



Images of mother, self, and God as predictors of dysphoria in non-clinical samples

John J. Cecero^{a,*}, Talia S. Marmon^a, Mark Beitel^a, Aida Hutz^b,
Christine Jones^b

^a *Fordham University, 113 West 60th Street, New York, NY 10023, USA*

^b *Counseling and Testing Center, Northern Arizona University, P.O. Box 6045, Flagstaff, AZ 86011, USA*

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Abstract

This study explored the interactions between individuals' images of mother, self, and God as predictors of dysphoria in a sample of 200 mostly Christian undergraduates. The study was intended to replicate and extend previous work, which has focused on only two or three of these variables. We predicted that results would support Jeffrey Young's early maladaptive schema conceptualization, which posits a predictive relationship between images of parents, self image (or schema), and emotional well-being. We further anticipated that God image would mediate the effects of the parent image on image of self and well-being. Instruments used included the multiple affect adjective checklist, the Young parenting questionnaire, and the adjective checklist. While path analysis of results provided support for Young's conceptualization, no support was found for the indirect effects of God image. Correlational findings were generally replicated in a public university sample ($N = 68$).

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1. Introduction

Previous studies have explored various aspects of the interaction between the individual's view of his or her parents, self image, conception of God, and emotional well-being. Pieces of this

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, Fordham University, New York, NY 10023, USA. Tel.: +1-212-636-6341; fax: +1-212-636-7153.

E-mail address: jjcsj@aol.com (J.J. Cecero).

complex picture have been studied from various psychological perspectives, including object relations (Brokaw & Edwards, 1994; Rizzuto, 1974; Tisdale, Key, Edwards, & Brokaw, 1997; Underwood, 1986; White, 1984), cognitive (Benson & Spilka, 1973), and social cognitive (Chartier & Goehner, 1977; Nelson & Kroliczak, 1984) theories, as well as from studies on images of God and religious coping (Bickel et al., 1998; Murphy et al., 2000).

Early research in the relationship between parent and God imagery largely ignored the influence of self image (Heinrichs, 1982). A favored model of more psychoanalytically-oriented theorists that has arisen in different guises is the idea that the individual's God image is a projection of his or her parent image (Rizzuto, 1974). While Freud's early exposition of this idea focused narrowly on the son–father dynamic (Birky & Ball, 1988), more recent empirical work has shown that composite representations of both parents may be even more closely related to God image (Birky & Ball, 1988; Justice & Lambert, 1986), and object-relations theorists like Rizzuto (1974) have adapted Freud's theory and given it broader application. In essence, according to the object-relations perspective, the God representation is different than other object representations in that it is not based directly on experiences of God, but relies on the utilization of representations acquired within the context of relationships with significant others, particularly parents (Birky & Ball, 1988; Lawrence, 1997).

Another vein of research explored the relationship between self image and God image, this time largely ignoring the influence of parent images. While there have been inconsistencies in findings in this area (e.g., Lawrence, 1997), there appears to be a substantive relationship between positive self image and positive God image (e.g., Benson & Spilka, 1973; Chartier & Goehner, 1977). Based on a model of cognitive consistency, Benson and Spilka (1973) hypothesized that one's self image influences how one views God. Consistency theory posits that data that imply the opposite of one's usual self-perception create cognitive dissonance (Benson & Spilka, 1973). To minimize the psychological discomfort caused by such dissonance, the individual may use techniques such as denial, distortion, or selective perception to ensure that information is consistent with self image. As consistency theory applies to one's image of God, the individual's self image may determine or influence his or her ability to see God as nurturing or accepting. Benson and Spilka (1973) note that "A theology based on a loving, accepting God is cognitively compatible with high self-esteem, but it could be a source of discomfort for a believer low in self-esteem. It does not make good cognitive sense to be loved when one is unlovable".

While Benson and Spilka favor the above explanation to account for the apparent relationship between one's view of oneself and view of God, Chartier and Goehner (1977) prefer Benson and Spilka's alternative suggestion that a third factor may play an important role, namely that parents may influence both God image and self image. Rejecting parents may induce a negative view of both oneself and of God, whereas accepting parents may impel a more favorable perspective. These researchers note that belief-in-an-accepting-God tends to develop in the same sort of family atmosphere required for the development of self-acceptance.

Other investigators have examined the parent–God–self interaction from a social cognitive perspective. Nelson and Kroliczak (1984) emphasize that parents often play a direct role in educating a child about religion and God, and the parents' qualities, for better or for worse, are often bound up in that education. This study notes that some parents employ enforcement threats such as "God will punish you if you misbehave", and children who subscribe to such beliefs have a more negative self image. This perspective, like that of Chartier and

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