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Religious / Spiritual: Differences in Substance or Style?

Ser "Religioso/a" ou "Espiritualizado/a": Diferenças Essenciais ou de Estilo?

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Abstract

While scholars debate the terms "spiritual" and "religious," people readily self-identify as "spiritual not religious (SNR)," "religious not spiritual (RNS)," "both spiritual and religious (BSR)," or "neither spiritual nor religious (NONE)." This study investigated how these self labels related to the substance and style of people's prayers and other faith-based features. Respondents (*N* = 103) completed an internet survey. RNS and NSR did not have enough respondents for analysis. BSR and SNR groups were indistinguishable with regard to the substance of their prayers and perceptions of God as loving or controlling. Likewise the two groups equally valued their faith positions as important for self-identity. BSR reported greater nearness to God. BSR and SNR respondents were significantly different on many style related characteristics (e.g., attendance at formal services; frequency and duration of prayer; age at first prayer). They were similar in their preferences for praying alone. These results suggest that the differences between claiming the designation of "religious" and / or "spiritual" may have more to do with the style than the substance of the faith system embraced.

Palavras-chave: Religious. Spiritual. Prayer. Substance. Style.

Resumo

Enquanto estudiosos debatem os termos "espiritualizado/a" e "religioso/a", surgem no cenário pessoas que prontamente se auto-identificam como sendo "espiritualizadas mas não religiosos/as" (SNR) ou "religiosas mas não espiritualizadas" (RNS) ou ainda como sendo, simultaneamente, "espiritualizadas e religiosas" (BSR), ou então, "nem espiritualizadas nem religiosas (NONE). Este estudo investigou como estas categorias auto identificatórias relacionam-se à essência e estilo das orações das pessoas e outras características com base em crenças religiosas. Participantes (*N* = 103) responderam a uma pesquisa via internet. RNS e SNR não apresentaram respondentes suficientes para uma análise. Não houve distinção entre os BSR e SNR em relação à essência de suas orações e percepções de Deus como amor ou controle. Igualmente, os dois grupos valorizaram suas posições de fé para se auto-identificarem. BSR relataram maior proximidade de Deus. Os respondentes das categorias BSR e SNR foram significativamente diferentes em muitas características relacionadas aos estilos (por exemplo, frequência aos cultos; frequência e duração da oração; idade da primeira oração). Estes dois grupos foram semelhantes em suas preferências pela prática da oração a sós. Tais resultados sugerem que as diferenças que designam as categorias "espiritualizado/a" e/ou "religioso/a" podem ter mais a ver com o estilo do que a essência do sistema de fé abraçado.

Key words: Religioso/a. Espiritualizado/a. Oração. Essência. Estilo.

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(o artigo aborda pesquisa sobre religião e considerou-se oportuno publicá-lo no dossiê, apesar de tratar de realidade norte-americana)

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Introduction

Recent work in the psychology of religion has sought to clarify the terms "religious" and "spiritual" (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). These arguments generally take a neutral position with respect to the classic linguistic meanings where the terms are nearly inextricably linked. Instead, investigators place an emphasis on understanding how the terms are employed in contemporary situations of self-identification. The result is that "religious" is often discussed as a relatively rigid, institutional, "cold" position, and as largely devoid of engagement at a personal level, especially by those who disavow it. Claims to the "spiritual" label are presented as flexible, individual, and "hot" in character, with intense amounts of personalized meanings, particularly by those who endorse it. On the contrary, those who embrace "religious" identify it as tradition-rich, comfortably stable while, to them, "spiritual" lacks moorings, flirts with narcissism, and is inherently flighty. Those who profess a dual identification as "both" have a tendency to see high and low aspects of each orientation. The results, in other words, mirror social psychological findings in the area of ingroup / outgroup studies (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010) where people tend to see their own perspective as the best one; this, as such, is not surprising. This study investigated how these self-applied labels related to the substance and style of people's prayers and other faith-based features.

It should be noted that much of the debate on this topic is occuring in the United States and in some European contexts. The specific terms "religion" and "spirituality" are bound tightly to the English language. In other contexts, China, for instance, the words carry little or no meaning in and of themselves. Likewise, as one reviewer observed, in a Brazilian context, these two words shift in meaning depending on whether a Catholic or a Protestant Christian uses them. The global dialogue concerning this area of study within psychology is becoming logistically easier (and more intellectually necessary). As a result, scholars are faced with the

task of developing awareness of how "common" words take on unanticipated meanings in contexts with which they are less familiar. The present paper is, hopefully, a useful part of that expanding conversation.

1 Inward, Outward, Upward Prayer: Practices of "Spiritual," "Religious," "Both," and "Neither" Respondents

The typical approach among these studies is to evaluate the extent to which people embrace or reject the words "religious" and / or "spiritual" as self-descriptive. This results in a four-part classification system wherein people can claim to be "religious but not spiritual" (RNS), "spiritual but not religious" (SNR), "both religious and spiritual" (BSR), or "neither religious nor spiritual" (NONE). Those claiming NONE are a small minority in the US; they are rarely discussed at length, although at least one major psychological treatment of the related position of atheism exists (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Similarly, people are reticent to categorically reject "spiritual" and endorse a position of RNS.

This leaves two categories that are used by the majority of people: BSR and SNR. Between these two positions, BSR often accounts for a greater proportion of the sample in many of the studies (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005).The discussion in the literature, therefore, seems to be driven primarily by the exploration of these two positions. In essence, the BSR individuals represent a classic interpretation of the words, capturing both institutional and personal levels of involvement, while the SNR taps into a more recent distinction that is more exclusively personal in nature.

From our perspective, what is more intriguing than perceptions of one's own group or someone else's group is the extent to which the people choosing to use the various labels actually differ in their behaviors. Previous work has shown that BSR people attend formal services more frequently than do SNR people, but that is

rather tautological, given the common definitional character of "spiritual" as rejecting of formality with respect to faith (Zhai, Ellison, Stokes, & Glenn, 2008).

The bulk of observations in this realm focus on readily visible aspects of behavior and represent markers of social behavior that help us understand how people work out the meaning for themselves in a cultural milieu. But what of internal behaviors? To what extent is there psychological variation in the intentions of what people seek to accomplish by practicing their faith, regardless of their self-labeling? This is where our interest is piqued. We would like to know the degree to which the substance of private practice relates to the style of its public enactment.

1.1 Substance Issues

In order to evaluate the relation between substance and style, one must find some substantive components of a life of faith that are freely available to both those who self-identify as SNR and those who self-identify as BSR. From among the options, the practice of prayer emerges as one likely candidate for exploration. Equally at home in either formal or informal settings, prayer is accessible in group or individual situations, thereby spanning the religious / spiritual contextual landscape whether under classic or contemporary definitions. Prayer can cover this wide swath of human experience because it is not restricted in time or space. Such breadth makes the topic a challenge to study systematically. In practical terms, studies often must emphasize one of these facets over others, recognizing that only a portion of the picture is being evaluated. In the current paper we will focus on the content of the prayers as a way to understand how people are engaging this particular discipline.

A possible weakness beyond the sheer expansiveness of prayer is that it may be the case that SNR people reject prayer *per se* due to its theistic presupposition. To lessen the likelihood of this we employ the following definition of prayer: "the

typically intentional expression of one's self in an attempt to establish or enhance connectivity with the divine, with others in a religious or spiritual framework, and with the self" (Ladd & McIntosh, 2008, p. 29). This allows for both theistic and non-theistic approaches to prayer since the emphasis is on the sensed connections established via the practice. The experience and practice need not, therefore, be limited to theistic contexts because the emphasis is placed on the individual person's goals and experiences; the nature of the target toward which these efforts are directed remains open in this definition.

Looking at the individual's approach to prayer is possible via many different strategies. One of the oldest methods to capture people's position concerning such practices is to evaluate how they use language to describe their experiences; what words and phrases do they use to explain themselves? Since prayer is a multidimensional psychological experience that people speak about using common language (Ladd & Spilka, 2002; 2006; Spilka & Ladd, 2013), we can use such a method to fine tune the comparison between BSR and SNR individuals. Prayer appears to contain at least eight empirically distinguishable elements on the basis of the language used: examination (self-reflection), intercession (for others), suffering (empathy), tears (contrition), rest (comfort), sacrament (adherence to tradition), petition (material needs), and radical (indignation). This is not to say that there are not other ways to think about the "structure" of prayer as we note elsewhere (Spilka & Ladd, 2013). It is, however, one particular model that we have found useful and stable (Ladd & Spilka, 2002; 2006; Spilka & Ladd, 2013).

These elements, in turn, can be conceptually aligned as relating to three distinct directions of belief (Ladd & Spilka, 2002; 2006; Spilka & Ladd, 2013). Inward concerns pertain to intensely personal aspects of belief. Outward oriented prayers move beyond the self, emphasizing relations with the surrounding world. Upward directed prayers are those primarily focused on the individual's desire to form connections outside the physical realm (e.g., deity, creative force, etc.). While these distinctions neatly describe theological and theoretical work, it is apparent

that people do not actually pray in such clear categorical fashion. Instead, they mix prayers of different directions, combining them to form various overarching themes. One common theme reflects internal concerns, of the individual who is praying, and also how that person's experience provide points of contact with other people's experience. Another theme addresses the inherent paradox of belief (good things happening to bad people and vice versa). A third theme that characterizes some prayers is the bold assertion of one's own opinion, a sort of contesting or arguing process. From among these two ways of classifying prayers (directions or themes) it is clear that some ways of praying are directed toward the individual while others are directed away from the person praying.

The main question of interest in the present study is what difference it makes to either embrace or reject "religion" as an identity. We anticipate that SNR should be higher than BSR in areas of prayer more related to individuality. In this realm are prayers of examination, suffering, rest, radical, and petition. These forms of prayer each take as central starting point the position of the one who is praying. (What is my own condition? How can my experiences help you? How do I experience personal comfort? Why are my preferences not the way of the world? How can I get what I physically need?) We also believe that SNR should be lower than BSR when the emphasis falls on relations to aspects of prayer linked to connections that presuppose interactions with social expectations and structures. In this case, prayers of tears, intercession, sacrament highlight aspects of life where the individual praying is either setting aside personal issues in favor of others or is being brought into alignment with externally established principles. (Tears: I have fallen short of the standards of my faith. Intercession: I set myself aside completely for your sake. Sacrament: I pray not simply as I choose, but as my tradition teaches me.)

Another way of thinking about the substance of belief systems is the extent to which those beliefs link to the core of a person's identity. If the growing tendency to describe "religion" as institutional and "spiritual" as personal is accurate, then

SNR should relate to a form of belief that is at the very heart of the individual while BSR should be less clearly oriented since its scope includes less personal facets.

These different ways of believing also should appear with regard to how people feel about God and their relationships to God. For instance, we anticipate that SNR proponents would emphasize a loving deity while de-emphasizing a controlling figure. Although BSR adherents could hold similar viewpoints, the "religion" aspect should weaken the overall effect since it contains more features consistent with institutional rule-guided behavior.

1.2 Style Issues

We identify style issues as fundamentally content-free practices. Among these, frequency of attendance and frequency of prayer are key components that are included in many studies. These two indices provide very different kinds of information. The former taps into socially observable behavior. The latter reflects more personalized behavior. From a common definitional perspective, we anticipate that BSR, with its institutional overtones, would demonstrate significantly greater levels of attendance. Since prayer is often interpreted as a private event, even when in a corporate context, we suspect BSR and SNR should be relatively equivalent on the measure of frequency.

Since prayer is a fundamental expression of a faith system (Spilka & Ladd, 2013), we expect that it will display not only the substance as noted above, but will also show notable stylistic features. In particular, we hypothesize that BSR will engage in prayer more frequently, in part due to the fact that BSR will be systematically engaged in more corporate activities that include praying. Also, predicated on the institutional component in BSR, we expect that these adherents will report beginning to pray at a younger age, having likely been socialized into a specific tradition.

Additionally, we think that BSR will report prayers that are of shorter duration than those of SNR classification. Since the SNR position typically claims a deeper personalization of faith, we think this should translate into a more intense practice of prayer.

It is important to note that these expectations arise largely from the prevailing assumptions about (and the claims made by) those self-identifying as SNR (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). It is certainly possible that the self-identifications overstate their positions or mischaracterize the positions of others. For instance, as one reviewer correctly notes, members of some conservative groups (e.g., Orthodox Christians and Haisidic Jews) may have very intense experiences as a result of participating in highly structured rituals. In that sense, they have a strong personal identification with the tradition, but are likely to reject the SNR label. The fact that these labels (e.g., BSR, SNR, etc.) are not always as clear as they appear is partially what the present study seeks to address.

2 Method

Participants

Data were collected via an internet survey advertised primarily but not exclusively within the context of an academic community (N = 93; 66% female; 86% Caucasian; average age = 35 years; 70% one or more semesters of college). The respondents were exclusively from the northern, mid-west region of the United States.

Materials

Using a forced-choice format, respondents indicated whether they considered themselves: religious but not spiritual (RNS = 4), spiritual but not religious (SNR = 25), both religious and spiritual (BSR = 51), or neither spiritual nor religious (NONE = 11). Given the literature's emphasis on SNR and BSR, in conjunction with the low response rate among the RNS and the NONE categories, the latter groups were both removed from further consideration in this study.

Scales previously developed and validated across several samples identified eight different ways that people think about their prayers (Ladd & Spilka, 2002; 2006). Alpha reliabilities for the scales exceeded .70 in all cases, mirroring reliability estimates in other samples.

To explore other questions of substance concerning the belief system, we included two instruments relevant to God concepts and perceived relationships. Benson & Spilka's (1973) "Loving / Controlling" scales ask respondents to indicate their agreement along a bi-polar scale (e.g., from controlling to loving). The five items for each scale are counterbalanced. Gorsuch & Smith's (1983) measure of "Nearness to God" consists of six questions (e.g., God is very real to me) in a Likert format (1 = low; 6 = high agreement). Reliabilities exceeded .70 for these tools.

We also investigated self-concept using a three item scale that reports on the extent to which the respondent's religiosity and / or spirituality is central to self-identity (Ladd, 2007). Reliability surpassed the .90 level.

Looking at the style with which the belief system is engaged, we included single Likert-type items capturing: frequency of attendance at formal services; frequency of private prayer; age at time of first prayer; duration of typical prayer; feeling more religious or spiritual when praying in groups.

3 Results

An initial multivariate analysis of variance revealed no significant differences in the approaches to prayer due to sex, F(8, 62) = 1.32, *ns*. Likewise a Chi-square analysis showed no sex differences with respect to how participants self identified on the religion / spirituality question, *Chi-square*(1) = .22, *ns*. The participant's age was similarly non-significant. Therefore we did not control for sex or age of respondent.

3.1 Questions of Substance

A multivariate analysis of variance did not demonstrate any significant differences in approaches to praying in relation to how people categorized themselves concerning religion and spirituality, $F(8, 62) = 1.22$, $p = .30$, *eta-squared* = .14. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the individual prayer scales.

Table 1. Prayer Scales: Means and (Standard Deviations)

	BSR	SNR
Examine	4.30 (.93)	3.71 (.97)
Tears	3.13 (1.04)	3.14 (1.11)
Sacrament	2.69 (1.16)	2.20 (.90)
Rest	3.76 (.93)	3.59 (1.11)
Radical	2.69 (1.07)	2.14 (.88)
Suffering	3.20 (1.01)	3.11 (1.09)
Intercession	4.26 (1.05)	3.73 (1.51)
Petition	3.45 (1.10)	2.93 (1.27)

Source: Authors

Differences also failed to emerge with regard to participant's sense of God as either loving (BSR = 5.46; SNR = 5.19) or controlling (BSR = 2.97; SNR = 2.36).

Significant differences did appear when considering how people felt about the nearness of God. BSR responders perceived a closer relationship with God than did SNR responders (5.49; 4.50), $t(62) = 7.90$, $p = .007$. In addition, those self-selecting BSR represented their belief system as more central to their self-identify than did those claiming SNR (4.95; 3.23).

3.2 Questions of Style

Regarding the manner in which people tended to engage their belief system, we observed significant differences on all the indices other than their preference for praying in a group setting (BSR = 2.98; SNR = 2.64); they both preferred to pray alone.

People in the BSR group attended formal services more frequently (3.84; SNR = 1.84), prayed more often (5.29; SNR = 3.83), reported praying on average for longer periods of time (14.41 minutes; SNR = 3.75 minutes), and indicated a younger starting age (4.35 years; SNR = 6.41 years) in relation to the SNR group.

4 Discussion

Our hypotheses were largely not supported with regard to the substance linked to the BSR and SNR positions. In essence, while the two groups intentionally distinguish between themselves, it appears that on several important fronts that differentiation means little. The data show that with regard to one of the most important components of faith (i.e., the practice of prayer), there are no substantial differences. In other words, whether people call themselves BSR or SNR, they pray in fundamentally identical ways. The same is true with regard to whether God is

viewed as loving or controlling. Though cast in common conversation as more strongly focused on topics such as love, the SNR position does not appear to emphasize this conceptualization to any greater extent than does the BSR orientation. This is particularly curious when noting that SNR report feeling more distant from God than do BSR. It may be that SNR and BSR mean something different when they speak of "God," however, that remains to be investigated.

In the area of style, our hypotheses fared much better, garnering clear support. The single non-significant difference, showing that BSR and SNR preferred private prayer is somewhat surprising given the corporate emphasis commonly attributed to BSR. It may be that while BSR attend more, this represents a behavior of which they are not necessarily fond. It is rare to see a report that distinguishes this point; we do not often ask participants if they enjoy the attending they do. It will be intriguing in future work to include such an item to gain additional insight.

With BSR praying more often, longer, and for a greater number of years, the data reveal that the style of BSR is clearly weighted toward the use of prayer. When SNR engage in prayer, they do it in very similar ways, they just do not use prayer as much as do BSR.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that SNR may be fundamentally a difference with regard to the style of participating or following a pathway of faith. There are obviously strong elements of practice that people who endorse a stance of SNR pull on when they so desire; it appears that they just desire to do so less often than do the BSR respondents. This makes sense in relation to the characterization of the SNR position as more individualized and the BSR position as more institutionally oriented. SNR is probably less likely to be claimed than is BSR. This is supported

by the work of Saucier & Skrzypinska (2006) whose data show that traditional religion (encompassing both involvement with long-established faith organizations as well as engaging in personal disciplines; similar to BSR in the present study) and subjective spirituality (primarily stressing personal preferences and practices, independent of corporate groups; similar to SNR in the present study) are often simply unrelated on matters of substantive belief. Only on rare occasions did the two positions contradict each other across an exceptionally wide number of variables. In other words, the two groups seemed far more similiar than they did different; that is the case in the present data as well.

Words such as “religious” and “spiritual” are obviously undergoing a transtition in their personal and social level meanings in many areas of the world. While the present study is clearly limited by its inclusion of only participants from one region of the United States, it does provide a window into the types of challenges facing the field at large; substance and style issues as described here are certainly not limited to the English language in the United States. The challenge is magnified as this area of study within the discipline of psychology becomes increasingly global. Not only do internal linguistic questions need to be addressed, but there is also the task of discerning how to relate unique contexts to the existing academic literature. Hopefully, this investigation concerning the linguistic and conceptual transitional process in one region of the world will help us think creatively about how to systematically describe where the field may be heading in other regions on their own terms.

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