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Research on the Experience of God:

Rethinking Epistemological Assumptions

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Spiritual and religious research inevitably creates a variety of problems for the social scientist. New directions in psychological research including postmodern methodologies (Kvale, 1992) and multiple levels of processing (Hall & Porter, 2004) add to previous challenges. In the God image, in particular, introduced a difficult construct to conceptualize and measure. Recent developments suggest several inadequacies in previous attempts to quantify and examine the God image construct. This paper will provide an overview of the critiques and limitations of previous research while introducing suggestions for important new directions in research.

Overview of the Research

The early development of the God image theory and research emerged from the work of Rizzuto (1979), who relied upon Freud and object relations theory to develop her initial conception of how an individual's attachment to their primary caregiver influences his or her experience of God later in life. Since the introduction of these concepts, the God concept and the God image are constructs which must be considered when examining one's relationship with God. The God concept is one's cognitive knowledge of God via education and word of mouth by parents and friends (Lawrence, 1997). The God image is one's emotional understanding and personal experience with God (Rizzuto, 1979). Kaufman (1981) postulates that the idea of God as an absolutely adequate attachment-figure, suggesting that God is thought of as a protective and caring parent who is always reliable and available to its children when

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² A copy of this paper is available at http://www.cospp.edu/pubs/papers_available.htm

they are in need. As one goes through the developmental stages to form a religious and spiritual identity, the God image becomes more prominent as it focuses more on one's personal growth in themselves as well as with their relationships with others. Church experience, experiences with friends and other Christians, and significant relationships over time play influential and prominent roles in the growth and development of one's God image (Moriarty & Hoffman, 2004).

The process of measuring various elements of the God image is still in development. While several measures have been constructed to measure one's God concept, it has been more difficult for researchers to devise a reliable and thorough measure of one's God image. This is primarily due to its individual subjectivity. The God image can be divided into three categories based on measurement constructs: in-depth clinical interviews used by Rizzuto (1979), qualitative measures such as analyzing drawings of God to measure one's perception of God (Heller, 1986), and letters written to God (Ludwig, Weber, & Iben, 1974). Thus far, quantitative surveys, checklists, and questionnaires such as the God Image Inventory and the God Image Scales have been most often used in psychological and theological analysis of individual experiences of one's God image (Gorsuch, 1968; Benson & Spilka, 1973; Spilka, Addison, & Rosenshon, 1975; Lawrence, 1997), while less attention has been given to qualitative methods (Kunkel, Cook, Meshel, Daughty, & Hauenstein, 1999).

Investigation of the God image has covered a spectrum of topics including attachment (Brokaw & Edwards, 1994; Halcrow, Hall, Hill, & Delaney, 2004; Hall, Halcrow, Hill, Delaney, & Teal, 2005; L. Hoffman, J. Hoffman, Dillard, Clark, Acoba, Jones, & Williams, 2005; L. Hoffman, Jones, Williams, & Dillard, 2004; Kirkpatrick,

1997, 1998; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002; Tisdale, Key, Edwards, Brokaw, Kemperman, & Cloud, 1997), ethnic and cultural diversity (Hoffman, L., et al., 2005), development and personal growth (Cheston, Peidmont, Eanes & Lavin, 2003; Cox, 2005; Jansen, DeHart, & Gerardts, 1994), gender differences (Nelson, Cheek, & Au, 1985), family values (Lee & Early, 2000), personality (Bowman, Coons, Jones, Stanley, & Oldstrom, 1987; Schaap-Jonker, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Verhagen, & Zock, 2002), quality of life (Gall, 2004), self esteem (Benson & Spilka, 1973) and self-worth (Francis, Gibson, & Robbins, 2001), among other topics. Many of the studies on God image have been correlational in nature, investigating the relationship between one's God image and another variable. These types of investigations tend to categorize one's God image in order to make comparisons.

Many who investigate the God image, attempt to measure it using questionnaires with Likert-type items, built from factor analysis. They often ask participants to categorize their image of God based on its correspondence to a given adjective (e.g., forgiving, loving, caring, restricting, controlling, unavailable, etc). An example of these types of measures is reported in Benson and Spilka (1973) and Spilka, et al.'s (1975) development of scales to measure the degree to which an individual experiences God as loving, controlling, wrathful, traditional, kind, omniscient, and deistic. Using these scales, individuals are asked to rate items as extremely inaccurate to extremely accurate in regard to their image of God. The work of Benson and Spilka (1973), Spilka, Addison, and Rosensohn (1975), and Gorsuch (1968) before them, laid the ground work for development of other quantitative measures of one's God image. However, these measures often have not taken the

distinction between the God concept and the God image adequately in to account. Conceptually, these scales are more likely to measure the God concept.

Lawrence's (1997) development of the God Image Inventory (GII) and God Image Scales (GIS) was a step forward in this type standardized quantitative inquiry. The GII is a 156-item psychometric instrument which contains the GIS, a 72-item questionnaire with items for six God image factors (i.e., acceptance, benevolence, challenge, influence, presence, and providence). The theoretical background for Lawrence's development of the GIS is based on research and measurement of self image, which are extrapolated to help conceptualize the possibly ways which one might experience God. Its apparently strong construct validity and ease of administration (a shorter 36-item form is also available) have contributed to the GIS's popularity among God image researchers. However, as with even the best psychometric instruments, the GIS has limitations. These are considered below.

Noting limitations of quantitative methods, other researchers have worked to develop more comprehensive measures of one's God image. For example Jansen, DeHart, and Gerardts, (1994), note the inability of quantitative questionnaires to help elucidate the way individuals construct their image of God. They chose instead to utilize a qualitative method: analyzing responses to open ended questions. Kunkel et al. (1999) have noted prior investigations of the God image have been narrowed by the tendency to limit participants' perspective to a set of predetermined descriptors. Kunkel et al. utilized concept-mapping, a procedure which combines phenomenological inquiry and open card sorts, in their pursuit of further understanding the scope, structure, and salience of one's God image.

The predominant limitation to all the research mentioned thus far is their ability to move beyond the conscious conceptions and screening when trying to elucidate the God image as a more unconscious, sub-symbolic process. The more face valid measures (checklists and questionnaires) lend themselves better to measuring the God concept. Despite this, some research has suggested that the checklists and questionnaires represent distinct psychological constructs (Hoffman, Jones, et al., 2004). This suggests that the checklists may be a more accurate representation of the God concept while the questionnaires may represent some type of mediating construct between the God concept and the God image. However, further research is needed to support this interpretation.

The most promising God image research thus far has emerged from Gibson (2004), who designed a research project which holds greater promise of examining the initial visceral reactions of people presented when presented religious content. While this research is still early stages of development, it does hold significant promise for moving beyond the cognitive screening limitations of previous research.

Research Limitations

The most common psychological measure of the God image is Lawrence's God Image Scales and God Image Inventory, the former of which is more applicable to psychological research (Lawrence, 1997). This implicitly assumes that it is measuring the God image with some measuring leeway for typical limitations of quantitative measures. However, as pointed to previously, it is our opinion that this is a problematic assumption.

The problems with the God Image Scales do not mean that we should disregard this measure. Rather, there needs to be a greater focus on what it really being measured. The current authors propose the God Image Scales are measuring an individual's *conscious perception of their God image*, rather than their actual God image. This psychological construct has utility, but needs to be distinguished from the original construct of the God image. An individual's conscious perception of the God image may distort the underlying unconscious emotional experience of God (i.e., the God image). If this hypothesis is accurate, one important aspect for future directions in God image research is examining the difference between the conscious perceptions of the God image and the original God image construct.

Distinguishing between these three aspects of the experience of God (God concept, perceptions of God image, and God image) retains important psychological utility. Hoffman (2005) suggested differences between the God concept and God image point toward important diagnostic information when working with therapy clients. Similarly, if we add in this third construct of the perceptions of the God image, the additional level of complexity can provide additional information about the multifaceted way people experience God. If the perceptions of the God image are a mediating factor between the God concept and God image in some individuals, then these perceptions provide important clinical data on the defensive structure as applied to religious experience.

Attachment research suggests two different models for how early caregiver relationships impact the way an individual experiences God (Hall, Halcrow, Hill, Delaney, & Teal, 2005). First, is the compensation model largely promoted by

Kirkpatrick (1997, 1998, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). This suggests God serves as an idealized attachment figure emerging from what is lacking in one's early caregiver relationships and later more mature relationships. A second model, the correspondence or correlation model, supports several lines of God image research (Halcrow, Hall, Hill, & Delaney, 2004; Hall, Halcrow, Hill, Delaney, & Teal, 2005; Hall & Porter, 2004). This model, originating in the writings of Freud (1961) and Rizzuto (1979), suggests an individual's adult experience of God corresponds with early caregiver experiences.

The compensation and correspondence appear contradictory at first glance; however, upon further analysis several theorists suggested the research is not contradictory and points toward a complex relationship (Hall, Halcrow, et al., 2005). Accordingly, two explanations may contribute to resolving the apparent conflict. First, it may be that different models may contribute greater influence upon the experience of God at different points of development. However, an alternative perspective provides a better explanation. Hall (Hall, Halcrow, et al., 2005; Hall & Porter, 2004) suggests both models concurrently explain different levels of processing, at least in some individuals. Accordingly, the correspondence level may be accurate at the subsymbolic and unconscious levels of processing while the compensation model is a more accurate appraisal of what is occurring at the conscious, symbolic level. In a sense, the conscious perception of the experience of God serves as a defense against the underlying unconscious experience of God.

Healthy individuals who have worked through their distorted experience of God should have a conscious perception of their experience of God that is largely

consistent with their God image as traditionally understood. However, for individuals with distorted God images, it is more likely that the perception of their God image and actual God image will not be consistent.

This discussion appears to suggest there is no difference between the God concept and the conscious perception of the God image. However, this is not accurate. The God concept is based more on a cognitive evaluation of the *quality* or character of God. This is what God is believed to be. The conscious perceptions of the God image refer to an appraisal of one's emotional experience of God. This appraisal is still cognitive, just like the conscious perceptions of the God image, but it is focusing on the individual's interpretation of experience. The God concept focuses on appraisals of God; the conscious perceptions of the God image focus on appraisals of the self.

A final proposal for the complexity of the experience of God should also be addressed. The experience of God may change partially due to the environment or contextual cues (Gibson, 2004; Hoffman, 2004). This is consistent with aspects of Gergin's (1995) concepts of the multifaceted self. The implications of Gergin's theory implicitly suggest many of our psychological constructs are less stable and more fluid than typically viewed by psychology, particularly empirical psychology.

The challenge with this proposal is that it makes research extremely complex. However, real relationships are complex, too! At this point, we can identify at least 3 types of complexity that contributed to difficulty in measuring the God image:

1. Different experiences of God occur currently at different levels of processing.
2. The experience of God changes over time.

3. The experience of God changes contextually.

These levels of complexity seem to suggest that it may not be possible to adequately measure the God image. In part, this may be true. However, this is partially dependent upon your epistemological assumptions. If the God image is assumed to be over stationary and simple, any measurement can't help but distort this construct even if results are fairly consistent over time. However, if research on the God image is interpreted to be measuring one aspect of a fluid process, then the research is more valuable, but less absolute. In stating this, the claim of fluidity does not suggest rampant inconsistencies and quick drastic changes. Rather, it suggests a trajectory that is more flexible and not always linear.

Broadening Our Epistemic Assumptions

The literature and theory reviewed and developed in this paper suggest a complex theory of how God is experienced. If correct, a new research agenda is necessary. The first part of this agenda requires an analysis of current measures. The first two sections of this paper have provided such an analysis. Now, attention needs to focus on how to implement this future research direction.

The first step will be delineating what the current measure are measuring and determining if they are sufficient measures for the next phase of God image research. To accomplish this, we must examine the measures as they pertain to 3-levels of the experience of God discussed thus far: the God concept, conscious perceptions of the God image, and the God image.

The most common measure of the God concept is Gorsuch's Adjective Checklist as a rating of the God concept (1968). While this measure has demonstrated

satisfactory psychometric properties, it is not a very balanced scale. There is heavy loading toward particular scales, especially the Traditional Christian scale.

Additionally, the terms included in this scale are heavily biased toward traditional conceptions of God and are not sensitive to gender and cultural variations. For example, there are more masculine adjectives than feminine. Additionally, the majority of the terms are based upon Western and traditional conceptions of God.

An adjective checklist approach is a valid measure of the God concept; however, a need for a better scale is needed. Future scales need to be inclusive of non-traditional language include more feminine adjectives, a better representation of cultural variations in language to describe God, and an improved balance of adjective groups which form the various scales.

This paper maintained that the God Image Scales (GIS) are better understood as a measure of conscious perceptions of the God image. However, this does not necessarily mean this is a strong measure. Several factor analyses of the God Image Scales found significant variations in the scales (Lawrence, 1997; Hoffman, L., Hoffman, J., 2005). Some of the six factors found in the initial study are highly correlated suggesting they are not measuring distinct constructs. While this scale provides a good initial frame to measure this construct, it is still in need of some updating.

The GIS suffer some of the same language limitations seen in the Adjective Checklist. The language is representative of classic theism and may not be adequate for many individuals in our postmodern, pluralistic society. Additionally, initial research conducted by Hoffman, Hoffman, et al. (2005) suggests the possibility of

cultural variations in which some of the subscales may be more difficult to distinguish in some cultural groups. This likely reflects language variations between cultures, especially pertaining to religious language. The implications of this are not clear. However, we argue this indicates the importance of ongoing research on cultural variations which utilize new factor analyses looking for these patterns.

The actual God image is the most difficult construct to assess. This is largely due to the nature of the construct. The God image is a relational and emotional construct which cannot be accurately measured through questionnaires which are highly face valid. Because of the complexity of this construct, we suggest that a mixed methodology is the best approach if attempting a comprehensive understanding of the God image. This mixed methodological approach is consistent with the contemporary postmodern trends in research (Kvale, 1992). While this approach may include some quantitative measures such as the GIS, the primary focus would be on qualitative, phenomenological, and the cognitive methodologies.

As discussed early, Gibson's research examined the influence of visceral reactions on cognitive processes relevant to the experience of God. This methodology is strongest methodology thus far at getting at the more experiential component of the God image. When combined with the more qualitative and phenomenological measures such as the letters to God, interviews, and projective measures, it is likely to produce a better understanding of the God image construct. In other words, these various methodological approaches all provide information on different components of the God image and broader religious/spiritual experience. Together they provide a more complete picture.

Conclusions

A new age of God image research appears to be emerging out of necessity and innovation. The long history of God image research paved the way for these new developments which offer hope to better understand this complex construct. Future research needs to abandon many of the previous epistemological assumptions in order to move toward a more multifaceted and complete understanding of this construct. Of particular importance is approaching research findings with appropriate humility in order to avoid oversimplifying and distorting the complex process of how people experience God.

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