicators of religious orientation, as variables in their research. Careful documentation of affiliation, as well as greater consideration of this construct as either an independent and/or dependent variable, is needed. Second, given the recent rise of critiques on the quality of psychological research in this field (e.g., Joiner, Perez, & Walker, 2002; Sloan et al., 2001; Smith, 2001), it seems that research on religion needs to begin to employ more sophisticated methodologies and related analytic techniques. Bateson (1997) argued that the field of religious research is 30 years behind the mainstream social sciences. If this is true, then we need to energetically focus on making important methodological advances. The growing literature of this field will no doubt attract growing critical interest and commentary. Third, there is the need to increase the inclusiveness of the research completed in this area. Although RSSSR does well in publishing studies that employ cross-cultural samples (and should continue doing so given its international perspective), more needs to be accomplished to include non-Christian faith traditions. The Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu faiths (among others) represent spiritual traditions that are very different from Christian models. Their inclusion can help construct robust models of spirituality that are representative and valid with large proportions of the world population.

Finally, the content analysis conducted in this study needs to be extended to include other serials in this domain of research. It is time to review the very large and rapidly increasing database that is developing. Not only is it important to understand the publication trends of the various journals, it is also critical that the field take stock of what it has already accomplished and discern what it has yet to do. Critical reflection and analysis are necessary so that a solid, integrated, and differentiated body of knowledge can be

developed that can speak to researchers across disciplines about the value of religion and spirituality in the lingua franca of the field: Science.

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In addition to the above authors, many scholars and scientists have made a significant contribution to the publication of this volume. They have anonymously screened the initial versions of these and other submitted manuscripts for the methodological rigor and scientific significance. They also have given the authors valuable suggestions for improving their papers prior to making their final revisions. We as editors and the respective authors are very grateful for the services they contributed. They have significantly improved the quality of the research reported here, and thus they have contributed indirectly to elevating the quality of the entire field of the social scientific study of religion.

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