
THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ARTICLES

An Explicit Request for Minitheories in the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality

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Minitheories aim to understand relatively specific phenomena, in contrast to larger scale or grand theories that aim to be comprehensive, inclusive theories of the psychology of religion. By focusing on more narrow phenomena or questions, minitheories allow clearer delineation of concepts, facilitate attention to questions that drive interest in the psychology of religion and enhance the applicability of the findings, support investigation of diverse topics, accelerate scientific progress, and help the psychology of religion connect with other areas of psychology. Risks of a minitheory approach include dispersion of effort, hobbling development of promising grand theories, generating a disconnected hodgepodge of findings, and deemphasizing the importance of theory. The advantages of minitheories can be strengthened and the risks decreased by explicitly tying each study to the larger intellectual and theoretical context, intentionally connecting minitheory-driven studies to each other, and valuing theoretical discussion and integration in research reports.

What is the relationship between religion¹ and people's feeling, thinking, and behaving? Thousands of publications provide a variety of answers. This variety is inevitable considering the

¹For ease of writing we sometimes use the term *religion* in isolation without the consistent addition of "and spirituality" as shorthand for the family of concepts related to religion and spirituality. We have attempted to apply the term(s) employed by the authors when citing their work. Throughout this article, we both use and omit the term *spirituality* with hesitation because of the conversation in the field about whether religion is a superordinate category that includes spirituality, spirituality is a superordinate category that includes religion, or whether they are incompletely overlapping constructs that should not be grouped into one. We believe that all three positions are viable, depending on the definitions of each concept, and, as should become evident in the rest of this article, also depending on which formulation is best for the question being asked, the study being conducted, and the minitheory that is motivating that study.

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range of phenomena falling (with varying fit) under the rubrics *religion* and *spirituality*; consider that Hill and Hood's (1999) book of measures contains 17 chapters and at least 126 scales. As with other complicated phenomena, the psychology of religion requires conceptual systems, or theories, to organize concepts and findings to make sense of them (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010; Kaplan, 1964). Theories make explicit but generalizable proposals about key elements and the principles of their interrelationships (Dubin, 1978; Kaplan, 1964; Schneider, 2006). Bernard Spilka has long been at the forefront of supporting not just theory, but *good* theory. We hope the following supports his legacy of advancing theory-based empirical investigation of religion.

What makes a theory good in the psychology of religion? In addition to meeting general criteria (see Alford, 1998; Dubin, 1978; Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010; Schneider, 2006), it must account for the interdisciplinary nature of religion (biological, psychological, sociological, anthropological; see Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2005) and address whether religion is a unique phenomenon or a subset of other psychological processes (Barrett, 2000; Dittes, 1969; Hill & Gibson, 2008; Newton & McIntosh, 2013; Paloutzian & Park, 2005; Pargament, Magyar, & Murray-Swank, 2005). More central to the focus of this article, we also believe that good theory in the psychology of religion should follow Bernie's advice and be *openly* theoretical. All studies are driven by at least implicit ideas about what the object of study is, what aspects are important to investigate, and how they interrelate (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010; see Kaplan, 1964); *good* theory is explicit about how the data connect to patterns of relationships theorized within the psychology of religion and other domains. We believe that an important solution to the scattered nature of findings and concepts that inhabit the psychology of religion is for scholars to communicate explicitly the connection of their work to broader theories in the field.

We do not argue that the quality of a theory is associated with its level of abstraction or breadth of coverage. We omit these criteria despite contemporary calls for large-scale theories in the psychology of religion to organize the varied findings (see, e.g., Helminiak, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2005; Paloutzian & Park, 2005). We agree with these calls for articulation and testing of theories that are closer in aim to grand theories (cf. Kuhn, 1962). However, we support Hill and Gibson's (2008) call for further attention to midlevel theories and argue that there are clear advantages to the continued development of minitheories within the psychology of religion.

ADVANTAGES OF MINITHEORIES

The "mini" in *minitheories* is not pejorative but indicates an intentionally narrower scope than grand theories of psychology or larger scale theories in the psychology of religion. Truly grand theories aim to be comprehensive, inclusive theories of human psychology and society (e.g., functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and evolutionary perspectives; Mills, 1959); the goal of larger scale theories in the psychology of religion is to provide a comprehensive account of religious feeling, thinking, and behaving and often their connection to other psychological processes. In contrast, minitheories aim to understand more specific phenomena, institutions, and behaviors (Alford, 1998; Mills, 1959). A minitheory may be connected to a grand theory such as attachment theory or evolutionary psychology (cf. Hill & Gibson, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2005) or to a larger scale theory designed specifically to explain the unique domain of religion

(see Helminiak, 2006; Park, 2005a). In the psychology of religion, minitheories may focus on understanding specific religious phenomena (e.g., religious development, conversion, religious experiences) or the relation of religion to other areas of psychology (e.g., the role of religion in coping, the application of attribution theory to the psychology of religion). The last two decades have seen more, and more sophisticated, minitheories of narrower processes such as religious intelligence, spiritual transformation, or religion as a personality factor (see Paloutzian & Park, 2005; Park & Paloutzian, 2005), and development of midlevel theories such as attribution, attachment, and coping in religion (Hill & Gibson, 2008; see Spilka & McIntosh, 1997, for other examples). Next we consider advantages of theories aimed at specific questions and domains.

Minitheories Allow Clearer Delineation of Concepts

One reason we advocate for minitheories is that at a more specific level of analysis, the concepts that the theories seek to relate can be defined more precisely than in theories operating at a more general level. A large-scope theory of religion must deal immediately with defining religion broadly and inclusively. Because religion is an abstract concept with many specific instantiations, the boundaries of the concept are indeterminate—though there likely are core attributes that are common for something to be considered *religious* (or *spiritual*; cf. Mervis & Rosch, 1981, e.g., identification of things, people, or behavior as sacred, Durkheim, 1915; Pargament et al., 2005, or the provision of meaning, Park, 2005a, 2005b; Park & Paloutzian, 2005). However, unresolved debates about whether the term *spirituality* expands, contracts, or muddles the domain of study suggest that neither the boundaries nor the core attributes are settled (Helminiak, 2006; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005).

The difficulty of settling on a consensus definition of religion is not surprising given the breadth of examples of religion that occur across temporal, cultural, and psychological contexts. The specific situation and larger context influence the meaning of concepts, in both the mind of the scholar *and* the minds of the people the scholar is studying (see Gabora, Rosch, & Aerts, 2008). It is thus necessary to specify the context of the concept *religion* when we are investigating its role and functioning. What is *religion* in one situation will share varying degrees of similarity to what is *religion* in another. Therefore a theory of religion in one context may not apply to religion in another. Of course, higher level theories seek to determine the principles of this contextual influence. Continued development of minitheories, however, allows for progress in understanding more delimited areas in which religion has an influence or is influenced.

Limiting the scope of explanation with specific definitions of religion helps prevent the theory from becoming too vague. If a large-scale theory must address all phenomena that are arguably religious, the idea of *religious* may become so broad that what is essential to it in one domain (e.g., a sense of the divine; see Hood, 2005) may not be considered essential to the overall theory, causing the theory to lose analytic power. This loosens the connection between the larger scale theory and the specific research question to the point that they may be irrelevant to each other (cf. Paloutzian & Park, 2005). Similarly, to accommodate the moderating contexts and multiple factors involved in religion, a larger scale theory may require a bewildering array of moving parts; as a theory becomes comprehensive it may become difficult for it to be wrong (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010) and thus become difficult to test (cf. Baumeister, Maner, & DeWall, 2006). Minitheories sacrifice breadth for precision, and we believe that this can be a virtue.

Minitheories Are More Proximal to Phenomena of Interest

An additional virtue of minitheories is that they facilitate attention to questions that drive interest in the psychology of religion and enhance the applicability of the findings. These basic-level questions address religious phenomena at the level of abstraction to which people naturally turn when thinking of how religion interacts with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—the level that carries the most useful information (see Rosch, Mervis, Gray, Johnson, & Boyes-Braem, 1976). Understanding religion requires careful analysis of a variety of phenomena, for example, individual differences in religion (e.g., Allen & Spilka, 1967), religious practices (e.g., ritual and prayer; Ladd & Spilka, 2002; Spilka, 2005), religious experience (e.g., Spilka, Ladd, McIntosh, Milmoie, & Bickel, 1996), images of God (e.g., Benson & Spilka, 1973), and integrating religion with other areas of psychology (e.g., with attribution theory; Spilka, Shaver, & Kirkpatrick, 1985). A theory that starts too large may be so many steps away from the specific issues addressed in studies of primary religious phenomena that the theory and data cannot interact. Paloutzian and Park (2005) related how for decades the grand theories in the psychology of religion were independent of the data collected. The studies had no framework, the data no structure, and the theories no way to develop.

By facilitating progress in understanding these basic levels of process in the psychology of religion, the development of minitheories can more quickly provide applications. For example, substantial research has investigated whether and how religion influences how people cope with and adjust to stressful and traumatic events (e.g., McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993; Newton & McIntosh, 2009, 2010; Pargament, 1997; Park, 2005b; Park, Cohen, & Herb, 1990). One important reason for this focus is that involvement of religion in difficult times is highly salient to those outside the psychology of religion. It is an obvious, basic question. A second motivation is that understanding how religion influences coping is useful to mental health and religious professionals. Theories focused on understanding religion and coping, even if that understanding is not driven by a larger theoretical program, provide information on processes and outcomes that will more quickly and clearly help people and help psychologists understand people.

Minitheories Facilitate Investigation of Diverse Topics

Use of minitheories can support investigation of a wider range of topics. The indefinite boundaries of religion mean that there may be elements of religion that are not relevant when the focus is on religion in a particular context. That is, the very construct of religion may differ across minitheories developed to explain and understand the role of religion in a more specific aspect of psychology. For example, issues of different sources of control or attributions of causality are often highlighted in theories of religion's role in coping (McIntosh & Spilka, 1990; Pargament et al., 1988), but they are virtually absent in research on religion and prejudice (e.g., Allen & Spilka, 1967; Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999). By allowing theories to focus on only elements and processes involved in a more bounded topic, minitheories ease the investigation of more numerous and diverse issues. Further, there is substantial diversity not only within the concept of religion but also, given any particular definition of religion, in content and practice. The psychology of religion is appropriately criticized for focusing too much thought and data collection energy on Western (mostly North American), theistic (mostly Christian) samples (Paloutzian & Park, 2005). Realizing that theoretical development

from a Western theistic standpoint may be a (large) minitheory, not a general theory of religion applicable across contexts, is an important perspective. Studying North American Christianity can proceed without the assumption that it is necessarily a grand theory of religion. (And, we argue, explicitly positioning it as *not* a grand theory of religion is critical.) In addition, however, research in the psychology of religion has also shown relative neglect to differences within the population of religious and spiritual individuals. Differences in religious beliefs and expression matter (e.g., Newton & McIntosh, 2009, 2010; Park et al., 1990). Valuing minitheories values work that focuses on specific traditions, explores the importance of differences, and documents traditions' similarities. Support of minitheories values investigations of a particular religious tradition or expression of spirituality even if they initially appear isolated from the larger theoretical questions guiding the field or do not fit well within the conception of religion in a larger level theory.

Minitheories Can Accelerate Progress

A minitheory approach can accelerate progress by supporting scholars whose studies or ideas are out of step with dominant theories; their original work can challenge and rapidly improve overall understanding of a phenomenon—in this case, religion—and thus provide a foundation for development and evaluation of larger scale theories (cf. Baumeister et al., 2006). However, when larger scale theories dominate and minitheories are devalued, certain studies or topics may be discounted, as the dominant theories do not value the questions being asked, or disagree about the relevance of the concepts being tested. Scientific papers, and assistant professors, may need to “declare allegiance” to a particular approach to get a hearing, or be seen as likely to have impact (cf. Baumeister et al., 2006, p. 31). Such inhibition of work deemed atheoretical can occur when there is a dominant theory directing research or when there are multiple competing larger scale theories (or conceptualizations). This can happen by a lack of support for work not directed at the larger scale theories or overvaluing of studies engaged in a theoretical debate, causing these studies (and not studies motivated by minitheories) to soak up the available journal pages and conference slots. As an example, Greenwald, Pratkanis, Leippe, and Baumgardner (1986) related how for more than a decade in social psychology

there was a high ratio of wasted to effective effort on the insufficient justification problem as (a) researchers formed into several theoretical camps . . . ; (b) each camp published own-theory-confirming results; (c) many findings remained unpublished and uninterpreted because they did not easily fit with any of these theoretical positions; and (d) consequently the social psychology community was delayed in discovering the limiting conditions of published findings. (p. 220)

Greenwald and colleagues (1986) indicated that the problem is a theory-testing versus a pattern-seeking approach. A confirmation bias occurs when the question is the truthfulness of a theory rather than the detection of patterns in the data. When the goal is not theory testing, “the researcher is more likely (a) to attend to the operations on which research findings depend and, consequently, (b) to discover theories of increasing power” (p. 217). We believe that this more local attention and the motivation to understand a more limited domain are facilitated by minitheory-driven research. Larger scale theories stress theory testing to advance scientific understanding rather than understanding a specific topic or domain. In

contrast, support for minitheories encourages more of the pattern-seeking approach than a theory testing one. Research based on a larger scale theory will choose particular midlevel theories to test. For example, from an evolutionary approach: Are perceptions of God based on an evolved hyperactive agent detection device (Barrett, 2000)? Or, from a control perspective: Does a particular unconscious motive (aversion to randomness) influence people's beliefs in the existence of a deity (Kay, Moscovitch, & Laurin, 2010)? These are important questions to test; however, research focused on minitheories of more applied phenomena will also supply findings and patterns that can inform the larger theoretical discussion.

Minitheories Help the Psychology of the Rest of Psychology

Because minitheories are focused on limited topics and understanding narrower phenomena, they leave room for the integration of other theories in psychology. Across topics in the psychology of religion we should never forget that the *psychology* of religion is a subfield of psychology. Borrowing theories developed in other areas of psychology can help with the problems of estrangement of the field and enhance theory development in the psychology of religion by building on theory development elsewhere (examples include attachment theory, Kirkpatrick, 1992; attribution theory, Spilka et al., 1985; schema theory, McIntosh, 1995; meaning, Park, 2005a; and appraisal theory, Newton & McIntosh, 2010). Understandings from outside the subfield should inform how we understand religion. We believe that the baseline for understanding how people form religious attitudes, use religious beliefs, and feel religious emotions should be how people form attitudes, use beliefs, and feel emotions of any type. A minitheory approach allows for focused consideration of how the general processes are similar or different when applied to a religious version of the phenomenon.

Integrating the psychology of religion and broader psychological theories at a minitheory level should, we believe, encourage a fine-grained analysis of not only how these process help explain religious phenomena but also how these general psychological explanations do or do not fit when applied to religion. As we begin to see differences in how religious versions of phenomena operate, the field will gain knowledge of what is distinct about religion and how that affects human functioning (see, e.g., Newton & McIntosh, 2013; Pargament et al., 2005; Pargament & Park, 1997). A significant contribution of the psychology of religion subfield to psychology in general should be noting how and why these things differ in religious domains, and thus how psychology's larger scale theories need to be adjusted to account for the full range of human psychology, which includes religion (cf. Hill & Gibson, 2008).

CONCERNS ABOUT MINITHEORIES AND A WAY TO ADDRESS THEM

Risks of a Minitheory Approach

Despite advantages to the development and use of minitheories, concerns about a minitheory approach are real and significant. First, there is a low friction slope between a minitheory approach and research that involves no explicit theory. Although scholars always have implicit assumptions that motivate any study (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010; Kaplan, 1964), a focus

on minitheories may lead to acceptance of research that does not explicitly reference any conceptualization of religion or an underlying understanding of the role of religion. Complete isolation from explicit theory enhances the disadvantages of a minitheory approach and does not yield many of the advantages—thus, as emphasized by Spilka (personal communications, 1983–2013), all empirical research must both rely on theory and do the hard work of tying the specific study to the larger intellectual and theoretical context in which it is studied.

An additional risk is that the very diversity of topics and conceptualizations that are a benefit of a minitheory approach work against rapid development of any particular area. This is a countervailing force to the acceleration in progress just discussed. One function of theory is to organize researchers to focus on topics of consensual interest, and structure research so it can be cumulative. This theoretical unity means that a study in one laboratory uses the same conceptualizations as that in another lab, so that findings can be more meaningfully combined and evaluated. A minitheory approach spreads this effort around and, at the extreme, hinders ability to detect patterns across studies and labs. It is hard to build on scattered, one-hit-wonder approaches. A “hodgepodge” of findings and theories that are “barely interconnected” and “inherently splintered” are no better in the psychology of religion than they are for psychology as a whole (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 115). Although a disconnected minitheory approach may mean that more scholars overall may experience delight at believing they are the first to find a particular effect, the field as a whole does not move forward as quickly or comprehensively when the same discovery is made repeatedly. Less delightful but similarly problematic for progress, the same idea can be tested repeatedly and found wanting.

The final risk of a minitheory approach that we discuss is that it could take the focus away from exciting advances in larger scale theories of religion. Broad-based theories are developing in the psychology of religion (Park & Paloutzian, 2005). For example, there is increasing work examining religion from evolutionary (Kirkpatrick, 2005), meaning system (Park, 2005a), and cognitive science (Barrett, 2000) standpoints. Backing away from evaluating these theories just as they are taking off would be a significant missed opportunity for the field. Indeed, the foundation for the argument we make for supporting minitheories has a counterpoint supporting larger scale theories. The diversity and breadth of religion means that understanding it will require uniting explanations across time, culture, and subdisciplines within psychology (Kirkpatrick, 2005). We agree that this argues for intentional work evaluating and developing these larger scale theories; however, for the reasons just detailed we also believe that this intentional work at this level should not discount the progress and contributions that can be made through work focused on minitheories.

An Explicit Request to Work Against the Risks

Our advocacy of continued development of minitheories fits well within the “multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm” suggested by Emmons and Paloutzian (2003, p. 395; Park & Paloutzian, 2005). Indeed, the approach suggested by Paloutzian and Park (2005; Park & Paloutzian, 2005) is for a framework that can contain theories at a variety of levels and an approach that synthesizes such theories. However, they noted that “the specific mechanisms, assumptions, and processes that allow this linking of information have yet to be developed” (Park & Paloutzian, 2005, p. 553). At one level, we suspect they are referring to social and psychological processes that provide the conceptual and functional linkages across domains in religion; however, we

also believe there is a need for the field to develop processes to work against the hodgepodge problem without devaluing the progress that will be made through a minitheory approach. Given that minitheories focus on the phenomena that are of common and shared interest among scientists and practitioners in psychology, we believe there will always be studies at this level. The task, then, is to facilitate their utility for the field as a whole.

One way for the overarching framework suggested by Paloutzian and colleagues to develop is for minitheories, though not created to test larger scale theories, to connect intentionally and address explicitly each other and the larger scale theories. One theme in the advantages of minitheories is that even if not designed to test larger scale theories, studies motivated by the minitheories can be relevant to them. Studies based on minitheories will produce data that are more or less consistent with larger scale theories and additionally may provide boundary conditions, points of emphasis, or anomalies useful for understanding other theories.

Thus, to our advocacy that minitheories be encouraged, we add the suggestion that one mechanism to decrease the hodgepodge problem is intentional linking in the literature among theories of all levels. This is not less difficult than working within a particular grand theoretical tradition, as it requires that one both seek ideas from outside the domain of one's minitheory and consider what higher order understandings of religion are consistent or not with the findings and approach. Explicit referencing of work operating at the higher theoretical level is a necessary aid to those who will use the findings and ideas in evaluating and extending the higher level theory.

We agree with the idea that progress must be multilevel, with work being done within theoretical umbrellas at the larger scope levels necessary for progress, but also that work be done on minitheories, which more promiscuously borrow findings and ideas from the (potentially competing) paradigms without committing to testing, affirming, or denying any one of them. Just as innovation can come from people with a diversity of weak ties (cf. Granovetter, 1973), findings with a diversity of weak (but explicit) ties to various conceptualizations and macrotheories can spur creativity and progress in the field. This permits information exchange, and the diversity that leads to creative knowledge production.

In short, one mechanism for the multileveled interdisciplinary paradigm is social and communicative. Basic scientists (those focused on research primarily to increase knowledge) across theoretical and training backgrounds, clinicians, and humanities scholars need to talk to each other at conferences (so attend those that focus on the topic of religion and attract those with different perspectives) and need to talk with people testing grander theories of psychology. Scientific creativity is enhanced when scholars work with a diverse set of colleagues (Baer, 2010). The solution is also structural, so we urge authors, reviewers, editors, and other monitors of journal content and article page counts to value speculation and integration in discussion sections, even for studies that did not aim to test a larger scale theory.

These conversations and journal–article discussions will not be productive, however, unless the field takes care to keep the *theory* in minitheory. Minitheories are mini not because they do not do theory well, they are mini because the domain of analysis is more limited, and often focused on a particular problem or issue rather than a broader question. All theories have a domain of analysis for which the concepts and relations among those concepts are supposed to hold true (Dubin, 1978); this domain is, well, smaller in minitheories. Their overall contribution to the psychology of religion need not be small, however, and it will be enhanced if the conceptualizations and the relationships among them are articulated.

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