

# Parochialism in the Social Scientific Study of Religion: A Response to Cornwall

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In the September edition of *JSSR*, Cornwall (2010) commented on a study that Poulson and Campbell (2010) recently published in *The American Sociologist*. In this study, we characterized institutional parochialism as “the degree to which people in an academic field tend to study their own societies” (2010:32). We found that scholars in the sociology of religion—as represented by content in *JSSR* and the *Sociology of Religion*—were preoccupied with parochial concerns. Notably, a study conducted concurrently by Smilde and May (2010) reported similar findings.

Still, the primary purpose of Poulson and Campbell (2010) was to expand DiMaggio and Powell’s (1982) typography to include “parochialism” as a form of “normative isomorphic pressure.” In the article, we characterized institutional parochialism as a condition likely evident in both Western and non-Western academic fields. We believed that parochialism was a normative pressure that compels *all* academic fields—not just sociology of religion—toward “sameness” in terms of topics studied.

An important “hook” in the paper was our assertion that: “if the sociology of religion can be characterized as parochial, we contend that the broader field of American sociology is likely far more so” (2010:31). In this regard, we hoped scholars might investigate parochialism in other subdisciplines. I believed most of these disciplines would be *more parochial* than sociology of religion in comparison.

So far, this expectation has been wrong. For example, I am currently investigating parochialism in the “social movements” field using the same approach as the Poulson and Campbell (2010) study. Like that study, two prominent journals within the subfield—in this case *Mobilization: An International Journal* and *Social Movement Studies (SMS)*—have been coded for article content. Table 1 is a summary of Western and non-Western content in *Mobilization* and *JSSR* for the years we have coded.

Comparing journals across disciplines is difficult, but there are important similarities between these publications. For example, both journals are considered preeminent within their subfields. Both tend to be dominated by sociologists but publish scholarship from other social science disciplines. As relates to article impact, both journals currently have nearly identical ISI impact factors (*Mobilization* = .911 and *JSSR* = .929). *JSSR* generally publishes more articles, but the article “gap” narrowed substantially after *Mobilization* became a quarterly in 2006.

So why is the content of *Mobilization* less parochial than *JSSR*? Having investigated both fields, I offer a few speculative reasons why this might be so.

Importantly, *Mobilization* content is not more diverse because social movement scholars are more inclined to study people who are “different” than themselves. In Poulson and Campbell (2010) it was noted that it appeared that those who study religion in the global south often had a personal connection—familial, religious, ethnic, etc.—to these topics. These are generally “Western” scholars who, often for reasons of personal affinity, are conversant with groups in the

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Table 1: Studies of Western and non-Western regions in *Mobilization* (2001–2010) and *JSSR* (2001–2008)

	Study of West Region	Study of Non-West Region	Total
<i>Mobilization</i>	120 (72.3)	64 (38.6)	166
<i>JSSR</i>	288 (90.6)	45 (14.2)	318

Percentage of article is in parentheses.

*Note:* Percentages sum to more than 100 percent because of comparative studies. The “total” article count is also less than the sum of articles for this reason.

global south. We have explored the backgrounds of these types of scholars more thoroughly in the ongoing study. Overall, it appears that one reason *Mobilization* is more “worldly” is because the journal publishes more contributions from these types of scholars when compared to *JSSR*. At the same time, I suspect that there is probably a similar “pool” of Western scholars who study religion in the global south, but who do not often consider *JSSR* when they submit their work for publication. Why?

*Mobilization* is a young journal, established in 1996, following a series of international conferences that increased contacts between European and American scholars within the field. Many journals claim to be “international” in scope, but those associated with *Mobilization* appear to be particularly serious about this claim. In effect, the journal was designed to be an appealing outlet for those who study the global south. By way of contrast, *JSSR*’s long and esteemed history likely increases the isomorphic pressures toward “sameness” in terms of the regions and religions studied.

Obviously, the sociology of religion is not entirely parochial. Moreover, there have been earnest calls by respected scholars of religion concerning the need to increase the study of other faiths (see Smith 2008). There are also scholars who are currently making serious efforts to “push” the field toward publishing a greater diversity of scholarship (see Smilde and May 2010). Like these scholars, I also believe that a greater diversity of scholarship within the sociology of religion would make the field stronger. Still, for the reasons outlined earlier, I mostly expect the content of the sociology of religion will remain parochial into the immediate future.

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